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Neoliberalism, Citizenship, and the Spectacle of Democracy in American Film and Television, 1973-2016

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Neoliberalism, Citizenship, and the Spectacle of Democracy in American Film and Television, 1973-2016

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Film and Television

by

Alice Elizabeth Royer

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Neoliberalism, Citizenship, and the Spectacle of Democracy

in American Film and Television, 1973-2016

by

Alice Elizabeth Royer

Doctor of Philosophy in Film and Television

University of California, Los Angeles, 2018

Professor William McDonald, Co-Chair

Professor Johanna R Drucker, Co-Chair

This dissertation examines American films, miniseries, and television shows that center on the democratic process, mobilizing it in the service of stories that both provide intense narrative and visual pleasures, and offer satisfaction in the form of apparent knowledge gained about the inner workings of electoral politics in the United States; these media texts are here theorized as "democracy porn." Significantly, democracy porn emerges alongside neoliberalism, and its proliferation mirrors that ideology's meteoric rise to prominence. As such, the dissertation considers texts made since the advent of neoliberalism in 1973, and up to the US presidential election of 2016, which marks a major shift in the meanings and values associated with democracy porn. Through historical, textual, and discourse analysis drawing on critical theories of affect, citizenship, and neoliberalism, the dissertation interrogates the complex ways in which democracy porn is constructed and functions within and surrounding moving image

texts. The project thus tracks the ways neoliberal ideology manifests in the media texts in question, as well as how the consumption of these texts impacts viewers' understandings of their own citizenship within a democracy increasingly steered by neoliberal principles. The project brings cultural critiques of neoliberalism—particularly of its impact on democracy and citizenship in the United States—into the disciplinary realm of cinema and media studies. This approach constitutes an intervention for the field, as analyses of neoliberalism within cinema and media studies have tended to approach the topic from an industrial standpoint. Ultimately, the dissertation seeks to begin answering the question: How is democracy porn symptomatic of the erosion of possibilities for democracy within the context of neoliberalism?

The dissertation of Alice Elizabeth Royer is approved.

John T. Caldwell

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2018

For my mom, Ginny Lee

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VITA

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Introduction:
Democracy Porn

> *Lincoln* is democracy porn trussed up in Spielbergian schmaltz.
> I fucking loved it.
>
> - Lindy West, *Jezebel.com*[1]

In her review of *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), author Lindy West uses the term democracy porn and goes on to describe the film as, "A wonky political procedural about the mad scramble to pass the 13th amendment"—a characterization that might better place it in a dry high school civics class than in the explosion- and CGI-laden multiplexes of 2012. But West does not pine for the ever-more-impressive special effects that justify ever-more-expensive ticket prices in today's cinema-going culture, because what she ultimately "fucking loves" about *Lincoln* is precisely what she perceives as its success in making the minutiae of the American democratic process—for lack of a better word—sexy. West's pithy description does considerable theoretical work. For, describing *Lincoln* as "democracy porn trussed up in Spielbergian schmaltz" presupposes both that "democracy porn" is a coherent category, and that this categorization lies at *Lincoln's* core as a text. "Porn" here operates in its recent colloquial usage as an associative suffix ("food porn," "torture porn") that points to a spectacular and pleasurable depiction of the word it modifies; combining democracy with porn in this way thus implies that the pleasures offered by *Lincoln*—including, but not limited to, those of reveling in the processes of democracy—approach the level of positive intensity commonly associated with sex. But how can a deep dive into the minutiae of a system notoriously tedious in its machinations arouse such

[1] Lindy West, "Democracy Porn Trussed Up in Spielbergian Schmaltz: I Fucking Love *Lincoln,*" *Jezebel.com,* November 9, 2012, http://jezebel.com/5959195/democracy-porn-trussed-up-in-spielbergian-schmaltz-i-fucking-love-lincoln.

affects? And if West is not alone in her response to *Lincoln*, what might such responses suggest about viewers' relationships with American democracy and their own places within it? To begin answering those questions, this dissertation aims to analyze *Lincoln* and other examples of democracy porn at the levels of both text and consumption, and as situated within their broader sociohistorical contexts. While examples of democracy porn can be found across several decades, its emergence is, significantly, coincident with the rise of neoliberalism in the United States and its proliferation mirrors that ideology's meteoric rise to prominence. Interrogating the relationship between neoliberal ideology and texts that can be described as democracy porn is a defining goal of this dissertation project.

As I intend to articulate it, democracy porn is a discourse that meticulously and spectacularly depicts the American democratic process through narrative, and, despite encompassing a broad spectrum of democratic visions ranging from comically ameliorative—as in *Swing Vote* (Stern, 2008)—to deeply cynical—as in *Veep* (Iannucci, 2012-2017)—ultimately serves to make normal neoliberalism's incursions on democracy.[2] By meticulousness, I mean the great extent to which democracy porn breaks the democratic process down into its constituent parts, the kind of attention to detail that led West to describe *Lincoln* as a "wonky political procedural." *Lincoln,* though, is but one example of myriad contemporary American films, miniseries, and television shows that center on the democratic process, mobilizing it in the service of stories that both provide intense narrative and visual pleasures, and offer satisfaction

[2] I use spectacle literally here, to mean, "A person or thing exhibited to, or set before, the public gaze as an object either *(a)* of curiosity or contempt, or *(b)* of marvel or admiration," but my understanding of the role of spectacle in democracy porn also follows Guy Debord. In *Society of the Spectacle,* Debord argues, "The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images" (12). This quote neatly encapsulates Debord's elaboration of spectacle's pervasiveness within capitalism, an argument at the core of my desire to unpack democracy porn as a discourse beyond the confines of the media texts themselves.

in the form of apparent knowledge gained about the inner workings of American democracy. Other examples of democracy porn include films such as *The American President* (Reiner, 1995), *Primary Colors* (Nichols, 1998), and *Game Change* (Roach, 2012), miniseries such as *John Adams* (Hooper, 2008) and *Tanner '88* (Altman, 1988), and television shows such as *The West Wing* (Sorkin, 1999-2006), *Scandal* (Rhimes, 2012-2018), and *Alpha House* (Trudeau, 2013-2014). Throughout the dissertation, I track the ways neoliberalism manifests in the media texts in question, as well as how the consumption of these texts impacts viewers' understandings of citizenship within a democracy increasingly steered by neoliberal principles. Ultimately, my hope is that this examination will begin to answer the larger question: How is democracy porn symptomatic of the erosion of possibilities for democracy within the context of neoliberalism?

Two major goals of the dissertation are to ask how media texts that can be described as democracy porn work in relation to neoliberal values and principles, and how these texts contribute to viewers' understandings of their own citizenship within a neoliberal democracy. For example, an entire episode of *The West Wing* (Season 5, Episode 19, "Talking Points") centers on President Bartlet's support of a deregulatory international trade deal that, if implemented, would immediately result in the loss of thousands of American jobs. Key members of Bartlet's staff seriously question whether the benefits of the deal outweigh the costs, but debate is futile given the President's economic expertise (he is a Nobel Prize-winning economist), which emerges as a trump card that requires no explanation beyond "It's complicated." In other words, *The West Wing* literally enacts a debate about neoliberal deregulation in this episode, ultimately coming down in favor of the free market without offering a compelling case for its promised long-term success. *The West Wing* is famous for narrativizing policy debates of this nature, which emerges as a major reason why its fan base has and

continues to be so enthusiastic about the show. Thus, in addition to unpacking examples like the one described above, this dissertation project attempts to understand how democracy porn impacts ways viewers think about their own lives as American citizens. In response to "Talking Points," for example, a commenter on review site MarkWatches.net notes, "Josh keeps trying to get Bartlet to stop speaking like an economics professor when he talks about free trade…But Bartlet knows that it's not that simple – something that Josh learns by the end of the episode."[3] Again, the pitfalls of the deregulated market come up here, but Bartlet's authority on the matter appears to have convinced this particular viewer that a freer market serves the interests of most Americans—and further that the economy is too complicated for ordinary people to understand.[4] In analyzing both the media texts in question and viewers' responses to them, my aim is to better understand the role democracy porn plays in its sociohistorical moment(s), and whether or how its proliferation is symptomatic of the inherent tension between democracy and neoliberalism. This project is now more vital than ever as the culture of neoliberalism has proliferated, becoming ever more intimately bound up with democracy since the 1990s, serving to, as many scholars argue, intensify its upwardly redistributive work, thereby further dismantling the material conditions of everyday life for an ever-growing population of already disenfranchised Americans.

Methodologically, the project uses textual analysis to offer close readings of narrative, formal, and intertextual elements in an effort to unpack the complex ways in which democracy porn operates within the films, miniseries, and television shows themselves. On a macro level,

[3] IneptLurker, 29 January 2014, comment on Mark Oshiro, "Mark Watches 'The West Wing': S05E19 – Talking Points," *Mark Watches,* 29 January 2014, http://markwatches.net/reviews/2014/01/mark-watches-the-west-wing-s05e19-talking-points/.

[4] For a more detailed analysis of "Talking Points," see chapter two below.

such analysis also serves to map the contours and defining features of democracy porn in order to both sketch its limits and draw connections between its formal qualities and capacity to produce powerful affects. Textual analysis is thus crucial in identifying and exploring the ways in which democracy, neoliberalism, citizenship, and their intersections are represented in the media texts, as well as providing links to the broader forces that inform their representations and the conceptions of democratic citizenship held by viewers.

Branching off from the media texts themselves, I use discourse analysis to examine an array of paratexts that operate in tandem with the moving image media in the construction and maintenance of democracy porn as a discourse. Such analysis draws on a variety of evidence ranging from reviews and popular criticism to Amazon user comments to Tweets and other forms of publicly accessible social networking content. Discourse analysis is crucial in isolating viewers' affective relations to the media texts in order to build a clearer understanding of the meanings and values democracy porn holds for viewers in relation to their own understandings of democratic citizenship. Thus, while these methodological strategies work together, textual analysis will address the construction and circulation of meanings and values that constitute democracy porn *inside* the films and television shows, while discourse analysis will consider such constructions and circulation *outside* the texts, as experienced by individual viewers in their everyday lives.

The films, mini-series, and television shows under scrutiny serve as primary evidence for my study. Other primary evidence will include production and publicity materials, reviews, popular criticism, Amazon user comments, blog posts, Tweets, and other publicly accessible social networking content surrounding the media texts under consideration. To support conclusions drawn from my examination of the primary evidence, secondary evidence includes

extant literature critiquing neoliberalism in the United States and the role of affect in public culture, particularly as each relates to the functioning of actually existing democracy. These secondary bodies of literature provide the critical apparatus by which I assess the values and meanings located in the media texts themselves.

Because democracy porn arises alongside neoliberalism, I officially begin my study in 1973, the year David Harvey cites as the start of neoliberal policy-making.[5] However, while there are a handful of examples of democracy porn in fictional film and television in the 1970s and 1980s—*All the President's Men* (Pakula, 1976), *Kennedy* (Gadney, 1983), and *Tanner '88* (Altman, 1988), to name a few—its production gains significant momentum in the 1990s. This surge makes sense when considered in relation to neoliberalism's ascendance in the United States. For, numerous critics and scholars cite the so-called "Washington Consensus" of the 1990s—Bill Clinton's election as president in 1992 in particular—as the moment at which neoliberalism became a new orthodoxy for both major political parties in the United States.[6] I use the term neoliberalism to refer to both the political economic theory that privileges free trade, open markets, and minimal state intervention, as well as the more diffuse cultural logic related to those tenets, which I will explain in greater detail below. It is also worth noting that there are films before the neoliberal period that have much in common with democracy porn, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Capra, 1939) key among them. However, while *Mr. Smith* does offer a

[5] Specifically, Harvey cites the US-backed coup in which Augusto Pinochet overthrew the democratically elected administration of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973 as the first experiment in neoliberal state formation. See Harvey, "Freedom's Just Another Word…" in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5-38.

[6] For more discussion of the Washington Consensus as a tipping point in neoliberalism's ascendance, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), and Joseph E. Stiglitz, *The Roaring Nineties: A New History of the World's Most Prosperous Decade* (New York: Norton, 2003).

detailed, behind the scenes account of the legislative process in Congress, it ultimately presents the populist—in other words, not liberal in the classical sense, nor of course neoliberal—message that the Washington political machine cannot squelch the spirit of an ordinary American and extraordinary citizen like Jefferson Smith, whose commitment to our nation's founding democratic principles compel a corrupt Senator whose bottom line is the accumulation of capital to both attempt suicide and confess his unethical behavior to the packed Senate chamber.[7]

The critique of neoliberalism by media political economists has been well under way for the past two decades in the work of scholars such as Robert McChesney, Herbert Schiller, Thomas Streeter, and Jennifer Holt, who have devoted considerable attention to the neoliberal market model insofar as it has impacted ownership in media.[8] Yet, these sound critiques of media ownership and deregulation disarticulate economics from culture; they do not address the textual dynamics related to a shift to a neoliberal media economy, nor do they consider the way those textual dynamics fit into larger ecosystems of subject production, including individual notions of citizenship. Democracy porn, however, necessarily combines cultural impacts of neoliberalism with economic ones, both because its cultural texts are produced in a neoliberal media economy, and because it consists of representations of the democratic process that are inhabited by neoliberal ideology. Not averse to nor agents of neoliberalism, representations of politics in film and television often prove to be both, frequently demonstrating an acute

[7] For further discussion of populism in films of the 1930s, see my account of *The Big Tomorrow* beginning on page 24 in the literature review below.

[8] For more discussion of neoliberalism and the political economy of media, see, for example, Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), Robert McChesney, *Corporate Media and the Threat to Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997), McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), Herbert Schiller, *Culture, Inc.: The Corporate Takeover of Public Expression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), and Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air: a Critique of the Policy of Commercial Broadcasting in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

awareness of and ambivalence about the issues media political economists have been investigating in relation to neoliberalism; yet no scholarship has attended to the fact that this critique itself is being played out on screen for media consumers. The work on media political economy discussed above will be part of the critical apparatus by which I analyze democracy porn, especially insofar as it offers insight into production contexts of the texts in question. However, my project largely seeks to investigate neoliberalism as it manifests within media texts, and to consider how viewers respond to it through discourse analysis with a focus on user-created content.

I thus locate my dissertation project as an intended cognate to work on political economy of media production, a parallel investigation of neoliberalism and media that assesses the former's impact on the textual practices of mainstream films and television shows about electoral politics, as well as the way those media texts operate within the broader landscape of material conditions of life produced and maintained within neoliberal democracy in the United States.[9] Further, following the work of political and cultural theorists such as Lisa Duggan, Michel Foucault, Nancy Fraser, and Wendy Brown, my project seeks to reintegrate culture and economics in analyses of neoliberalism and media. In *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (2003), Duggan argues that we cannot understand neoliberalism as purely a set of pro-business economic policies because, "The *economy* cannot be transparently abstracted from the *state* and the *family,* from practices of racial apartheid, gender segmentation, or sexual regulation."[10] Duggan's critique of neoliberalism here

[9] I borrow my understanding of political economy from Vincent Mosco, who, in *The Political Economy of Communication,* describes it as "the study of social relations, particularly power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (24).

[10] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), xiv.

concretizes the interrelatedness of economics and culture, leading her to propose that the progressive-left cannot succeed politically until it stops reproducing false binaries—economic vs. cultural, universal vs. identity-based, distribution vs. recognition-oriented—within its own ranks. My own investigation uses Duggan's work on neoliberalism as a critical apparatus to explore the intersections of neoliberalism and democracy specifically as represented in democracy porn, asking questions such as: How and to what extent are marginalized groups included in the democratic process within democracy porn's diegeses? And, do the media texts in my corpus abstract cultural issues from economic ones, as in the extant literature on political economy of media and, as Duggan argues, in progressive-left activism?

Scandal (Rhimes, 2012-2018), ABC's hit series about White House Communications Director-turned-head "fixer" at her own crisis management firm Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), serves as a rich text for my project in many ways, the ways in which neoliberal ideology inhabits its textual and extra-textual worlds key among them. In the fictional Washington, D.C. imagined on *Scandal*, the corridors of power under President Fitzgerald Grant's Republican administration apparently do not see vectors of difference such as gender, race, or sexuality, allowing for the African American Ms. Pope to be both the White House Communications Director and the (white) President's mistress, and for the openly gay Cyrus Beene (Jeff Perry) to be the President's Chief of Staff. In this same world, Pope and her employees—"Gladiators," as they call themselves—are constantly positioned as the only staff in Washington, D.C. capable of ensuring that our democracy remains functional. While *Scandal*'s moral universe is much murkier than this brief description implies, it is nonetheless one in which many high-ranking elected officials in the United States Government outsource their problems to a private contractor, one of many neoliberal imprints on *Scandal*'s world, which also largely

ignores the ways in which difference—such as Olivia's race and Cyrus' sexuality—would be relevant in its characters' lives. Critical theories of neoliberalism put forth by Duggan and others prove extremely useful in unpacking examples such as this one, as well as consumers' responses to them, as evidenced throughout the dissertation.

Duggan, for example, isolates two key terms, *privatization* and *personal responsibility,* as central to understanding the many intersections between the culture of neoliberalism and its economic vision.[11] In its concomitant rhetoric, these terms are used to position neoliberal policies as the common sense means by which to expand collective freedoms and increase wealth for all; Duggan argues, however, that the terms actually serve to elide the ways neoliberal policies perpetuate systematic oppression based on vectors of difference along with well-documented processes of upward redistribution. Such processes are significant for Duggan because they work to "[Shrink] the scope of equality and democratic public life dramatically," and decreasing opportunities for those disproportionately disenfranchised along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality to combat the proliferation of neoliberal policies.[12] Duggan further argues that progressive politics with downwardly redistributive goals have been displaced by efforts toward a multicultural egalitarianism that promotes limited forms of inclusion without redressing material inequalities. What, then, of *Scandal*'s multicultural egalitarian White House and its depiction of a *private* citizen taking *personal responsibility* for myriad problems that democracy cannot seem to solve? I attempt to work through those questions and many more relating to *Scandal*'s role in public discourse in chapter two.

[11] Ibid., 12.

[12] Ibid., 13.

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser's work on neoliberalism also proves helpful in making sense of *Scandal* and other media texts in my corpus. In *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (1997), Fraser, like Duggan after her, argues for the reintegration of economics and culture in the left's struggle to reduce inequalities produced under neoliberalism. Slightly mediated, I deploy one concept in particular—Fraser's discussion of affirmative versus transformative remedies—to analyze the social projects enacted in the narratives of democracy porn. As Fraser explains, affirmative remedies, exemplified by mainstream multiculturalism, attempt to correct inequities "without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them," whereas transformative remedies such as deconstruction of both language and social institutions aim to "correct inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework."[13] In her own analysis, Fraser ultimately comes down in favor of transformative remedies, arguing that they more comprehensively combat injustices at their roots, rather than merely their symptoms. While Fraser's binary logic here verges on overly schematic (certainly remedies exist on a more complex spectrum than these two options imagine), her discussion of affirmative and transformative remedies is a useful hermeneutic for my analysis of democracy porn, raising questions about, for example, *Scandal*'s imagined world of a multiculturally-inclusive Republican White House, and the broader question of whether a transformative remedy could reasonably be represented in democracy porn's mainstream texts.

Unlike Fraser and Duggan, David Harvey, in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), discusses neoliberalism as a purely economic project. Though articulating a notion of neoliberalism divergent from the one to which I largely subscribe in this dissertation, Harvey provides a useful framework for understanding how neoliberalism's upward redistribution of

[13] Fraser, 23.

wealth operates. In keeping with the broader field of critiques of neoliberalism, Harvey asserts that "The main substantive achievement of neoliberalization…has been to redistribute, rather than to generate, wealth and income," and goes further to articulate "accumulation by dispossession" as the process by which such redistribution is achieved. Harvey's explanation here constitutes a veritable toolbox for analysis of neoliberalism's manifestations in democracy porn.[14] "Accumulation by dispossession," according to Harvey, comprises four main features: privatization and commodification, financialization, the management and manipulation of crises, and state redistribution.[15] As the neoliberal processes Harvey explicates are represented in democracy porn, his analysis is useful throughout the dissertation in considering how such practices are transformed into narrative, broken down into their constituent parts, and spectacularized (or not) within the media texts I examine.

While each approaches it from a different theoretical and disciplinary position, all of the critics discussed above agree that neoliberalism and democracy exist in a fundamental state of tension, and locating that tension within democracy porn and its viewership is a key task of my dissertation project. Harvey, for example, argues that neoliberalism is skeptical of democracy in both theory and practice, preferring governance by elites to that of elected representatives by and of the people. Indeed, given the primacy of the deregulated market in neoliberal thought, there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of a neoliberal state—regardless of who is running it. This paradox has not stopped neoliberals from harnessing state power to their advantage, though. Rather, Harvey argues, in the US, it has led to a reconfiguration of judicial, electoral and representative state institutions coupled with a rise in neoconservatism, which reconciles the

[14] Harvey, 159.

[15] Ibid., 160-165.

authoritarianism neoliberalism requires to maintain *market* freedoms with its ideals of *individual* freedoms (here in line with those of the Christian right). One thread of this dissertation tracks the evidence (or conspicuous absence) of the shifts in democratic governance that Harvey claims result from the rise of neoliberalism as they manifest in democracy porn in an effort to better understand the broader ecosystem of forces that produce and maintain the material conditions of contemporary life in the United States; further, I identify some ways these media texts impact viewers' understandings of democratic citizenship as evidenced in discourses surrounding the films examined in my study.

Again, I understand neoliberalism as both the political economic theory that privileges free trade, open markets, and minimal state intervention as well as the broader cultural logic related to those ideals. Such a view attempts to account for the many significant ways neoliberal ideology resonates beyond the economic sphere to reconfigure notions of class, race, gender, and sexuality, in turn facilitating a massive concentration and upward redistribution of wealth. While numerous political and cultural theorists have interrogated the relationship between democracy and neoliberalism—many, such as those discussed above, coming to the consensus that the two are fundamentally incompatible—no such work exists within the field of cinema and media studies. And while there is a growing body of thought on the ways neoliberalism has impacted media at the industrial level, little has been written about its textual manifestations in moving image media. By exploring the relationship between democracy and neoliberalism as represented in democracy porn, my project seeks to begin filling this gap.

Examining the role democracy porn plays in the everyday lives of its viewers will be crucial to understanding it as a phenomenon that rises alongside neoliberalism in the United States. Another major task of my project, then, will be to interrogate the affective relational

qualities of the media texts in question, or the way individual consumers experience them. For their fans, the films, miniseries, and television shows that can be described as democracy porn, like their literally pornographic brethren, elicit powerful affective engagements that exceed interactions with the texts themselves. With pornography, such affects frequently take form in masturbation, which offers a clear method by which they may be resolved and diffused, at least temporarily. Accordingly, I ask: what shape do analogous excessive affects take as produced by democracy porn? Further, where might they be channeled, and to what ends?

To clarify how I mobilize affect throughout the dissertation, I will return to the review of *Lincoln* with which I began this introduction. West's second sentence—"I fucking loved it"—suggests that her viewing experience of *Lincoln* was not a middling one. Her word choice is instructive here: she does not just love *Lincoln,* she "fucking loves" it. Like the "porn" of democracy porn in West's previous sentence, "fucking" is not used literally, but rather as an adjectival intensification of West's declaration of love for *Lincoln.* Its literal meaning, however, also resonates in such close proximity to the word porn, imbuing West's love with a sexualized and aggressive tone that suggests a more complex interaction with the film than explicitly articulated in the words themselves. Taken together, West's response to *Lincoln* indicates that something about its status not as a Spielberg film, nor as a film starring Daniel Day-Lewis, nor even a film about Abraham Lincoln, but *as democracy porn* has created an excess of affective engagement for the author. That such excess manifests in the words "fucking loved" is telling, and understanding how such affects function is a major goal of this dissertation project.

In *Lincoln*, subplots detailing the Lincoln family's personal lives (Mary Todd's mental health, Robert's desire to fight in the Civil War, Tad's grief over the death of his brother William, Abraham's role as a husband and father) and several other key players are interwoven

with the larger narrative following the legislative ground game to pass the 13th amendment. This narrative construction lends itself to affects that circulate subterraneously, moving freely between the way we feel about the characters and the way we feel about the political process, thus conflating affective relations to interpersonal relationships with those linked to citizenship. This process in *Lincoln* is exemplary of the unique way in which democracy porn more broadly fosters affective engagements with character-driven plots alongside wonkish stories detailing the minutiae of the democratic process. My study interrogates such affective engagements in order to understand the always already political relationships between and among people, things, and ideas, with a specific focus on viewers' understandings of democratic citizenship. In this approach, affect proves to be a nuanced tool for understanding the complicated, frequently contradictory ways we engage with the world. Such nuance stands in contradistinction to ideology, which attempts to map subject positions onto predetermined vectors of difference as conceived through identity politics.

My understanding of affect is aligned with one of the major camps formed in the recent "affective turn" in scholarship, which Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar describe as "invested in how concepts like affect, emotion, and feelings aid in comprehending subject-formation and political oppositionality for an age when neoliberal capital has reduced possibilities for collective political praxis."[16] Lauren Berlant's work, which is exemplary of this strain in affect theory, is especially instructive for my project. In her book, *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant considers how the "crisis ordinariness" she views as characteristic of late capitalism manifests in cruelly optimistic relations wherein, "The thing you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might

[16] Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar, "Affect," *Social Text* 100 (Fall 2009), 37.

involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project."[17] *Cruel Optimism* merges two major theoretical discourses—historical materialism and affect—and marks a significant intervention in Berlant's hands, as she illuminates the ways in which they may be mutually constituting: materialism concretely politicizing affect, and affect allowing her to address the complex ways in which material conditions can manifest in individual bodies and feelings.

In my project, I take Berlant's understanding of affect—which, again, centers on the way feelings work toward subject formation and may or may not be harnessed toward political resistance—and put it into productive conversation with notions of democracy, neoliberalism, and citizenship as they relate to democracy porn. As neoliberalism works to restructure the relationship between public and private life, privileging privatization and dismantling collectivity whenever possible, the natures of both democracy and citizenship are also necessarily in flux. Many critics, including Duggan and Fraser, have likened the nature of citizenship under neoliberalism to the role of the consumer transacting in a marketplace. If we understand citizenship as the status of being a citizen and its accompanying rights and privileges, the rights and privileges of the neoliberal "consumer citizen" can be boiled down to the ability to support policies based on what appears to make the most business sense at an individual level. Because questions of citizenship have historically been theorized through the deployment of ideology and identity politics, my hope is that using affect in such an endeavor will add to and complicate previous work in a way that proves useful in understanding the intricacies of our public and private lives as citizens while also adding to existing critiques of the neoliberal construction of a "consumer citizen."

[17] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 1.

Again, my dissertation mobilizes affective relations—largely as drawn from viewers' responses to the media texts in the form of user reviews, blogs, and social networking content—to explore larger questions of citizenship related to democracy porn. Central among these questions are: How is citizenship represented in the media texts, especially relative to portrayals of the democratic process? What role does neoliberal discourse play in these representations? How do the notions of democracy and democratic citizenship represented within the media texts affect viewers' perceptions of their own lives as citizens? And further, for whom do these texts offer salient notions of citizenship? My hope is that using affect as a tool to explore democratic citizenship within neoliberalism will move my study beyond an examination of media's role in mirroring the context in which it is produced, though that task remains vital to my project and scholarship more broadly. Ultimately, by using these investigatory tools to make sense of a body of films, miniseries, and television shows that are doing similar textual and cultural work, my dissertation contributes to diverse areas of thought including studies of neoliberalism and affect, as well as, of course, cinema and media studies.

Having described the major concepts I mobilize in my analysis of democracy porn, it will now be useful to further delimit democracy porn as a discourse in an effort to clarify the evidentiary boundaries of my study. Democracy porn presents meticulous—detailed, processural, fetishistic—depictions of the democratic process through which viewers are granted behind-the-scenes access to the way governing happens in the United States. This may mean a portrayal of lawmakers mobilizing obscure procedural rules or finding legislative loopholes, it might be an exploration of the extra-democratic politicking and backroom deals that float in the popular imagination but are infrequently concretized in mainstream political discourse, or it could manifest simply in a depiction of the day-to-day tasks involved in elections and legislation that

may not be immediately obvious to the public. In any case, democracy porn's characteristic representation of the democratic process allows us to see a vast spectrum of activities that go into the elections and legislation that make up the American democratic process, much like hard core pornography provides visual access to an extensive range of sexual activity. For reasons I will attempt to unpack throughout the dissertation, this (imagined) access is one of the main sources of pleasure (positive affects) engendered by democracy porn.

If a meticulous representation of the democratic process were the only defining feature of democracy porn, it would follow that C-SPAN's comprehensive coverage of legislative goings on could be considered part of the discourse; but this is not the case. For democracy porn is also characterized by a spectacular and narrativized representation of electoral and legislative processes. In other words, like pornography, democracy porn allows us to take pleasure in what feels like surreptitious or illicit viewing—what it really took to get that bill passed or with whom that senator is really having a closed-door meeting—and presents it to us in a way that has a clear beginning, middle, and end; the mundanity, publicness, and ongoingness intrinsic to C-SPAN's coverage of the legislative process do not produce the same kinds of excessive affective engagements essential to democracy porn, as evinced in West's review of *Lincoln* above. Democracy porn, by contrast, takes something akin to C-SPAN's otherwise dry and tedious subject matter and sexes it up with the high production values, exciting plot twists, and identificatory character arcs that the Hollywood machine has been honing since its inception.

Because of its complex relationship with the role of democratic citizenship, democracy porn, and by extension my corpus of media texts, is further delimited by its explicit focus on the electoral elements of American democracy. Films that narrativize the inner workings of government agencies and institutions to which civil servants are appointed rather than elected are

not within the parameters of democracy porn. Accordingly, media texts about the CIA, FBI, and the criminal justice system are not included in my study because these agencies operate under a different rubric of citizen accountability than their institutional counterparts that are populated by elected representatives. Democracy porn is thus unique among media texts that are ostensibly about politics for its meticulous yet spectacular narrative depiction of the way the day-to-day business of the nation (or town, or city, or state) is conducted vis-à-vis the democratic tenet of self-governance. As such, democracy porn also raises important questions about the role of citizenship in contemporary neoliberal democracy, which I interrogate at the levels of text (how neoliberalism manifests within the narratives), and consumption (how viewers experience their own lives as citizens living under neoliberal democracy). Through such an investigation, I seek to articulate what makes democracy porn distinct in relation to the larger field of media about politics—which has heretofore remained inscrutable within cinema and media studies, as I will discuss below—and to better understand the constellation of forces that coalesce to produce and maintain democracy porn as a discourse within the context of neoliberalism.

Though democracy porn represents a relatively small percentage of the larger field of media about politics, it still encompasses diverse narrative and thematic elements, which are unified by their meticulous, fetishistic, and spectacular depictions of the democratic process.[18] Nevertheless, certain key components stand out as crucial for understanding how democracy porn operates, as well as how and why it constructs its characteristic representations of democracy in the context of neoliberalism. My project is thus organized by three major thematic

[18] It is also worth noting that, despite the relatively small number of media texts that can be categorized as democracy porn, the corpus has a certain caché about it, a tradition of quality; many of the films, miniseries, and television shows in question are peppered with A-list talent both on- and off-screen, are produced by big name companies (notably HBO), and are hailed as critical darlings. They are frequently treated as "media events," and considered required viewing for a certain milieu. In my project, I aim to investigate how these features interact with the texts in question and their reception.

groupings that emerge as defining features of democracy porn's fictional, narrative media texts. They are: the electoral process, the legislative process, and the representation of real historical events. I devote a chapter to exploring each of these major themes as they all raise distinct questions that illuminate democracy porn and its contexts in different ways. Following a survey of relevant literature within the field of cinema and media studies, I will introduce key questions relating to each theme and further explain the logic of the dissertation's structure in the chapter outline below.

This dissertation explores democracy porn as it manifests in fictional, narrative films, miniseries, and television shows, but the discourse can also be located outside of fictional media. Nonfiction media such as biographies of major political figures, documentaries and cable news coverage about elections, and wide swaths of programming slates from networks like the History Channel and PBS can also be understood as democracy porn. As such, my project does not intend to offer a comprehensive analysis of democracy porn. Rather, it seeks to understand the discourse as it manifests in mainstream, fictional films, miniseries, and television shows produced in and about the United States. In so doing, my hope is to begin understanding how and why democracy porn operates as a discourse specifically within these texts and narrative forms. What, in other words, can fictionalized narrative representations of the democratic process do that nonfictional texts, journalism, and popular discourse cannot? That said, a comprehensive analysis of democracy porn as it manifests in mainstream, fictional media texts necessarily includes discussions of some paratextual materials that do not fall within those parameters but that can nonetheless be described as democracy porn. For example, "Life and Times of Abraham Lincoln," a 2013 exhibition at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, told the story of Abraham Lincoln's legislative life while billing itself as a space "where Hollywood meets history." The

exhibit featured original artifacts gathered from collectors around the country displayed alongside sets and costumes from the film *Lincoln.* Such juxtaposition raises myriad questions, not least of which concerning the relationships between the film, the exhibit, and Ronald Reagan's significant role in the proliferation of both neoliberal thought and policymaking.

Films explicitly about the political process have been undertheorized in cinema studies, in part because they do not constitute a coherent body of work. Such media texts have historically brought together tropes and addressed themes from many genres, often using politics as a backdrop for stories of suspense, intrigue, or scandal while avoiding a meaningful engagement with how and why electoral politics operate the way they do. Consider, for example, American politics as seen through the action-packed, life-or-death experiences of President James Marshall (Harrison Ford) in *Air Force One* (Peterson, 1997), versus their depiction in the fast-talking, high-minded world of President Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas) in *The American President.* While the former film certainly confronts anxieties that may be relevant to American politics in the real world—namely, terrorism—it does not approach them in a way that specifically highlights the role of the democratic *process* in resolving those fears. In *The American President,* on the other hand, every element of the narrative—including the romance between President Shepherd and lobbyist Sydney Ellen Wade (Annette Bening)—is driven by the very laborious process of gathering the votes necessary to get aggressive environmental legislation passed through Congress. This focus on the role of the democratic process in working out complex social phenomena, as in *The American President,* is a defining feature of democracy porn, but not central to films about politics more broadly.

While scholars have rightly paid considerable attention to questions of politics in cinema, surprisingly little has been written about representations of electoral politics in cinema, and no

substantive work exists on representations of the *democratic process* in moving image media. The small amount of extant literature on politics in film and television frequently takes the form of major surveys that attempt to bring together disjointed bodies of media texts, preventing their authors from making nuanced arguments that go beyond describing the ways the texts mirror their contexts of production. This dissertation thus constitutes an intervention in cinema and media studies for its manageable scope—looking exclusively at media texts that center on particular depictions of the process of American democracy in action during the neoliberal period—and its specific approach to the films, miniseries, and television shows in question—one that accounts for viewers' affective engagements with these texts, including interactions that do not neatly map onto the ideas presented in the texts themselves.

Of scholarship that does interrogate the relationship between politics and film, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner's *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (1988) offers perhaps the most comprehensive precedent. In it, the authors attempt to chart the socially, culturally, and politically tumultuous time in the United States between 1967 and their present moment as manifested in Hollywood film. The authors also articulate the myriad identity-based discourses circulating in the 1970s and 1980s to analogous representations in Hollywood films of the time. Though it does not exclusively focus on texts featuring depictions of political processes in the electoral or legislative senses, *Camera Politica* is useful here for its methodological precedent, which discusses and articulates film texts to their contexts while also accounting the role of spectatorship, albeit minimally.

Slightly more akin to my own efforts here, *American Politics in Hollywood Film* by Ian Scott considers the American political project as inscribed exclusively within films that focus directly on American politics. The book, which discusses films across a whole spectrum of sub-

genres that fall under the umbrella of "political films," attempts, unsurprisingly, to unpack the relationship between American politics and Hollywood film. However, Scott's large scope and broad understanding of political films as a genre—which brings together titles as diverse as *The Candidate* (Ritchie, 1972)*, The X-Files* (Carter, 1993-2002)*,* and *American Dreamz* (Weitz, 2006)—limits his ability to craft a persuasive argument beyond the truism that American politics and Hollywood film are related to one another. Michael Coyne's *Hollywood Goes to Washington: American Politics on Screen*, the only other book-length study of electoral politics in cinema to date, takes on a similarly broad and incoherent group of films and thus fails to illuminate their significance with any nuance. In limiting my study of politics in film and television to texts that can be described as democracy porn, my dissertation attempts to probe deeper and illuminate more complex ideas about how these films, mini-series, and television shows function both on their own and within their broader cultural and sociopolitical contexts.

As I will discuss in more depth in the chapter outline below, analyzing the role of history is crucial to understanding how democracy porn operates in its contemporary moment(s); the 1930s in particular emerge as a flashpoint for democracy porn's understanding of history. The bulk of literature in cinema studies on representations of electoral politics in film looks farther into the past, some of which proves useful to my own contemporary project. Two books that consider the relationship between Hollywood film and mid-twentieth century liberalism, Lary May's *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (2000) and John Bodnar's *Blue-collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film* (2003), offer insight into the relationship between politics and Hollywood film in the 1930s in particular. In *The Big Tomorrow,* Lary May offers a compelling counterhistory of Hollywood film's relationship to cultural politics in the United States from the 1930s to the 1960s. His

account complicates the popular materialist assertion that classical Hollywood films cannot ideologically rise above the corporate capitalist conditions of their production, positioning the films instead as sites of struggle in which questions about the very notion of what constitutes an American politics were being worked out. In particular, May contends that films from the 1930s tended to promote the values of a "producer's democracy" in which citizens from the country and the city came together around an increasingly inclusive idea of self-governance that resisted monopoly capitalism. *The Big Tomorrow* offers some useful concepts for my study of democracy porn. Most significantly, that May does successfully locate forms of resistance in the Hollywood model is a cogent reminder not to dismiss mainstream cultural texts outright.

Blue-Collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film by John Bodnar overlaps with *The Big Tomorrow's* periodization considerably (Bodnar's work begins in the 1930s and goes into the 1980s), and shares Hollywood film as its central object of study, but Bodnar's text has a much more specific focus—on representations of working people in film. In it, Bodnar presents Hollywood film as the site of a "matrix of multiple meanings," and aims to account for the cultural resonance of frequently contradictory figures ranging from Tom Joad in *The Grapes of Wrath* (Ford, 1940) to Travis Bickle in *Taxi Driver* (Scorsese, 1976). Bodnar's discussion of the 1930s, like May's, proves most relevant for my purposes. As Bodnar sees it, the 1930s was a time when the inherent tensions between democracy's ideal of governance by the people as a collective and liberalism's commitment to individual freedoms were on full display both in politics and culture. Though the films do not resolve such contestations, Bodnar argues, they tended to side more with liberalism than with democracy. We can locate another productive tension between May's account of Hollywood in the 1930s and Bodnar's: the former arguing that democratic populism reigned in that period, the latter

tentatively declaring that liberal individualism had the representational upper hand. The 1930s are invoked periodically in democracy porn—perhaps in ways that eschew these tensions altogether—albeit with a heightened neoliberal understanding of individualism standing in for that of liberalism, and I explore what it signals in these texts at key moments throughout the dissertation.

As discussed briefly above, the chapters of this dissertation are organized around the three major thematic components that emerge as defining features of democracy porn: the electoral process, the legislative process, and the representation of real historical events. Some of the media texts I examine enfold more than one of these components, so the same film, miniseries, or television show does occasionally come up in more than one chapter. The chapters do, however, remain discrete, as exploring each of the thematic elements illuminates the corpus in different ways.

Chapter one focuses on films and television shows that take political campaigns and elections as their central narratives. These texts position the process of running for office and the act of voting as the twin pillars of democratic citizenship. The chapter thus considers questions relating to the scope of contemporary public life and the role of individual participation in the democratic process. These questions are especially urgent in light of the increasingly circumscribed possibilities for redressing public grievances through democracy in the context of neoliberalism, which is a major concern of the dissertation broadly writ. This chapter also begins the interrogation of democracy porn's ultimately uncritical depiction neoliberalism's incursions on American democracy that continues throughout the dissertation. Given that the election narratives considered here are most closely associated with the citizenry, the media texts discussed in chapter two directly engage with an American public that is cynical about and

disillusioned by the political process. *Swing Vote* (Stern, 2008) serves as a particularly productive text for this chapter. In it, downtrodden, alcoholic, unemployed single father Bud Johnson (Kevin Costner) becomes the subject of national attention when the presidential election hinges on his vote alone, forcing him to learn the value of citizenship (and become a better man in the process).

By reinscribing our democratic process with the significance of individual participation, *Swing Vote* and the other films addressed in this chapter raise questions about the nature of citizenship in contemporary American democracy as impacted by neoliberalism. Because these texts most directly confront the role of the "ordinary citizen" in American democracy, this chapter will consider *whom* democracy porn imagines in that role, and how these imagined citizens are configured by socially constructed markers of class, race, gender, and sexuality. Other issues I explore related to the representation of political campaigns in chapter two include the depiction of candidates and their staffers as exemplary citizens, which liberates the consumer-citizen from the burden of civic engagement and redirects that energy towards what Lauren Berlant has described as the intimate public sphere. Other key texts discussed in this chapter include *Tanner '88* (Altman, 1988) and *Scandal* (Rhimes, 2012-2018).

Following elections, the logical next step in the democratic process (at least as it is depicted in democracy porn) is legislation. Chapter two thus looks at films and television shows that represent the legislative process in several contexts. If the media texts discussed in chapter one most directly address the role of citizenship under neoliberal democracy, the films and television shows discussed in chapter three most explicitly interrogate our particular system of representation as a way to *do* democracy. Among other questions, chapter two examines the broad spectrum of problems democracy porn imagines for the democratic process in the

contemporary neoliberal context. Using Linda Williams's work on pornography as a framework, the chapter looks at how democracy porn's legislative texts attempt to work through the problems it presents about our system of governance and society more broadly. Legislation is unique in the themes explored so far in the dissertation in that its procedural elements naturally lend themselves to serialization; this chapter will accordingly ask questions regarding the impact of narrative structure in depicting the process of democracy.

The West Wing is paradigmatic among depictions of legislation (as well as other themes found in democracy porn), specifically in its distinctive grammar, tone, and ability to consistently engage viewers both at the level of character and democratic process over a period of years. It thus forms the central case study for chapter two, in which I will attempt to understand how and why *The West Wing* was so successful with viewers, and some particular ways in which this success enabled the show to construct its own vision of neoliberal democracy. While discourse analysis will be an important component of my study throughout, *The West Wing's* large and active fan community will be a particularly productive source by which to assess viewers' affective engagements with democracy porn. The chapter also considers cinematic representations of the legislative process, paying particular attention to *Dave* (Reitman, 1993) and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003).

Chapter three analyzes films and miniseries that focus on the American democratic process as it existed in the past in order to consider how these narratives may illuminate our understanding of American democracy in the historical present. If democracy porn can be characterized by its uncritical relationship to both neoliberalism's incursions on democracy and the heightened material inequalities resulting from that infiltration, then the past serves as and ideal setting to depict a romanticized American democracy enacting its declaration that "All men

[sic] are created equal." Each of the films and miniseries under consideration in chapter one engage with the originary assurance of an ideal democratic society as put forth in the spirit (if not the letter) of our country's founding documents; the chapter analyze what constitutes such an originary assurance and the role it plays in both the media texts and their consumption. For example, in discussing *John Adams,* a seven-part miniseries produced by HBO that recounts the founding of the United States through a biographical look at Adams' contributions to it, I explore questions related to its particular depiction of the American revolutionary period as looked back on from 2008.[19]

Indeed, a central concern of this chapter is exploring relationships between the represented past and the contextual present, in particular asking whether neoliberalist worldviews are grafted onto eras that predate them in these media texts, and if so, how? Through analyzing the ubiquitous presence of nostalgia in the films and miniseries under scrutiny,[20] this chapter also addresses issues surrounding American democracy's capacity to produce the good life, and for whom? Because these films and miniseries present the most direct confrontation with the question of history in democracy porn, they will serve as the clearest illustrations of the way

[19] Studies of representations of history in film and television constitute a vast body of literature. Major texts in this field that may prove useful in chapter one include *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), in which Robert Rosenstone defends historical films as a legitimate way to think historically; Marcia Landy's *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), which considers the intersections of cinema, popular history, and cultural memory; *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event,* edited by Vivian Sobchack (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Robert Burgoyne's analysis of the narrative construction of nationhood in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,1997).

[20] Svetlana Boym's work on nostalgia will be particularly generative in this context. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), Boym defines nostalgia as, "A sentiment of loss and displacement, but…also a romance with one's own fantasy" (11), and further notes, "The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology…" (14). Her assertions are multiply resonant with the larger work democracy porn performs in the public sphere. See also: Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

history is or is not harnessed in the service of neoliberalism. Yet a concern for history, both invoking it and making it, is a major trope of democracy porn; chapter three thus also raises questions about the specific historical and nostalgic lenses through which democracy porn presents its stories drawn from the annals of actual American history. Beyond *John Adams,* the chapter also examines *Thirteen Days* (Donaldson, 2000), *Lincoln,* and*Charlie Wilson's War* (Nichols, 2007).

Thinking through the recent, paradigm-shifting events in American politics—namely the 2016 election of Donald Trump as President of the United States—the conclusion considers how the meanings and values associated with democracy porn are contingent on their sociopolitical contexts. The conclusion also reviews key findings regarding the main concepts under scrutiny in the dissertation, namely, representations of democracy, neoliberalism, and citizenship as represented in democracy porn, viewers' affective engagements with them, and how these representations fit in the broader constellation of forces that determine the material conditions of life in the United States. It will also address some of the unanswered questions brought up by the dissertation and gesture toward areas for further research related to this project specifically as well as democracy porn more broadly. Finally, the conclusion offers some speculative insights regarding the significance of democracy porn's role in the production, maintenance, and dissemination of contemporary notions of citizenship under neoliberal democracy and look for fissures in the neoliberal regime in order posit possibilities for resistance to it.

Ultimately, my analysis of democracy porn seeks to bring cultural critiques of neoliberalism, particularly of its impact on democracy and citizenship in the United States, into the disciplinary realm of cinema and media studies through textual and discourse analysis. Such a project constitutes an intervention for the field, as analyses of neoliberalism within cinema and

media studies have tended to approach the topic from an industrial standpoint. By thinking through this project, I hope to answer questions such as: How has the democratic process been represented in American films and television shows since the onset of neoliberalism? How does democracy porn function in the formation of neoliberal consumer-citizen subjectivities? How is democracy porn symptomatic of the erosion of possibilities for democracy under neoliberalism? And finally, where can we place democracy porn in the broader constellation of power relations that determine the material conditions of everyday life in the United States? Democracy porn's relatively recent proliferation, its adoring fans, and overwhelmingly positive critical reception are evidence that the phenomenon is significant for many people in the United States. My project seeks to unpack the conditions of possibility for democracy porn as a cultural phenomenon and to better understand the role it plays in the everyday lives of ordinary American citizens.

Chapter One:
The Electoral Process

> Some say a tie is like kissing your sister. But it took an Electoral College tie for me to get to kiss the sister I never knew I had.
>
> - First Daughter Catherine Meyer, *Veep*

A meticulous, fetishistic treatment of the processual aspects of democracy is a defining feature of democracy porn. The electoral process is one of the two key pillars of the democratic system as imagined by democracy porn—the other being the legislative process, representations of which I will analyze in chapter two—and the detailed depictions of that process offered by the stories under discussion in this chapter provide viewers with some of the discourse's greatest viewing pleasures. As in democracy porn more broadly, such pleasures stem in large part from the perception that these narratives grant privileged access to the inner workings of power. Acknowledgement of such pleasures is a recurrent theme in viewer responses to democracy porn's election-based texts. For example, Amazon user Mo closes a two-paragraph review of *Game Change,* which details Sarah Palin's role as John McCain's 2008 presidential running mate, with "I loved seeing the behind the scenes stuff that was going on in the campaign. That's the butter of this film. Overall, 5 out of 5 for the film, would definitely recommend it."[21] Mo is not alone in appreciating the backstage butter on offer in *Game Change*—the phrase "behind the scenes" is used in 48 positive reviews of the film out of 805 total at the time of writing. The same sentiment is expressed by numerous other phrases as well, meaning that many more viewers took pleasure in seeing what went on behind the scenes in the McCain campaign that did not make into the national conversation at the time. Though it might seem simple on the surface,

[21] Mo, "Loved the movie," review of *Game Change,* Amazon, April 3, 2016, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2PDJ16T6DXOR0/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00AYB1VSK.

viewers are drawn to the nitty gritty depictions of campaigns and elections for a range of reasons, and exploring them as they specifically relate to several key democracy porn election narratives is one of the goals of this chapter.

Electoral process narratives within democracy porn are further characterized by a focus on two sub-processes: voting and campaigning. The campaign process is frequently presented from an insider's perspective, as in the example of *Game Change* above, which is largely told from the point of view of McCain campaign Senior Strategist Steve Schmidt (Woody Harrelson), or in *Primary Colors,* a thinly veiled look at Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign that uses young but crucial campaign aide Henry Burton (Adrian Lester, in a position vaguely approximating that of George Stephanopoulis) as our avatar. Incidentally, both films are based on books written by journalists who were on the trail with the real life campaigns, but by the time these stories made it to the big screen, close aides but not the candidates themselves had become the eyes through which the audience gains its insider knowledge. Journalists do, however, frequently play key roles in these narratives, usually in the form of finding skeletons in candidates' closets. Fully fictionalized—or at least more deliberately masked—campaign narratives are more likely to feature a candidate protagonist, as in *Bulworth* (Warren Beatty, 1998)*, House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, 2013-), *Political Animals* (Greg Berlanti, 2012), *Head of State* (Chris Rock, 2003)*, Man of the Year* (Barry Levinson, 2006), or *Welcome to Mooseport* (Donald Petrie, 2004). The last three films in that list, it is worth noting, represent another sub-thread in democracy porn's election narratives: the fish out of water candidate story wherein an ordinary citizen surprisingly finds himself (and it is always a man) running for office. And while technically more act than process, the fetishistic treatment voting receives in democracy porn is certainly akin to the other processes under consideration here. Depictions of voting range from

individuals doing their civic duty—some with more significance than others—as in *Swing Vote* (Joshua Michael Stern, 2008), to delegates voting at party conventions, as in *Tanner '88* (Robert Altman, 1988), to manipulations of the voting process, as in *Scandal* (Shonda Rhimes, 2012-2018). The voting-centric stories just mentioned will serve as the key studies for this chapter for their unique ability to illuminate relationships between democracy porn as a discourse and viewers' understandings of their own citizenship, a central question of this dissertation.

While all examples of democracy porn imagine ways in which ordinary citizens might interact with the democratic process, texts that take political campaigns and elections as their central narratives present the most substantive explorations of contemporary democratic citizenship. As with democracy porn more broadly, these films and television shows come in many forms, but are united in their presentation of voting as the cornerstone of democratic citizenship. Perhaps more so than any of democracy porn's other major themes as addressed in this dissertation, election narratives can be humorously satirical, as in Leslie Knope's run for City Council in *Parks & Recreation* or Selina Meyer's presidential campaign on *Veep.* They are sometimes dark visions of what it takes to win political power, such as Frank and Claire Underwood's pursuit of the presidency in *House of Cards* or Mike Morris's efforts to the same ends in *The Ides of March.* But just as often, they present fictionalized accounts of real election stories that highlight the myriad machinations possible under our system of governance, as *Milk* does in retelling Harvey Milk's struggle to become one of the first openly gay persons elected to public office. While these texts vary greatly in tone, relation to real life political circumstances, and countless other diegetic and extra-diegetic qualities, they all harness the political campaign in the service of the particular fetishistic and spectacular narrative pleasures that characterize democracy porn. In structuring their election narratives as democracy porn, these stories offer

great insight into our collective understandings of the scope and shape of public life in the United States within their respective sociopolitical moments. Further, given that elections constitute the most visible—and perhaps, most tangible—way most Americans exercise their rights as citizens, the films and television shows analyzed in this chapter illuminate conceptions of the role of individual participation—and thus, citizenship—within the democratic process.

Throughout their hybrid narrative forms (often character-driven drama interwoven with wonky political procedural) and broad focus on citizenship, democracy porn's election stories are united by their positioning of individual participation in the form of voting as a key—if not the only—tenet, of democratic citizenship. Makers frequently contend in the discourse surrounding their works that this stance is motivated by the desire to incite political action among audiences. However, considered in the larger context of neoliberalism, such messaging may be seen to shore up what Lauren Berlant would describe as the "intimate public sphere," which aids in the production of consumer citizens who consider the private viewing of these stories of national political import to be an end in itself, rather than taking them as calls to civic action. Such are the conditions of possibility for the wonky political procedural elements of democracy porn's narratives to serve as little more than stakes-raising backdrops to the character-driven plots that often tackle broader, universal themes such as will-to-power and, significantly, that often fall in line with the Great Man narratives that have formed the foundation of the American mythos.[22]

Berlant's work further informs my analysis through her understanding of citizenship, which is considerably more elastic than that imagined by democracy porn. She describes citizenship as, "a status whose definitions are always in process. [Citizenship] is continually

[22] For a more substantive discussion of the structuring role of the Great Man Theory of History within democracy porn, see chapter three.

being produced out of a political, rhetorical, and economic struggle over who will count as 'the people' and how social membership will be measured and valued."[23] Furthermore, "Citizenship provides an index for appraising domestic national life, and for witnessing the processes of valorization that make different populations differently legitimate socially and under the law."[24] Here, I likewise aim to use citizenship as an index for analyzing democracy porn at the textual level, and similarly attempt to account for the particular kinds of citizens depicted therein. Beyond that, I am also interested in the way such "on the nose" portrayals of citizenship impact viewers' understandings of their own lives as citizens. Particularly salient to my purposes here is what Berlant would describe as the "privatized citizenship" that has "been installed…as the moral foundation of national life."[25] Put another way, my analysis pays particular attention to the sociopolitical contexts of democracy porn's production—namely, neoliberalism—within which "the people" might just as easily be referred to as "the consumers." And while neoliberal rhetoric would contend that this mutation is a positive one, because the market does not discriminate regarding who does the consuming, my analysis also attends to unpacking what Lisa Duggan has described as "the central intersections between the *culture* of neoliberalism and its economic vision," which can be located especially in two key terms: *privatization* and *personal responsibility.*[26] In neoliberal rhetoric, these terms operate to naturalize neoliberal policies, to present them as expanding freedoms and increasing wealth; but in actuality, Duggan argues, these terms serve to obscure identity politics and processes of upward redistribution. Put simply,

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[23] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Chapel Hill: Duke University Press, 1997), 20.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 21.

[26] Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 12.

I intend to consider citizenship in the context of neoliberalism at the textual level within democracy porn's election narratives as well as evinced by viewers' responses to those narratives.

Yet, again, the idea of citizenship imagined by democracy porn—at least on its surface—is much more static, rigid, and circumscribed than those put forth by critics such as Berlant and Duggan. It largely centers on actions by which Americans directly interact with the democratic process. Simply put, in democracy porn, citizenship is almost always (though not exclusively) presented as the act of voting. I should note here that this understanding of citizenship applies only to the ordinary citizen characters in democracy porn, with whom viewers are ostensibly meant to identify, especially in the election narratives under consideration in this chapter. The professional politicos who make up the bulk of the characters within democracy porn, on the other hand, are conveniently presented as doing the heavy lifting of democracy so that we ordinary citizens are relieved of that burden. Spectatorial identification with those Washington elites seems to occur—when it occurs at all—through humanizing, relationship-based plotlines that bear varying degrees of significance on the (political) narrative as a whole. More on that below. To begin to unpack the paradoxical notions of American citizenship embedded in the electoral plots of democracy porn, I will first discuss a film that explicitly focuses on the role of the ordinary citizen performing the act of voting, which democracy porn's narratives position as the foundational act of democratic citizenship: *Swing Vote* (Stern, 2008).

Swing Vote

While voting is portrayed as the cornerstone of democratic citizenship in some capacity across a number of films and television shows under democracy porn's umbrella—*Scandal*, *Recount*, and *Welcome to Mooseport*, to name a few—most stories about democracy's electoral

processes tend to focus on campaigns, their staffs, and most significantly, their candidates. However, as with each of democracy porn's key subject areas, there is a sub-theme within the larger topic of the electoral process that more directly addresses the act of voting and the role that action plays in the lives of ordinary Americans. *Swing Vote* offers a particularly substantive example of this trope. In it, downtrodden, alcoholic, single father Bud Johnson (Kevin Costner) becomes the subject of national attention when the presidential election hinges on his vote alone, forcing him to learn the value of citizenship (and become a better man in the process).

In several ways, *Swing Vote's* tight focus on Bud's democratic awakening reflects the neoliberal mindset that positions citizens as consumers whose politics should be informed only by their own immediate needs without consideration of either their position within the larger American populace or how changes made in the present moment might reverberate for future generations. While Bud's singular journey makes him a useful avatar through which viewers might reflect on their own citizenship—and indeed, many viewers did just that, as I will discuss below—the narrative's focus on him as an individual, if not exemplary, citizen serves to obfuscate the possibilities by which he or others might harness real political agency within the context of the American democratic system. In other words, by depicting his finding meaning in the act of voting as a successful end to Bud's coming-to-citizenship story, *Swing Vote* precludes broader understandings of citizenship, at once constructing, representing, reproducing an idea of the individual neoliberal American citizen whose contentment in voting-as-democracy effectively neuters possibilities for real political action.

Swing Vote begins with Bud's incredibly precocious 12-year-old daughter, Molly (Madeline Carroll), jostling him awake after having passed out in his clothes the night before. Though it is immediately established that this routine is not new for the duo, this day is

significant—it is election day and Bud has promised to meet Molly after school to vote, not only because it is his civic duty, but so she can write about it for a school report. Unsurprisingly, things do not go as planned. After Molly successfully drags Bud out of bed and gets him to drop her off at school, Bud ends up losing his job at an egg processing plant. Cuts had to be made, management says, and Bud's job performance has been less than stellar, as evidenced by surveillance footage of him sneaking a beer behind a massive stack of egg crates, accidentally knocking over a good portion of them, and then slinking away from the scene. True to form, Bud responds to his latest failure by getting drunk with his buddies, and only remembers that it is election day when the bar's television shows Molly on the local news, having been chosen for an election day story due to her standout school report on, yes, the importance of voting. By this point, however, Bud is too drunk to make it to his polling place on time, and ends up passing out in his truck.

Realizing her father has once again let her down while anxiously awaiting him as the polls are due to close, Molly decides to take matters into her own hands, sneak past the small town polling place's sleeping social servant and cast Bud's vote herself. Through a complicated plot contrivance involving a vacuum cleaner tripping a cord, the electronic voting machine loses power while Bud's ballot is inside but has not yet been officially cast, and spooked at the prospect of being caught for the felony she is committing, Molly slinks out of the polling place undetected. As it happens, the presidential candidates end up with 266 and 267 electoral college votes, each just short of the 270 necessary to win, and the popular vote in the state of New Mexico with its five electoral votes is exactly tied. Thus Bud's registered-but-not-counted vote becomes the deciding factor in the entire presidential election. A slew of cameos by real life journalists emphasize both the unlikelihood of this scenario and its theoretical possibility under

the US electoral college system, and, with an unabashed didacticism that permeates the film, remind us of the resonances between the diegetic situation and the actual 2000 presidential election. Bud is quickly identified as the swing voter, wakes up to the national press corps outside of his and Molly's trailer, and the plot steps up the pace as his vote is personally courted by the presidential candidates—incumbent Republican President Andrew Boone (Kelsey Grammer) and his Democratic challenger Donald Greenleaf (Dennis Hopper).

Having laid the groundwork for the civics lesson it aims to teach, *Swing Vote* shifts into a more satirical tone for much of its protracted second act, which explores the lengths to which the candidates will go to win Bud's vote. Each candidate ultimately demonstrates that his desire to win outweighs his professed political convictions, and it is in the game of one upsmanship that ensues between them that neoliberalism's imprint can most clearly be tracked throughout the film. *Swing Vote*'s neoliberal values are succinctly illustrated when Democratic candidate Greenleaf commits to restrict immigration policies, and Republican President Boone endorses marriage equality. Each stance arises in direct response to comments Bud makes in an interview, and also constitutes a reversal of each candidate's previously established position on the subject. Such flip-flopping can be read as part of a neoliberal value system in multiple ways.

First, it is reflective of the post-Washington consensus political landscape in which neoliberal economic deregulatory policies have emerged as the guiding principle for both major political parties in the US. While my reading of *Swing Vote* may at first seem to be a stretch given that neither of the political issues at hand are, at least on the surface, about economic policymaking, it is important here—as with many of democracy porn's narratives—to remember calls from myriad political and social theorists such as Wendy Brown, Nancy Fraser, and Lisa Duggan, who implore us to consider neoliberalism's impact beyond the sphere of economics

proper. For, as Duggan states, "The *economy* cannot be transparently abstracted from the *state* or the *family,* from practices of racial apartheid, gender segmentation, or sexual regulation."[27] Thus, while popular discourse tends to position marriage equality and tightening immigration laws as primarily social issues about which Democrats and Republicans have differing positions, *Swing Vote* demonstrates that they are both issues politicians are willing to embrace in the interest of gaining power, which is tantamount to obtaining access to formulating the kinds of neoliberal economic policies that will serve the corporate and individual interests that funded their successful elections. Thus, these policies in turn ultimately work to sustain the upward redistribution of wealth that neoliberal economic policies have been shown to produce, thereby further disenfranchising the groups they purport to aid—in this case, gays and working class Americans.

The candidates' position changes further reflect a neoliberal value system insofar as the two specific political issues in question are illustrative of the central role played by what Lauren Berlant would describe as the "intimate public sphere" within *Swing Vote.* For Berlant, the intimate public sphere in the US "renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere."[28] This privatization of citizenship has engendered a shift in our nation's understanding the "body politic," which is now rarely valued as *public.* The privatized citizen who inhabits the intimate public sphere is less likely to consider how questions of national interest impact Americans outside of his or her immediate family, creating the conditions of possibility for communities of all kinds to not only lose strength in their social bonds, but to be positioned in

[27] Ibid., xiv.

[28] Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City,* 5.

false oppositions to one another. Once opposed by the nebulous cultural logic produced by the myopic civic focus of the intimate public sphere, communities may either be viewed as competition in pursuit of the fantasy of the American dream—that was once presented as bountiful enough to benefit all Americans, at least rhetorically—or ignored altogether as individual citizens' concerns retreat within the fortress of the family. For Berlant and others, the intimate public sphere is both a symptom and product of the Reagan revolution, in which conservative cultural politics were used as justification for neoliberal economic policies that have and continue to foster the upward redistribution of wealth in the US and globally, and widen the gap between the rich and the poor at an unprecedented rate.

The intimate public sphere, then, harnesses the fantastical promise of the American Dream to construct a fractured, privatized electorate that both has a very limited vision of the value of citizenship and buys into the neoliberal idea that deregulatory economic policies improve their material quality of life. In light of the overwhelming evidence that deregulatory policies actually serve to upwardly redistribute and concentrate wealth in the hands of an ever-shrinking elite, the dangers of such an atomized citizenry are clear.[29] That this logic is re/produced within a film like *Swing Vote,* which on the surface advocates for the seemingly innocuous idea that voting matters, is troubling. Indeed, the logic of the intimate public sphere is *Swing Vote*'s driving narrative theme, and serves as the underlying rationale for Bud's ultimately successful transformation from useless schlub to engaged citizen; this logic manifests most directly through Bud's relationship with Molly. In thoroughly analyzing the role of the intimate public sphere vis-a-vis Bud's relationship with Molly in *Swing Vote*, one might argue that such a

[29] For thorough accounts of the ways neoliberal deregulatory policies function to upwardly redistribute wealth thereby increasing economic inequities, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism,* Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus,* Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy,* among many others.

focus could help viewers negotiate their relations to the issues of immigration reform and marriage equality, using presumed identification with "everyman" Bud to consider these matters in a new light. But such a focus and proposed identification is problematic given Bud's membership in the one group of Americans that has always had access to the full rights and privileges of citizenship: cisgender heterosexual white men. In other words, while the film presents Bud's opinions on the issues at hand as the commonsense perspectives on the basic civil rights of historically marginalized groups of people (immigrants and the LGBTQ community), his perspective—and indeed, that of the film itself—stems from a position of immense privilege that must be considered as such, and not as unmarked and value-neutral. Buried under the guise of a good, honest guy trying to do what's right by his daughter is a reification antiquated power structures that privilege the voices of heterosexual white men over all other groups of people, and indeed, allows that singular voice to speak for whomever it pleases.

Not only does *Swing Vote* reinforce the idea so pervasive in the American imagination that heterosexual white men are inherently qualified to make decisions about the rights and privileges afforded to other groups of citizens, its focus on immigration and marriage equality as cultural issues buttresses the falsehood that these matters are not intimately bound up with questions of economics. Indeed, as many have argued, the marriage equality movement was a direct outgrowth of the neoliberal worldview, a means of sanitizing and privatizing the more radical queer movements of the 1980s and 1990s and replacing their demands with the depoliticized goal of marriage.[30] Opening up access to this quintessentially *privatized* institution for LGBT people created a new population of government-sanctioned families, thereby shifting numerous financial burdens away from social services and onto themselves. The link between

[30] For an excellent entry point into the left's critique of same-sex marriage, see: Lisa Duggan, "Holy Matrimony!," *The Nation,* February 26, 2004, https://www.thenation.com/article/holy-matrimony/.

immigration and economics is of course much clearer, but the most common arguments about it tout that immigrant labor negatively impacts the American economy. Bud himself plainly states the popular refrain on the subject when he describes "insourcing," as a process wherein, "Instead of sending our jobs, you know, losing 'em, to Mexico, they're bringing in Mexicans to take our jobs." While this argument has been thoroughly debunked, it nonetheless feeds many cultural fires and negative stereotypes about immigrant populations in the US.[31] The film's political blindness about the issue of immigration in particular is also reflected in other ways. For example, the small town of Texico, New Mexico in *Swing Vote* is depicted as having some residents of color, but they are largely relegated to the margins of both the frame and the story. The two people of color in featured supporting roles—intrepid reporter Kate Madison (Paula Patton) and her boss John Sweeney (George Lopez)—do not participate in any of substantive political discussions beyond underscoring the significance of Bud's situation and echoing the truism that voting itself is the essence of citizenship. According to the US Census, the population of the real life Texico, New Mexico was 55.9% Hispanic or Latino as of 2010.

Swing Vote attempts to present a bipartisan call for civic engagement in the face of an increasingly disengaged electorate. On the surface, such a message would appear to be unambiguously in support of the democratic system. Yet *Swing Vote*'s larger narrative and the diegetic world in which it takes place smacks of a 1930s populism that John Bodnar has argued, rather than easily siding with "the people," elucidates the underlying tensions between democracy and liberalism. Bodnar finds this tension especially apparent in Frank Capra's work during the 1930s, and given the frequency with which the term "Capraesque" is used in discourse

[31] See National Research Council et al., *The New Americans: Economic, Demographic, and Fiscal Effects of Immigration* (National Academies Press, 1997).

surrounding *Swing Vote,* it will be useful to consider Bodnar's analysis of Capra's politics alongside the film at hand.

As Bodnar sees it, the 1930s were a time when the inherent tensions between democracy's ideal of governance by the people as a collective and liberalism's commitment to individual freedoms were on full display both in politics and culture. Though these tensions were never resolved in the texts, Bodnar argues, the films did tend to side more with liberalism than with democracy. When democracy porn references films from this era through pastiche, as it often does, the liberal ideals are mutated to fit in with the present neoliberal moment, offering democracy less agency in the contemporary films than in those Bodnar discusses in their reflection of the increasingly privatized nature of the neoliberal democratic state. Working people in American film of the 1930s also evince, for Bodnar, a discourse in which politics are eschewed in favor of a focus on the survival of the American family; a similar prioritization drives the narrative of *Swing Vote.* Bodnar goes on to consider the films of Frank Capra as exemplary of these tensions, noting, "Capra's film politics were the quintessential politics of American mass culture…They vacillated constantly between extremes of liberalism and democracy, and considered the fate of the individual in the context of both ideals."[32] Despite the presentation of such ambivalence, however, Capra's films are always ultimately concerned with the individual and in that way can be read as tacitly aligned with liberalism.

Democracy porn proliferates in a similar moment in American history, where the crisis ordinariness of life under late capitalism has reached a fever pitch, and Americans are increasingly disillusioned by our democratic process but maintain a desire to relate to it in some way. Democracy porn plays an important role in this tension between cynicism about the

[32] John E. Bodnar, *Blue-collar Hollywood: Liberalism, Democracy, and Working People in American Film* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 34.

democratic process and the persistence of faith in the American dream. Bodnar further claims that films that attacked the sanctity of the state at a time when people wanted to have faith in that institution did not do well. Since the 1930s, however, faith in our democratic system has eroded considerably, making audiences more open to stories that criticize US democracy. Indeed, opposed to *Swing Vote*'s saccharine tone, many successful examples of democracy porn in recent years are very often cynical in their treatment of the state. And in those texts—many of which I consider in detail throughout this dissertation—the imprint of neoliberalism is often closer to the surface than in *Swing Vote,* which tacitly promotes neoliberal values while screening the realities of their implications. Considered in this context, *Swing Vote*'s politics feel especially nefarious. For, more so than those overtly cynical examples of democracy porn, *Swing Vote* presents a "Capraesque" story and tone that masks, rather than reveals, neoliberalism's assault on the democratic principles it strives to exalt. Despite what they perceive as some flaws in its execution, the populist mask worn by *Swing Vote* seems to have served as a successful disguise for viewers and reviewers of the film, many of whom describe specific ways it proved impactful for them, including directly affecting their own understanding of what it means to be an American citizen.

Swing Vote received middling reviews, scoring 38% and 47% on review aggregators RottenTomatoes.com, and metacritic.com, respectively. Reviews reflect critics' ambivalence about the film, with many focusing on what they perceived as its success in making a civic-minded, mostly family-friendly movie in the style of Frank Capra updated to reflect the apathy of a modern electorate, while acknowledging that it failed to achieve Capra-level quality on several fronts. Even when critics find fault in the quality of the filmmaking, however, they often describe

its less-than-subtle call to civic action as affectively impactful. For example, Justin Chang, writing in *Variety* states,

> Graced with a gently cynical spirit and more brains than its average-Joe protagonist, 'Swing Vote' applies a pleasing Frank Capra-esque glaze to the fanciful story of a blue-collar American whose vote ends up being the only one that counts. Result may not be the sharpest slice of political theater imaginable, but pic's comic smarts and affecting daddy-daughter drama provide a sturdy platform for its heartfelt advocacy of informed voting and responsible citizenship.[33]

And in *Entertainment Weekly*, Ben Glass notes,

> The covert intelligence embedded in the boobish political comedy *Swing Vote* states that we the people are stupid, drunk, apathetic, or all of the above. But on the face of it, the Capra-esque civics lesson conveyed in this pandering fantasy is that every citizen's vote is crucial to the American electoral process. Not only that, but by properly appreciating the precious gift of participatory democracy (as encouraged by a wise, liberal Hollywood), even the sorriest dumb-ass can shape up overnight into an informed, thoughtful activist, someone deserving of change we can believe in.[34]

Though Chang's and Glass's comments differ significantly in tone, both authors position the *Swing Vote*'s civic-minded narrative as the most successful element of the film.

Underscoring this point, Chang goes on to say, "It's hard not to be stirred by how earnestly the film implores viewers to educate themselves and exercise their rights, or by how boldly it casts its hero as a stand-in for unsophisticated, apathetic schmoes everywhere."[35] Indeed, Chang seems to be onto something in his assertion that the film's deeply earnest call to action is stirring, at least for some viewers. Amazon user M. Harlan, who gave *Swing Vote* five

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[33] Justin Chang, "Review: 'Swing Vote,'" *Variety,* July 29, 2008, http://variety.com/2008/film/reviews/swing-vote-2-1200508066/.

[34] Ben Glass, "Swing Vote," *Entertainment Weekly,* August 8, 2008 http://www.ew.com/article/2008/08/08/swing-vote.

[35] Chang, "Review: 'Swing Vote.'"

stars, describes how the film led them to interrogate their own understanding of American citizenship, stating:

> Swing Vote was a very interesting movie for me. The fact that it was out during the re-elections of 2008 made me stop and pause and really listen to what McCain and Obama had to say concerning what they would do to help our country. I had to stop and think about "what if I was the last person to be able to swing the vote one way or another". This movie was very thought provoking with a little comedy involved but it still got the point across. We as Americans need to pay attention to both parties and make the right choice from what we hear and understand. Very good movie, very thought provoking, and a strong underlying message of we can't just sit back and ignore what's going on around us, we need to be part of the voice.[36]

Even viewers who were highly critical of the film evince an affective response to *Swing Vote*'s civic aims, such as Amazon user T. Johnsonon, whose two-star review states:

> I fell asleep a couple times during this movie because it was so boring. Kevin Costner's acting was less than stellar. The girl was OK but the movie was too boring for me to care. It all felt completely contrived. There was no depth to anything in the movie either, except for the final speech which was the only 2 minutes of the movie worth watching. Really the whole message of that speech is that Americans (yes Kevin represents most of us) are lazy, ignorant, selfish people who deserve the politicians that we put in office with our ignorance and falling for their manipulative advertisements. After I gave it a little thought, I find this highly offensive.[37]

The syntax makes it difficult to discern what it is about Bud's final speech that Johnsonon found so offensive and why: Is it the film's positioning of Bud as representative of most Americans because Johnsonon believes Americans to be overwhelmingly different than Costner's character? Or does Johnsonon agree that Americans are mostly "lazy, ignorant, selfish" people and is thus

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[36] M. Harlan, "Great Movie," review of *Swing Vote,* Amazon, March 3, 2009, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R337LCW2K3X7O/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B004LHMYAW.

[37] Todd Anderson, "90 minutes of yawns followed by an OK speech," review of *Swing Vote,* Amazon, May 24, 2009, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/nR31N227T3GIL44/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B004LHMYAW.

offended by the idea that we are failing our democracy by ignorantly electing manipulative politicians? It is impossible to answer these questions based on the information provided by the review, but what is clear is that *Swing Vote,* and particularly Bud's climactic speech at the end, created a substantive affective charge for T. Johnsonon that led them to reflect on the state of American citizenship and their own relationship to it.

T. Johnsonon is not wrong: Bud's final monologue is among the film's most compelling moments at the most basic dramatic level; it is also significant for my purposes here as it represents the clearest and most concise distillation of neoliberal ideology found in *Swing Vote*. Occasioned by the final presidential debate—held at Bud's request to help him make his final decision on the eve of his vote, and for which he himself serves as moderator—the speech is preceded by some of the film's many cameos by real-life news media personalities. Longtime television journalist Aaron Brown introduces the debate both for the television audience in the diegetic world and the film's audience, by directly addressing the camera and literally stating (perhaps for sleepy viewers like Johnsonon) that "the stakes could not be higher." Arianna Huffington chimes in to add some democracy-specific exposition: "I wonder what the founding fathers would make of all this?…Something tells me that somewhere right now, Franklin and Jefferson are looking down and smiling."[38] And thus the stage is set for Bud to deliver the film's similarly didactic climactic speech, which I quote at length to clearly illustrate the issues I will explicate below:

> Tonight I feel embarrassed. I've had my chances more than most. I've grown up in a country where if I decided to do more with my life than just drift and drink, then I could be standing where, where maybe you [the candidates] stand tonight. Instead, I've taken freely and I've given nothing. I'm ashamed in front of my…[choked up] daughter…and my country. I've never served or sacrificed. The only heavy lifting I've ever been asked

[38] *Swing Vote*, directed by Joshua Michael Stern (Touchstone / Disney, 2008), DVD.

> is simple stuff like, you know, pay attention, vote. If America has a, well if America has a true enemy tonight I guess it's me. Tonight, a below average man is gonna choose between two exceptional men. Tomorrow, one man's vote is gonna make a difference. Because tomorrow we're gonna have a president, and not just someone to fill a chair in Washington. We need someone who's bigger than their speeches, the kind of president we learned about in school when we still cared.[39]

Here, a reformed Bud demonstrates that he has learned the error of his ways and in so doing, succinctly illustrates how neoliberal ideology can insidiously transmute the discourse of the American dream. The speech ostensibly expresses the lesson Bud has learned over the course of the film: that democratic citizenship is a privilege that should not be taken for granted. What is curious about it, though, is the extent to which Bud denigrates himself in the process. It certainly would have been sufficient for him to admonish his previous failings directly as they relate to citizenship, that he had not been engaged in the process of democracy until now; but he goes much farther than that, describing himself as the *true enemy of America,* and for seemingly no other reason than the fact that the sum of his life experience reflects the reality of the American Dream, rather than the hollow promise it portends. And while it is true that Bud's subject position provides him more advantages towards the possibly of achieving that dream than nearly any other group of Americans, his path of "drift and drink" likely resulted from a lifetime of foreclosed opportunities. In other words, Bud buys into neoliberal ideology and takes *personal responsibility* for the fact that he did not grow up to be a Great Man, despite the fact that such a life path was probably never a realistic possibility for someone like him. Furthermore, by underscoring the idea "one man's vote is gonna make a difference," Bud sustains the myth that such a thing is possible within a democratic system under which representatives—up to and perhaps especially including the president—are essentially bought by high-level donors and

[39] Ibid.

corporations who then have unparalleled influence in the creation and implementation of legislation that protects their own interests.

While the *Swing Vote* is not without its charms or merits, the relative generosity offered by critics and viewers alike—seemingly a product of their enthusiasm for the film's goal of calling for civic engagement—fails to adequately interrogate exactly how the film makes its plea. T. Johnsonon's criticisms obliquely point to a deeply problematic element in the construction of *Swing Vote*'s call to action: that it is accomplished through the supposedly universal avatar of Bud, the ordinary American citizen. While Bud does stand in for an important segment of the American populace, he is also a representative of literally the only group of people who have always lived with the full rights and privileges of citizenship in the United States: heterosexual white men. At no point is this privilege acknowledged or interrogated by the film with the exception of the brief mention in his final speech quoted above, and Bud's personal politics are never articulated. He is a bastion of unmarked whiteness.

Though the film's cast has a modicum of diversity, at no point are the political concerns of people of color brought up as part of Bud's political awakening. Indeed, the only real political issues addressed with any specificity throughout the film are those of immigration and gay marriage, and *Swing Vote* uncritically defers to Bud's uninformed and largely incoherent opinions on both topics. One could perhaps argue that the film's overall criticism of egotistical politicians who would do anything to court a vote is really the biggest issue it aims to address; but the message that critics and viewers alike picked up on is not one of the need to incite the systemic change necessary to redress that problem, but rather the need for Americans to live up to the *individual responsibilities expected of them as citizens* and vote. And while a heterosexual white man acknowledging the ways in which he has squandered his privilege in a major

Hollywood film does offer some pleasure, at least for this viewer, the crow eating Bud does in his final monologue only reinforces the film's overarching contention that he is personally responsible for his all of his failures, without acknowledging the myriad ways in which he himself has been failed by a democratic system that has been consistently shrinking throughout his lifetime.

Thus, in its final moments, *Swing Vote* most clearly displays the rhetoric of personal responsibility that, as I have argued following the work of Duggan and others, positions the negative material impacts neoliberal economic policies have on the vast majority of hardworking Americans as the inevitable result of a life lived with an insufficient investment in surmounting the free market; this bait-and-switch is reflective of the neoliberal imperative that lies at the core of democracy porn as a discourse. Like so much of democracy porn, *Swing Vote* is clearly meant to be a celebration of the democratic system and a lamentation that it is not receiving the meaningful engagement it needs to live up to its potential, but the imprint of neoliberal values that pervades the film undermines its message by blaming the steady dissolution of our democracy exclusively on ordinary, individual citizens like Bud rather than its systematic rigging by those in power to benefit themselves and those who have the financial resources to ensure that their interests are being served.

* * *

While its direct appeal to the act of voting is instructive regarding the ways democracy porn manages ideas of citizenship, *Swing Vote*'s focus on the common man as citizen-voter is somewhat anomalous among examples of the election narrative throughout the discourse. Much more common within democracy porn are election stories in which the focus is on the candidate and his (or her, on rare occasions) campaign staff. The mythos of the common man is frequently

still present in these stories, however, in the form of candidates who either stumble into running for office, or are called upon to do so either by their own dissatisfaction with the status quo or recognition from their community that they possess the capacity to make positive change in elected office. When the common man runs for office in democracy porn, he frequently proves himself to be an exemplary citizen and human being. Indeed, while election narratives almost always include political corruption of some kind, it is overwhelmingly kept at a distance from the candidates who serve as screens onto which the purest democratic ideals are projected both within the diegetic world and beyond it. Corruption in these stories stems from years of entrenched politicking, something that the candidate would work to change if elected. *Silver City* (John Sayles, 2004), for example, is largely premised on protecting Colorado gubernatorial candidate Dickie Pilager (Chris Cooper) from possibly scandal-inciting knowledge related to his campaign, allowing him to maintain ignorance of the corruption bound up with his largest campaign financier. And in *Head of State* (Chris Rock, 2003), party elites tap Mays Gilliam (Rock) to run for president, assuming he will lose but aiming to exploit the fact that he is African American to help the party's chances in the next election cycle, and not disclosing any of this to the candidate himself. The common-man-as-candidate trope takes on a slightly different form in *Tanner '88* (Robert Altman, 1988), and in so doing illustrates one way in which a surface level critique of the US electoral process can serve to obfuscate deeper flaws within American democracy within democracy porn.

Tanner '88

Tanner '88 is a particularly noteworthy example of a candidate-focused election democracy porn narrative. Directed by Robert Altman and written by Garry Trudeau of *Doonesbury* fame, *Tanner '88* is a mockumentary-style mini-series made for HBO that follows

fictional politician Jack Tanner's campaign to win the Democratic nomination for president from the New Hampshire primary through to the Democratic National Convention in Atlanta. Tanner (Michael Murphy, who had previously worked with Altman on *Nashville*) is a former Michigan Congressman who left office to care for his ailing young daughter, but heeds the call to return to politics; the call is inspired by both his prior record of vision and leadership, and in response to what many perceived as a disappointing Democratic field that election year. *Tanner '88*'s depiction of an experienced politician who has maintained his status as an ordinary, approachable citizen places it on the more optimistic end of democracy porn's spectrum, yet such idealism is tempered by the show's focus on the Tanner campaign's—and indeed, democracy's—relationship to the media. Despite the candidate's selfless commitment to public service and genuine desire to help Americans navigate the very real problems of their daily lives, his campaign is ultimately thwarted by its inability to make his message legible in a media landscape that privileges sound bites and televisual spectacle.

Most scholars who have analyzed the mini-series describe Tanner's campaign as a failure, doomed from the start by its inability to master the necessary evil of mediation in modern campaigning while staying true to the candidate's ideologically pure democratic spirit.[40] Such critics are not wrong; Tanner does ultimately fail achieve the goal he sets out for: earning the Democratic nomination for president. And in the context of the 1988 election during which the series was both produced and disseminated, the construction of a candidate's image in mass

[40] See Gregory Frame, "'The Real Thing': Election Campaigns and The Question of Authenticity in American Film and Television," *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 03 (August 2016): 755–777, Howard Hampton, "See How They Run," *Film Comment* 44, no. 5 (2008): 30–34, Michael Hoover, "Tanner '88 and the Television of Politics," *New Political Science* 15, no. 1–2 (June 1, 1994): 71–83, Richard T. Jameson, "Television: Tanner '88 For Real Is for Now," *Film Comment; New York* 24, no. 3 (June 1988): 73, and Heather Osborne-Thompson, "Tracing the 'Fake' Candidate in American Television Comedy," in *Satire TV: Politics and Comedy in the Post-Network Era*, ed. Jeffrey P Jones, Ethan Thompson, and Jonathan Gray (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 64–82.

media was an especially present concern following the ways in which Ronald Reagan revolutionized that process during his administration.[41] Yet, in looking back at *Tanner '88*, perseverating on a largely centrist and truly mass media's construction of political candidates feels rather quaint. Media's omnipresence and its inherent biases have long since been accepted as the irreversible state of journalism on a global scale, the significance of which for elections being just one component of that reality. Hindsight allows us to approach the relationship between media and politics as an investigative venture rather than as pure condemnation. It is in this context that I would like to suggest an alternative reading of *Tanner '88*. While analyzing *Tanner '88* with a focus on the media's role in electoral politics is important work, it is work that has been done, at least for the pre-internet era, and such analysis misses many of the significant ways in which *Tanner '88* and other election narratives engage with the state of democratic politics in the United States: namely by extolling the virtues of democracy and positioning its contemporary problems as products of external forces that may be reigned in by the exemplary citizens who become candidates.[42] Viewing *Tanner '88* through the lens of democracy porn enables us (re-)consider the larger implications of these extant arguments and examine the ways in which they may illuminate the shadowy power structures the series simultaneously critiques and upholds.

Like many other democracy porn narratives, *Tanner '88* engages with the most timely concerns about the state of democracy during the period in which it was produced, in this case

[41] See Timothy Raphael, *The President Electric: Ronald Reagan and the Politics of Performance*, Theater--Theory/Text/Performance (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).

[42] Scholarly work on the relationship between media coverage and democratic elections will no doubt be reinvigorated in the wake of the 2016 elections in the United States, though those events do not bear on my own analysis of *Tanner '88* given the specific historical moment in which it was produced and on which its narrative comments.

the mediation of political campaigns that became de rigueur during the Reagan administration. From its first shot, the entire premiere episode (of 11 total half-hour installments) is essentially spent setting up this issue on several fronts: we open with a view of the control room of a local New Hampshire television station as Tanner is introduced for an interview, the privileged position of this meta-textual framing both introduces series' the ahead-of-its-time mockumentary formal structure and distances itself from its own medium, television. The next major sequence finds Tanner's staff gathered to watch an early cut of his promotional campaign film—rather a pathetic response to Reagan's game-changing "Morning in America" ad—and from there the staff gathers a focus group of New Hampshirites to view the promotional film and offer their feedback. Later, when Tanner arrives to do some on-the-ground campaigning with his college-aged daughter, Alex (Cynthia Nixon), they are met by *Boston Globe* reporter Hayes Taggerty. Tanner introduces Alex to Taggerty, who immediately asks her very specific questions about some anti-Apartheid activism she had been involved in while at university, and when Tanner asks why he has to go there, Taggerty replies with, "I'm writing a series of columns on the events and figures that helped shape the characters of the various candidates."[43] Tanner bristles at Taggerty's reply, setting in motion a plot line that will play out through the rest of the series: the Tanner campaign's tenuous relationship with the press. An important thread within this subplot is the campaign's desire for the exposure press coverage can bring but resentment for the then-new imperative among journalists to dig deep into candidates' personal histories.

As this plot develops, *Tanner '88* positions individual members of the mass media as the main culprits in instigating the shift in the journalistic tone of campaign coverage. As the mini-series depicts it, the perceived problem is ubiquitous among the press corps, but driven by

[43] *Tanner '88,* episode 1, "The Dark Horse," HBO, February 15, 1988, directed by Robert Altman, written by Garry Trudeau, accessed on Hulu.com.

specific journalists who have strayed from the once-hallowed ethics of the profession to feed the baser curiosities of their readerships. Tanner succinctly sums up the campaign's—and the series'—perspective on this journalistic transformation in what might be described as a prologue, the first in a series of vignette interviews with the characters (all played by the original cast) that appear before each episode, in which they reflect back on the fictional 1988 campaign. The extras were added in 2004 when the series re-aired on the Sundance Channel in advance of a follow-up four-part mini-series called *Tanner on Tanner* (Altman, 2004), also commissioned by Sundance TV, and appear before each episode on the Criterion Collection DVD (which was also available to stream on Hulu.com as of the time of writing) release after a graphic announcing "Once more in '04." In the "Once more in '04" segment before episode once, Tanner says, "'88 was the year the curtain on our private lives got pulled back. That was the year the media took down Gary Hart for having a mistress. And after that, everyone—everything—became fair game."[44] Several characters in *Tanner '88* evince participation in this new media model, including Taggerty, who somewhat begrudgingly follows the trend while maintaining an old-school respect for the candidate, Deke Connors, the wannabe auteurist documentarian hired to make promotional videos for the Tanner campaign, Molly Hark, a fledgling on-air reporter desperate to move up in the world, and David Seidelman, a smooth operator reporting for *The Washington Post.*

Each of these characters at some point report information that the campaign would have rather not been public, to varying degrees of frustration among Tanner and his staff, but it reaches a fever pitch when Seidelman breaks the story of Tanner's previously private relationship with Joanna Buckley (Wendy Crewson). Unlike the majority of political romance

[44] "Once more in '04," *Tanner '88* episode 1, "The Dark Horse," February 15, 1988, directed by Robert Altman, written by Garry Trudeau, accessed on Hulu.com.

scandals that receive maelstroms of media attention, Tanner's relationship is not adulterous. Rather, it had been kept a secret because Buckley had been serving as Deputy Campaign manager for the series' fictionalized version of the Dukakis campaign—the real life version of which took place concurrently to the production and distribution of *Tanner '88,* more on that below—constituting a not insignificant conflict of interest. Though reprimanded by his campaign manager, TJ Cavanaugh (Pamela Reed), Tanner argues that he and Joanna had been seeing each other since before she was working for Dukakis and maintained professionally ethical boundaries in their relationship after she took the job. The campaign responds by refusing to allow Seidelman on the press bus (a revenge act that feels much less sinister in the context of the show than when considered in light of the very real embargoes on press freedoms currently being enacted by the Trump administration). Tanner's campaign quickly resolves the crisis when Joanna leaves her job working for Dukakis and she and Tanner legitimize their relationship by getting engaged. The gratuitousness of Seidelman's muckraking is narratively underscored by the fact that Taggerty had pieced the romance together long beforehand, but chosen not to write about it because, as he tells Joanna, "It's none of his business" unless she wants to talk about it.[45] Thus, though drawn into the new journalistic order to a certain extent as evidenced by his series of columns about the candidates' relevant personal histories, Taggerty largely adheres to the old school approach to campaign reporting; and Seidelman is his shiny '80s foil, constantly on the prowl for the best dirt no matter its impact on the actual political stakes involved. This example is the most significant of a number of moments when the members of the press engage in what Tanner—and by extension, the series—views as a misuse of their access to the campaign and a distraction from the actual issues at stake in the election.

[45] *Tanner '88,* episode 7, "The Great Escape," HBO, June 20, 1988, directed by Robert Altman, written by Garry Trudeau, accessed on Hulu.com.

Yet *Tanner '88*'s criticism of the media's relationship to political campaign processes is misdirected. For, as Jennifer Holt explains in *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996,* individual media professionals were and continue to be beholden to a larger system that had been in a constant state of flux at the time due to the deregulatory policies that proliferated during the Reagan administration, impacting every aspect of media production and distribution. Holt explains, "It is important to understand deregulation in the Reagan era not as the mere absence of regulation but instead as the presence of a politicized and carefully crafted government stance of support for the 'free market.'"[46] This administrative stance "enabled media industries to merge and converge on an…unprecedented scale," producing massive conglomerations controlled by an ever-shrinking number of parent corporations. Indeed, *Tanner '88*'s production network, HBO, was a key player in the history of this industrial shift; owned from its origins by Time, Inc., which though it already controlled a vast array of other media companies in 1988, in 1989 would be part of an historic $14 billion merger with Warner Communications to create Time-Warner.[47] The implications of this rapid process of consolidating media ownership that was well underway by the time *Tanner '88* aired are many and few of them good, but suffice it to say for our purposes here that, journalistic practices were certainly impacted by the myopic focus on the bottom line that comes along with such mergers.[48] Thus, while its criticisms of the spectacularization of narratives within political campaigning are certainly warranted, *Tanner '88*'s focus on individual journalists obfuscates the systemic nature of the problem while being produced by the very infrastructure it aims to

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[46] Jennifer Holt, *Empires of Entertainment: Media Industries and the Politics of Deregulation, 1980-1996* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 11.

[47] Ibid., 18.

[48] Ibid.

lampoon. In so doing, the series reifies the neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, implying that the actions of characters like David Seidelman are those of a lone bad egg, rather than the product of a longterm and still ongoing process by which neoliberal capitalism has sold the idea that competition in a free market allows for the best version of anything to achieve success, and those endeavors that succeed should be allowed to operate free from the iron grip of government regulations.

If the media's depoliticization of election coverage is constructed as the antagonistic force in *Tanner '88*, then democracy itself is that which must be saved, and Jack Tanner is the hero who arrives to do the saving. Like the relationship between media and political campaigns, this dynamic is also very deliberately set up from the series' first episode. In fact, these stakes are all clearly articulated in a single, "impromptu" monologue Tanner gives to his campaign staff at the end of episode one. Frustrated by the media shift explicated above, Tanner arrives back at campaign headquarters, exhausted, to find a similarly downtrodden staff. When TJ tells him that the focus group did not "get it," referring to his promotional campaign film and candidacy in general, Tanner launches into a speech that redresses everyone's concerns. Covering ample rhetorical terrain, Tanner compares Thomas Jefferson to Copernicus and Darwin, speaks with conviction about the strength of ideas and asking impertinent questions as the essence of the American experiment, addresses how Vietnam and Watergate led to the contemporary crisis of faith among the electorate in our democratic system and reframes those problems as testimonials to the strength of American democracy, and finishes with:

> We are the envy of this world! Why? Because throughout our history, we have always maintained that we could do better! We've insisted that we could do better. We've always been willing to reinvent ourselves for the common good. And in our darkest hour, leaders—real leaders—have always stepped forward to hold the American people to the

> responsibility of citizenship! Well it's time for that kind of leadership now, TJ. I'm not sure that it's me, but I'd like the chance to find out.[49]

Tanner's speech is, quite simply, among the purest distillations of democracy porn's key themes and formal structures: it provides a behind the scenes look at the process of doing democracy and accounts for flaws in the execution of it while ultimately extolling the unparalleled virtues of the democratic system; and, specific to democracy porn's election narratives, it presents the candidate as an exemplary citizen who arrives to do the heavy lifting so the broader citizenry (and audience) can rest easy knowing that their shared values are being protected. Surreptitiously caught on video by Deke, the campaign then uses the footage to cut new ads that are far more successful with audiences than the original video, and set the tone for the rest of the campaign—and series—which is summed up by the new slogan, "For real."

Further locating it within the discourse of democracy porn, *Tanner '88* enacts Jack Tanner's stated goal of "holding the American people to the responsibility of citizenship" in myriad other ways, most significantly through its insidious campaign theme song, "Exercise your right to vote." The song becomes an almost haunting refrain over the course of the series, popping up in different, sometimes surprising contexts. It is most frequently used as para-diegetic punctuation between scenes, but the song is also performed live within the diegesis several times, including by a DC political humorist / lounge singer who does her own spin on it after performing another song about Tanner's candidacy, and by a hair metal band performing at a fundraising event in Los Angeles. It goes like this:

> Exercise your right to vote
> Choose the one you like the most
> It's your individual right

[49] *Tanner '88,* episode 1, "The Dark Horse."

To to choose the one you want to fight
For you.
Pick the proper candidate
You can change the course of fate
It's a decision that you must make
Select the one you think is great
For you.

The song's ubiquity throughout the series and its direct, unironic link to the Tanner campaign—TJ hums the tune when feeling particularly optimistic about their prospects, for example—suggests that its lyrics are meant to be taken at their face value as a call to the citizenry (audience) for engagement with the democratic process. The lyrics also make plain that, as far as the series is concerned, the extent of the "responsibility of citizenship" is the act of voting, a reductive view that percolates throughout democracy porn as a broader discourse. Encouraging civic engagement, albeit reductive, is all well and good; yet, the lyrics also reflect the neoliberal ideology by which citizenship is likened to transacting in a marketplace. The ideal candidate, by the song's logic, is not necessarily the most qualified, need not have the best ideas, but is simply, somehow, the one who you, the voter, believe to possess some nebulous concoction of positive qualities making them "great." The candidate, then, has become a commodity, one that can be purchased not with money but with a vote. The instructive consumerist positivity of the lyrics is especially hollow when considered in light of the neoliberal deregulatory legislation that had by 1988 systematically dismantled the Federal Election Campaign Act of 1974, most notably amendments passed in 1979 that created loopholes allowing for unlimited "soft money" campaign donations. These loopholes would stay in place until 2002, and be reinstated shortly thereafter by Citizens United vs. FEC in 2010. In other words, the idea that an individual vote mattered much at all was rather farcical in 1988, but interrogating that root problem is not within the purview of democracy porn.

Whether the series did ultimately have any influence on viewers' relationships to the responsibility of citizenship is one of the central questions of this dissertation. Because the release of *Tanner '88* predates the internet age, however, it is more difficult to get a sense of how it impacted individual viewers' understandings of democratic citizenship when it originally aired than with the other texts I consider in this chapter. And because television was not widely considered a medium worthy of critical attention in 1988, there are not many professional reviews to draw from either. That said, of the reviews that were written at the time, it is clear that critics were not sure what to make of *Tanner '88*; in both form and content, it was perhaps too far ahead of its time. Indeed, it bore the burden of trying to establish HBO as a producer of high quality original content at a time when the idea of putting quality and television the same sentence was laughable, while at the same time shooting on video making for seemingly little aesthetic value by the celluloid-centric standards of 1988. The *New York Times* review, for example, opens with, "Call it imaginative; call it satire; call it a mixed result. 'Tanner '88: the Dark Horse' is too real to be funny, but it's also not real enough. How can a film make fun of politics when politics makes fun of itself?"[50] And later, "Mr. Trudeau and Mr. Altman are saying Tanner's a good guy, but Ms. Reed, harassed and on edge, smoking one cigarette after another, plays a more interesting person. For one thing, she's apparently having a lousy romance. In a television movie, that's more interesting than exquisite details about politics. For exquisite details, we can look to C-Span."[51] Both excerpts point to a critic who does not appreciate the very essence of what democracy porn has to offer. Indeed, *Tanner '88* was anomalous for and

[50] John Corry, "TV Review; 'Tanner '88: A Satire on Presidential Campaigns," *The New York Times*, February 15, 1988, sec. Arts, http://www.nytimes.com/1988/02/15/arts/tv-review-tanner-88-a-satire-on-presidential-campaigns.html.

[51] Ibid.

ahead of its time. While there was certainly plenty of political dissent in the 1980s, the shininess of the Reagan era was still new enough that it seems audiences weren't particularly interested in engaging with the democratic process at all. Such disinterest is evidenced by, if nothing else, the paucity of titles that might even obliquely qualify as democracy porn produced in that decade. In my research for this project, I came across only eight titles made in the 1980s that were worthy of consideration given the parameters outlined in my introduction; and of those titles, only *Tanner* stuck out as significant enough to analyze in depth.

Yet, by 2004, when *Tanner '88* was released on the esteemed Criterion DVD label and re-aired on the likewise prestige-focused Sundance Channel in advance of the four-episode follow-up, *Tanner on Tanner*, a bevy of new reviews popped up celebrating the series. The intervening 16 years apparently primed audiences for the kind of detailed interrogation of the democratic process *Tanner '88* presents, prompting Dana Stevens, writing in *Slate,* to proclaim that the miniseries "accomplished the impossible: It made me nostalgic for the 1980s." She goes on to describe Altman as "our most democratic filmmaker."[52] Stevens even makes note of the campaign theme song, claiming, "It's hard not to hear the song's exhortation as a message and to come away tapping your toe while thinking, 'Gee, I'd better double-check my voter registration before the primary.'"[53] And John Leonard claims the show "out *West Wings The West Wing*" in his *New York* magazine piece.[54] As these reviews attest, the form and content of democracy porn became legible as a valid means of engagement with democratic politics at some point between

[52] Dana Stevens, "Primary Colors," *Slate*, February 4, 2004, http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2004/02/primary_colors.html.

[53] Ibid.

[54] John Leonard, "Election Return," *NYMag.com*, http://nymag.com/nymetro/arts/tv/reviews/n_9805/.

1988 and 2004, at least in part thanks to *Tanner '88* paving the way. So, while *Tanner '88* might have been too formally daring for television in an era where such boundary pushing simply was not done, its long tail has proved impactful for viewers in more recent years. As I argue throughout this dissertation, what it means to out *West Wing The West Wing* might not be as complimentary as Leonard intends, however, and while staying on top of one's voter registration status is no doubt important, that message may be an insufficient means by which to effect any political change under the regime of neoliberalism, which is more difficult to dismantle now than it was in 1988 or even 2004 thanks to the proliferation of legislation and judicial rulings like Citizens United v. SEC.

Despite the somewhat bleak tone of my analysis above, and one might argue inherent to nearly any critical look back at the 1980s, *Tanner '88* ultimately reflects Altman and Trudeau's admitted optimism about democracy both at the level of form and content. That spirit seems to have come through to critics and scholars alike, even when they are otherwise unimpressed by the work. Indeed, Trudeau himself explicitly articulates this sentiment in a conversation between himself and Altman recorded as a special feature for the Criterion edition DVD of *Tanner '88*, stating, "But you [Altman] and I aren't cynics. We're hopeful. We keep moving forward."[55] Yet, in its attention to and criticism of the mediated nature of electoral politics in the United States, the miniseries directs viewer's concerns away from a major contributor to that status quo: the neoliberal deregulatory policies that simultaneously led to the proliferation of cable news networks and the 24-hour news cycle, and the dwindling number of perspectives permitted to participate in that cycle resulting from the corporate conglomeration of media industries. Altman

[55] Garry Trudeau and Robert Altman, "Conversation with Garry Trudeau and Robert Altman," disc 2, *Tanner '88,* DVD, Robert Altman, dir., written by Garry Trudeau, New York: Criterion Collection, 2004.

and Trudeau's optimism might thus best be described as cruel, in Lauren Berlant's sense of the term.[56] For despite their noble efforts to create work that might somehow make more transparent the system of governance in which they have put their faith, they have instead misdirected the electorate they hoped to inspire.

Scandal

Just as *Tanner '88*'s meditation on the media's role in constructing the democratic candidate and call to civic action are reflections of the sociopolitical landscape of its time, so too is *Scandal*'s (Shonda Rhimes, 2012-2018) depiction of the electoral process, a quarter of a century later. The imprint of neoliberalism deepened significantly in those 25+ years, and as such its individualist ideology has become an increasingly important trope in the discourse of democracy porn. The consumer citizen obliquely referred to by *Tanner '88*'s campaign song has been distilled to the point that "citizen" has practically become an incidental part of that title, and consumption has been rhetorically mutated to stand in for politics itself. In discussing the politics of contemporary brand cultures, Sarah Banet-Weiser has described this state of affairs as "consumption as praxis," in which "the act of buying goods that have politics attached to them" is often conflated with cultural resistance.[57] Through both its textual narrative located firmly within the corridors of power in Washington, DC and a sophisticated and far-reaching extra-diegetic brand identity, *Scandal* is an exemplary consumer object with politics not only attached to, but embedded within it. As such, it is an ideal text through which to consider democracy porn's depictions of individual participation as *the* key tenet of contemporary democratic citizenship as it relates to the individual consumerist mindset produced by neoliberal capitalism.

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[56] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

[57] Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Authentic TM: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, Critical Cultural Communication (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2012), 8.

Using a primetime network television show to investigate democracy porn's representations of individual participation vis-a-vis democratic citizenship is useful for two important reasons. First, despite our contemporary fractured media landscape, network television still boasts the highest concentration of viewers overall across all televisual dissemination methods; only one or two cable shows have typically made the top 20 most watched programs charts in recent years. *Scandal* is a particularly fruitful show to this end, as it has not only been in the top 20 most watched shows for its three most recent seasons as of this writing, but it has also been an industry leader in terms of social media engagement, which provides ample evidence through which to analyze viewer's affective engagements with the show. Second, analyzing a network television show allows us to situate democracy porn's neoliberalist underpinnings within the context of television's legacy as one of the greatest disseminators of capitalist ideology in history. Such historical context illuminates the significant role television has played in the construction and maintenance of the neoliberal consumer citizen, and furthermore, offers useful grounding in the origins of the intimate public sphere.

Television's emergence in the mid-20th century coincided with myriad social, economic, and technological changes in the United States, which ultimately coalesced to codify the nascent medium as a commercial one largely modeled after the then-booming radio industry. Many television historians have charted the political economic forces that led to this molding of the television industry in radio's image (as opposed to, significantly, the film industry), but the final outcome is the most important for our purposes here, and that outcome positioned television to become, more than anything else, the widest-reaching way to deliver eyeballs to advertisers. Put differently, upon its emergence, television quickly became a powerful means by which to encourage consumption among its viewership. The television industry took shape after WWII,

really gaining a foothold in American culture beginning in the 1950s. This timing coincided with numerous shifts in the fabric of the United States, which was experiencing an economic boom without the burdens of war for the first time since the 1920s, as well as adjusting to a newly singular position as a global superpower. Thus the corporate industrial framework adopted by television was ideally suited to reinforce government messaging at the time, which implored Americans to demonstrate their patriotism by forming nuclear families, moving to the suburbs, and consuming, consuming, consuming. As George Lipsitz explains, "Commercial network television emerges as the primary discursive medium in American society at the precise historical moment that the isolated nuclear family and its concerns eclipsed previous ethnic, class, and political forces as the crucible of personal identity. Television programs both reflected and shaped that translation, defining the good life in family-centric, asocial, and commodity-oriented ways."[58] What exactly constitutes the good life in televisual representations has been in constant flux since that original moment, but the medium remains a crucial interpellation device for American consumerist ideology.

Given these origins, it is logical that television's early emphasis on the nuclear family would eventually morph into a representation of democratic citizenship that reduces it to the single act of voting, when it appears at all. Specifically, voting alone and for reasons that are entirely based on one's self-interest. We have seen how this ideology manifested in the campaign song from *Tanner '88*. *Scandal* takes this logic even further by removing voters altogether, liberating them from the political process and giving them the freedom to consume without the heavy burden of critical thinking. In what follows, I consider how *Scandal's* depiction of the

[58] George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," *Cultural Anthropology* 1, no. 4 (1986), 367.

ultimate democratic subterfuge—rigging a presidential election—operates within its hyperbolic fantasy world, and examine how the show's very dedicated fanbase reacted to it.

Scandal, ABC's hit series centered on Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), White House Communications Director-turned-head "fixer" at her own crisis management firm, continues television's legacy of erasing markers of difference and modeling good consumerist lifestyles. One form of consumerism it guides viewers in that early television programs did not, however, is citizenship, which was largely presented as distinct from consumption in the older shows. In other words, while consumption was presented as a central way to be a good citizen in television shows such as *Father Knows Best, Leave it to Beaver,* and *The Honeymooners, Scandal* dramatizes the neoliberal worldview that citizenship itself is tantamount to consumption. In its fantasy world, the corridors of power under President Fitzgerald Grant's ("Fitz") Republican administration apparently do not see vectors of difference such as gender, race, or sexuality, allowing for the African American Ms. Pope to be both the White House Communications Director and the white President's mistress, and for the openly gay Cyrus Beene (Jeff Perry) to be Chief of Staff, all with minimal acknowledgment of the ways in which those identity markers are marginalized by the party platform they collectively work to enact. In this same world, the democratic system is in constant crisis, and Pope and her employees—"Gladiators," as they call themselves—are positioned as the only staff in Washington, DC capable of ensuring that it remains functional. Put differently, *privatization* is presented as the savior of democracy. While *Scandal*'s moral universe is much murkier than my brief introduction implies, it is nonetheless one in which many high-ranking elected officials in the United States government outsource their problems to a private contractor who is constantly positioned as being more capable on pretty much every front than the democratic system itself. That is but one of many neoliberal

imprints on *Scandal*'s world, which also largely ignores the ways in which difference—such as Olivia's race and Cyrus' sexuality—would be relevant in its characters' lives; because in this neoliberal dystopia that so captured the nation's attention, discrimination is subordinate to market value.

Yet it is not simply the textual representation of neoliberal democracy in *Scandal* that interests me here. As part of creator Shonda Rhimes's broader vision, the show has also been an industry leader in cultivating a dedicated fanbase largely through the use of social media, and has used the intimate access to viewers' lives that medium provides as a springboard for encouraging myriad other avenues for consumption. The synergistic relationship between *Scandal'*s diegetic and extra-diegetic branding produces meaningful affective engagements for its viewers that take shape in social media responses to the show and sometimes demonstrate impacts on their understandings of citizenship. Thus, below I consider all of these factors in a thick reading of *Scandal* that begins by situating my analysis within the already robust literature about the show, then interrogating the neoliberal imprint on its depiction of the electoral process at the textual level—in particular a key plot thread from the second season in which Olivia and a small cadre of co-conspirators rig the presidential election in Fitz's favor—then looks outward to place the text within Rhimes's media empire, and finally draws on viewer's social media responses to the show in order to draw some conclusions about the ways in which *Scandal*'s multi-faceted transmission of neoliberal ideology impacts their understandings of democratic citizenship.

Much of the critical discourse on *Scandal* has revolved around race, and rightly so. The value of a wildly successful primetime network drama being anchored by a black female protagonist cannot be overstated; and the discourse on race within the show's diegesis is equally worthy of discussion. The show has generated so much interest that scholarly work had been

published on it as early at 2015, record time in the world of academic publishing considering that *Scandal* only began airing in 2012. The most substantive scholarly discussion of *Scandal* to date has been a special issue of *The Black Scholar* called "Scandalous," the centerpiece of which is a roundtable conversation about the show. In her introduction to the roundtable, Mia Mask explicates the significance of Olivia Pope's presence on the national cultural scene in the context of contemporary life in the United States, in which police violence against African Americans occurs daily with no recourse, efforts to disenfranchise African American voters persist, and mass incarceration rates continue to rise with black men making up the largest percentage of the prison population despite constituting less than 15% of the US population. "These conditions," Mask argues, "make it impossible to view *Scandal* outside the context of American race relations. Regardless of whether the complexity of race relations is acknowledged in the diegesis of the show, many spectators recognize the context in which the show exists."[59] Indeed, in keeping with its neoliberal rhetorical stance, race is all but ignored on *Scandal*; but that Olivia Pope is the first black female character to anchor an hour-long network drama since *Get Christie Love!* In 1974 is no doubt a testament to her extra-textual political import. Beyond her mere presence in primetime network television, Olivia Pope is further celebrated in the roundtable for confounding tropes associated with black women. Tara-Lynne Pixley discusses how representations of black women are in a double bind wherein they are reduced to tropes if they engage too directly with blackness and criticized as too perfect or not black enough if they do not. Olivia Pope's intricate characterization, however, confounds such historically limiting understandings of black women characters on television, leading Pixley to describe her as "a sort of *supertrope*—a person whose motivations might include traces of simplified stereotype, but

[59] Mia Mask, "A Roundtable Conversation on Scandal," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 6.

whose complex humanity stretches beyond the lines that would attempt to limit them to just one aspect of their character."[60] Yet while the "complex humanity" Pixley describes is part of what makes Olivia Pope's presence in the televisual landscape so significant, it also acts as an important tool by which *Scandal* normalizes the "neoliberal bent," for which Pixley also acknowledges the show "can easily be maligned."[61] I believe that "neoliberal bent" should not be so easily dismissed and aim to begin interrogating it here.

Given the primacy of race in writing on *Scandal,* scholars and critics alike have considered the relationship between Olivia Pope and President Fitzgerald Grant vis-a-vis miscegenation. What has been absent in those discussions is how the historical stakes at play in such a relationship intersect with the show's setting and the driving force behind much of its action: the American democratic process. Indeed, it seems that the many worthy topics of discussion brought up by *Scandal* have distracted critics from engaging with the role of the democratic process within the show, the neoliberal stamp on which has serious implications for its representations of race, gender, and sexuality. Lisa Duggan's work is once again instructive in tracking neoliberalism's impact on democracy through to its effects on historically marginalized communities. The two key terms she isolates, *privatization* and *personal responsibility,* are central to understanding the many intersections between the culture of neoliberalism and its economic vision.[62] In neoliberal rhetoric, these terms depict neoliberal policies as the common sense way to expand our freedoms and increase wealth for all. Duggan argues, however, that the terms actually serve to elide the ways neoliberal policies perpetuate systematic oppression based

[60] Tara-Lynne Pixley, "Trope and Associates," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 32.

[61] Ibid., 31.

[62] Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality?*, 12.

on vectors of difference along with well-documented processes of upward redistribution. Such processes are significant for Duggan because they work to "[Shrink] the scope of equality and democratic public life dramatically," decreasing opportunities for those disproportionately disenfranchised along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality to combat the proliferation of neoliberal policies.[63] Duggan further argues that progressive politics with downwardly redistributive goals have been displaced by efforts toward a multicultural egalitarianism that promotes limited forms of inclusion without redressing material inequalities. What, then, of *Scandal*'s multicultural egalitarian White House and its depiction of a *private* citizen taking *personal responsibility* for myriad problems that democracy cannot seem to solve?

Critical theorist Nancy Fraser's work on neoliberalism offers a useful lens through which to view *Scandal*'s multiculturalist world. In *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition*, Fraser, like Duggan after her, argues for the reintegration of economics and culture in the left's struggle to reduce inequalities produced under neoliberalism. One concept in particular, Fraser's discussion of affirmative versus transformative remedies, may be mediated to analyze the social projects enacted by *Scandal*. Affirmative remedies, here exemplified on the cultural side by mainstream multiculturalism, attempt to correct inequities "without disturbing the underlying framework that generates them," whereas transformative remedies such as deconstruction of both language and social institutions aim to "correct inequitable outcomes precisely by restructuring the underlying generative framework."[64] Fraser ultimately comes down in favor of transformative remedies, arguing that they more comprehensively combat injustices at their roots, rather than merely their symptoms. While

[63] Ibid., 13.

[64] Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition* (New York: Routlege, 1997), 23.

Fraser's binary logic here verges on overly schematic (certainly remedies exist on a more complex spectrum than these two options imagine), her discussion of affirmative and transformative remedies presents itself as a useful hermeneutic for my assessment of *Scandal'*s representation of race. For, as the show erases the material inequalities inherent to living real life as a person of color, a woman, or a queer person in favor of a fantasy world in which those markers of difference are not relevant to its characters' lives, *Scandal'*s multiculturalism constitutes an affirmative remedy that, by Fraser's logic, does little to resist the systems that produce those inequalities in the real world, if not, in fact, reify them.

In this way, *Scandal* reproduces the false promise of the American Dream, which, to paraphrase Lauren Berlant, is voiced in the language of unconflicted personhood.[65] The idea that any American can have access to the making of history regardless of their identity markers or other relevant circumstances of their birth seems to be the underlying logic for *Scandal'*s muted racial and sexual politics, themselves an outgrowth of Rhimes's now-famous colorblind scripting and casting policies.[66] Of course, personhood is anything but unconflicted in the United States, and as I argue, neoliberal ideology works to exacerbate conflicts along the lines of race, gender, sexuality, and myriad other identity vectors by privatizing all things public, thereby dismantling social relations on all fronts. The egalitarian fantasy world of *Scandal* thus obfuscates the ways in which differing embodiments of personhood are more or less capable of functioning in the lived experience of actually existing American society. To further explore this idea, and the ways

[65] Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, 4.

[66] Gregg Kilday, "'Scandal's' Shonda Rhimes on Scripts' 'Odd Assumption of Whiteness,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 24, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/scandals-shonda-rhimes-scripts-odd-672683.

in which the neoliberal bent of *Scandal* mitigates much of its progress in terms of representation, I will now take a closer look at the show at the textual level.

As in democracy porn more broadly, *Scandal'*s narrative is structured by a balance between storylines that offer pleasure through spectacularized, insider depictions of the democratic process and those that provide the more common satisfaction of character-driven drama, with a weekly procedural storyline thrown in most episodes for good measure. It is distinct from its fellow democracy porn texts, though, in just how spectacular its representations of democracy are, offering a profoundly dark, conspiratorial vision of US governance in which President Grant is in an ongoing power struggle with a super secret government spy agency run by none other than the father of his mistress, Olivia Pope. While access to the "room where it happens" is still a major source of narrative pleasure in *Scandal,* that room is decorated with all of the trappings of a primetime soap opera and populated by a deeply interconnected cast of characters whose constantly shifting relationships with power and each other constitute the show's main draw; the endlessly will-they-or-won't-they nature of Olivia Pope and Fitz's illicit affair is at the center of those relationships. In other words, when considered against something like *Tanner '88,* in which the processural view of democracy's inner workings drives the plot, *Scandal* is firmly located on the pornier end of the democracy porn spectrum, for lack of a better term. That tone and narrative structure play an important role in analyzing *Scandal*'s representation of the electoral process.

Fitz is already the president when *Scandal*'s diegesis begins, but the circumstances of his election are slowly revealed through flashbacks over the course of the first and second seasons. The extended expositional plot provides a look into Fitz's presidential campaign, hitting many of the notes common in democracy porn's more cynical depictions of this process: Fitz wants to do

good for his country as a candidate, and possesses the qualities necessary to be president, but ultimately lacks the personal vision to reach the office on his own, so his numerous handlers step in to compensate for his deficits. Key among those handlers are his Campaign Manager (later Chief of Staff) Cyrus Beene, his wife Mellie, and when their efforts fall short, Olivia, who has come on board as a media relations consultant for the Grant campaign as a favor to her old friend Cyrus. It is on the campaign trail that Fitz and Olivia's affair begins, and elaborating that backstory is the election subplot's most obvious narrative purpose, while it also neatly encapsulates the show's dark vision of contemporary democracy. The latter aspect of the election plot demonstrates the tactics the series deploys to alleviate the stress of its vision for viewers. In addition to Fitz's status as a semi-puppet candidate, the election plot illustrates *Scandal*'s bleak view of the democratic process through a plan to rig the election in Fitz's favor by hacking into electronic voting machines in a key county—aptly named Defiance—in the mother of all swing states, Ohio. Narratively triggered by the possibility that a resolute journalist, who happens to be Cyrus's husband, will uncover the conspiracy in the diegetic present, the election flashback plot reaches its climax in season two, episode 11, when Olivia agrees to participate in the plan, a decision that solidifies *Scandal*'s exonerative stance towards the dystopian neoliberal brand of democracy it narrativizes.

In that episode, titled "A Scandal, A Whore, a Criminal, and a Liar," the election plot flashbacks are edited in parallel with the present tense Fitz miraculously regaining his capacities after surviving an assassination attempt in the diegetic present tense that left him with a bullet through his skull. The cross cutting reinforces a parallel narrative theme wherein Fitz's ability to lead is questioned as he struggles to demonstrate his strength following the assassination attempt in the present, and to make legible his presidential vision for the US in the flashback. In each of

the temporal threads, it is Olivia who offers the voice of reason that gives Fitz the strength and insight he needs to live up to what she views as his potential. Despite her best efforts to mould Fitz into a winning candidate, however, he is still down in the polls. Enter Hollis Doyle, a Texas energy tycoon and massive donor to the Grant campaign, who proposes a plan to ensure Fitz's victory to a small group of key figures in the campaign—Cyrus, Mellie, Olivia, and Judge Verna Thornton. While each of the participants acknowledge that election rigging is not a morally sound thing to do, they neutralize their deviance by reframing it as patriotic, the only way to ensure that their candidate, a "true believer" who comes along "once in a generation" can win the White House. The plan, Hollis says, can be set in motion with a single phone call, but the group agrees that they cannot go through with it unless the decision is unanimous, and Olivia is the only holdout. In a final attempt to change her mind, Cyrus makes the following plea to Olivia, who has to this point been maintaining her moral high ground, and just walked out of a meeting among the co-conspirators:

> CYRUS: We take care of Fitz. We don't do it because we are believers—which, we are. We don't do it for the rush or the high or the power—which we are most certainly junkies for. We do it because Fitz can't. He can't do it. If he could do it, we wouldn't worship at his altar. People like Fitz, they go down in history. People like us, we create the history. We run this world so he can lead it—
> OLIVIA: In order to lead it, the *people* have to elect him, Cyrus. The *people* have to find him worthy.
> CYRUS: That's what I'm trying to tell you. The way this world works, the people is you, and me, and Hollis, and Mellie, and Verna. We are the people.
> OLIVIA: Cy—
> CYRUS: No. It comes down to two questions Olivia: Does he deserve to be president? And if you believe he does, do you think he can win it on his own? If you can say yes to both, then we'll never discuss election rigging ever again.[67]

[67] *Scandal,* season 2, episode 11, "A Scandal, a Whore, a Criminal, and a Liar," directed by Stephen Cragg, written by Mark Fish, featuring Kerry Washington, Tony Goldwyn, Bellamy Young, and Jeff Perry, aired January 17, 2013, on ABC.

Olivia slides down the wall of the hallway in which Cyrus has accosted her, clearly in agony as she considers the choice she faces, and we see a rapid flashback montage of moments from earlier in the episode (nested within the larger flashback structure) at the end of which Olivia throws her phone at the mirror that lines one side of the hall. A lower third then temporally locates the narrative one day before the general election, and a visibly distraught Olivia tells the rest of her co-conspirators that she is "in." Hollis makes a call stating only that "It's a go," and the episode ends with heightened music and close-ups of each of the conspirators' faces as they register the gravity of their involvement in rigging a presidential election; as the music hits a fever pitch, the screen goes to black and the *Scandal* titlecard flashes to close the episode.

Neoliberal ideology is a driving force of the election rigging plot in *Scandal,* traceable through two key threads. First and most significantly, Hollis Doyle is essentially a stand-in for neoliberalism itself. He is a private citizen who has been able to donate such a large amount of money to the Grant campaign that he has gained unfettered access to the candidate. Donations so sizable have been directly enabled by neoliberal deregulatory decisions such as the Supreme Court ruling in Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, which eviscerated restrictions on campaign spending, allowing for essentially unlimited corporate donations to political campaigns and, as many have argued, ushering in a new era of corporate and individual influence in politics.[68] Within the political economy of Washington, DC, that kind of campaign

[68] The literature on Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission is vast, but for some of the most salient critiques of its impact on the nature of citizenship for non-corporate, human citizenship and possibilities for true democracy, see Francis Bingham, "Show Me the Money: Public Access and Accountability after Citizens United Note," *Boston College Law Review* 52 (2011): 1027–64, Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (MIT Press, 2015), Atiba R. Ellis, "Citizens United and Tiered Personhood The Impact of Citizens United: Corporate Speech in the 2010 Elections," *John Marshall Law Review* 44 (2011 2010): 717–50, Conor M Dowling and Michael Gerald Miller, *Super PAC!: Money, Elections, and Voters after Citizens United*, 2014, and Steven L. Winter,

funding directly translates to favors owed—something Hollis explicitly acknowledges when he describes himself as "a guy who everyone at this table owes a favor to" when asked why he is personally invested in the plan—usually involving some future financial benefit for the donor. Hollis's company, Doyle Energy goes on to receive a two billion dollar government contract shortly after Fitz's inauguration, the privatization of government projects being another clear marker of neoliberalism at work. Taken together, Hollis's involvement in the election rigging plan reflects the ways in which neoliberalism works to corporatize democracy from the top down.

If Hollis represents the economic aspects of neoliberalism, then Cyrus makes the case for its more diffuse cultural logic. When confronted with Olivia's recitation of the foundational American myth that the people get to decide who will govern, Cyrus responds by using a rhetorical strategy that has been crucial in the spread of neoliberal ideology: he frames an idea that works to benefit a very small number of people (in this case, Fitz and the cohort of conspirators) and repackages it using the language of democracy so that it can now be seen as a patriotic act done in the name of the republic and for the benefit of the entire population. That Olivia first vehemently refuses to participate in the plan and then eventually agrees to it after ostensibly being convinced by Cyrus's argument is nothing short of an object lesson in neoliberal ideology for the audience who is encouraged to identify with her as the eminently capable protagonist. As in *Swing Vote,* the fact that an entire presidential election hinges on a single county points to the fragility of democracy under our electoral college system. But unlike *Swing Vote,* which attempts to make the case that even under this system, an individual vote does matter, *Scandal* here evinces a worldview in which the shortcomings of democracy are best left

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"Citizens Disunited Symposium: An Intersection of Law: Citizens United v. FEC," *Georgia State University Law Review* 27 (2011 2010): 1133–46

in the hands of elites who know what is best for the ordinary American. In this way, *Scandal"*s "room where it happens" is something of a devious spin on the intimate public sphere, wherein the theoretical citizen who was once politically engaged insofar as it benefitted their individual life has become so committed to consumption that their political agency within the democratic system has been usurped by an intimate group of elites conspiring to exploit the aforementioned fragility of our democratic system for their own gain. It is truly the distillation of neoliberal values. In order to understand just how insidious and far-reaching *Scandal*'s neoliberal ideology is, I will now situate the show within the larger media empire of its creator and showrunner, Shonda Rhimes, whose meteoric rise to Hollywood power and outspoken agenda of promoting diversity both in front of and behind the camera have been the subject of much attention in recent years.

At the time of writing, *Scandal* ranks as the main attraction for ShondaLand, the playfully eponymous production company Rhimes founded in 2005 as a home for her work on *Grey's Anatomy* (Rhimes, 2005-). The ShondaLand logo consists of a black-to-pink gradient background in which a large, static, shiny red heart is encircled by a blue rollercoaster with chasing lights and a car zipping around the track. Above, the word ShondaLand floats in a decorative, cartoonish font with swirling pink embellishments behind it. The "Land" flickers like neon along with an accompanying zapping noise, and gleeful squeals punctuate environmental roller coaster sound effects. It only lasts about two seconds, but—through the scale of the heart in relation to the roller coaster in particular—manages to evoke a uniquely Rhimesian brand of pleasure, one that considers the thrills associated with affairs of the heart as the affective equal of those on offer at amusement parks. The formal juxtaposition of the heart and the roller coaster in the ShondaLand logo further connotes a temporal relationship: the heart is static, existing in time

marked only by the roller coaster's frenetic pace. Yet, again, visually they receive equal weight. In other words, the ShondaLand logo serves as a distillation of Rhimes's work, wherein romantic seriality is blended with somewhat procedural stories of the week. Beginning with *Grey's Anatomy* and continuing with both *Private Practice* and *Scandal,* Rhimes's shows have consistently balanced the amusement park-like instant gratification of a procedural narrative structure with serialized, soap operatic stories that provide duration-based pleasures, creating a hybrid narrative structure that is rare among hour-long contemporary primetime dramas.[69] Elevating romantic entanglements to the same ratings tier as the procedural is nothing short of revolutionary in a primetime network television landscape dominated by multiple iterations of the *NCIS* franchise, reality competition shows, various other strict procedurals, and a sitcom or two. With its distinctly irreverent, feminized aesthetic and bold semiotic moves, the ShondaLand logo neatly encapsulates how Rhimes refuses to craft her own shows in the image of the examples available to her.

Though only responsible for one show at its founding, ShondaLand's name served as a sign of things to come. The success of *Grey's* led quickly to a Rhimes-created spinoff, *Private Practice* (2007-2013), followed of course by *Scandal* in 2012, solidly positioning Rhimes as the proprietor of something closer to the Disney end of the amusement parks that use the -land suffix spectrum than the homespun boardwalk evoked by ShondaLand's logo. Indeed, Rhimes has not only created her own Land, with three of her shows simultaneously dominating the multi-platform televisual terrain of 2016, she has created her own universe. Few showrunners earn the

[69] While rare in the contemporary television landscape of 2016, the particular hybridity of Rhimes's work is not without precedent. The "new dramas" of the 1980s that took the form of what Jeffrey Sconce has termed the "cumulative narrative." See Jeffrey Sconce, "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Duke University Press, 2004), 93–112.

distinction of having the "universe" moniker attached to them in the discourse surrounding their work—Ryan Murphy, Aaron Sorkin, and Joss Whedon being some of the more prominent examples—but Rhimes is central among them, and notably, the only person in the "universe" cohort who is not white and/or male. In the decade since ShondaLand's founding, Rhimes has become one of the most powerful figures in Hollywood, her meteoric rise characterized by circumstances as distinct as her voice.

Despite her name recognition as an individual, from the beginning Rhimes's success has been bolstered by a core group of collaborators who work in varying capacities across multiple projects, and vocally support Rhimes in the press. Her longtime producing partner Betsy Beers handles development and other business needs at ShondaLand, though that relationship falls much more neatly into the usual Hollywood paradigm than the ever-expanding network of creative collaborators Rhimes has assembled. A 2014 profile in *The Hollywood Reporter* notes, "The culture Rhimes has built is one of fierce loyalty, where writers move from one series to the next,"[70] but it doesn't stop there. Contributors to the Shonda Rhimes Universe are not restricted to a single creative role nor to a single show, moving freely from in front of to behind the camera and vice-versa, from writer to director to producer, ad infinitum. Peter Nowalk's credits offer perhaps the most notable example of such mobility within ShondaLand. Nowalk began his professional relationship with Rhimes as a writer on *Grey's Anatomy* in 2008, working his way up to executive story editor and eventually supervising producer. In 2013, he became co-executive producer of *Scandal,* for which he also contributed writing. And in 2014, he created his own ShondaLand show, *How to Get Away with Murder.* Nowalk's career exemplifies

[70] Lacey Rose, "Shonda Rhimes Opens up About 'Angry Black Woman' Flap, Messy 'Grey's Anatomy Chapter and the 'Scandal' Impact," *The Hollywood Reporter,* October 8, 2014, http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/shonda-rhimes-opens-up-angry-738715.

Rhimes's commitment to bringing others up along with her, enacting a feminist politics that is altogether uncommon at the level of industrial media production in which she works.

While Nowalk's creative trajectory is exemplary within ShondaLand, it is by no means anomalous; several significant contributors to *Scandal* have also floated around Rhimes's universe. Tony Goldwyn, who is best known for playing the President on *Scandal,* began working with Rhimes as a director on *Grey's Anatomy* and later *Private Practice.* In addition to his starring role, he occasionally does double-duty and directs on the *Scandal* set as well. Dan Bucatinsky, who plays reporter and Presidential Chief of Staff Cyrus Beene's husband James Novak on *Scandal,* was previously a producer on *Grey's Anatomy,* and developed a still-unproduced show for ShondaLand in 2013. Myriad *Scandal* actors including Jeff Perry (Cyrus Beene), Bellamy Young (First Lady Mellie Grant), Kate Burton (Vice President Sally Langston), to name a few, have made appearances in other ShondaLand shows as well.

Such a fluid creative environment has rewarded Rhimes with a culture of "fierce loyalty," where collaborators not only wear many hats and work on multiple shows, but vociferously support her in the press.[71] When a *New York Times* piece covering the impending premiere of *How to Get Away With Murder* described Rhimes as an "angry black woman," for example, numerous ShondaLand stars immediately responded by dismissing the claim and singing her praises. Among them, Joshua Malina (who plays David Rosen on *Scandal*) Tweeted, "Wow. Did I just read a @nytimes piece that reduced my brilliant, creative, compassionate, thoughtful, badass boss to an 'angry black woman?'" Bellamy Young added, "Kudos to everybody who

[71] Ibid.

lifted their voices in support of our beautiful @shondarhimes today. #KindnessMatters."[72] The controversy went far beyond ShondaLand, spawning the Twitter hashtag #IWasAnAngryBlackWoman and prompting coverage from an array of major news and cultural criticism outlets including *The Hollywood Reporter, NPR, Variety, Vox, Vulture,* the list goes on. Rhimes's intentions in creating such a collaborative working environment are not entirely benevolent, however, as evidenced in the aforementioned *Hollywood Reporter* profile. She says, "Most writing staffs have this crazy high turnover, and then everyone's really miserable, and I don't understand that, I don't know why you don't grow people to then be able to take over as you. That's how I can have more shows."[73] Rhimes's statement here demonstrates the complexity of her personal politics which include both an undeniably progressive commitment to representing and providing opportunities to historically disenfranchised people within mainstream industrial media production, and a seemingly blind allegiance to the capitalist spirit of individualist accumulation.

It is perhaps precisely this politics that has brought Rhimes the success she currently enjoys, a success that has given her the unprecedented distinction of producing the entirety of a Thursday night network primetime lineup. Since *How to Get Away With Murder*'s debut in 2014, and continuing through the time of writing, Shondaland has been responsible for all of ABC's Thursday primetime block, which includes *Grey's Anatomy* and *Scandal* in addition to *HTGAWM* (*Scandal*'s seventh and final season concluded at the end of the spring 2018 season, and the *Grey's* spinoff *Station 19* replaced it in the Thursday night ShondaLand lineup as of fall

[72] E. Alex Jung, "Many Famous People Were Unhappy With That New York *Times* Piece on Shonda Rhimes," *Vulture,* September 20, 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/09/celebrities-respond-times-shonda-rhimes-piece.html#.

[73] Rose, "Shonda Rhimes Opens up About 'Angry Black Woman' Flap, Messy 'Grey's Anatomy Chapter and the 'Scandal' Impact."

2018). Harkening back to the age of ABC's TGIF (Thank God It's Friday) programming of the 80s and 90s, the network has branded the ShondaLand evening as TGIT (Thank God It's Thursday), an appellation that easily translates to a hashtag (#TGIT), which the network actively promotes as part of its larger marketing strategy for the shows. Rhimes was an early advocate of the power of social media engagement to drive ratings, and *Scandal* was the first show to be promoted via a network-created hashtag, with #WhoShotFitz in 2012. *Scandal* has continued to use network-sanctioned hashtags to boost the show's social media presence, which is further bolstered by the cast's live-tweeting every episode and directly engaging with fans in the process. The hope in cultivating a robust social media presence for a television show is, of course, that there will be a direct correlation between growth in online engagement and viewership. Such a correlative relationship is very difficult to prove, but a 2014 study conducted by Twitter to better understand the impact of TV-related tweets does provide evidence that exposure to TV tweets led 90% of respondents to take some form of subsequent action. The study defines action in four broad categories: action taken on Twitter (78%), action taken to watch TV content (77%), action taken to find out more about a show through online searching (76%), and action taken on other social media sites (60%).[74] While not entirely conclusive, the results lend some credence to Rhimes's implicit belief that social media activity can impact viewership. What is not in doubt, however, is that it can strengthen a brand identity, which is an important part of Shondaland's overall operation.

The official history of how the *Scandal* cast began live-tweeting each episode is that Rhimes herself had long been active on Twitter and began live-tweeting on her own, as did

[74] Anjali Midha, "Study: Exposure to TV tweets drives consumes to take action - both on and off Twitter," *Twitter* (blog), May 8, 2015, https://blog.twitter.com/2014/study-exposure-to-tv-tweets-drives-consumers-to-take-action-both-on-and-off-of-twitter.

Kerry Washington. Soon, Rhimes "mobilized" the rest of the cast to follow suit—whether or not that mobilization involves contractual obligations or compensation is unclear—and the Twitter community took note. Then came the #WhoShotFitz hashtag, and shortly thereafter, the *Scandal* fans on Twitter—self-proclaimed Gladiators—had begun Tweeting obsessively while new episodes aired and for hours or even days afterwards. Anna Everett notes that *Scandal*'s Twitter fan culture "betrays a level of intense affect and engagement that is highly prized in the TV industry."[75] By her estimation, these affects are primarily directed towards the show's soap operatic plot twists and the turbulent relationship between Olivia and Fitz (which inspired the extensively used #Olitz hashtag, a portmanteau of the characters' names and the celebrity couple name given to them by the internet). Everett's discussion does not consider whether or not fans evince an affective engagement with the show's representation of democracy; it does, however, describe *Scandal*'s online fan culture as "a powerful racially inclusive virtual space for the type of hashtag activism organized around a jubilant multiculturalism."[76] Everett's characterization smacks of *Scandal*'s neoliberal imprint, demonstrating both that it is reflected in viewer's responses to it and has largely been ignored by critics eager to celebrate the significant step in black female representation the show has made. The "jubilant multiculturalism" Everett describes (the existence of which she substantiates only with a cursory assessment of users' Twitter avatars) sounds awfully similar to that of *Scandal*'s diegetic fantasy world, in which identity markers bear no relation to differential possibilities for lived experiences. From such a statement, we can only surmise that Everett herself has subscribed to or is at least unconcerned with the neoliberal logic *Scandal* dramatizes, that the show's fans have similarly bought in

[75] Anna Everett, "Scandalicious," *The Black Scholar* 45, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 37.

[76] Ibid.

through their responses, or both. Regardless, the fact remains that the significance of Olivia Pope's presence and popularity on network television is mitigated by *Scandal*'s adherence to a value system that works behind the scenes to upwardly redistribute wealth and exacerbate disenfranchisement along the lines of race, gender, class, sexual orientation and gender identity, immigration status, and other markers of difference from the white, cisgender heteropatriarchy that controls power and wealth.

Everett's description of *Scandal* fans' Twitter presence is further problematic in her declaration that such activity constitutes "hashtag activism." In fact, Everett describes *Scandal* fans' social media presence as "activist" on multiple occasions in her article "Scandalicious: *Scandal,* Social Media, and Shonda Rhimes' Auteurist Juggernaut," and for reasons that are not entirely clear. One possibility is that she intends the term as an acknowledgment of the impact fans have on the show's storytelling, vis-a-vis Henry Jenkins's work on internet fandom in which he discusses the ways fans readily appropriate cultural artifacts and amend them to fit with their own desires.[77] Yet, given that Everett focuses primarily on Twitter users' obsession with Olivia and Fitz's relationship rather than the explicitly political aspects of the show, "activist" is a curious choice of words. Indeed, even if it is meant to celebrate a thriving fan culture from a Jenkinsian perspective, what Everett describes as "activist" behaviors among *Scandal* fans' social media activity could just as easily be seen as what Tavia Nyong'o by way of Jodi Dean would call "the fantasy of virtual participation," especially when viewed in light of viewers' relationships to the democratic elements of the show.[78]

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[77] See Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

[78] Jodi Dean, *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Tavia Nyong'o, "Queer Africa and the Fantasy of Virtual Participation," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (July 22, 2012): 40–63.

Dean, in *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics,* argues that engagements with democracy and other ostensibly humanist projects in the age of communicative capitalism cannot be completely disarticulated from the corporate-capitalist informational infrastructures that carry those messages. This argument lead Nyong'o to ask, "Does communicative capitalism elevate the transmission of affect over the accomplishment of political objectives, reducing politics to what Dean calls a fantasy of participation?"[79] Nyong'o goes on to consider this question by analyzing very different subject matter than my own, but the foundational issues at stake are resonant for our purposes here, forcing us to at least consider the possibility that no Tweet can truly be activist, and to ruminate on what the transmission of affect over the corporate informational infrastructures of social media can accomplish in terms of viewers' engagement with *Scandal* and democracy porn more broadly. Such critiques of affective labor in social media are particularly resonant when considering democracy porn. Given its commitment to engaging with processes of democracy through its narratives, democracy porn's texts—be they unabashedly ameliorative as in *Swing Vote* or spectacularly cynical as in *Scandal*—always place significant value on democracy as both a system and an idea. Embedded in that value system, especially in stories about the electoral process, is the belief that citizenship (expressed almost exclusively in the form of voting) is a cornerstone of democracy. Thus, just as clicktivism is critiqued for being an insufficient form of social protest, doing more to content the clicker than help a cause, social media engagement surrounding *Scandal* and other democracy porn texts ultimately does more to shore up the already sturdy corporate machinery that produces it than it does to foster any real civic engagement.

[79] Nyong'o, 46.

To begin thinking through these issues, and to conclude my discussion of *Scandal,* the Shonda Rhimes Brand, and the relationship with neoliberalism thereof, I would like to look briefly at viewer responses specifically relating to the election rigging plot discussed above. Unlike viewers' responses to the more didactic texts considered earlier in this chapter, reactions to *Scandal* most often highlight the characters' relationships and the fast-paced plotting; perhaps unsurprisingly, they are also much more emphatic about the pleasures the show offers. Some viewers even go so far as to express their distaste for the political elements of the show, such as Amazon user Lucy Bloom, whose review of season two states, "Great story about Olivia Pope and the President of the United States. Could do without the political pitch for same sex marriage. I want to be entertained, not preached at."[80] While Lucy Bloom's comments are certainly extreme compared to those of other viewers, her privileging of entertainment value over politics is not unique. The show itself focuses less on the processes of democracy than other examples of democracy porn, but that is part of what makes it such an interesting test case. Given viewers' investment in the soap operatic character relationships on *Scandal,* responses to explicitly political plot lines such as the election rigging plot are particularly revealing about the way the show impacts their understandings of citizenship. Among the Tweets using the #Scandal hashtag between the previously discussed episode's original airdate of January 17, 2013 and January 20, 2017 and including the word "election," viewers demonstrate some level of interest in the democratic elements of the plot. Evoking viewer responses of other democracy porn texts, for example, @Mattfox316 writes, "So much stuff happened in this episode. Ask for divorce, ask

[80] Lucy Bloom, "Great love story," review of *Scandal* season 2, Amazon, June 25, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1VV8N0DX8WTTJ/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B009M7PR5A

for marriage, cheat the election. I was never into government until #Scandal."[81] Most viewers / Twitter Gladiators were not so earnestly invested in the show's politicking, however. A major theme in these Tweets is viewers expressing sympathy for Olivia in having to make such a difficult decision, and significantly, excusing her for choosing to rig the election because they view it as an act affirming her love for Fitz. Twitter user @MizzYari_ says, "Olivia knew that the love of her life would've been shattered if he had lost the election #nochoice #scandal #HolyFitz."[82] Tweets of this nature, which constitute a significant percentage of those responding to the episode, demonstrate both a strong identification with Olivia, and a subscription to the neoliberal ideology depicted in the show.

Through the deployment of neoliberal rhetoric that emphasizes privatization and individual responsibility, democracy porn's election narratives overwhelmingly work to bolster what Lauren Berlant has described as the intimate public sphere. For Berlant, the intimate public sphere "renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere."[83] We have seen how citizenship is constructed in this way throughout the texts examined in this chapter, from the way Bud takes personal responsibility for his failure as a citizen in *Swing Vote*, to a campaign song that urges citizen-listeners to make voting decisions based on which candidate is "great" for their individual needs in *Tanner '88,* to the paradoxical way *Scandal* turns "the room where it

[81] Matthew Fox, "So Much Stuff Happened in This Episode. Ask for Divorce, Ask for Marriage, Cheat the Election. I Was Never into Government until #Scandal," microblog, *@mattfox316*, January 18, 2013, https://twitter.com/mattfox316/status/292120509330620416.

[82] Yari, "Olivia Knew That the Love of Her Life Would've Been Shattered If He Had Lost the Election #nochoice #scandal #HolyFitz," microblog, *@MizzYari_*, January 18, 2013, https://twitter.com/MizzYari_/status/292123859816165377.

[83] Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City,* 5.

happens" itself into an intimate public sphere in order to condone its protagonist's participation in the rigging of a presidential election. Furthermore, examining the discourse surrounding each of these key texts has pointed to important ways the powerful affects they produce impacts the way viewers understand their own lives as citizens, often in ways that suggest an investment in the intimate public sphere over a desire to engage with the people.

Chapter Two:
The Legislative Process

This is just like on C-SPAN, except I'm not bored.

- Elle Woods, Esq.
Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde

Following elections, the logical next step in the democratic process as it is depicted in democracy porn is legislation. Accordingly, this chapter looks at films and television shows that represent the legislative process across several contexts. If the media texts discussed in chapter one most directly address the role of citizenship under neoliberal democracy, the films and television shows discussed in what follows most explicitly interrogate our particular system of representation as a way to *do* democracy. Like the election-centered texts discussed I chapter one, democracy porn's legislative stories provide pleasure by providing viewers with intimate access to the inner workings of the process, but here that access probes even deeper, moving from the campaign trail to the most exclusive corridors of power in Washington, DC. The epigraph above, drawn from perhaps the most fantastical example of democracy porn discussed in this dissertation, succinctly describes the nature of the discourse's representations of the legislative process. Elle's comment refers to her experience of actually participating in the legislative process, and it is that level of access that democracy porn seeks to simulate in the texts discussed throughout this chapter, which take the kind of dry content that fulfills C-SPAN's public service mandate to make accessible the proceedings of the United States federal government and sexes it up by lifting the curtain on both the backroom deals that determine the course of official proceedings and the lives of the elected officials and their staffs who manage it all.

Two major sub-processes form the foundation for the sexed up, non-boring legislative process within the American democratic system as imagined by democracy porn: debate about and creation of legislation itself. Debates are presented in many forms throughout democracy porn's cohort of legislative films and television shows. It is often dramatized as a literal debate on the House or Senate floor, as happens in the Garry Trudeau-penned *Alpha House* (Trudeau, 2013-2014), a comedy centered on four Republican Senators who share a house in Washington, DC, or the short-lived Lawrence O'Donnell creation *Mister Sterling* (O'Donnell, 2003), serial drama in which the son of a former Governor is appointed to fill the seat of the senior senator from California after his untimely death. On rare occasions, democracy porn depicts legislative processes below the federal level, as in *Parks & Recreation* (Daniels and Schur, 2009-2015), a sitcom that follows local politics in the fictional town of Pawnee, Indiana through the eyes of the low-level bureaucrats who run the Parks and Recreation Department. The show's central protagonist, Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler), is elected to the City Council midway through the show's seven-season run, which introduces debate narratives between her and her fellow Council Members, as well as between the Council and the public during open comment meetings. It is not insignificant that the three examples I have cited to illustrate the prevalence of debate plots within democracy porn are all television shows. Legislation is unique in the themes explored so far in this dissertation in that its processual elements naturally lend themselves to televisual serialization; as such, this chapter also asks questions regarding the impact of narrative structure in depicting the process of democracy. Debate also manifests on a smaller scale in these texts through conversations about weighty political issues between individual characters. Such discourse is a signature of Aaron Sorkin's writing and plays an important role in *The American President* (Reiner, 1995), the plot of which is instigated by the President and his staff working to

get two major pieces of legislation through Congress. They debate the finer points of the legislation amongst themselves throughout the film, as well as with Congressional Representatives and lobbyists.

As my brief description of *The American President* implies, this more personal form of debate is intimately bound up with the second of the defining subprocesses within democracy porn's legislative narratives: the creation of the legislation itself. This subprocess is common in, though not exclusive to, films that depict the legislative process, which, like *The American President,* often center on efforts to create a single piece of legislation and usher it along its journey from bill sitting on Capitol Hill to full-fledged law. We also see this process at work in *Legally Blonde 2* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003) and *Dave* (Reitman, 1993), both discussed in more detail below. But no democracy porn text can outshine *The West Wing* (Sorkin, 1999-2006) as the apex of representations of the legislative process. Through its distinctive formal grammar and tone, the series dramatizes the creation of copious pieces of legislation and the debates related to them, while consistently engaging viewers both at the level of character and democratic process over a period of years. As such, it forms the central case study of this chapter, in which I attempt to understand how and why the series was so successful with viewers, and unpack some particular ways this success enabled the show to construct its own vision of neoliberal democracy. Moreover, *The West Wing's* large and active fan community provides a particularly productive source by which to assess viewers' affective engagements with the series, and illuminates some significant ways in which those engagements inform understandings of their own citizenship. Again, the spectacularized, meticulous way these legislative processes are presented by democracy porn provides immense narrative pleasures for viewers. And in the

examples examined throughout this chapter, much of that pleasure seems to result from the imagined access they grant to the corridors of power, to "the room where it happens."

The phrase "the room where it happens" literally refers to the private spaces where the much of the wheeling and dealing that fuels legislative processes takes place both in real life and as represented in democracy porn; it is also a reference to the eponymous song from the stage musical *Hamilton,* based on the life of founding father Alexander Hamilton. As a piece of theater, *Hamilton* falls outside the scope of this dissertation, so I will not analyze it in depth (at least until it is made for the screen!), but it is a clear example of democracy porn. However, this particular song provides a useful entry point for theorizing the way democracy porn's legislative films operate at both the levels of text and reception, so I will briefly consider it here. Sung by Aaron Burr—who famously shot Hamilton in a duel in 1804 and is presented as his foil throughout the narrative—the song describes a closed-door dinner meeting that took place between Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison in 1790. Though there are no complete historical accounts of what exactly took place during the meeting, it resulted in moving the new nation's capital from New York City to what is now Washington, DC in exchange for bipartisan support of Hamilton's financial system in Congress. Burr sings of his frustrations at being excluded from the meeting, while also making a structural critique about the lack of transparency in the new democratic system:

> No one really knows how the game is played
> The art of the trade
> How the sausage gets made
> We just assume that it happens
> But no one else is in
> The room where it happens.[84]

[84] Leslie Odom Jr., vocalist, "The Room Where it Happens," by Lin-Manuel Miranda, Spotify, track 5 on disc two of *Hamilton (Original Broadway Cast Recording),* Atlantic Recording Company, 2015.

Burr's refrain here also stands in for a frustration experienced by the American people more broadly, raising the question: In a system of governance that is supposed to be by and for the people, why are so many of the details worked out in secret?

In its imaginings of the legislative process, democracy porn provides access to conversations like the one that happened between Hamilton, Jefferson, and Madison and from which Burr was excluded. In films like *Dave* and *The American President,* the audience is invited into these private rooms and bear witness to the dealmaking and number crunching that makes up democracy's backend, and viewers indicate over and over in their responses that these narrative threads are a major source of the viewing pleasures they experience through democracy porn. While in the context of democracy porn, the "it" that happens in these private rooms is the legislative sausage making to which Burr refers, the use of that particular pronoun in relation to something that happens in a private room is also suggestive of the genre from which democracy porn borrows part of its name.

My use of "democracy porn" as a structuring moniker for this project means to evoke discourses surrounding both the US democratic system and pornography. Further, in combining the two, the term aims to make an argument about one way American democracy has come to be understood in the public sphere, as at least partially evidenced in the films and television shows discussed in this chapter and throughout the dissertation. The choice to modify "democracy" with "porn" is, of course, a provocative one, but I hope to prove that its effectiveness as a label does not stop at the level of attention-getting gimmick. Indeed, given the increasing frequency with which "porn" is used colloquially as an associative suffix to somewhat flippantly describe niche genres such as "torture porn" in film, and other image-based trends such as "food porn," there may seem to be—on the surface—an inherent disjunction in affiliating it with a what many

people believe to be the best system of governance yet conceived by humanity.[85] However, the seemingly oceanic space between a neologism born in the late postmodern tradition of ironic detachment and the earnest, utopian goals of democracy as a system of governance is precisely what democracy porn aims to articulate, traverse, and unpack.

As described in the Introduction to this dissertation and briefly above, the term democracy porn also adopts the recent colloquial use of the word porn, which transfers an element of prurience on to the word to which it is attached. Thus, in democracy porn, politics are frequently eschewed in favor of a focus on sexier aspects of what it means to *do* democracy: secretive backroom deals, dramatic interpersonal relationships among bureaucrats and elected officials, exciting uses of obscure procedural rules. Democracy porn thus harnesses the dry, tedious scaffolding of a democratic society in the service of myriad visual and narrative pleasures. While most colloquial-cum-scholarly uses of the word porn as an addendum focus on topics that are more closely related to orgasm or explicit sexual pleasure—torture porn in its oblique reference to BDSM sexual practices, and food porn in its conjuring up of the longstanding relationship between food and sexuality, for example—democracy porn is remarkable in its ability to confer intense pleasures onto material that is not solely about sex. Regardless, the media texts in question frequently deals pleasures that can be better understood with the help of the urtext of porn studies.

Any consideration of pornography as a subject of academic inquiry cannot omit a discussion of Linda Williams's seminal book *Hard Core: Power, Pleasures, and the "Frenzy of the Visible."* In it, Williams takes pornography seriously as a cinematic genre, attempting to get

[85] I borrow the framing of porn as an associative suffix from Evangelos Tziallas's discussion of "torture porn" in "Torture porn and surveillance culture," *Jump Cut* 52 (2010), http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc52.2010/evangelosTorturePorn/.

past its myriad contestations in order to theorize how it functions at a textual level. Williams ultimately crafts both a history and a theory of pornography as genre, charting its cinematic trajectory and proposing generative comparisons along the way that facilitate further thinking on the topic, a particularly challenging task given the genre's problematic history of reception in the academy. Williams's lengthy comparison of pornography with the Hollywood musical constitutes one of the work's central contributions; briefly recounting it will benefit our study of democracy porn.[86] For Williams, the utopian dimension of Hollywood musicals, as theorized by Richard Dyer, parallels pornographic narratives in several significant ways. Dyer argues that the utopian sensibility of the musical constitutes a space to work out complex social phenomena by demonstrations of: energy as a solution for exhaustion, abundance as a solution for scarcity, intensity as a solution for dreariness, transparency as a solution for manipulation, and community as a solution for fragmentation. Pornography, Williams argues, similarly solves problems through utopianism, but with a more deliberate focus on sexual difference. Yet, while Dyer's account intends to recuperate the much-scorned escapism of the Hollywood musical, Williams presents a less optimistic account of pornography, particularly in her description of "separated utopias."[87]

The separated utopias enacted by show segments of the backstage musical serve to work out the social problems introduced in the films' narrative sections. Unlike integrated utopias found in other musical narrative forms, the solutions offered by separated utopias are so obvious in their escapism that, Williams argues, it is difficult to take them seriously. For Williams,

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[86] See chapter five, "Generic Pleasures: Number and Narrative," and chapter six, "Hard-Core Utopias: Problems and Solutions" in Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

[87] Williams, *Hard Core*, 160-166.

separated utopias in pornographic films serve to solve the problems of the male viewer through "phallic and commodified intensity and abundance," but fail to account for other problems, namely that of female desire.[88] Following Dyer and Williams, I propose that the room where it happens is democracy porn's separated utopia, where the problems of the democratic system that are introduced in the more public spaces of the texts are worked out. But, like hard core pornography, they fail to solve all of the problems linked to the texts' narrative worlds—issues inherent to the modern society that democracy attempts to govern, namely, neoliberalism's incursions on democracy and the social problems produced by that infiltration.

Among other issues, this chapter examines the broad spectrum of problems democracy porn imagines as intrinsic to the democratic process in the contemporary neoliberal context, and how the discourse attempts to work through them; viewing these issues as filtered through the separated utopia of the room where it happens provides a useful hermeneutic to this end. Take, for example, *Dave,* a comedy in which an ordinary man, Dave Kovic (Kevin Kline) who runs a temp agency and also sometimes works as a presidential impersonator ends up standing in for the president on the national stage after he has a mid-coital stroke during a rendezvous with his mistress. Machiavellian west wing staffers orchestrate Dave's secretly replacing the president for public appearances and meetings in the rooms where it happens, instructing him to be as laconic as possible. The whole plan, they say, is temporary and meant to ensure that the American people are not unnecessarily concerned about the president's health because he will recover soon. But Dave soon realizes that these senior staffers do not have the best interests of the American people in mind and are actually attempting to orchestrate a coup d'état. Meanwhile, Dave's newfound access to the daily life of a president has both inspired him because of the

[88] Ibid, 161.

possibilities for doing good such power affords a person, and frustrated him as he learns that so many government officials lack the can-do spirit that he associates with being an American. One of Dave's presidential appearances includes a visit to a homeless shelter, during which he learns that it will be forced to close if it loses its government funding. When Dave's puppet masters forge the presidents signature to cut the shelter's funding, Dave decides to solve this social problem on his own, in the utopian space of the room where it happens.

To work out his plan, Dave invites another everyman, his friend Murray (Charles Grodin) who is an accountant, to the White House and they spend all night in one of the West Wing's stately conference rooms crunching numbers in the federal budget to find the $650 million needed to save the shelter. In a cabinet meeting the next day, Dave announces his plan to save the shelter through some small cuts across the budget, none of which the cabinet members object to—an individual social problem has thus been solved in the utopian space of the room where it happens. Inspired by his success, Dave sets his sights on a bigger solution, and again working with Murray in the separated utopia of the White House, comes up with a plan for a program that would provide a job for every American who wants one. Though this New Deal-esque plan is presented as the solution to the social problems the film introduces, it is constructed in such a way that positions the democratic system, rather than misuse of it, as the problem and as such suggests an undemocratic increase in executive power as the solution. Despite the progressive politics that inspire Dave's plan, it ultimately proposes, as Christian B. Long has argued, a "business, or CEO, model for the presidency," which "reframes democracy in oligarchic terms, giving business interests greater agency within democracy than its putative citizens."[89] In other

[89] Christian B. Long, "The Mysteries of Washington, D.C.: Hollywood's White House Tunnels," in *Film and the American Presidency*, ed. Jeff Menne and Christian B. Long, (New York ; London: Routledge, 2015), 260.

words, *Dave* suggests that the solution to social problems conceived of in the room where it happens is, essentially, neoliberalism itself. Spencer Downing further supports this view of the film:

> Kovic cuts red tape, circumvents selfish special interests, and restores faith in national politics by simply being decent and applying common sense…*Dave*'s point is clear: Washington is run by corrupt politicians who neglect regular Americans as they squabble over pork barrel projects and line their own pockets. Although ostensibly 'liberal' in its sympathies for government welfare programs, *Dave*'s vision of 'the system' mirrors neoconservative critiques. As Ronald Reagan said, government *is* the problem.[90]

As we can see from this example, democracy porn, like hard core pornography, engages with its subject matter as a utopian ideal. Also as in pornography, however, the solutions that utopian ideal provides fails to account for all of the problems tethered to its subject. In *Dave,* not only does the solution fail to solve the problem of neoliberalism, it proposes neoliberalism itself as the solution.

Dave is exemplary of the way democracy porn operates in its filmic legislative texts, both in narrative form and the way neoliberal ideology operates therein. Due to the temporal constraints of the feature film, democracy porn's cinematic texts about the legislative process feature an "everyperson"—that is, not a member of the Beltway elite—protagonist who serves as an avatar for the audience and gains access to the room where it happens through a series of often fantastical circumstances. Television's capacity for episodic narratives, by contrast, is conducive to storytelling that better reflects the legislative process itself, which is ongoing but comprised of discrete (if intertwining) issues, projects, and debates. I will examine the way television's serial storytelling impacts democracy porn's representation of the legislative process

[90] Spencer Downing, "Handling the Truth: Sorkin's Liberal Vision," in *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Sleight of Hand in the FIlms and Television Shows*, by Thomas Fahy (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005), 135.

in my analysis of The West Wing, below. First, we will turn our attention to another cinematic text that centers on a Washington outsider who gains access to the room where it happens in an outlandish way; and this time, that person is—gasp—a woman.

Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde

Unique among the democracy porn canon in its direct, almost exclusive appeal to a female audience, *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde* (Herman-Wurmfeld, 2003) is a something of a hyperfeminized retelling of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* in which the perky, pink-suited, and very blonde Elle Woods, Esq. (Reese Witherspoon) stands in for Jefferson Smith and makes the pilgrimage to Washington, D.C. with the hope of making a difference. Equal parts democracy porn, chick flick, and opportunistic sequel, *Legally Blonde 2* highlights the hegemonic masculinity of US democracy and upends it by presenting a utopian vision of a femmed legislative process. Though initially dismissed by the Washington elites for her high femme aesthetic and demeanor, Elle's steadfast commitment to a feminist politics of connection, affirmation, and support eventually wins her a cadre of allies who work collaboratively to accomplish her goal. Their ultimate success begins to dismantle the femmephobia that is so pervasive in government and serves to make the legislative process feel accessible to the femme-presenting citizens whom it has historically both oppressed and excluded. Yet despite its utopian possibilities, the femininity advocated by *Legally Blonde 2* is most readily signaled by conspicuous consumption; purchasing and discussing cosmetics is so important to Elle that the threat of feeling morally suspect for doing so propels her into civic action, constituting the film's inciting incident. The progressive promise contained within the film's femme politics is thus tempered by an investment in the neoliberal narratives of personal responsibility and consumption that are so pervasive in democracy porn writ large. The film's unusual—and for

many viewers, uneasy—union of chick flick and democracy porn tropes makes *Legally Blonde 2* a particularly generative text for our purposes here, the significance of which is compounded by its anomalous status as a feature film focusing on the legislative process that is neither responding to the legacy of Bill Clinton nor presenting a fictionalized account of a true political story, as is true of the vast majority of other filmic democracy porn texts focusing on the legislative process.[91]

Legally Blonde 2 is part of a genealogy of pilgrimage to Washington stories and borrows a great deal from the filmic urtext of that narrative tradition, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington.* Such texts, according to Lauren Berlant, are often centered on a infantile citizen whose inability to "read the codes" of "America as a site of practical politics" disrupts D.C.'s norms, "eliciting scorn and derision from 'knowing' adult citizens but also a kind of admiration from these same people, who can remember with nostalgia the time that they were 'unknowing' and believed in the capacity of the nation to be practically utopian."[92] As in the first *Legally Blonde* film, the impulse for others to interpret Elle's outward appearance—blonde and hyperfeminine—as a signifier of incompetence, thus marking her as infantile, is a central concern in the sequel. Elle's citizenship is added to the equation when, upon learning that her beloved Chihuahua Bruiser's mother is owned by a cosmetics company and being used for animal testing, she begins a campaign to save her. Elle vows, in fact, to save all of the animals being used for testing by the C'est Magnifique Corporation, which happens to be represented by the Boston law firm at which she is a rising star. When she makes the case to liberate the animals from C'est Magnifique to the

[91] For a detailed analysis of democracy porn texts that dramatize real historical events, see Chapter 3.

[92] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke University Press Books, 1997), 28-29.

firm's partners, however, Elle is not only laughed at for her attempted advocacy but fired for stating that she can't work with people who tacitly endorse hurting living beings because it is part of the job of protecting the client's best interests. Not one to take defeat lightly, Elle pulls herself up by her strappy sandals, lands a job as a Legislative Assistant to Representative Victoria Rudd of Massachusetts (Sally Field), and sets off for Washington, D.C. where she aims to outlaw animal testing in the entire cosmetic industry through the passage of "Bruiser's Bill." Elle's pilgrimage to Washington then begins in earnest, and along with it, a more nuanced engagement with the legislative process than one might expect given the film's seemingly frivolous tone. The message that substantive ideas can be contained in frothy packages is thus communicated both through Elle's character arc and at the broader formal level of the film as guided by director Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, whose earlier work, it is worth mentioning, exhibits a politically-minded queer sensibility.[93]

Given that *Legally Blonde 2* is first and foremost a commercial star vehicle designed to bank—literally and figuratively—on Witherspoon's original A-list-making performance as Elle Woods, the choice to center the film on the legislative process is somewhat surprising. Indeed, the commercial imperatives of mass media texts such as the *Legally Blonde* franchise make focusing on a potentially alienating subject like politics a risky proposition, as I discuss in more depth in my analysis of *The West Wing* below. Financial risks aside, the D.C. setting creates a neat symmetry with the first *Legally Blonde* film insofar as it provides another elite masculine milieu in which Elle can plant herself and confound its inhabitants with the effervescent cocktail of hypercompetence and hyperfemininity that defines her personal brand. Having done her part

[93] Prior to directing *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde,* Charles Herman-Wurmfeld's directorial credits include two love stories centered on queer women, *Kissing Jessica Stein* (2001) and *Fanci's Persuasion* (1995), as well as the extremely queer, extremely campy short, "Fabian's Freeak Show" (1994).

to dismantle femmephobia in the oppressively patriarchal microcosm of Harvard Law School as she did in the first film, *Legally Blonde 2* sees our heroine taking on a bastion of patriarchy whose power has farther reach.

As with any fish out of water story, Elle must learn to navigate the local culture in order to accomplish her goal, which in this case means figuring out how the actually existing legislative process works, as opposed to the abstraction taught in law school (and perpetuated by the American mythos). Viewers learn the ins and outs of the procedure by which a bill becomes a law alongside Elle, a civics lesson signaled in part by a rock cover of the *Schoolhouse Rock* classic "I'm Just a Bill" on the soundtrack. But just as quickly as Elle identifies the key figures she needs to meet with on the Energy and Commerce Committee in order to gain the support she needs for Bruiser's Bill to make it to a House vote, she comes to the disheartening realization that all infantile citizens reach on their pilgrimages: that the system into which they have put their faith does not live up to its democratic possibilities in practice. Contrary to many the experiences of many other infantile citizens whose idealistic vision of Washington is shattered by exposure to governmental corruption—Jefferson Smith among them—Elle's awakening takes place when she comes to understand that the standard operating procedure in D.C. is a slow-moving process. This protocol might have "worked for 200 years," as noted by Victoria's Chief of Staff and Elle's office antagonist, Grace, but it is not nearly efficient enough for Elle's taste. By framing government itself as the problem rather than a corruption of it, *Legally Blonde 2* veers from the *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* narrative on which it is loosely modeled and reflects the corporatized neoliberal world in which it was produced. As Elle continues her political education and journey from infantile to competent citizen, she learns how to leverage

her uniquely femme perspective to benefit rather than burden her legislative agenda, with the consumerist elements of her femme identity proving most useful.

Legally Blonde 2 has all the trappings of democracy porn's paradigmatic take on the legislative process as discussed in the other feature film examples above, but it presents them with a femme spin. Elle Woods herself is the everyperson avatar through which the audience gains access to the room where it happens, one of very few women to fill that role in the democracy porn canon. That our protagonist is not only a woman but high femme significantly impacts the way she interacts with the legislative process and by extension, the film's representation of democracy itself. From the moment Elle walks up the steps of Congress in her Jackie Kennedy-esque pink suit and pillbox hat, her femininity is highlighted at every turn, sartorially and otherwise. When she walks into her new office, for example, one of her new colleagues refers to her as "Capitol Barbie." Yet while her hyperfeminine appearance most immediately marks Elle's difference from the denizens of her new world, the femme, and feminist, epistemology that lies beneath also proves to be a significant impediment in her attempt to engage with Washington politicking. In the Washington, DC imagined by *Legally Blonde 2,* the social problems presented by the film cannot be solved in the room where it happens, because that space, according to the film's neoliberal worldview, is itself the problem.

Upon her arrival, Elle responds to the mean-spirited, competitive nature of her new workplace with positivity, operating by the guiding principle that listening and looking for the best in people can go a long way to finding the common ground necessary for successful compromise. Elle works tirelessly to bring up her colleagues, giving them credit for helping her when she did things on her own, complimenting them when they don't deserve it. Her worldview is best illustrated by her use of the "Snap Cup," which is also featured in the first *Legally Blonde*

film, and has participants write notes with positive comments, or "warm fuzzies," about their colleagues, place them into the cup, and then read them aloud to the group. Her Congressional colleagues initially reject the game, and the culture of support it represents. Elle is rejected several more times as she attempts to usher Bruiser's Bill through the legislative process until she reaches the tipping point in her education about the realities of the democratic process. After having begun to play the game, Elle tells Grace that she believes she can get a meeting with a key member of the Energy and Commerce Committee's aids, and the exchange continues:

> GRACE: You could have a hundred meetings and it still wouldn't matter. This is Washington politics, not warm fuzzies and kissing booths. It takes savvy and street smarts. I've seen thousands of polite, idealistic girls just like you who traipse up and down this hill and all they do is end up empty-handed with blisters on their feet.
> ELLE: Thank you, Grace. [Pause] You know, you actually reminded me of something really important. I came here to give my dog a voice, and I'd forgotten about my own. So you can do it the Washington way, but I'm gonna do it the Elle Woods way.[94]

The Elle Woods way is, unsurprisingly, a femme approach to the legislative process. But as we will continue to see, a femme approach that is intimately bound up with the neoliberal imperatives of individual responsibility and consumption, rhetorically presented in such a way that erases the economic privileges necessary to participate in them.

Like the other democracy porn texts considered in this chapter, *Legally Blonde 2* narrativizes (and spectacularizes) the procedural aspects of the legislative process, the behind-the-scenes lobbying that must take place in order for that process to succeed, and provides pleasure by offering viewers access to the rooms where all of these processes take place. The "Washington way" that Grace represents is transactional, it is built on asking what one can secure in exchange for supporting a given bill rather than what positive changes would result

[94] *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde,* directed by Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, written by Kate Kondell (MGM, 2003), DVD.

from it. One imagines—and sees, in other examples of democracy porn—the rooms in which these transactions take place to be masculine in nature: dark, smokey, and filled with old white men drinking scotch in leather chairs. In other words, Grace's way of doing things is the way most Americans understand Washington politics to operate. It is a slow-moving process, and positions those who possess political capital as the most powerful force in Washington, as opposed to the system of democracy itself. We see this distribution of power very clearly when Grace celebrates having scheduled a meeting with a powerful Congressional Committee Chair, despite the fact that she will have to wait several months for it to happen.

Elle's brand of lobbying, however, is centered on emotional appeals to congressional representatives, ranging from pointing to the important, "warm and fuzzy" role animals have played in their lives (her knowledge of which stems from exhaustive research and preparation) to boosting their personal self-esteem by offering free haircuts from her friend Paulette (Jennifer Coolidge). This latter tactic is of course in keeping with Elle's femme identity, and helps to foster in our nation's Congressional representatives the tenacity necessary to stand up for their convictions and themselves. For, as Katherine Stern has observed about the process of engaging in feminine artifice despite societal derision, "It takes courage to enact [the] ritual of self-fashioning followed by self-effacement, just as it takes courage to persist in an endeavour that provokes contempt in others, ridicule perhaps, and, above all, the suspicion that one is causing oneself psychic or bodily harm."[95] The Elle Woods way of lobbying thus not only works toward the passage of Bruiser's Bill, but also for recognition of the strength it takes to present as femme in a masculinist culture, and through a longer lens, toward a more affirming—and by extension, better serving—Capitol Hill culture. The rooms where it happens in the Elle Woods way are

[95] Katherine Stern, "What Is Femme? The Phenomenology of the Powder Room," *Women: A Cultural Review* 8, no. 2 (September 1, 1997), 187.

likewise feminine in nature. Rather than a mahogany-paneled study, Elle makes personal connections with important Congressional representatives at a salon, where she discovers the stern member of the Energy and Commerce Committee who had rebuked her on her first day in Washington is a fellow member of the Delta Nu Sorority, and the doggie day care, where she is informed that Bruiser has begun a same-sex relationship with another important representative's dog. Reimagining the utopian space of the room where it happens as less masculine and more publicly accessible is significant in so far as it solves the problem of femme exclusion from the legislative process that the film presents. Yet like Elle's gender performance itself, acceptance of femininity comes as a package deal with compulsory consumption, and the readily accessible spaces Elle chooses to do her version of democracy are not only structured by economic exchange, they are also designed to cater to an economic elite that can afford the extravagant services they provide.

Having obtained the necessary committee sponsorship to send Bruiser's Bill to the House for a vote, it seems that the Elle Woods way of doing democracy will succeed, until Representative Rudd pulls her support at the last minute. We then soon learn that Rudd does democracy the Washington way and has made a deal to get another pet (no pun intended) bill passed—at the cost of withdrawing her support of Bruiser's Bill. Representative Rudd eventually confesses that she blocked the bill because one of her major campaign investors himself wants to do animal testing, and tries to make the case that she cannot do any good for her constituents if she is no longer in Washington, and keeping her seat requires these kinds of compromises. Elle responds by telling Rudd that she is not doing any good anyway and vows to get Bruiser's Bill passed without her support, by taking it to The People. Rudd responds: "The People believe what

we tell them to believe. It'll never work, Elle. You can't get The People to care."[96] This exchange constitutes the most significant turning point in Elle's transition from infantile to competent citizen, for it posits Rudd's corruption rather than Grace's bureaucratic red tape to be the real obstruction to doing democracy right.

As I have suggested throughout this discussion of *Legally Blonde 2*, while Elle's affirmative and collaborative method of doing democracy constitutes a significant femme intervention into the masculinist nature of the legislative process, its utopian possibilities are muddied by neoliberal underpinnings. At its core, *Legally Blonde 2* is a feel-good story that romanticizes democratic engagement in the service of consumption and both hetero- and homonormativity and as such, does more to promote the neoliberal idea that citizenship *is* consumption than the utopian idea that gender performance ought not be a barrier to civic engagement. Indeed, consumption—and by extension, the deregulated market idealized by neoliberal rhetoric—is positioned as more important than democracy itself throughout the film. When Elle is about to leave for Washington, for example, Paulette asks her, "Isn't planning the wedding of the century and changing the law kinda hard?" to which Elle responds, "Paulette, I taught Bruiser how to shop online, I think I can handle Congress."[97] Congress, by this worldview, exists to facilitate consumption, not regulate it. And while the legislation Elle proposes involves regulation of the cosmetics industry, it is significantly regulation that supports animal rights, as opposed to, say, the social safety net. By using animals as a focal point, the film's politics deftly side-step many other significant regulatory issues relevant to the cosmetic industry, such as its environmental impacts, in order to create an apolitical world in which

[96] *Legally Blonde 2*.

[97] Ibid.

human social inequities are obscured by the desire to protect cute animals who can be trained by their owners to be dutiful consumers.

The film's focus on animals as consumers extends to a subplot in which Elle discovers that Bruiser is gay and in love with a Rottweiler who happens to be owned by the very conservative Congressman—Stanford Marks—whose support Elle needs to get Bruiser's Bill out of committee. Though resistant at first, Stanford soon publicly declares love for his gay dog, and Bruiser and Les the Rottweiler are later married. Gay marriage has long been critiqued as a neoliberal project as it does more to protect the assets of wealthy LGBTQ people than to combat the very real social inequities faced by significant portions of the queer population.[98] *Legally Blonde 2* not only obfuscates the injustices faced by the LGBTQ community beyond marriage inequality, it effectively erases *all* inequalities faced by queer people, albeit via a rather cheeky nod to those on the right who argued that marriage equality was a slippery slope that would eventually lead to marriage between humans and animals.[99]

The significant elisions embedded in the canine threads of *Legally Blonde 2*'s plot are also reflected in the film's feminism. As I have argued, the femme approach Elle brings to the legislative process is a significant intervention; it is also, however, limited by significant omissions. While the eventual march on Washington Elle and her team put together in support of Bruiser's Bill celebrates the power of women coming together, it does so in a way that erases the material inequalities women face under neoliberalism. The organizing Elle and her team accomplish is plausible within the context of the film's fantasy world given that the women who

[98] For an excellent entry point into the left's critique of same-sex marriage, see: Lisa Duggan, "Holy Matrimony!," *The Nation,* February 26, 2004, https://www.thenation.com/article/holy-matrimony/

[99] See also: "Freedom to Marry Our Pets Society Page," *Bully Bloggers* (blog), https://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/freedom-society-page/.

descend on Washington are all members of the Delta Nu Sorority, membership of which implies the kind of privilege that allows someone to be ignorant of the fact that others do not enjoy the same. Yet overall, both the organizing in the film and Elle's struggle throughout, as Hilary Radner has noted of the first *Legally Blonde* film, position work as "understood in terms of individual satisfaction and self-fashioning rather than as part of a larger social structure fueled by an economic imperative."[100] In other words, the grassroots organizing represented in *Legally Blonde 2* is exemplary of what has colloquially been termed white feminism.

Legally Blonde 2 attempts to revolutionize the room where it happens into a neoliberal utopian space in which citizen-consumers of any gender may gain admittance. But like Williams's assessment of the separated utopias of the backstage musical, the Elle Woods way of doing democracy proves somewhat too escapist to be taken seriously. Such is not the case for *The West Wing,* which depicts the work of west wing senior staffers with such a commitment to verisimilitude that fans have and continue to call for Martin Sheen, who plays the show's president, to run for political office. It is to this paradigm-shifting television show that we now turn our attention.

The West Wing

Writing in *The Weekly Standard* in March 2000, conservative columnist John Podhoretz described The West Wing, then partway through its first season, as "nothing more or less than political pornography for liberals—made up of equal parts unrequited longing for and rage at Hollywood's not-so-obscure object of desire, William Jefferson Clinton."[101] Beyond having the

[100] Hilary Radner, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Films, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2010), 64.

[101] John Podhoretz, "The Liberal Imagination," *Weekly Standard,* March 27, 2000, http://www.weeklystandard.com/the-liberal-imagination/article/12329.

distinction of being one of only two examples of the word "porn" being applied to a media text under consideration in this dissertation, Podhoretz's assessment is perhaps the most succinct distillation of how, exactly, *The West Wing* constitutes democracy porn. For, contained within his derision, Podhoretz succinctly identifies the inspiration behind the production of much of what can be considered democracy porn in the 1990s—Hollywood's collective working through of the unrequited political optimism created and then destroyed by the Clinton administration. The cool factor Clinton brought to politics piqued the interest of Hollywood types on several levels, spurring substantive donations and creative output alike, and the shift between the excitement created by Candidate Clinton and the frustration caused by President Clinton can be tracked in that creative output. What remains constant in Hollywood's production in response to its Clinton infatuation is a sustained engagement with and representation of the democratic process; Clinton was certainly a boon for democracy porn. As Podhoretz suggests, *The West Wing* encompasses both sides of that shift, with the senior staffers and overall tone of the show embodying the youthful, can-do spirit of the Clinton administration, save for the president himself, who, rather than a saxophone-playing Southern charmer with sex appeal, is a professorial New England grandfather whose main source of charm is his arsenal of Latin-based dad jokes. This is not to say that President Josiah "Jed" Bartlet (Martin Sheen) is not likable—he is certainly that—but his appeal is not sexual. Podhoretz—who later became a consultant on the show beginning in its fifth season—goes on to describe how life in the real west wing is more readily characterized by endless meetings and phone calls than the rousing steadicam-tracked walk-and-talks that came to define *The West Wing's* style both narratively and visually. The real west wing is C-SPAN to *The West Wing*'s CNN; in other words, it is the paradigmatic democracy porn text.

The West Wing's origins stem from extra material Sorkin had written for *The American President*, the initial screenplay for which was 385 pages, far too long for the White House-set romantic drama.[102] As the story goes, Sorkin's agent had asked him to have lunch with *ER* Producer John Wells in 1998, and Sorkin did not realize until he arrived that the lunch was actually pitch meeting. The night before, his friend and fellow screenwriter Akiva Goldsman had suggested Sorkin should do a show about senior staffers in the White House that was essentially *The American President* without the romance, so when Wells asked Sorkin what he wanted to do, he replied, "I want to do a series about the President's senior staffers."[103] Wells loved the idea, but production was put on hold for a year because of fears that the Monica Lewinsky scandal would put audiences off the idea of a fictional political drama. After President Clinton's impeachment ended that saga in December 1998, NBC added *The West Wing* to its 1999 programming slate, and the rest is television history. The show ran for seven seasons—with Sorkin at the helm for the first four—won a total of 27 Emmy Awards, drew a devoted and still-active fan base, and significant to my purposes here, arguably constitutes the most sustained, in-depth representation of the US legislative process in the history of film and television.

In short, *The West Wing* is, in Sorkin's words, "a valentine to public service."[104] Creating such a show was a bold tack to take, given the historical tendency for shows about politics failing to make it to a second season. Beginning with a TV adaptation of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (ABC, 1962-63), to another play on that great urtext of democracy porn with *Grandpa Goes to*

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[102] Eric Kohn, "Aaron Sorkin On How He Almost Didn't Pitch 'The West Wing' And Why 'The Newsroom' Is Ending," IndieWire, June 30, 2014, http://www.indiewire.com/2014/06/aaron-sorkin-on-how-he-almost-didnt-pitch-the-west-wing-and-why-the-newsroom-is-ending-24748/.

[103] Ibid.

[104] "Extended Interview: Aaron Sorkin," *PBS NewsHour*, accessed July 24, 2017, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media-july-dec00-sorkin_09-27/.

Washington (NBC, 1978-79), to *Hail to the Chief* (ABC, 1985) in which Patty Duke starred as the first female President, and to yet another take on the Mr. Smith story with *Top of the Hill* (CBS, 1989), audiences have historically not demonstrated a sustained interest fictionalized politics on television. That grim televisual history is likely a product of several factors: not only do political shows have the potential to alienate huge audience segments, but, according to Wells, "They're too dry. And people tend to think these shows are like eating your vegetables: they're good for you."[105] Moreover, public cynicism about politics had been on the rise at least since Watergate, and with the Clinton presidency not turning out to be the salve to public opinion that many thought it would be, creating a new—and expensive—political show in 1999 was a risky proposition. But thanks to a change in leadership at NBC's programming department, *The West Wing* changed all of that. Banking on the possibility that public cynicism just might be the perfect atmosphere in which to introduce a new political program onto network television, Garth Ancier, President of NBC Entertainment stated, "'Well, it may well be that the show is a wish fulfillment for the American public. People in the show have honorable goals and are trying to do their best. And that's what we want to believe our representatives are doing."[106]

As with all examples of democracy porn, *The West Wing*'s narrative structure balances detailed representations of the democratic process with personal stories about the characters' non-political lives. Yet unlike the film examples of legislative tales discussed above, its narrative is ongoing and straddles the line between episodic and serialized. In this way, *The West Wing* follows what Horace Newcomb describes as a "cumulative" narrative, which combines "stories

[105] Bernard Weinraub, "All the President's Men . . . and Women," *New York Times*, September 26, 1999, sec. Television, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/09/26/tv/cover-story-all-the-president-s-men-and-women.html.

[106] Ibid.

of the week" with the accumulation of longer plot and character arcs that may or may not receive attention in a given episode.[107] Cumulative narratives became widespread on television in the 1970s and had become ubiquitous by the 1990s, by which time they were practically de rigueur for any program striving for prestige. Jeffrey Sconce cites cumulative narratives as a crucial base from which many of the most successful shows of the 1980s and 1990s developed their storytelling structures, then further paying special attention to "crafting and maintaining ever more complex narrative universes, a form of 'world building' that has allowed for wholly new modes of narration and that suggests new forms of audience engagement."[108] Of shows that best exemplify this broad strategy, Sconce includes the Wells-produced *ER*, so it makes sense that Sorkin's collaboration with Wells would attempt to replicate that show's successful model in some way. In its attempt to construct a complex narrative universe, *The West Wing*, of course, benefitted from its relation to the actually existing world of Washington, DC and as such was able to leverage that proximity to "create [a world] that viewers gradually feel they [inhabited] along with the characters," thus building a "strong and complex sense of community" among its audience.[109] The sometimes slippery interplay between the civics lessons presented weekly on *The West Wing*, the characters' personal and professional lives, and real life DC politics created a powerful affective engagement for fans of the show, many of whom continue to discuss it in online communities at the time of this writing, over a decade after *The West Wing* went off the air.

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[107] Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press, 1974), 112-25.

[108] Jeffrey Sconce, "What If?: Charting Television's New Textual Boundaries," in *Television After TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*, ed. Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (Duke University Press, 2004), 95.

[109] Ibid.

Beyond a compelling, carefully crafted narrative world, *The West Wing* offers viewers all of the greatest pleasures democracy porn has to offer. Perhaps most significant among them being access to the corridors of power, the ultimate rooms where it happens. The ongoingness of televisual storytelling allows for the elite White House staffers who make up the shows ensemble to be humanized in such a way that viewers can identify with them, rendering moot the need for an everyperson avatar as in the feature films discussed above. The characters of *The West Wing* are intelligent, well-spoken, noble, public servants, educated at the nation's best universities. They are fantasy versions of Washington elites, with whom it is difficult to find moral faults, and yet they are also depicted as flawed human beings who are capable of error and humor. Sorkin and other key members of the production team maintain that *The West Wing* is a show about family and relationships first and politics second; the ensemble is thus a workplace family in the tradition of programs like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. That the workplace in question happens to be the White House raises the dramatic stakes and allows for ordinary conflicts to be elevated to crisis level. Conflicts are further elevated and stakes raised higher still through the show's famously sharp dialogue, nearly all of which was written by Sorkin himself for the first four seasons. Dialogue also plays a significant role in constructing *The West Wing*'s representation of the key, interrelated legislative processes as imagined by democracy porn: debate and lobbying. In keeping with its positive, optimistic outlook and generally optimistic worldview, the show pays much more attention to the former. And while the "liberal" point of view almost always wins in the end, Sorkin and his team were careful to ensure that both sides of the issues were presented—and more importantly, respected.

Yet, while *The West Wing* consistently depicts multiple points of view on a given topic, the spectrum of ideas permitted to be considered for debate is relatively narrow and the show's

much-discussed "liberal" slant is ultimately reflective of a post-Washington consensus Clintonian liberalism that is more neo- than most commenters have acknowledged. The neoliberal imprint can be seen most readily in the content of and opinions expressed within the political debates that make up so much of the show's narratives. Like Clinton's politics themselves, *West Wing* neoliberalism is reinforced at the formal level by the show's use of language, which is harnessed to turn democracy into a lifestyle brand. As Michael Wolff put it in *New York Magazine* in 2000, "That's the idea. Give politics a hip language. It signifies the most powerful thing in America today: This is a cool place to work. The White House is a cool place to work."[110] This branding is further reflected in the show's frenetic pacing and cinematography as well as its overall tone. For Wolff, the takeaway from this aspect of the show's messaging is: "If you're inside, you'll feel good about yourself," which reflects both a common goal of neoliberal rhetoric and its invisibility.[111] In order to further situate *The West Wing* as democracy porn and explicate its politics, neoliberal and otherwise, I will now consider the three episodes drawn from three different seasons, with each exemplifying a key theme in democracy porn's representation of the legislative process.

First, there is the insider's view of the White House; and the rooms where it happens in the President Bartlet's west wing are deeply utopian. Many have argued that the fictional access *The West Wing* offers viewers to these corridors of power constitutes one of the show's main pleasures. This, for Ann C. Hall, in "Giving Propaganda a Good Name: *the West Wing,*" locates

[110] By Michael Wolff, "Our Remote-Control President," *NYMag.com*, accessed June 2, 2017, http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/features/4134/.

[111] Ibid.

the show firmly in the tradition of propaganda.[112] As her title suggests, Hall does not intend to use "propaganda" as a negative descriptor of the show, but rather to articulate what she views as the essence of the show's agenda, which is "to correct social problems and political errors through its positive representation of government and politicians."[113] In response to criticisms that the show is naive or idealized, Hall proposes that it is instead "a successful piece of postmodern propaganda whose goal is to create greater faith in the American political processes."[114] Season one, episode five, "The Crackpots and These Women," often referred to by fans as "The First Big Block of Cheese Day Episode" provides a particularly memorable look inside the White House and supports Hall's claim that the show's propagandistic elements "[illustrate] that the United States government is open to all, sexy, smart, and fun—it is *the* place to be."[115] Hall's assertion is best illustrated through the Big Block of Cheese Day plot, which begins in a morning staff meeting when Chief of Staff Leo McGarry sets the stage for what is to come:

> Andrew Jackson, in the main foyer of his White House, had a big block of cheese…The block of cheese was huge, over two tons, and it was there for any and all who might be hungry…Jackson wanted the White House to belong to the people, so from time to time he opened his doors to those who wished an audience…It is in the spirit of Andrew Jackson that I from time to time ask senior staff to have face-to-face meetings with those people representing organizations who have a difficult time getting our attention. I know the more jaded among you see this as something rather beneath you, but I assure you that

[112] Ann C. Hall, "Giving Propaganda a Good Name: The West Wing," in *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics, and Sleight of Hand in the Films and Television Series*, ed. Thomas Fahy (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005), 119.

[113] Ibid., 116.

[114] Ibid., 118.

[115] Ibid., 115.

> listening to the voices of passionate Americans is beneath no one, and surely not The People's servants.[116]

Deputy Communications Director Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe) is tasked to meet with a representative of the United States Space Command, who has come to ask the White House to "pay a little more attention to UFOs."[117] He goes on to tell Sam that a UFO had been picked up earlier that day by air traffic control in Honolulu. Later, Press Secretary C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) meets with wildlife advocates—including a young Nick Offerman, who, coincidentally would later play Ron Swanson on another democracy porn series, *Parks and Recreation,* which also featured *West Wing* cast member Rob Lowe—who present a case for building a $900 million wolves-only roadway stretching 1,800 miles from Yellowstone to the Yukon Territory. The scenes are comic in tone and both Sam and C.J. poke fun at the other people in their respective meetings, but they also both demonstrate that the "crackpots" had some valid points contained within their outlandish agendas. Their reluctant interest in the absurd asks is reiterated in a toast the President gives to conclude the episode in which he notes that the staffers always "start out so cynical but it never fails, by the end of the day, there's always one or two converts."[118]

Leo's investment to Big Block of Cheese Day is a demonstrative of the Bartlet administration's commitment to one of the core principles of democracy: the idea that the voice of The People matters. That the staff scoffs at it as an idea but is earnestly impacted by it in practice illustrates *The West Wing*'s commitment to depicting that ideal as a real possibility in

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[116] *The West Wing,* season one, episode five, "The Crackpots and These Women," NBC, October 20, 1999, directed by Anthony Drazan, written by Aaron Sorkin, Netflix.

[117] Ibid.

[118] Ibid.

contemporary life. And by portraying the people with whom the staff meets (representatives of The People) as "crackpots" whose good intentions blind them to the flaws in their proposals but to whom C.J. and Sam give their respectful attention anyway, the show makes the case that the lofty ideals laid out in our constitution are best protected by the intellectual elites that populate Bartlet's west wing. Taken together, the Big Block of Cheese Day meetings serve as evidence for Hall's argument that *The West Wing* is propaganda, and I would add, that the "smart, sexy, and fun" U.S. government it presents is branded as such in large part through an ambivalent representation of ordinary Americans. In other words, the senior staffers in the Bartlet administration are something akin to the "cool kids" whose lives we as viewers we may aspire to but also know are beyond our reach. Moreover, by providing more extensive access, an ultimate insider's view, to the west wing on a weekly basis, we as viewers are positioned as closer to Bartlet's senior staff than to the "crackpots" with whom they begrudgingly meet on Big Block of Cheese Day. That this multi-layered message is communicated without dismissing or disrespecting the ordinary citizens who care enough to bring their concerns to the government is a testament to Sorkin's skillful writing—about which I will say more below—and the quality of the performances by the cast, including the "crackpot" day players. As with many of the civics lessons narrativized on *The West Wing,* it seems to communicate the idea that to be a concerned citizen is to be a good citizen; as far as taking action on that concern, though, better leave that to the professionals—but here is an official White House pen for making the effort.

"The Crackpots and These Women" opens with a casual, relaxed scene in which the most of the male members of the ensemble—President Bartlet, Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford), Communications Director Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), Sam Seaborn, and Personal Aide to the President Charlie Young (Dulé Hill)—play a friendly game of basketball in

the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, glimpses of the White House visible in the background. When the President is clearly exhausted, staffers encourage him to take a breather by engaging in some friendly trash talk, and rather than admit his limitations, Bartlet introduces an obvious ringer to join his team. The President argues that Mr. Grant, played by NBA All-Star Juwan Howard, is eligible to play in the federal employee pickup game because he serves on the President's Council on Physical Fitness, but Grant admits that he previously played basketball at Duke. As with the Big Block of Cheese plot from the episode, the cold open provides viewers access to the corridors of power—or in this case how those in power let off steam in the little free time they have. It also serves several narrative purposes, including laying the groundwork for a conflict between Toby and the President that will be one of the episode's subplots; but in a larger sense, it shows a more relatable, down-to-earth side of the characters, to remind the viewers that they are regular people, albeit some of the most powerful ones in the country. The scene essentially says, "Washington Elites—They're Just Like Us!" In this way, the scene exhibits another of the key ways in which *The West Wing* exemplifies democracy porn: it spends significant time in this episode, and indeed, most episodes, humanizing the elite politicos that make up the ensemble.

As we have seen time and again, democracy porn works to spectacularize and thus elicit narrative pleasures from the processes of democracy in part by weaving together stories about its characters with in-depth, nuanced considerations of policy and procedural issues. In democracy porn broadly, the characters' humanization often serves to keep viewers engaged and invested in the more wonky aspects of the narrative, as we saw with both *Legally Blonde 2* and *The American President.* The same is true of *The West Wing* in that, for example, the characters' interest in the "issue of the week" is often (though not always) prompted by someone's personal

investment in it. Other times, when an issue arises from an external force, a character may reveal his or her personal connection to it, using that as evidence for one side of the debate about it. This humanization also counts, for Hall, as a significant element in positioning the *The West Wing* as propaganda, and significantly, creates a sort of protective sympathy for the characters in advance of their espousing of possibly audience-alienating liberal ideas on prime time network television. And while Hall is right in her assessment of the effect of this rhetorical strategy and that the show is generally liberal—she cites the President's first appearance in the series in which he storms into a meeting and chastises members of the religious right after having been mocked offscreen for the bulk of the episode after having ridden his bicycle into a tree—the same humanization can be used to create sympathy for less progressive politics as well. In season two, episode 16, "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail" (also known as "The Second Big Block of Cheese Day" episode), for example, Toby has a humanizing moment in advance of meeting with a large group of protestors demonstrating against the World Trade Organization (WTO). But rather than the pro-choice views the President expresses in the pilot, Toby's humanity and progressive street cred are used to create a safe way for the show to side with the citadel of neoliberalism that is the WTO, reflecting the specific Washington Consensus Clintonian brand of liberalism that best describes the show's politics.

The episode is thus demonstrative of particular way in which *The West Wing* employs the humanizing elements of its narratives to mitigate objections to the political ideas it endorses, as well as exemplary of the neoliberal imprint on those same ideas. Like the first Big Block of Cheese Day episode, one of the key subplots in "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail" is that senior staffers are assigned meetings with groups who had submitted petitions to but would not otherwise be able to secure meetings at the White House. This time

around, Toby is sent to speak at a forum put on by World Policy Studies as part of protests in opposition to the annual meeting of the World Bank. The episode first aired on February 28, 2001, just over a year after the 1999 Seattle WTO protests that had received significant, and mostly negative, media attention, though many activists credit them with introducing antiglobalization activism to mainstream discourse. The *West Wing* protestors are a clear allusion to those real-life demonstrators, and the show immediately makes obvious how it will side in the debate on globalization from the episode's opening moments, when Leo recounts to Josh how he had to take numerous detours to get to the office because of road closures caused by the demonstrations. Others are similarly frustrated as they arrive, including Toby, who walks in to the morning staff meeting while Leo is in the middle of his infamous Andrew Jackson speech, proclaiming that he had been "waylaid by 30,000 tourists." When another staffer corrects him that they are protestors, Toby retorts, "No, I don't call them protestors. I've seen better-organized crowds at the DMV…in my day we knew how to protest."[119] His day, he says, was 1968, and when pressed on the subject, he admits that he was taken to protests by his older sisters. The protestors, according to Toby, are amateurs. Amateurs with whom, Leo informs him, he will be conducting a "free exchange of ideas" later that day. This moment serves both to humanize Toby—who is consistently positioned as the most progressive member of the senior staff—by playing up his "grump with a heart of gold" persona and providing a charming bit of personal information from his childhood, as well as to remind us that he is the most qualified member of the staff to take on this particularly timely Big Block of Cheese Day assignment. It also sets the tone for the way the episode will stage the debate on free trade initiated by the protestors'

[119] *The West Wing,* season two, episode 16, "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail," NBC, February 28, 2001, directed by Jessica Yu, written by Aaron Sorkin, Netflix.

presence, which is not only dismissive of a critical perspective on the subject, but belittling as well.

Later, Toby arrives at the forum via police escort, with throngs of angry protestors behind barricades outside the car window. He takes no notice of the scene, however, as he performs nonchalance from the backseat, reading the paper and whistling "This Old Man" in an oblique reference to *Columbo* that casts him as the titular detective, perhaps in good spirits because he is closing in on a suspect. Toby's insouciance toward the protestors' and their concerns is further reinforced when, upon being handed off to the police officer who has been assigned to protect him for the event, he assures her that "It's gonna be a day at the beach," and shortly thereafter, upon surveying a chaotic scene, he jokingly asks her to fire her gun. He then pulls the "group leader" aside by calling him "Solzhenitsyn," a reference to the Soviet dissident writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, presumably because of his opposition the influx of western interests in Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union. It is, however, a strange choice of slur from the usually extremely literate Sorkin, as Solzhenitsyn's political writings were largely focused on critiquing the heavy hand of the government under communism, practically the opposite of the financially deregulatory pursuits of the WTO. The reference is one of many signals that Sorkin and his writing team fail to grasp the intricacies of the free trade issues that the Seattle, and by extension, the episode's, protestors seek to raise. Once out of the fray, rather than beginning the "free exchange of ideas" with which he had been tasked to facilitate, Toby tells "Solzhenitsyn" that he had made a mistake by giving up his group's right to have cameras present at the forum. The thoughtful debate for which *The West Wing* is famous is thus sidestepped in favor of a condescending lesson in civic unrest. Again, instead of trying to help the protestors be better at demonstrating such that their voices might be heard—a type of help not uncommon for *West*

Wing staffers to offer engaged citizens, in keeping with their noble sense of public service and the common good—Toby dismisses them outright because they fail to meet his expectations. By the *West Wing*'s logic, it does make a kind of sense that civil disobedience would prove frustrating to its cast of dedicated civil servants insofar as they have put their faith into the democratic system and are committed to seeing it as the best way to make change in the United States. What does not make sense, however, is why a character like Toby who had, in a previous life moment, been a committed social activist, would antagonize a group of people who are attempting to make change rather than helping them to funnel their energies onto what is, in his current view, a better path to get things done. This slippage in narrative logic bespeaks the political incoherence that continues to unfold throughout the episode.

Sorkin and his writing team are so dedicated to discrediting the protestor's rationale that they are in fact never permitted to speak for themselves in the debate about free trade the episode eventually presents, which is itself incredibly abbreviated. Instead, as Toby sits on the stage reading the paper while the protestors continue to yell incoherently, his police officer bodyguard asks him what's wrong with the WTO, to which he responds by saying "nothing's wrong with [what the WTO does]." The officer then asks, "What would [the protestors] say if I asked them the same question?"[120] Toby replies that the protestors would argue that the WTO benefits corporations and not people while also making his own point of view on the subject clear—that it benefits both. He offers no further explanation nor evidentiary support for his claim, however, and then proceeds to leave the hall altogether. Once outside, he finally registers the protest scene and offers slightly more detail about what he views as the benefits of free trade, again with no

[120] Ibid.

support, and while spending equal time denigrating the demonstrators and asserting his superiority over them:

> TOBY: It's activist vacation is what it is. Spring break for anarchist wannabes. The black t-shirts, the gas masks as fashion accessory.
> OFFICER SACHS: These kids today, with the hair and the clothes…
> TOBY: Alright, that's it, flatfoot.
> OFFICER SACHS: I got great feet.
> TOBY: You want the benefits of free trade? Food is cheaper.
> OFFICER SACHS: Yes.
> TOBY: Food is cheaper, clothes are cheaper, steel is cheaper, cars are cheaper, phone service is cheaper. You feel me building a rhythm here? That's 'cause I'm a speechwriter, I know how to make a point.
> OFFICER SACHS: Toby—
> TOBY: It lowers prices and raises income. You see what I did with "lowers" and "raises" there?
> OFFICER SACHS: Yes.
> TOBY: It's called the science of listener attention. We did repetition, we did floating opposites. And now you end with the one that's not like the others. Ready?
> OFFICER SACHS: [nods head]
> TOBY: Free trade stops wars. And that's it. [Raises voice] Free trade stops wars! And we figure out a way to fix the rest. One world, one peace. I'm sure I've seen that on a sign somewhere.[121]

While most of the benefits of free trade Toby cites are undeniably true, presenting them in the simplified language of political speechmaking erases the less desirable costs that come along with them.

Put differently, by condensing the impact of free trade to bullet points, Toby presents an incomplete view of the stakes at play in the passage of market-driven legislation and constructs an argument intended to produce allegiance to an economic system that benefits few at the expense of many. The intellectual superiority he intends to communicate by calling attention to

[121] Ibid.

his rhetorical skills thus also constitutes a raising of the curtain and an implicit admission that he is more interested in making a case for free trade than engaging in a debate about it. While free trade does result in lower prices and higher income, it has been well-documented that the increase in capital accumulation resulting from deregulatory trade policies is disproportionately distributed to the already rich. The most dubious claim Toby makes, however, is that free trade stops wars. The idea, which was prevalent during the reign of the Washington Consensus, stems from Thomas Friedman's assertion that, "No two countries that both had McDonald's had fought a war against each other since each got its McDonald's."[122] McDonald's here acts as a stand-in for globalization, the implication being that that countries are disincentivized to initiate armed conflicts against other nations with which they are linked through economic interests. Though the statement, which is logline for Friedman's larger Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention, was already false at the time it was published in 1999 and has since continued to accumulate counterexamples, it is illustrative of the powerful rhetoric that has been used to bolster support for neoliberal policies across the political spectrum. It is hard to object, after all, to something that is framed as promoting world peace; and once something is framed as such, it makes sense that its critics would receive the sort of contempt directed at both the *West Wing* protestors and their real-life analogues in Seattle. Again, the statement's simplicity reduces the complex consequences of global free trade policies to a binary logic that positions them as a catalyst for exclusively positive change. Yet when viewed from a different angle, one could just as easily argue that the desire for free trade on the part of powerful western nations such as the United States has in fact been the impetus for initiating armed conflicts, as in, for example, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, approximately two years after this episode first aired.

[122] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 1st Anchor Books ed (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 248.

The show's derision towards the protestors is narratively justified by Toby's opinion that they are not organized, that they are protesting badly, that they are not really committed to a cause, a point of view which is legitimized by his well established progressive ideology as demonstrated throughout the course of the show's then two and a half seasons, and which viewers are reminded of multiple times throughout the episode. Yet, unlike with other debates about significant issues dramatized by *The West Wing,* this structural rationale so thoroughly delegitimizes the perspective the protestors represent—that is, resistance to global free trade—that they are at no point permitted to clearly articulate the ideas that have moved them to take to the streets. Any time the protestors speak, they are presented as an unruly mob with no clear argument or goals. The clearest explanation of the critique of free trade comes from Toby himself, who, when Josh shows up to see how things are going at the forum, says:

> TOBY: The WTO is undemocratic, and accountable to no one. Decisions are made by executive directors and the developing world has little to say about institutional policy.
> JOSH: What what that?
> TOBY: I protested to you. [Raises fist with cigar in hand.]
> JOSH: Why?
> TOBY: 'Cause I'm not allowed to get arrested anymore.[123]

Immediately following this interaction, Toby goes back into the hall to finally address the protestors, but that "free exchange of ideas" takes place offscreen. but we don't see that interaction, the plot is tied up at the end of the episode when Josh returns to the west wing and tells Sam and Donna that Toby "Blew the doors off the place." He then jokes that he almost died when he was hit with a banana, further delegitimizing the protestor's grievances. While Toby's mini-protest does vaguely point to some internal conflicts he may be having about his own views on the subject, his relentless disdain for the protestors throughout the episode and eventual

[123] *The West Wing,* "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail."

decision to tow the party line by making what we can assume is a pro-free trade speech clearly places the series itself on the side of free trade. That the opposing view is so thoroughly maligned—as opposed to numerous other examples of opposition coming through "proper democratic channels" throughout the series—doubles down on *The West Wing*'s position that the democratic governance should be left to the elites, either in the west wing or at the WTO.

It is worth noting that the other Big Block of Cheese meeting in the episode sees C.J. meet with representatives from the Organization of Cartographers for Social Equality, who have come to ask that the President mandate that geography be taught using maps made in the Peters Projection rather than the Mercator Projection, because the former, "has fostered European imperialist attitudes for centuries and created an ethnic bias against the Third World." Though, as in her meeting about the wolves-only roadway, she goes in skeptical of the presenter's perspective, both she and Josh—who has come to sit in on the meeting purely for its expected entertainment value—are swayed by the presentation. The irony that the staff can be at once capable of understanding that systemic inequalities can be fostered by the cartographical perspective while simultaneously rejecting the protestors' claims that the deregulation of global financial markets produce the same results much more immediately tangibly is disheartening. Yet it is in keeping with the Washington Consensus Clintonian liberalism that characterizes *The West Wing*'s political point of view.

The third and perhaps most significant feature in defining *The West Wing* as democracy porn is its focus on debate and lobbying as the driving forces of the legislative process. Due to both its myopic focus on that process and the number of episodes produced, *The West Wing* constitutes perhaps the most substantive fictional representation of the legislative process ever distributed by mass media. And while the examples discussed above explicate the ways in which

that representation is bolstered by the rather dissimilar human desires to connect with one another and have access to power, they have not illustrated the extent to which actual politicking is depicted on the series. Stories narrativizing the legislative process dominate *The West Wing*'s plots and the show's procedural aspect frequently leads to its depicting complex debates about weighty political issues or the rationale behind and execution of obscure constitutional rules in great detail. As with the Big Block of Cheese Topics discussed above that the series treats with a great deal of humor, these more serious issues frequently evince the subterranean neoliberal ideology that permeates the show, which is almost always discussed as liberal, without the neo-. The Show's framing of debate and lobbying as the cornerstones of the legislative process is reinforced at the formal level, as they are both areas in which Aaron Sorkin's famously snappy dialogue can do some of its most convincing work to emphasize the gravitas of what it means to run the United States, as well as underscore the idea that such work is too important to be done by anyone but hyperintellectual elites. The stakes are further buttressed by the show's frenetic use of steadicam cinematography and the verisimilitude of its sets. "Talking Points," the 19th episode in the show's fifth season, is exemplary of the series' structural use of debate and lobbying as quintessential democratic processes, and further stands as arguably the most substantive defense of neoliberal ideas out of all 156 episodes of *The West Wing.* Though it falls in the post-Sorkin era, at which point many have argued the show's quality took a dip, the episode is useful insofar as John Wells's writing brings to the surface the neoliberal ideology that Sorkin's kept under the surface.

Aaron Sorkin left *The West Wing* at the conclusion of the show's fourth season in 2003 along with his producing partner, Thomas Schlamme. John Wells, who had previously served as an Executive Producer on the series but had been splitting his time between it and two other

shows—*E.R.* and *Third Watch*—took over as Showrunner and made significant changes to the program and its workflow. Whereas Sorkin had written nearly every episode of the first four seasons himself, using his writing staff largely to generate ideas, Wells shifted to the more standard writer's room approach, receiving "written by" credits on only ten episodes himself. Critics have also argued that the show lost something of its *je ne sais quoi* under Wells's leadership, moving into a more crisis-oriented narrative flow and failing to deliver on the sparkle that defines Sorkin's banter-filled dialogue. Of this, Richard Schiff said, "I think Aaron Sorkin is a wonderful writer in a certain style of kind of a romantic lyricism…But time was running out on that kind of romantic honeymoon…It's more naturalism and reality-driven drama now."[124] That said, while Wells did put his mark on *The West Wing,* he also made a concerted effort to maintain continuity with the show's trademarks. So while "Talking Points" in some ways illustrates the Wells' attempt to deepen the representation of conservative ideas, it also follows logically from the first four seasons in its narrative structure, style, and form. Continuity with earlier seasons is supported in this particular episode by the longtime creative talent at its helm: it is one of only two episodes in the series directed by Richard Schiff who plays Toby, and written by Eli Attie, who joined the writing staff of *The West Wing* in its third season and had previously worked in the real west wing, first as a Special Assistant to President Bill Clinton, and then as head speechwriter for Vice President Al Gore. "Talking Points" is thus somewhat of a creative palimpsest in the *West Wing* canon, evincing formal and ideological vision that represents the show's full run through the input brought to the table by its creative leadership's temporal overlapping.

[124] Noel Holston, "A New Wing Takes Flight," *Newsday*, January 15, 2004.

The episode centers on President Bartlet's support of a deregulatory international trade deal that would immediately result in the loss of thousands of American jobs. Upon learning some information that had previously been kept from him, Josh, who is thoroughly praised for negotiating the deal to the satisfaction of numerous powerful lobbies and important players on both sides of the aisle in Congress, comes to seriously question whether its benefits outweigh its costs. Though he makes his case to both Leo, and later, Bartlet, debate is futile given the President's economic expertise—he is a Nobel Prize-winning economist—which emerges as a trump card that requires no explanation beyond "It's complicated." In other words, *The West Wing* literally enacts a debate about neoliberal deregulation in this episode, ultimately coming down in favor of the free market without offering a compelling case for its promised long-term success. In the process of getting to that conclusion, the episode also dramatizes the specific and critical roles lobbying and debate play within the legislative process. Through Josh's simultaneous journeys to negotiate the deal and comprehend the benefits of free trade when confronted with its realities, viewers are once again reminded that policy and processes at the highest levels of government are complex and best left to professional politicos, who themselves even sometimes struggle under the pressure.

Though the specifics of the deal are never clearly articulated, the process by which Josh succeeds in nailing down the details of the deal and getting and the many parties involved to agree on them is highlighted throughout the episode, which picks up in the final hours before the President and his staff head to Brussels for the official signing. When Josh arrives at work for the day, he is congratulated on a job well done by numerous colleagues and even the President himself, who is so pleased that he has sent a gift to Josh's office. The initial lobbying Josh has done to ensure the deal's success has thus happened before the episode's diegesis begins, but

unlike the offscreen action in "Somebody's Going to Emergency, Somebody's Going to Jail," we here are privy to the some of the most important moments in the process as Josh must frantically meet with many of the deal's stakeholders after learning of the aforementioned important and previously undisclosed fact. That significant morsel is that the deal will immediately result in 17,000 programming jobs in the technology industry to be sent to India. Though it is later revealed that the technology company that would be outsourcing the jobs had made this deal with India in advance and that Leo and many other D.C. insiders knew about it in advance, Josh learns of this development the plebeian way, through the press. As he had previously promised the union that represents the workers who will lose their jobs that the deal would not result in job losses for their industry, the revelation makes Josh a liar, and forces him to scramble to do last-minute damage control with several of the deal's industrial players to smooth over his inadvertent gaffe. The impending trip to Brussels means that this wrangling must be juggled with the lobbying Josh has already begun with members of Congress per the President's directive at the start of the episode.

The complicated exposition in place, the Josh plot shifts to actually depicting the process by which legislation is made behind the scenes in Washington, with the stakes raised even more than usual given both the introduction of a complicating variable (the news of job losses resulting from the deal) and the time constraints. We see Josh play hardball while meeting with the lobbyist from the tech company that will be outsourcing the jobs, who informs Josh that the deal will actually result in losing not just the 17,000, but 3.3 million jobs over the next ten years. Later, Josh is confronted by representatives from Communication Workers of America (CWA), the union that represents workers who will bear the brunt of the job losses, which he promised would not be the case during their original negotiations. That union also happens to be the first to

have supported President Bartlet when he was a candidate, and these impending job losses represent not just Josh's failure to keep his word regarding the deal in question, but the breaking of a promise Josh made to them five years prior about how they would be valued by the Bartlet administration's broader platform. Two representatives from the CWA vow to stay in Josh's office until he figures out how to make good on his promise. Finally, Josh meets with the Republican Speaker of the House, who he is surprised to learn has no issues with the trade deal and promises to deliver hundreds of votes in the House. Before leaving, the Speaker jokes that Josh should run for Congress as a Republican. The day's events leave Josh questioning his allegiance to free trade, and he discusses his personal struggle with colleagues in several other short scenes. At one point, he asks the Vice President's Chief of Staff Will Bailey (Joshua Malina) how he became a free trader, and their conversation goes as follows:

> JOSH: How'd you become a free trader?
> WILL: America has a quarter of the world's wealth and only two percent of the customers. You have to sell to others.
> JOSH: So, how do you make that case to people who are gonna lose jobs?
> WILL: Ask them how often they go to Wal-Mart to buy cheap cardigans, or drill bits?
> JOSH: Drill bits? WILL: I don't wear cardigans.
> JOSH: Okay. WILL: But I like a nice drill bit.
> JOSH: So it all comes down to cheap drill bits.
> WILL: Pay more for a drill bit, you have less to spend on other things. Keep out cheap foreign drill bits and that country will keep out cheap American something else, and that costs us jobs.
> JOSH: Do you ever wonder if we forget the human face of trade, the blood and muscle?
> WILL: You have to go with what grows the economy for everyone. There's blood and muscle in India too.[125]

The free trade plot reaches its conclusion when Josh is finally able to bring his concerns to the President, who acknowledges that it is a difficult situation when one considers the loss of

[125] *The West Wing,* season five, episode 19, "Talking Points," NBC, April 21, 2004, directed by Richard Schiff, written by Eli Attie, Netflix.

American jobs but stays firm in his commitment globalization. When Josh reminds Bartlet of the irony that their talking points is that free trade creates high-paying jobs, the President puts a paternalistic button on the conversation by responding, "And it will, but I've been trying to tell you it's not that simple."[126] The degree to which this plot depicts the complex political economic calculations that go into a deal of this nature and the seamlessness with which those nuances are woven into the episode as a whole is certainly a testament to Attie's writing, which is more wonkish than Sorkin's, but does not abandon the humanity that had always been so crucial to the show. Yet, by focusing more on the process by which such legislation is made rather than its substance, the episode ultimately serves as an interpellation device for neoliberal ideology.

Through Apparatus Theory, Marxist critics long have argued that film's verisimilitude operates to make invisible its capital- and labor-intensive production processes, which facilitates viewer immersion thereby easing the way for the text's ideology to be transferred from maker to spectator. While this argument has been problematized on several fronts since its introduction in the early 1970s, the idea that ideology is imbued in a media text at the levels of both narrative and form is certainly still relevant today. The relationship between form and content is noteworthy when considering *The West Wing* because its high production values serve to reinforce its ideological positioning—as Apparatus Theory argues is true of all moving image texts that do not foreground the filmic mechanics that enable the story to be told—but its explicitly political subject matter compounds the illusion; at levels of both form and content, *The West Wing* presents its world as a glimpse into what it is really like in the corridors of power while also masking its own ideology in both of those aspects. It does so through its narrative content by presenting an ostensibly progressive worldview that simplifies and normalizes

[126] Ibid.

neoliberal ideology. This ideology is reinforced at the formal level by extreme verisimilitude in its sets, agile cinematography, and a frenetic pace lead by the dialogue as described above. Much has been made of the show's production values, as they positioned NBC (and by extension, the other two major broadcast networks) as able to compete with pay cable in the transition to what is now termed "quality television." Perhaps the most-discussed topic in this regard is the show's use of Steadicam to follow action, what has become known as the "Sorkin walk-and-talk." In *The West Wing,* Steadicam cinematography frequently bridges scenes as characters encounter each other while walking from one office or meeting to another, sometimes changing groupings and parting ways in the process, the camera keeping pace with them as they tend to the important business of running the country. This technique, as Janet McCabe has described it,

> [Creates] aesthetic cohesion from the highly polished sound bites, snatched conversations, and characters only momentarily taking center stage before being replaced by others made visible a democratic discourse and deliberation—albeit from a leftish perspective…[engages] the citizen-audience, inspiring civics lessons and drawing citizens enthusiastically into the realm of the political, often showing realities that are obscured from view. In that regard, the aesthetic and technical choices defining what the politics [look] like [proves] a way through which the citizen-audience…make sense of how power [works]."[127]

While apt in its assessment of the relationship between the show's formal choices and its narrative content, McCabe's argument here demonstrates just how powerful the show's ideological erasure is at the narrative level in taking the show's *representation* of how power works as reality. And while McCabe offers no evidence in support of her claims regarding the way viewers of *The West Wing* responded to the show as it relates to their lives as citizens, that question is an important one, and one that I shall consider below.

[127] Ibid., 63-64.

As the Podhoretz quote that began my discussion of *The West Wing* demonstrates, the show was not universally adored by critics as it aired. And while seasons two and three especially saw strong ratings, the series was never the runaway hit that, for example, *Scandal* has been. Yet many of the show's advocates were (and remain) fiercely devoted to it, and have created an enduring fan culture that is still active at the time of writing, 12 years after the final season aired. The series' impact on both viewers and the broader culture is undeniable, which raises several questions: Who watched (and continues to watch) *The West Wing*? Why are many of those viewers so invested in it? And how have viewers' relationships with the show impacted their understandings of themselves as citizens?

To the first question—who watched *The West Wing*—it is of course impossible to know the distribution of viewership with regard to political party without access to expensive proprietary data that breaks down television audiences such as Nielsen ratings, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the audience was not exclusively comprised of liberals. At least in Washington, DC itself, there is documentation that *The West Wing* found dedicated viewership on both sides of the aisle. Discourse surrounding the show in its original run is replete with commentary from Republicans who confess their love for it. Former Reagan and Bush I press secretary Marlin Fitzwater, for example, states in a piece in *George* magazine about the show's relationship to real life Washington on the eve of the 2000 presidential election, that he was prepared not to like it, "But from the second show on, I've loved it. It very accurately portrays so many elements of presidential life—the frantic energy about issues and decisions."[128] Fitzwater, who, like Podhoretz, eventually came on board as a writer for the show, further confesses: "And

[128] Sharon Waxman, "Inside The West Wing's New World," in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, ed. John E. O'Connor and Peter C. Rollins (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2003), 208.

the truth is, my friends all love the show."[129] Journalists at the time did not seem interested in investigating the breakdown of partisanship in the viewing audience outside of Washington, but a recent thread on Reddit.com reveals that at least some non-politico Republicans are fans of the show. When user jbbarnes88 asked in the *West Wing* subreddit if "Any people who consider themselves Republican enjoy *The West Wing,*" several commenters responded in the affirmative, some even providing their rationale. User Dream_Out_Loud states, "yes. love the show. and I've never voted for a Democrat in my life," and snack_mac_cho says, "I tend to lean more conservative. I LOVE this show. I I [sic] love the romantic view of government. I also think the views aren't as skewed as people say."[130] An entire website made by an anonymous Republican fan of the show provides even more insight about its conservative viewership. The site appears to have been last updated in 2002 (and features a healthy dose of delightful early 2000s clip art and general hobbyist web design) remains hosted on personal website service angelfire.com at the time of writing, and describes the value the author finds in the show as a Republican in some detail. On the page titled "A Republican's View of the West Wing [sic]," the author describes how they initially came to enjoy *The West Wing* as one of the most cinematic shows on television and, over time, to appreciate the way it dramatizes debates between the two major political parties, eventually beginning to "enjoy the show being so liberal."[131] The author goes on: "I must say that *The West Wing* has given me a better understanding of the Democratic views, and has shed some light on how to counter a debate with the opposing party. 'Know thy

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[129] Ibid.

[130] "Any People Who Consider Themselves Republican Enjoy the West Wing? • R/Thewestwing," *Reddit*, accessed August 17, 2017, https://www.reddit.com/r/thewestwing/comments/30457i/any_people_who_consider_themselves_republican/.

[131] "A Republican's View of the West Wing," accessed August 17, 2017, http://www.angelfire.com/tv2/westwing0/republicansView.html.

Enemy' is a phrase I use often when discussing politics. Learning about your opponent will only strengthen your case, and in the end will better equip you with the skills to come to a peaceful agreement."[132] The spirit of democratic discourse dramatized by *The West Wing* clearly made an impact on at least this Republican viewer, along with the nobility of public service the show depicts. So, while Podhoretz may be right in his assessment that the show is "political pornography for liberals," as it certainly seems to serve that purpose for some, he is wrong that it is "nothing more than" that, because has also played something akin to that role for some conservatives as well.

For consistency, I draw the bulk of my viewer response evidence throughout this dissertation from Amazon user reviews with the rationale that such a large, general purpose e-commerce site draws a more diverse cross section of viewers who might write a review than, for example, a website focused exclusively on film and television content such as IMDb or Netflix. *The West Wing* originally aired during the beginnings of user reviews and streaming video content online becoming common practice, so for the most part the reviews I use to evaluate viewers' relationships to the show were written based on viewing the show after its original airing, either through streaming services or on DVD. The earliest Amazon reviews for the series were written in 2002, so were written in close proximity to the original airing for the series' later seasons, with slight delays as audiences had to wait for the latest season to be released on DVD. Like the sources cited above, Amazon reviews, too, demonstrate that *The West Wing* found fans in both the Republican and Democratic Parties. Of the 1,404 reviews about Season One on Amazon at the time of writing, for example, a search for the word "Democrat" returns 38 reviews compared to 27 for "Republican," and 33 for "liberal" and 17 for "conservative." Such

[132] Ibid.

searches do not provide context for the use of those terms, of course, but a closer look illustrates that the keywords are, indeed, often used to identify a given user's own political leanings before singing the show's praises. In a review titled "Best series ever," for example, user Bella_Italia notes, "Whatever your political beliefs (I am very conservative, for example), this is still some of the most intelligent programming I've seen. It's funny, it's clever, and it's a great civics lesson!"[133] User OgenRwot expresses a similar sentiment in a review titled "One of the best shows ever written": "The politics are Democrat based and I am a Republican but I LOVE this show. They do a very good job balancing the politics. If you are a true politico I guarantee you will enjoy this show no matter what your political leanings are."[134] Drawn in by the smart writing and measured discourse on important political issues, conservative fans of *The West Wing* do exist outside the Beltway, it seems, and in not insignificant numbers.

The somewhat surprising evidence that the ostensibly liberal show drew audiences from across the political spectrum makes the question of what about *The West Wing* creates such a strong affective engagement for so many of its viewers all the more interesting. Regardless of political views, one recurrent theme viewers cite as a reason for their fandom—obliquely referenced in the reviews above—is also central to the show's distinction as *the* exemplary democracy porn text: its distinctive take on depicting the inner workings of American Democracy. Many reviewers describe the reasoned, measured debate presented in the signature Sorkin style of quick back-and-forth banter as "intelligent," and thus able to teach important

[133] Bella Italia, "Best series ever," review of *The West Wing:* Season 1*,* Amazon, March 7, 2010, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3PZY3FBAKSKWF/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000KZPG04.

[134] OgenRwot, "One of the best shows ever written," review of *The West Wing:* Season 1*,* Amazon, October 12, 2010, https://www.amazon.com/review/RMXVBET1DV0K/ref=cm_cr_srp_d_rdp_perm?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00005JLF3.

civics lessons while simultaneously entertaining. By keeping up with the show's pace and absorbing the densely packed (by television's standards) information about the democratic process presented by the show, viewers feel validation about not only their own intelligence, but their taste as well. Amazon user Ron Carlson, for example, notes—after identifying himself as a Republican—in his five-star review that, "The screen writing is superb, witty, funny, and educational…But if the show does not captivate you by episode 8 of season 1 (my favorite), then you probably should move on to something else. No disrespect intended, but if you are not addicted by episode 8, the show is just probably too intelligent for you to grasp the stories."[135] Other users, such as Chu H. Choi, are less smug in expressing their admiration for the level of discourse dramatized by the show, but are similarly impressed by *The West Wing*'s trademark blend of didacticism and narrative pleasure. Choi's five-star review titled "Great, great series," for example, states: "Even though the politics is [sic] way left of where I am, this is a smart, well-written TV series. I love the quick banter and I feel like I'm learning more about how the political system works just by watching it!"[136] And further still, many reviewers exhibit their affective connection to this aspect of the show by arguing for its use as a pedagogical tool. Take user Deanna J. Marquart, whose review is titled "I'm in denial" (in reference to her reaching the end of the series), says, "It makes me want to start a revolution by insisting on restoration of civics classes in American high schools and using the seven Seasons of The West Wing [sic] as

[135] Ron Carlson, "The most intelligent screen writing," review of *The West Wing:* Season 1*,* Amazon, February 17, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RHE724D89CJWR/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000KZPG04.

[136] Chu H. Choi, "Great, great series," review of *The West Wing*: Season 1, Amazon, June 28, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RO8AZ1NPPNCLM/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000KZPG04.

the curriculum."[137] John Akard, qashqai echoes the sentiment in his review, stating: "I would like to see the entire series offered in High Schools through out the nation as part of the Civics or Government Classes. If I were a teacher, I would make The West Wing part of my curriculum."[138] Yet for all the high praise reviewers offer regarding the educational value of *The West Wing*'s detailed representation of the American democratic process, the positive tone of that depiction presents itself as the series' primary affective draw.

Perhaps more than anything else, Amazon reviewers evince an affective engagement with *The West Wing* based on the show's overwhelmingly optimistic point of view regarding the role of government and those who oversee it a the highest levels. Many fans express this sentiment by stating that the show depicts the way government *should* operate. Should in its usage here carries significant affective baggage: first, it suggests viewers believe that the *West Wing*'s representation of government is *the* correct manifestation of the Framers' intentions. Further, should implies that this correctness stands in contradistinction to other less correct realizations of government, both fictional and non-. Put differently, using should in this way neatly encapsulates both the intrinsic value viewers find in *The West Wing*'s vision of our democratic process, as well as the meaningful corrective that vision represents to an audience fatigued by political disillusionment. The world of *The West Wing* is populated by staffers who, as one reviewer put it, have heeded a "call to duty" to serve their country, and viewer responses broadly indicate that the characters' nobility of purpose is the most important aspect of the show's *correct* depiction

[137] Deanna J. Marquart, "I'm in denial," review of *The West Wing*: Season 7, Amazon, June 30, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2TWVMIOE4EYTU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000HC2LHQ.

[138] John Akard, Qahqai, "The West Wing; Bravo!" review of *The West Wing*: Season 7, Amazon, May 29, 2015, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RYVD6CRWAXDRY/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000HC2LHQ.

of government.[139] Amazon user Edwin C. Pauzer describes the show as follows: "This is a story of our government and how our government should operate, with characters that have ideals instead of agendas, whom you can trust, and trust not to play dirty tricks."[140] He then goes on to clarify why exactly the story told on *The West Wing* is significant to him, writing in the latter half of the George W. Bush administration's second term: "I wish everyone in the current West Wing could be made to watch this over and over again!"[141] Pauzer's review is similar to those of countless others who seem drawn to the series as an antidote to a feeling of disappointment with the way Washington, DC functions (or ceases to). Though perhaps propelled by negative affects, many viewers cathect with the series because of its ability to make them feel good.

For the politically disillusioned viewer, the fantasy world of *The West Wing* seems to offer, more than anything else, a sense of hope. Reviewers express this sentiment time and again, and along with it the comfort they take in knowing that such positivity can be accessed on demand through repeated viewings. Such is the position of E. Guthrie, who says, "This series is way beyond awesome. I watched it a couple of years ago, and wanted to have it to watch again, whenever I need to feel hope for humankind."[142] As Guthrie's comments demonstrate, *The West Wing*'s well-intentioned characters provide many viewers with hope not just about our political system, but about nothing short of humanity's failure to live up to its potential. And given

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[139] Scott Marks, "Five Seasons and going Strong," review of *The West Wing*: Season 5, Amazon, July 16, 2010, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RDJEE2KI6WMA6/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000BB1MIM.

[140] Edwin C. Pauzer, "The West Wing Soars," review of *The West Wing*: Season 2, Amazon, April 20, 2006, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R31D46DPN998TW/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0001HAGQK.

[141] ibid.

[142] E. Guthrie, "The Best of the Best," review of *The West Wing*: Season 1, Amazon, February 9, 2015, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1KNDU9VA1NY70/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000HC2LI0.

humanity's tendency to do just that, *The West Wing* has emerged as a place where fans can go to escape the horrors of the world—a somewhat more literal version of the decadent, deco-filled escapist fare the Hollywood Dream Machine produced for suffering audiences during the Great Depression, but now available for viewing any time in the comfort of your living room. Hope may not spring eternal in life under neoliberal capitalism, but at least it can be synthetically reproduced by a product of that same system? Guthrie's feel-good use of *The West Wing* may sound innocuous enough, until one recognizes how it enables complacency with whatever human failure produced a need to watch the show in the first place. A more overtly problematic effect of the show's benevolent tone reveals itself, however, when viewers project their newfound hope onto (likely undeserving) real-life politicians. Marcia Iverson begins her review of season 7 in this way, stating, "Watching The West Wing always gave me the sense that, flawed as our leaders may be, they have the country's best interest at heart, and they work incredibly hard."[143] And Jeanne Yule says, "In spite of your political affiliation, it's nice to watch this and see that sometimes, the people 'up there in government' really do work hard with our best interest at hand."[144] As both of these reviews demonstrate, *The West Wing*'s verisimilitude and optimism, coupled with a desire to have faith in the political system, has fostered a slippage for some viewers between the way characters behave on the show and the way Washington politicians behave in real life. While there is no way to know for certain how this logical leap impacts these viewers' propensity for civic engagement, it does seem to provide them with a sense of

[143] Marcia Iverson, "Great series, great season," review of *The West Wing*: Season 7, Amazon, December 27, 2008, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3AQU6V2JH4GS6/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000HC2LHQ.

[144] Jeanne Yule, "Great show," review of *The West Wing*: Season 5, Amazon, December 10, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3A17P3WZ5PMJC/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000BB1MIM.

reassurance that the government is operating smoothly, regardless of whether or not that is borne out by real world evidence. Some reviewers, though, do explicitly describe ways that watching *The West Wing* impacted the ways they approach the rights and privileges associated with citizenship.

Having demonstrated that viewers are affectively engaged with *The West Wing*'s depiction of the processes of American democracy, the question of *what* that engagement means for their relationship to American citizenship looms large. Do the strong affective ties described above inspire viewers to get find out for themselves whether or not Washington runs the way it is depicted on the series? Might they even be inspired to even get off the couch and participate in the processes of American democracy represented on the show? Do they believe that watching the show itself constitutes a civic act for which no follow-up is necessary? Or is *The West Wing,* despite its many affective draws, merely one in a lengthy roster of shows that viewers enjoy as fiction, dissociated from their consideration of real world civic life? Again, while it would be impossible to conclusively answer these questions using Amazon reviews as evidence, viewers do make some noteworthy claims therein that suggest some ways a sustained engagement with program can manifest in civic action and self-image. As indicated in a review cited above, many reviewers believe *The West Wing*'s representations of democratic processes are informative enough to be used as a teaching tool. At least one user/educator, Catherine Burgess agrees, and does just that; she states, "Use it in my social studies class! Great way to teach the government. Kids love the fast paced [sic] action so I use it every year."[145] Though not quite the revolutionary reinstatement of civics classes that user Deanna J. Marquart calls for in her own review,

[145] Catherine Burgess, "Great teaching tool," review of *The West Wing*: Season 5, Amazon, December 16, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3UE6P44X4CFUU/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B000BB1MIM.

Burgess's review illustrates a concrete way in which the series inspires civic action. An enthusiastic affinity for the series' positive view of democratic governance does not always translate to real world civic action, however, as evidenced in Maria S. Farmer's review: "I must admit, that for the last two presidential election years (2008 and 2012), I have gotten out my 'West Wing' boxed set, watching what government COULD be. I am too sad for my beloved country to watch the 'real thing' unfold."[146] Swapping out "should" with "could," but retaining the former term's connotative resonance as discussed above, Farmer here confesses to behavior (or lack thereof) that might well be lurking just beyond the confines many of the reviews I have cited here. Despite a professed love of country, Farmer has become so disillusioned by the reality of political life in the United States that she has positioned *The West Wing*'s highly functioning version of democracy as a fantastical retreat rather than an aspirational model. In this way, the series functions as a release valve for the many pressures inherent to life under a failing system. And while the relief it offers might create a feeling of stability for Farmer and other viewers who take a similar approach, their resulting inaction ultimately serves to maintain the system—in this case neoliberal democracy—as a whole.

Whether or not the majority of *West Wing* fans use the series to encourage an active engagement with civic life in the United States like Burgess, or to escape from it like Farmer, many have remained invested in the series long after the end of its original run. One such viewer is Dr. Patricia Saddlemire, who in her five-star review dated June 20, 2014, succinctly brings together all of the affective draws I've discussed, specifically articulates how her strong

[146] Maria S. Farmer, "Belongs in category TV's 'Golden Age of Television,'" review of *The West Wing*: Season 2, Amazon, December 2, 2012, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R171KMOVRY0VQ8/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0001HAGQK.

relationship with the program impacts her relationship to her life as an American, and notes its continued uniqueness within the televisual landscape:

> It underscores what the problems are that all White House staff members face and presents them in a patriotic and focused manner to remind everyone of what America was meant to be. My family was very disappointed when the series went off the air. There is little that fills the void in 'thinking programs' that both provide ACCURATE information about the role of government and instill a longing for the American Dream.[147]

Though many series—*Mister Sterling* (Lawrence O'Donnell, 2003), *Commander in Chief* (Rod Lurie, 2005-2006), *Battleground* (J.D. Hall, 2012), *State of Affairs* (Alexi Hawley, 2014-2015), and *Madam Secretary* (Barbra Hall, 2014-) among them—have attempted to ride *The West Wing*'s coattails, none have come close to achieving its level of cultural import.

More than a decade after *The West Wing* went off the air, its legacy remains palpable, manifesting in a wide range of new cultural artifacts. Various permutations of the cast have reunited for several web videos, including one for prolific shortform comedy producer Funny or Die. Myriad publications and websites including *The Atlantic, The Guardian, The A.V. Club, IndieWire,* and *The Independent* have and continue to publish reviews of individual episodes and reflections on the series' resonances with contemporary politics. Joshua Malina, who played Will Bailey on the show (and continues to play David Rosen on *Scandal* as of this writing), co-hosts *The West Wing Weekly* podcast*,* on which he and co-host Hrishikesh Hirway plan to rewatch the entire series, discussing one episode each week along the way. The podcast also features a plethora of special guests including cast members, writers, technicians who worked on *The West Wing,* along with real life politicos, who share inside information about the production, actual political life, and the relationship between the two.

[147] Dr. Patricia Saddlemire, "Superior Script and Story Line," review of *The West Wing*: Season 2, Amazon, June 20, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2PZKMV8DI570W/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B0001HAGQK.

Lines between the show and real political life at the White House became increasingly blurry during the Obama Administration. Continuing to harness the social media savvy to which many credit Obama's victory over John McCain in the 2008 Presidential election, the staffers of the real West Wing of 2014 introduced Big Block of Cheese Day: Virtual Edition, in which actual White House officials took to the internet to interact with concerned citizens who would not have otherwise had access to meetings. The day was promoted online with a video in which *West Wing* cast members Bradley Whitford and Joshua Malina interact with then-current White House Press Secretary Jay Carney.[148] In 2016, Carney was pushed aside from his podium in the White House press briefing room when Allison Janney stepped in to reprise her role as Press Secretary C.J. Cregg, and also raise awareness about the country's growing opioid epidemic.[149] And later that year, six members of the cast joined Presidential Candidate Hillary Clinton on the campaign trail in Ohio.[150] All of these examples demonstrate both the continued interest in the series among its dedicated fanbase and a desire to harness that enthusiasm towards real civic engagement. And yet the specter of the the release valve remains, as evidenced by the recent uptick in numbers of people streaming the series since Donald Trump was elected president.[151] While my analysis of the meanings and values associated with democracy porn ends with that same paradigm-shifting event, thus making a thorough account of this new moment in *West*

[148] The Obama White House, *Big Block of Cheese Day: Virtual Edition*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JJGDieJ5Tc.

[149] PBS NewsHour, *Allison Janney Makes Surprise Visit to White House Briefing*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0qqcD1MKicI.

[150] "'The West Wing' Cast to Campaign for Hillary Clinton – Variety," accessed October 13, 2017, http://variety.com/2016/biz/news/west-wing-cast-hillary-clinton-1201867222/.

[151] "Donald Trump Presidency Sparks Rise in The West Wing Viewership | The Independent," accessed October 13, 2017, http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/donald-trump-the-west-wing-where-to-watch-aaron-sorkin-a7583516.html.

Wing fandom beyond the scope of this dissertation, it is clear that the series continues to permeate political and civic life in the United States.

Chapter Three:
History

> If the sun comes up tomorrow, it is only because of men of goodwill.
> That's all that is between us and the devil.
>
> - Kenny O'Donnell, *Thirteen Days*

The specter of American History looms large throughout the entire corpus of films and series examined in this dissertation. From the ample references to historical events, to the frequent fetishizing of the constitution and other founding documents, to the Washington, D.C. landmarks that dominate its iconography, even the zaniest examples of democracy porn showcase concrete connections to the nation's past. Consider, for example, *Scandal* and *Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde*, both analyzed in previous chapters: While the high level of fantasy governing their representations of democratic processes place them on the fringes of democracy porn as a discourse, they are both colored by the Washington, D.C. setting in ways that imbue their narratives with a sense of real history. In *Scandal,* important meetings frequently take place on The Mall, with the national phallus—the Washington Monument—omnipresent in the background. And as with so many Washington pilgrims before her, Elle Woods turns to the Lincoln Memorial's silent sage to replenish her faith in our democratic system in *Legally Blonde 2.* Despite being sutured to actual American history to varying degrees, those examples, along with all of the other media texts examined so far in this dissertation, are fictional stories that take place in their contextual historical presents. Yet the spectacularized fantasies of the legislative and electoral processes depicted by democracy porn are not limited to the present, nor are they exclusively works of fiction. Indeed, a significant number of films and miniseries that can be described as democracy porn are retellings of real events drawn from the annals of American

democracy. These works depict pivotal moments in American history, illustrating in great detail the role of the democratic process in both facilitating and obstructing change.

Given democracy porn's uncritical relationship to both neoliberalism's incursions on democracy and the heightened material inequalities resulting from that infiltration, the past serves as an ideal setting to present a romanticized vision of American democracy enacting its declaration that "All men [sic] are created equal." Each of the films and miniseries under consideration in this chapter engage with the originary assurance of an ideal democratic society as put forth in the spirit (if not the letter) of our country's founding documents. These texts raise questions about what constitutes that originary assurance, the role it plays within their diegeses, and the way it is related to the sociohistorical circumstances of the texts' production contexts. For example, in discussing *John Adams* (Hooper, 2008), a seven-part miniseries produced by HBO that recounts the founding of the United States through a biographical look at Adams' contributions to it, I explore questions related to its particular depiction of the American revolutionary period as looked back on from 2008. Indeed, a central concern of this chapter is exploring relationships between the represented past and the contextual present, in particular asking whether neoliberalist worldviews are grafted onto eras that predate them in these media texts, and if so, how? Following a deep analytical dive into *John Adams,* considering both the text itself and the discourse surrounding it, the chapter looks at two other historical examples of democracy porn: *Lincoln* (Spielberg, 2012), and *Charlie Wilson's War* (Nichols, 2007). Each of these analyses pay special attention to the role of nostalgia, and the way in which the narratives under interrogation reflect the Great Man theory of history, both of which emerge as defining features of democracy porn's imaginings of the American past.

Studies of representations of history in film and television constitute a vast and diverse body of literature. Major texts in the cross-disciplinary field include *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History*, in which Robert Rosenstone defends historical films as a legitimate way to think historically; Marcia Landy's *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, which considers the intersections of cinema, popular history, and cultural memory; *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event,* edited by Vivian Sobchack; and Robert Burgoyne's analysis of the narrative construction of nationhood in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*. Yet for such an inherently interdisciplinary field, its major arguments can be delineated along disciplinary lines. Historians tend to focus on the ways in which actual historical events are simplified or falsified in their translation for the screen. Film scholars, on the other hand, accustomed to the idea that subjectivity is inherent to all narrative forms, often confine their analyses to the cinematic texts themselves.[152]

Coming out of cinema studies, my own work is aligned much more closely with the textual analysis camp, which, when considering historical films, often deploys Hayden White's historiographical argument that objective historical truth is an impossibility given the many interpretive choices made in the process of crafting the raw material of history into a narrative, academic, cinematic, or otherwise.[153] However, neither of these approaches to the study of moving image-based representations of history have tended to provide sufficient insight regarding a central question posed in this chapter: how are contemporary neoliberal values enmeshed within historical diegeses? To begin understanding that process, it is necessary to look

[152] For a much more substantive account of the tension between history and cinema studies in analysis of historical stories told on film, see Robert Brent Toplin, "The Study of Cinematic History," in *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 2002), 160-177.

[153] See Hayden White, "The Modernist Event," in Sobchack, Vivian, ed. *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television and the Modern Event* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 17-32.

outside the texts as the historians do, to locate fissures in the historical narrative. But that is only the first step; the task is not to identify these "inaccuracies" merely for the sake of it (for, we must remember, per White's argument, history is always already subjective), but rather to consider what such deviations can illuminate for us when considered in the context of their production, which, for democracy porn, is in many ways defined by pervasive neoliberal ideology.

The stakes of thinking history and neoliberalism together are particularly high, for, as Marcia Landy notes in *Cinematic Uses of the Past*, "In neoliberalism as in fascism, familiar events and images from the past are invoked as rallying points, as forces for cohesion and consensus in the interests of national solidarity."[154] As we will see throughout this chapter, the subject matter and narrative tropes of democracy porn make it an ideal form through which to attempt the kind of nationalist project Landy describes. Indeed, Landy's approach to the study of historical films constitutes the closest model for my own purposes here, as her analysis focuses on placing representations of history in the cinema within their respective sociopolitical contexts in order to illuminate the cultural work they do beyond telling history on film. Landy's work constitutes a critical reading of history on film that seeks to "expose the discursive nature of representation," and which does not deny that history may be used to "make capitalism, cultural imperialism, nationalism, biological determinism, or individual initiative seem to be natural."[155] As such, her study provides "strategies for understanding the forms this naturalization assumes."[156] Indeed, democracy porn is one such form, and its representations of history do

[154] Marcia Landy, *Cinematic Uses of the Past* (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 2.

[155] Ibid., 14.

[156] Ibid.

significant work to make normal the American mythos, often as imbued with contemporary neoliberal ideology.

Much of Landy's analysis rests upon her assertion that "successful modes of representation use the past to incarnate a sense of common experience," and unpacking the tropes that, together, work to create that apparent commonality. In particular, drawing on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche and Antonio Gramsci, Landy investigates the role of melodrama, excess in historical representations, and affective investments in common sense and folklore within cinematic representations of history. While Landy's project covers several forms of historical narrative, I take inspiration from her work, and apply it to my own narrower corpus; and in what follows, pay particular attention to what I have identified as the two major narrative tropes that operate within democracy porn's historical texts to naturalize their very circumscribed vision of America's past: the Great Man Theory of History, and nostalgia.

The first major trope that fuels democracy porn's affirming visions of American history is the Great Man Theory's influence on these texts' narratives. This theory, now broadly considered an antiquated school of thought, runs counter to White's perspective that there is no objective, truthful portrayal of history. Popularized by historian Thomas Carlyle in the 1840s, the Great Man Theory famously postulates that, "The history of the world is but the biography of great men."[157] By Carlyle's logic, these Great Men—and indeed, like the 19th century ideas on which their narratives are based, these examples of democracy porn focus exclusively on male greatness, and white male greatness at that—are destined for eminence by divine inspiration and an inherent capacity for leadership; and it is the actions of these men that turn the gears of history. Carlyle's blindness to the myriad sociohistorical factors that set some individuals up for

[157] Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (1841; Project Gutenberg, 2008), http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1091/1091-h/1091-h.htm.

greatness and squelch the inherent leadership capacities of others is glaringly obvious from our contemporary vantage point. Indeed, the theory's flaws were visible to at least some of Carlyle's contemporaries, most prominently the sociologist Herbert Spencer, who argued that the so-called "Great Men" were not born, but made, that they are products of their social environments, as early as 1874.[158] Spencer's counter-argument paved the way for White's *Metahistory* a century later, which in turn became a foundational text in critical historiography, as discussed above.

Since Spencer's time, acknowledging the constructedness and subjectivity of official histories has become so widely accepted that its influence has extended even so far as mainstream cinematic narratives. In *Film Nation,* Robert Burgoyne notes the proliferation of films that approach the history of the United states, "from below."[159] By this, Burgoyne refers to films that seek not to rehearse the narrative summarized by Jacques Rancière as "this is where we come from," but "to recover a a different message from the past, a message that will validate the increasingly hybrid and polycultural identity of American life and bind it to an image of nation that expresses a sense of 'this is how we are.'"[160] Films such as *Glory* (Zwick, 1989), *JFK* (Stone, 1991)*,* and *Malcolm X* (Lee, 1992), Burgoyne argues, attempt to remake the dominant national fiction in such a way that complicates a Great Man vision of history by accounting for the contributions of individuals (unfortunately, still overwhelmingly cisgender, heterosexual men, but at least slightly more racially diverse) who had been omitted from dominant historical narratives. Though these films, too, are "occasionally flawed by nostalgia," they nonetheless

[158] Spencer, Herbert. *The Study of Sociology*. International Scientific Series, American Ed. v. 5. New York: D. Appleton & Company, 1874.

[159] Robert Burgoyne, *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History*, Rev. ed (Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[160] Ibid., 2.

constitute a remarkable shift in mainstream cinematic representations of history, making democracy porn's deployment of the Great Man theory in even more contemporary texts all the more conspicuous.

Yet, while countless thinkers have, through both words and moving images, problematized the nature of historicity by pushing back against the purported objectivity and linear narratives through which history is often presented, democracy porn consistently positions its characters—particularly its historical protagonists—as Great Men. Take, for example, the film*Thirteen Days*—quoted in the epigraph that opens this chapter—which tells the story of how the Kennedy White House navigated, successfully, the Cuban Missile Crisis in October of 1962. The way *Thirteen Days* details the process by which the nation's highest elected official led his team in making decisions about military force—with discussions of the way those decisions are funneled through the government of particular interest here—locates it squarely within the bounds of democracy porn. As with all examples of democracy porn, the film also works to humanize these powerful characters, and does so by portraying them as Great Men. Throughout the film, the Great Men of the Kennedy administration are consistently shown exhibiting grace under the most extreme pressure, and possessing almost superhuman ingenuity in navigating the highest stakes international brinksmanship within the strictures of democracy. At several points, for example, when top military officials resist President Kennedy's ideas, he stands his ground and gives orders that keep to his own plan, and is rewarded with successful results. Formally, the film emphasizes Kennedy's slight frame in relation to the brutish, towering military men, but his inherent genius consistently prevails. As this recurring narrative trope and the epigraph suggest, *Thirteen Days* thus lionizes the members of the Kennedy administration who worked to end the crisis in a way that suggests these (heterosexual, cisgender white) men were born to make such

significant contributions to history. And in case the myriad instances of successful moments in executive branch leadership accompanied by a soaring score did not drive the point home well enough, Special Assistant to the President Kenny O'Donnell (Kevin Costner) says, in voiceover, the morning after the epigraphical statement: "The sun came up. Every day the sun comes up says something about us."

Ultimately, *Thirteen Days* serves to create goodwill—distinct from, but related to, the kind the epigraph suggests is intrinsic to one's character—directed towards JFK and key players in his inner circle. In so doing, the film is part of a broader trend that, as Mark White argues, has constructed "a seductive, hagiographic portrayal of a great president and liberal hero committed to peace and reduction of Cold War tensions."[161] White's analysis further proves that this brand of mythologizing works—he argues that the now-dominant view of Kennedy as a great president was not widespread until after his death, and in fact has been created and maintained in large part by idealized representations of him. *Thirteen Days,* White argues, "is representative of the way in which film and television have sustained the myth of Kennedy's presidential brilliance—a myth in which the nuances and contradictions of his life and political career are obscured."[162] Thus, as we shall see with other historical examples of democracy porn,*Thirteen Days* owes much of its power to the Great Man theory as an ideological underpinning. The simplicity of Carlyle's theory—premised on a willful ignorance of the complex systems that govern whether or not a given human will have opportunities to evince greatness—still wields considerable affective heft, it seems. As I will argue throughout this chapter, the historiographic foundation

[161] Mark White, "The Cinematic Kennedy: *Thirteen Days* and the Burnishing of an Image," in Iwan W. Morgan, ed., *Presidents in the Movies: American History and Politics on Screen*, 1st. ed, The Evolving American Presidency Series (New York: Palgrave Macmillan/St. Martin's Press, 2011), 136.

[162] Ibid., 147.

provided by the Great Man theory, embellished with heavy doses of nostalgia, are signature features of democracy porn's historical texts, and together, they work to produce surplus of affect that exceeds even that of their entirely fictional counterparts.

As Landy argues with historical cinema more broadly, examples of democracy porn that tell real stories from the nation's past act as nodes around which a cohesive national identity may form; no small feat in the fragmented world of postmodern historicity. Yet these texts rise to the occasion, fortifying the hegemonic American mythology through the ideological underpinning of the Great Man theory of history—and a nuanced deployment of nostalgia attuned to the cynical gaze of contemporary viewers. Nostalgia is a very powerful force in this context, for, as Svetlana Boym notes in her influential work on the subject, *The Future of Nostalgia*: *"*The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition."[163] Boym's framing here illustrates how nostalgia seeks to collapse time, effectively erasing or making irrelevant social progress in order to fetishize an idealized vision of the past. As such, nostalgia places rigid limits on the ways in which the problems of history, notably the historical treatment of marginalized groups, can be represented within democracy porn's historical texts. Put differently, the American myth that nostalgia shores up when deployed by democracy porn—that our constitutional democratic system ensures equal opportunity for all—is irreconcilable with the actual events that make up the nation's history; so those aspects of the American heritage that evince the structural inequality that is in fact written into the nation's founding documents must be relegated to the margins, presented with a positive spin, or omitted altogether from democracy porn's narratives.

[163] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.

This thread in Boym's thinking lines up with much of the previous academic work on nostalgia, which broadly tended to position it as regressive and, as Fredric Jameson has noted, incompatible with "genuine historicity."[164] Boym's study notably adopts a more nuanced view of the subject than Jameson and others, and provides generative analytical insights regarding its operation in contemporary American popular culture, specifically cinema. In explicating the manifold functions of nostalgia, Boym identifies what she defines as its two major forms—restorative and reflective, which she distinguishes as follows:

> Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells in *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance. The first category of nostalgics do not think of themselves as nostalgic; they believe that their project is about truth. This kind of nostalgia characterizes national and nationalist revivals all over the world, which engage in the anti modern myth-making of history by means of a return to national symbols and myths and, occasionally, through swapping conspiracy theories. Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and time.[165]

In delineating these two types, Boym conceives of positive possibilities for nostalgia in its reflective form, which can work to maintain a plurality of cultural legacies, rather than a single, exclusionary narrative. Yet, while the nostalgia embedded in democracy porn does occasionally gesture towards the messy, challenging aspects of times past that characterize the reflective mode, it overwhelmingly presents as restorative, and as such makes significant contributions to the maintenance of the dominant, incomplete American mythology.

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[164] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, no. 146 (1984), 67

[165] Boym, 41.

Continuing to apply Boym's argument to our topic at hand, democracy porn's nostalgia is further characterized by its status as American popular culture. In an inspired turn using *Jurassic Park* (Spielberg, 1993) as her focal point, Boym explicates how American popular culture capitalizes on history beyond the reach of living memory in order to freely construct a setting, experience, idea—or ideology. She says, "Popular culture made in Hollywood, the vessel for national myths that America exports abroad, both induces nostalgia and offers a tranquilizer; instead of disquieting ambivalence and paradoxical dialectic of past, present and future, it provides a total restoration of extinct creatures and a conflict resolution. American popular culture prefers a technopastoral or a techno-fairy tale to a mournful elegy."[166] While not quite as prehistoric as the dinosaur, America's founding fathers died long enough ago that their lives are open, and indeed have been subject, to a wide range of interpretations. When presented nostalgically in the service of myth-making, their stories can be cleansed of events and details that complicate the larger project of producing a net positive image of American history. *John Adams* and *Lincoln,* discussed in detail below, display elements of the technopastoral and the techno-fairy tale—that is, their imaginings of the past are celebrated for their verisimilitude, their dedication to capturing the living textures of their respective periods, but in such a way that the challenges of those times can be narratively resolved by the triumph of American democracy.

Despite the clear resolutions offered by both *John Adams* and *Lincoln,* both also gesture towards the more complex visions of the past characteristic of the history "from below" approach analyzed by Burgoyne, as do other historical examples of democracy porn. These complications—political corruption, passing references to slavery, grim depictions of illness—make it tempting to think of these texts as operating in Boym's reflective mode of nostalgia,

[166] Ibid., 33.

highlighting the turbulence of the past in order to comment on the tumult of the present. Or perhaps, as Pam Cook argues of nostalgia films more broadly, to think nostalgia does not exclusively function as "a simple device for idealizing and de-historicizing the past" in these films. Or perhaps that, through self-reflexivity, nostalgic films such as these can "employ cinematic strategies to actively comment on issues of memory, history, and identity," which in turn have the power to encourage reflection in audiences.[167] Indeed, discourse surrounding many of the media texts discussed in this chapter suggests this past-as-present interpretation to be common. Yet, I contend that upon closer inspection, the progressive, critically nostalgic lens reveals itself to be a cipher—rather than using a critically nostalgic vision of the past as an allegory for contemporary issues, historical examples of democracy porn present the past as just messy enough to engender contemporary resonance, but ultimately work towards complicity with the dominant ideology of the present—namely, neoliberalism.

Foucault argues that the distinguishing feature of American neoliberalism (compared to, for example, that from France of Germany) is that Liberalism itself played such an important role in the founding of the country, and that the debate between big and small government has never been settled. For Foucault, the major shift between original Liberalism and neoliberalism is the way in which labor power is reframed as human capital, producing what he calls an "entrepreneurial subjectivity," which in turn helps to cultivate the larger neoliberal project of shifting the burden of a variety of responsibilities from institutions to the individual. In focusing on one exceptional individual's groundbreaking triumphs, great man histories such as those presented by democracy porn constitute an ideal narrative structure to sell the idea of the entrepreneurial subject as a model for American citizenship. Neoliberalism and the Great Man

[167] Pam Cook, *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2005), 5.

theory of history might at first seem like strange bedfellows given the temporal chasm between them, but they find something of a synergistic relationship in democracy porn. The discourse's use of the Great Man theory as a guiding narrative principle also means that, in effect, democracy porn is nostalgic in narrative form as well as content; for beyond the ways the stories it tells valorize a collective national past, they are constructed in such a way that is itself nostalgic for a time when historiographic practice uncritically accepted ideas of truth, objectivity, and a master narrative. Though they sometimes pander to the contemporary drive to problematize official histories by adopting certain postmodern, "from below" narrative tropes—such as revealing character flaws in great man protagonists, occasionally going so far as presenting them as antiheroes—the texts ultimately attempt to reinscribe a dominant ideology into a culture that, as Fredric Jameson notes of the postmodern condition more broadly, has become "a field of stylistic and discursive heterogeneity without a norm."[168]

Democracy porn's nostalgia functions to erase the complexity of American culture, and create national solidarity around the project of democracy, served with a hearty side of neoliberalism. Its use of great man narratives in conjunction with a focus on the processes of democracy serve this project well in providing a structural rationale for excluding historical contributions from groups of people who have been excluded from participating in democratic decision-making processes. That is to say, presenting the history of US democracy as an insider's view of the process at its highest levels allows for a world in which the vast majority of action is taken by white men. While such a picture is not erroneous given the history of power relations in this country, these stories are predicated on the idea that democracy happens only within the corridors of power directly affiliated with our democratic system and erases the significant

[168] Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, I, no. 146 (1984), 65.

histories of agitation, resistance, and persistence under difficult circumstances that makes up so much of the story of the United States. In so doing, the historical examples of democracy porn ultimately reify antiquated visions of the American mythos that make normal the idea that power should be concentrated in the white male circles it always has been. In this way, democracy porn's "true" historical narratives are part of "official historicizing," which, according to Marcia Landy, "challenges the various narratives that constitute traditional humanistic and idealistic notions of global progressive history."[169] Together, nostalgia and a great man approach to the representation of history also work to produce a surplus of affect, one of the defining features of democracy porn more broadly. Below, I seek to examine the function of such affect as it relates to the neoliberal worldviews inhabiting the texts in question, as well as the ways viewers signal their uses of it in describing their consumption practices. The great man theory of history's focus on the extraordinary achievements of individual historical actors is ideally suited to the portrayal of an anachronistic entrepreneurial subjectivity; *John Adams* is exemplary of this trope in democracy porn and it is to it that I now turn my attention.

John Adams

The *John Adams* miniseries originally aired in seven parts on HBO in the spring of 2008. Using the book John Adams by David McCullough as its source, the program stars Paul Giamatti in the titular role, with Laura Linney as Abigail Adams, and a host of well-known British and American character actors including Tom Wilkinson (as Benjamin Franklin), Danny Huston (as Samuel Adams), and David Morse (as George Washington) filling out the rest of the extensive cast. Helmed by the British director Tom Hooper in his third collaboration with HBO, after the two-part *Elizabeth I* in 2005, and feature film *Longford* in 2006, the miniseries received

[169] Landy, 10.

significant critical acclaim and won numerous awards upon its release. It follows in a long line of prestige miniseries produced by HBO, including *Tanner '88*, which is discussed in chapter one, and the 2003 screen adaptation of *Angels in America* directed by Mike Nichols. In the 2008 awards season, *John Adams* beat the latter series to set a new record for most Emmy Awards won by a single series, at 13.

John Adams begins on the night of the Boston Massacre in 1770 and follows Adams's life from there until his death in 1826, focusing on both his contributions to the founding and first decades of democracy in the United States, and his family life, in particular his relationship with wife Abigail. Like other examples of democracy porn, the story weaves these two narrative strands together seamlessly, at once providing the viewer with the pleasures of being in "the room where it happens" at the very birth of American democracy, and humanizing perhaps the most enigmatic of the "great men" who have been dubbed America's founding fathers. Throughout the series, Adams is positioned as the consummate individualist—all of his involvement in the revolutionary struggle is refracted through the lens of its impact on his own life. The choices he makes to participate in the revolution, and later to serve as the second President of the fledgling American Democratic Republic are framed as products of Adams's obsession with proving his own intelligence rather than a call to public service. And yet, while this self-interest does occasionally create problems for Adams, the miniseries as a whole ultimately casts it as a necessary part of his contribution to American history, celebrating him as something of an anachronistic avatar of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject. Indeed, Adams's characterization highlights in particular the fact that he had no small part in the conception of and fight for a concept that, as Lisa Duggan has argued, has been of great rhetorical service in the selling of neoliberalism to the American people: freedom. Bolstered by the spectacle of

meticulous production and costume design recreating colonial Boston and its environs, *John Adams* harnesses the nostalgic, nationalistic affective charge built into stories about colonial America in order to reclaim one of history's more confounding great men and reconstruct his legacy as a visionary whose values were not fully understood in their time, but can serve as historical precedent for the contemporary neoliberal worldview that permeates so much of American life in the present.

In dramatizing debates about declaring independence from Britain and the formation of a new nation that took place at the Continental Congresses and going into meticulous detail about the shape a new democratic system of governance should take, *John Adams* is a categorical example of democracy porn, broadly defined. In adopting a nostalgic gaze directed towards the American colonial period and the way it positions it protagonist as one of history's Great Men, it is also a definitive example of the way democracy porn manifests specifically to tell real stories from history. The structural use of the Great Man theory of history in constructing Adams as a character is particularly interesting in this case, for, in his own words, Adams endeavored to become a "great man." By the end of his life, however, he had come to believe that he had failed to achieve that goal because, as historian John Ferling notes in his biography of Adams, "he believed himself to be 'obnoxious, suspected and unpopular.'"[170] While history has largely agreed with Adams's negative self-assessment, such personality traits do not preclude achieving Great Man status by Carlyle's metrics. And Ferling does ultimately claim that Adams deserves to be remembered as a Great Man for the myriad contributions he made to the founding and establishment of the US democratic system, all fueled by what Ferling describes as Adams's

[170] John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 446.

"steadfast commitment to liberty."[171] It is precisely Adams's investment in liberty—in the freedom to pursue one's individual desires without restrictions from social structures—that makes his character an ideal vessel to carry neoliberal ideology in *John Adams.*

From the show's outset, Adams is framed as an individual resolutely charting his own course, endlessly preoccupied by publicly proving his intellectual superiority, and standing not for a cause, but "for the law." He is not easily swayed by calls from contemporaries, including his activist cousin Sam Adams, to join the revolutionary movement. Indeed, it is the law that ultimately convinces Adams to enroll in the struggle, when he is insulted by the Crown's practice of exporting trials for crimes committed in the Colonies to Britain; he takes offense at the suggestion that the colonists are too simple-minded to adhere to and reasonably enforce the law. This individualist positioning accomplishes two things: first, in his obsession with proving his intellectual worth, Adams is situated as what Michel Foucault would describe as an entrepreneur of the self, which, for Foucault, is the defining characteristic of American neoliberal subjectivity.

Foucault's conception of American neoliberalism is particularly instructive in analyzing *John Adams* as it traces the specific way in which neoliberalism has manifested in the United States back to the founding of the country itself. He notes that, unlike France or Germany, for example, liberalism in the United States "was appealed to as the founding and legitimizing principle of the state. The demand for liberalism founds the state rather than the state limiting itself through liberalism."[172] In other words, Foucault argues that American democracy was, paradoxically, from the start characterized by a focus on freedom from governmental structures,

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[171] Ibid., 454.

[172] Michel Foucault and Collège de France, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978-79*, ed. Michel Senellart (Basingstoke, England ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 217.

rather than a means by which the government may place limits on its reach, as in the European context. That liberalism has always been "a whole way of being and thinking" in the United States enabled a specifically American brand of neoliberalism to emerge here as well. In Foucault's view, the key distinguishing factor between neoliberalism in the United States and its liberal origins is a shift in the way labor is theorized within economics.[173] In neoliberal thought, labor is conceived not as the blunt abstraction it is in classical liberalism—labor power, which every worker possesses in equal measure and exchanges for a wage—but rather is accounted for in its all its specificity—human capital that can be endlessly cultivated by the worker to earn not a wage but an income that is commensurate with their skills and qualifications for doing the job. When labor power comes to be viewed as human capital and the amount a worker earns varies based on the human capital they have accumulated, then every choice an individual makes becomes a question of investment in the self, in one's ability to increase the value of their labor. This understanding of labor, Foucault argues, positions the worker as *homo œconomicus,* economic man, who is an entrepreneur of the self, which fundamentally alters the nature of subjectivity. Entrepreneurial subjectivity, then, emerges conjointly with neoliberalism in the United States, and is characterized an imperative to be both the producer and consumer of one's own satisfaction.[174]

The extent of Adams's investment in being rewarded for cultivating his human capital is most clearly seen in the fifth installment of the miniseries, "Unite or Die," which begins in 1788 when Adams is serving as Vice President under President George Washington. The episode opens with a debate about what to call the President in the new democratic republic. Adams,

[173] Ibid., 218.

[174] Ibid., 226.

presiding over the Senate as Vice President, proposes that he be addressed as "his highness," and is accused by the senatorial body of being a monarchist, citing the fact that the constitution explicitly states that "no title of nobility shall be granted by the United States." Adams, who has made no secret about his own desire to be president, responds by saying, "These are not titles of heredity that I am proposing, but titles conferred for merit."[175] The exchange demonstrates how the monarchical tendencies that position Adams as an outsider in the eyes of his fellow revolutionaries are transmuted to imbue Adams with a prescient understanding that the liberalism on which the United States was founded would eventually lead to a social fabric so individualized that every person may be a monarch in their own mind, with a right, divine or not, to view the needs of all others as less important than their own. Reading John Adams as a evincing an entrepreneurial subjectivity in this way necessarily suggests that the miniseries has enmeshed contemporary ideology into its colonial-era subject matter.

The second thing Adams's positioning as a staunch individualist accomplishes, which is intimately bound up with the first, is that it aligns him with that most essential of American democratic ideals: *freedom.* Indeed, Adams's character is attached to the concept of freedom to such an extent that it seems to define his understanding of American democracy itself. Early in the series, when addressing the second continental congress in favor of revolution, Adams closes his emotional appeal with, "Let me have a country…a *free* country."[176] The miniseries continues to emphasize Adams's investment in freedom through to its final moment, when we hear Adams, in voiceover from beyond the grave, read an excerpt from one of his letters to Abigail: "No,

[175] *John Adams,* episode 5, "Unite or Die," HBO, April 6, 2008, directed by Tom Hooper, written by Kirk Ellis, accessed on Amazon.com.

[176] *John Adams,* episode 2, "Independence," HBO, March 16, 2008, directed by Tom Hooper, written by Kirk Ellis, accessed on Amazon.com.

posterity, you will never know how much it cost us to preserve your freedom. I hope that you will make a good use of it. If you do not, I shall repent in heaven that I ever took half the pains to preserve it."[177] These two examples are exemplary of the way Adams consistently foregrounds his own contributions to the establishing the United States as "a free country" throughout the miniseries. The final quote in particular demonstrates the way neoliberal ideology is injected into Adams's characterization in the miniseries, which not only casts him a the spokesperson for freedom in colonial America, but also leaves the contemporary audience with the edict that it is their responsibility to appreciate the fruits of his labor. Thus, through the way Adams is presented as a Great Man in *John Adams*, he comes to embody the key terms Lisa Duggan has associated with neoliberal rhetoric: *freedom* and *personal responsibility.* The way *John Adams* positions its protagonist as an entrepreneurial subject is also an important component of the show's deployment of nostalgia.

John Adams, like many other examples of democracy porn that narrativize actual historical events, broadly directs its nostalgic gaze towards the founding of the United States and in particular, the construction of its democratic system of governance. The narrative of the *John Adams* miniseries is thus characterized by what Boym would describe as a "restoration of origins." Of this form of nostalgia, Boym notes, "What drives restorative nostalgia is not the sentiment of distance and longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the restored tradition."[178] Anxieties about the genocidal, white-supremacist omissions from the official narrative of the founding of the United States have risen throughout the 20th and 21st

[177] *John Adams,* episode 7, "Peacefield," HBO, April 20, 2008, directed by Tom Hooper, written by Kirk Ellis, accessed on Amazon.com.

[178] Boym, 44-45.

centuries as voices from historically marginalized groups have slowly made their way into mainstream discourse. Indeed, the nation's long, deplorable history of racism crescendoed in the national consciousness in the year *John Adams* was released, 2008, when Barack Obama became the first African American President of the United States. In this context, a restorative return to the nation's origin story that celebrates one member of the cohort of heterosexual, cisgender white men also known as the Founding Fathers does significant work to patch up the incongruities between the American myth of equality and the historical fact that the enslavement of human beings based on race is written into the nation's founding documents.

If there is one major challenge to the restorative nostalgia exhibited by *John Adams,* it is the figure of Abigail: she is selfless, depicted as caring for everyone at the expense of her own needs. It is Abigail who acknowledges that the White House is being constructed by slaves, and who offers sustenance to the suffering soldiers who pass by the Adams family farm. Yet, while the series does rightly highlight the fact that John viewed her in many ways as his intellectual equal, and allows her to be somewhat agentic in relation to her male contemporaries—a rare thing in texts depicting the American revolutionary period—her voice ultimately has little impact on Adams's actions. Instead, she acts as our contemporary collective conscience, evincing the kind of critical thinking that breeds what Boym would term reflective nostalgia. Yet the gestures toward complexity, or what Burgoyne would call a view of US history from below, that Abigail provides are fleeting and eclipsed by the miniseries' dominant restorative nostalgic gaze. Ultimately, *John Adams* reinscribes the dominant narrative of the American origin story using Adams himself as a bridge between past and present. He becomes a something of a time traveler, exhibiting contemporary self-interest within the "we the people" setting of the American origin story, sidestepping the unsavory elements of that tale's real history and providing historical

justification for the individualism that now defines American culture. The tradition that is restored thus affirms both itself as History and also the present as a reasonable extension of that history. In other words, *John Adams*' generalized nostalgia for the American revolutionary period and the presumed identification viewers experience with Adams as protagonist works to shore up the contemporary neoliberal project by extending its history backwards and suturing it to the very core of our national value system.

Both the neoliberal imprint on and nostalgic gaze of *John Adams'* imagining of colonial America extends beyond the characterization of its protagonist to the colonial iconography that frames and permeates the miniseries itself. The title sequence that opens each of the seven episodes offers the clearest encapsulation of the revolutionary colonial imagery that appears frequently throughout *John Adams*, imagery that is today commonly associated with the libertarian Tea Party Movement in the United States. Set to a snare- and horn-heavy theme by composer Rob Lane, the title sequence begins with a string of cross-faded extreme close ups of the "Join, or die" flag that was an important symbol for Colonial American revolutionaries. The fragmenting close-ups mirror the snake on the flag, which has been cut into pieces representing each of the original colonies. We are eventually presented with a shot of the entire flag, lit by what appears to be candle light and waving regally against a black backdrop. Through a series of cross-dissolves, the "Join, or die" flag is replaced by myriad other revolutionary flags, and eventually, the stars and stripes. Most noteworthy among the other flags is another that prominently features a snake, this time a coiled rattlesnake, along with the words "Don't tread on me."

While both of these reptilian banners were, indeed, important symbols of the American revolution—designed by Benjamin Franklin and General Christopher Gadsden, respectively—

their meaning has evolved in recent years as they have been appropriated by the modern day Tea Party movement, which had its early origins in late 2007, just before the release of *John Adams*. The movement gained momentum following the inauguration of President Barack Obama in January 2009, when CNBC pundit Rick Santelli called for a "new Tea Party," during a rant against the administration's announced plans to bailout homeowners in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis.[179] Conservatives heeded Santelli's call, and Gadsden's "Don't tread on me" flag soon became a ubiquitous symbol of the movement. Though *John Adams* was in production before the flag became affiliated with the burgeoning Tea Party, the association had begun to coalesce by the time the miniseries was released, with the flag and the conservative movement becoming only more intimately bound up with each other in the following years. Of course, the meanings and values originally associated with the flag were what drew the Tea Party to adopt it in the first place, which brings us back to Foucault's assertion that the liberalism on which the United States was founded is readily mobilized in the service of neoliberalism.

John Adams received overwhelmingly positive responses upon its release. The few criticisms of the series—both popular and academic—tend to revolve around specific historical liberties taken in dramatizing Adams's life. One scholarly response detailing the historical inaccuracies, for example, devotes a paragraph to explaining that Nabby Adams (John and Abigail's eldest daughter) was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1810, not 1803 as indicated by on-screen text in the miniseries.[180] Yet, in focusing on the minutiae of historical chronologies and omissions as advocacy for complete fidelity to the historical record, such critiques miss the

[179] Eric Etheridge, "Rick Santelli: Tea Party Time," Opinionator *(blog), New York Times,* February 20, 2009, https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/02/20/rick-santelli-tea-party-time/.

[180] Jeremy Stern, "What's Wrong with HBO's Dramatization of John Adams's Story," *History News Network,* October 27, 2008, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/56155.

ideological anachronisms enmeshed in the story more broadly. Writing in *The New Republic, John Adams* screenwriter Kirk Ellis responds to this line of criticism by reflecting on the thought process behind the decision to deviate from history. He says,

> The "truth" I sought to illuminate in the miniseries was emotional and intellectual rather than literal. With every historical project I've done, the next-day bloggers often make the assumption that filmmakers alter "facts" either out of ignorance or negligence. In fact, a good deal of soul-searching goes into every deviation from the record; nothing is arbitrary. Some changes are made deliberately from the outset, with an eye to the overall structure of the piece; others arise as a result of production exigencies. But all aim to further the broader goal of making "history" accessible in dramatic form.[181]

In detailing the process by which a filmmaking team might bring a real historical story to the screen, Ellis's comments illuminate the limitations built into a critique of historical fidelity. The question we should be asking about dramatizations of real historical events is not *what* has been altered, but rather, *how* have events been altered? Put differently, in the quest to make history accessible that Ellis describes, how do contemporary values come to inhere in the narrative?

The textual analysis above explicating the ways in which adopting formal qualities of democracy porn—specifically uses of nostalgia, iconography, and the great man approach to history—work to construct the character of John Adams anachronistically as a neoliberal subject begins to answer the question posed in the preceding paragraph. But for the sake of illustrating specifically how neoliberal characterization results from emotionally-motivated deviations from the historical record, per Ellis's comments, I will provide one more example: Part one of the miniseries opens on the night of the Boston Massacre in 1770 and tells the story of Adams debating, but ultimately deciding to represent the British soldiers accused in the case, their trial,

[181] Kirk Ellis, "One for the Books," *The New Republic*, May 6, 2008, https://newrepublic.com/article/63831/one-the-books.

and subsequent acquittal. There are numerous alterations of the historical record throughout the episode, including the fact that there were two separate trials for the British soldiers involved in the Boston Massacre, not one as the series depicts. Ellis directly addresses this manipulation in his *New Republic* piece, attributing the choice to condense the trials to "economy in storytelling." Another important historical change in that episode that Ellis does not address in his piece, but that seems to be driven by the desire to seek "emotional and intellectual truths" that he describes, is the choice to portray Adams as unsympathetic to the revolutionary movement at the time of the trial, and locating his revolutionary tipping point as being the passage of the Coercive Acts in 1774. Passed by the British Parliament, the Coercive Acts were meant to punish Massachusetts colonists for the Boston Tea Party specifically, and growing revolutionary sentiment generally, by rolling back myriad rights they had previously been granted. One of four total, The Administration of Justice Act, called for all trials of royal officials to held in Great Britain; the series positions this act in particular as what pushes Adams over to the side of the revolution. According to the historical record, however, and as detailed by historian Jeremy Stern, Adams had been sympathetic to revolutionary ideas since 1765, and was a member of the Boston Sons of Liberty beginning in the 1760s as well.[182] Many more modifications fan out from the choice to depict Adams as resistant to the revolutionary cause for so long, including presenting Adams as antagonistic towards his cousin Samuel Adams, who was a prominent member of the Sons of Liberty—which, in actuality, he was not.[183] While this series of deviations plays a key role many other thinkpieces besides Stern's that enumerate the historical inaccuracies of *John Adams,* those

[182] Jeremy Stern, "What's Inaccurate About the New HBO Series on John Adams," *History News Network,* March 18, 2008, https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/48493.

[183] Ibid.

assessments all stop short of considering how exactly such changes operate in the miniseries' broader portrayal of Adams's character.

The decision to position Adams as a holdout on the idea of revolution supports the series' larger project of characterizing him as a man who does not follow the pack, a genius maverick of sorts, whose senses of logic and justice inform his every decision, and as such, who is not easily persuaded to deviate from established norms. In other words, he is characterized as the ideal neoliberal subject: Rather than jumping on the revolutionary bandwagon, he is presented as considering only himself and his immediate, nuclear family—rather than the broader citizenry—when deciding whether or not it is worth it to fight for a cause. He is an individualist who is only moved to fight when an overreaching government takes away his *individual rights.* As argued above, the Adams character as written in *John Adams* displays such neoliberal subjectivity throughout the miniseries in myriad other ways as well, this is just one example of how that subjectivity results from a deviation from the historical record. Adams's late arrival to the revolutionary effort can also be subsumed under Ellis's admitted desire to cultivate emotional engagement from the audience—his resistance to joining the cause creates narrative tension throughout the first episode, allowing for a more satisfying payoff when he does decide to join, thereby heightening the drama of his soaring revolutionary rhetoric at the conclusion of part one. Another aspect of the "emotional and intellectual truths" Ellis sought to capture, one may surmise, entails attempting to create a character that will resonate with contemporary viewers. Regardless of whether or not that was an explicit goal for them, Ellis and the rest of the production team behind *John Adams* have allowed some of their own contemporary subjectivity to seep into their protagonist.

Unsurprisingly, Ellis's philosophy for historical adaptation is largely in line with that of Tom Hanks, who served as Executive Producer for *John Adams,* and has been a driving creative force behind a number of noteworthy films and miniseries narrativizing American history. In a 2010 *Time* profile, historian Douglas Brinkley digs into Hanks's own thinking on representing American history, and finds that, like Ellis, Hanks strives to create an affective engagement with the past for his viewers. The language Brinkley uses to describe this Hanksian perspective is striking:

> What differentiates Hanks from the academic past masters is his conviction that the historical experience should be a very personal one. He harbors a pugnacious indignation against history as data gathering, preferring the work of popular historians like McCullough, Ambrose, Barbara Tuchman and Doris Kearns Goodwin. He wants viewers to identify with their ancestors, allowing them to ponder the prevalence of moral ambiguity, human willpower and plain dumb luck in shaping the past. And he wants to be transported back in time, with a Sousa band banging the drum loudly.[184]

In seeking to make the historical experience a "personal one" and foster identification with historical figures among contemporary viewers, Hanks aims to get a disillusioned and disengaged populace excited about national history.[185] And while his strategy has proven successful—so much so that Brinkley notes that his name on an historical nonfiction title carries power similar to Oprah's—[186]it comes with significant ideological implications that have gone uninterrogated, perhaps because of Hanks's reputation as "the nicest guy in Hollywood." Yet, an implicit byproduct of Hanks's intention to create narratives that resonate for contemporary viewers out of past events is the imposition of anachronistic values and beliefs. Given that

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[184] Douglas Brinkley, "The World According To Tom," *Time* 175, no. 10 (March 15, 2010).

[185] Ibid.

[186] Ibid.

Hanks's appeal as a producer is as broad and normative as that of his star persona, and that he has a long record of public support for party-line, centrist Democratic politics, the contemporary values grafted onto his historical narratives tend to reflect the most widely accepted version of our current national ideology, which is to say, neoliberalism.

This ideological bent becomes especially potent when considering precisely *how* it emerges in *John Adams.* Later in the *Time* article, Brinkley notes that, when it comes to Hanks's convictions manifesting in terms of narrative structure: "The way he found [to make history interesting for people] was to make it a mix of spectacle and drama, drawing on his own cultural influences."[187] In other words, Hanks's approach to telling the stories of American history is to literally employ the key narrative strategies of democracy porn—suturing spectacle (political in the case of democracy porn, often military in other historical texts Hanks has produced) together with historical characters drawn in such a way that they serve as points of identification for contemporary viewers. It is precisely in the character embellishments added with the goal of fostering identification that neoliberal subjectivity is anachronistically grafted onto these narratives, and, by extension, into the history of the United States, at least as far as some viewers are concerned.

In addition to creating space for contemporary ideology to inhabit historical narratives, the emotional appeal resulting from the production processes and narrative structures Ellis and Hanks explain seems to, significantly, constitute one of democracy porn's main draws for viewers. Much of the affective engagement elicited by *John Adams,* then, stems from what is also a key location for the miniseries' storytelling team to massage the historical record in the service of fostering identification—that is to say, the characterization, which is also a major site

[187] Ibid.

for the infiltration of contemporary ideology. Identifying with the characters in *John Adams* thus becomes a flashpoint in the process by which democracy porn injects neoliberal ideology into American history, and, by extension, reifies or instills that ideology into the minds of its contemporary viewers. Evidence that this confluence of deliberate manipulations of the historical narrative for the sake of identification on the part of the production team results in viewers' affective engagement with the resulting characterizations comes up frequently in user reviews of *John Adams.*

For example, Amazon user MB's review succinctly illustrates the slippage between character identification and neoliberal ideology. They state: "Great insight into the personal family sacrifices our forefathers made to create this great REPUBLIC, the United States of America; and to ensure that citizens' INDIVIDUAL rights are more important than any collective government - even our own government"[188] [emphasis original]. In one sentence, MB reveals that they understand the preservation of individual rights to be a (if not the) primary concern of republican governance, and directly connects that idea to their affective response to the characters in *John Adams*. Yet nothing about the definition of a republic suggests that individual rights are more important than collectivity. Quite the opposite, in fact; a republic is strictly defined as "a state in which power rests with the people or their representatives."[189] Given that *individual rights* have been used rhetorically to sell neoliberalism to the American public for decades, this particular Amazon reviewer's clearly stated belief that they are the essence of a republic is more likely a testament to the insidiousness of neoliberal rhetoric and the hegemonic

[188] MB, review of *John Adams,* Amazon, September 12, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2P5OSI2E89TTD/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00687PWQG.

[189] *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "republic (n.)," last updated December 2009, http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/163158?redirectedFrom=republic.

success of neoliberal ideology in the United States today, than it is a result of watching *John Adams.* What is of most interest to our analysis here is the direct connection MB draws between that neoliberal connotation of the word republic and their affective response to the way the miniseries depicts the characters, which suggests that the specific way historical actors are portrayed in *John Adams* facilitated a neoliberal reading of the Framers's intentions.

In addition to plotting and character motivations that resonate with contemporary neoliberal culture, viewers' affective relations with the characters in *John Adams* are further bolstered by the miniseries' visceral depiction of daily life. More so than the democracy porn texts discussed in other chapters, viewers of stories dramatizing real history evince a greater investment in the verisimilitude of the production design. In particular, many *John Adams* reviewers comment on the way the miniseries immerses its audience in the difficulty of living in colonial America. Meticulous attention to the period details of everyday colonial life found in both design and direction provides illuminating context for the process of creating a new democratic system for many viewers. As hairMetalGuy notes, "if you want to know what it felt like to live in a different time this movie transports there."[190] Also unlike responses to the texts examined in other chapters, political leanings and party affiliation do not come up as frequently in reviews of *John Adams.* The way reviewers express their ideas regarding both of these trends further supports the argument that neoliberal ideology circulates in *John Adams*—the former drawing attention to the colonists' rugged *individualism*, and the latter reflective of the bipartisan role neoliberalism has assumed in the United States since the Washington Consensus. Amazon user Nancleans, for example, states:

[190] hairMetalGuy, "An important series," review of *John Adams,* Amazon, June 20, 2008, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2TVLMFSN5TW3H/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00687PWQG.

> This is not a sugar coated look at the past. The men and women of the Revolution are depicted as real people. Though the series focuses on John Adams, the others involved in the Revolution are well represented. This is not just a story of the past. It is a road map for our future. It is impossible to watch this series about men and women of courage and conviction, and not be struck by the lack of such men and women in our government today.[191]

Nancleans's comments are exemplary of a common refrain in reviews of *John Adams* in which consumers refer to political events with charged language but without specifying the reasons fueling their agitation. On one level, these reviewers' assumption that readers would understand their rationale reflects a widespread disillusion with government that has been gaining momentum at least since Watergate. But on another, the use of unqualified vague language to dismiss the status quo in Washington (read: suggest that "government *is* the problem"), and the expectation that anonymous readers will agree with that sentiment, reveals just how widespread—and malleable—neoliberal ideology is in the United States today. That is, these reviewers surmise, in responding to a text that is explicitly about the minutiae of the democratic process, that other viewers had the same affective experience of deriding (at least our contemporary manifestation of) American government while watching.

Not all explicitly political responses to *John Adams* are so vague as to appear non-partisan, however; some are expressly conservative while still assuming agreement on the reader's part. This expectation among reviewers of *John Adams* comes in stark contrast to conservative responses to the fictional democracy porn texts discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, which overwhelmingly mark themselves as such either by expressing an "I'm conservative but still enjoyed this" or an "I'm conservative, so I did not enjoy this" sentiment. That reviewers of *John Adams* are not compelled to identify their partisanship speaks to the

[191] Nancleans, "Everyone should watch this series," review of *John Adams,* Amazon, August 5, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R3QKJ3RDAMYBG5/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00687PWQG.

power of nostalgia to construct false collectivities as well as neoliberalism's contemporary hegemony. The depoliticization of neoliberalism since its ascendance as the ruling ideology for both major political parties in the US can clearly be seen in another comment from hairMetalGuy's review:

> When I first watched it I thought it would be another "America is a bad country"/"the poor are always being taken advantage of" Hollywood movie that would make me angry. Instead I found myself amazed and inspired and a little confused as to how this got out of Hollywood without someone losing a job. I am so impressed that I am ordering copies for many of my friends and family.[192]

The less-than-subtle—and sympathetic—allusion to the time-honored conservative talking point that Hollywood is run by liberal elites in hairMetalGuy's review, and their surprise in not feeling alienated by the miniseries' political leanings, is noteworthy. It tells us both that hairMetalGuy identifies as conservative in some capacity, and that their reading of the politics expressed in *John Adams* is that they are proximate enough to their own views to be not only inoffensive, but to receive the endorsement of being disseminated to throughout their personal network. Of course, Tom Hanks, whose creative vision is a driving force behind *John Adams* as discussed above, sits atop the pyramid of "Hollywood liberal elites," as evidenced by both the projects he has chosen (several of which are discussed in this dissertation), and his long history of support for liberal causes, financially and otherwise. As argued above, Hanks's politics are bound up with the way *John Adams* is constructed as a miniseries, at least with relation to neoliberal values; an apparently conservative viewer's enthusiasm for the show thus reifies the disassociation between neoliberal ideology and partisanship.

[192] hairMetalGuy, "An important series."

As seen in the excerpt from Nancleans's review, above, the erasure of partisanship viewers exhibit in responses to *John Adams* extends beyond their affective engagements with the way US democracy is depicted diegetically; viewers also demonstrate a serious investment in using the miniseries as a point of comparison to what they view as the many failures of US democracy today. Apparently facilitated by the nostalgic treatment *John Adams* gives to the American colonial past, many consumers come away from their viewing experience with the feeling that the way things were done in the revolutionary period are the way government *should* operate, and the current manifestation of US democracy is a far cry from that ideal. To this effect, Amazon user M. Clemmensen notes, "Hooper's intimate direction easily draws the viewer into the respective scenes and helps the audience understand that the early days of American history were, in many ways, not much different than the stormy political climate in which we currently live in the present day; except that our founding fathers cared deeply about democracy and our current politicians do not."[193] Disappointment with US democracy is not exclusively directed at politicians, however. Take Ronald M. Riggs, for example, who says, "I suspect many of these giants would tremble to see how egocentric and dependent on government many of our citizens have become."[194] Like MB's review above, Riggs's testimony demonstrates the power of neoliberal rhetoric to redefine basic concepts in the service of its goals. While there is a denotative link between egocentrism and reliance on government, it is not a particularly obvious one, and indeed, neither behavior is necessarily tremble-inducing. In connecting the two and

[193] M. Clemmensen, "John Adams- An Excellent and Informative Series," review of *John Adams,* Amazon.com, April 21, 2012, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R360SLIVJ31BBB/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00687PWQG.

[194] Ronald M. Riggs, review of *John Adams,* Amazon.com, August 8, 2015, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R9Y5KQWD8LO8M/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00687PWQG.

imbuing them with negative connotations, Riggs reveals an antagonism towards government characteristic of neoliberal subjectivity. What is most curious in Riggs's usage of these terms, though, the suggestion that neoliberal ideology has severed any relationship between egocentrism and individualism, the latter of which is heralded as the ultimate freedom in the neoliberal worldview. It is also worth noting here that Riggs presents the failures of contemporary citizens in contrast to the "giants" portrayed in *John Adams,* which suggests uncritical consent to the great man theory of history.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the ways *John Adams* triggers viewers to reflect on their disappointment in the failures of contemporary US democracy, the idea that "every citizen should see this" is a common refrain among its Amazon reviewers. This sentiment constitutes the most common pattern in viewer responses to the full spectrum of democracy porn texts, though the meanings and values associated with it in relation to each of the narratives discussed in this dissertation vary. With regard to democracy porn's historical texts, such as *John Adams,* it is here that we can truly begin to see restorative nostalgia at work. For, in positioning the vision of democracy depicted in *John Adams* as a model that all Americans should be exposed to, the miniseries works toward the "total restoration of extinct creatures" that Boym describes. In these reviews, the authors tend to lionize the creatures in question—America's Founding Fathers—and also mark them as Different from the contemporary citizenry, with the implication that exposure to the lives of Great Men like Adams would remind the today's entitled citizenry that they should be grateful for the *freedoms* those men fought for them to have. Amazon user R. Norton succinctly expresses this attitude: "I suggest that US citizens should see this show in order to appreciate the wonderful opportunity we have in this country as a result of these men who are

now gone."[195] And in a review titled "The John Adams mini-series should be required viewing for every citizen of this country," David Turner says, "The John Adams mini-series explains the process that our founding fathers utilized to achieve [our unique] freedoms - something that we shouldn't take for granted. This mini-series seems to be very accurate and helps me appreciate the sacrifices that were made."[196] Built into the call for appreciation both of these authors make is a coded rebuke to any expression of dissatisfaction with the state of citizenship in the United States; it is an expression of nostalgia for a time when American citizenship was heralded as the pinnacle of egalitarianism. In other words, nostalgia for a time before those excluded from all the rights and privileges associated with that citizenship had been able to voice their grievances, complicating the perfection previously attributed to US constitutional democracy.

The nostalgia *John Adams* seems to tap into for viewers, then, is not exactly for colonial period it depicts—remember that the harsh realities of day-to-day colonial life left an impression on many viewers—but for a time when the originary constitutional assurance that "all men are created equal" was uncritically accepted as the truth of American citizenship. The lack of appreciation for the founding fathers' work that Norton and Turner attribute to contemporary US citizens, and the subtextual condemnation contained therein, thus resonates with Boym's account of restorative nostalgia. She argues that, "what drives restorative nostalgia is not the sentiment of distance and longing but rather the anxiety about those who draw attention to historical incongruities between past and present and thus question the wholeness and continuity of the

[195] R. Norton, review of *John Adams,* Amazon.com, September 4, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2ED49KG8KXFX1/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B001684L0A.

[196] David Turner, review of *John Adams,* Amazon.com, December 29, 2014, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2EWEQLR5Z060I/ref=cm_cr_othr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B001684L0A.

restored tradition.[197]" In bringing the extinct creatures that the founding fathers so vividly back to life, and with minimal acknowledgement of the flaws and exclusions that have been built into American citizenship from the start, *John Adams* thus functions as a nostalgic safe space for viewers wishing to reject the dissent by which progress is made. The miniseries thereby reifies the national myth that the citizenship in the United States affords the same benefits to *all* citizens, which has been eroded in recent decades by critiques from groups whose everyday realities expose the fiction in that idea. And further, in bridging the time between the represented past and the contextual present, as *John Adams* does through the alterations it makes to the historical record in an effort to foster character identification, the series erases incongruities between colonial American and contemporary neoliberal subjectivities.

Ultimately, insights drawn from Hanks's and Ellis's perspectives on adapting historical events for the screen, considered alongside viewers's responses to *John Adams* serve to illustrate one way neoliberal subjectivity is reproduced and maintained as a hegemonic force in contemporary American culture—through the production and consumption of texts that harness the power of the national mythos in part to make normal the erosion of possibilities that democracy provides for citizens to redress their grievances. From this angle, democracy porn can be seen as what Louis Althusser would describe as an ideological state apparatus, serving to interpellate viewers into the uniquely American neoliberal subjectivity that casts all citizens as *homo œconomicus,* or entrepreneurs of the self.[198] The affective engagements viewers evince in their responses to *John Adams* do not, for the most part, clearly indicate whether or how they will mobilize those affects in the service of civic engagement in the real world. What they do

[197] Boym, 44-45.

[198] Foucault, 225-227.

suggest, however, is that after identifying with figures into whom an anachronistic neoliberal ideology has been written, viewers have been compelled to express sentiments demonstrative of their own neoliberal subjectivities. Yet if we are to follow Foucault's thinking on the subject of *homo œconomicus,* it is reasonable to surmise that those viewers who uncritically exhibit an entrepreneurial subjectivity would be likely to make decisions relating to citizenship based on the extent to which the results "will produce something that will be his own satisfaction."[199] In other words, as user MB's review clearly states above, neoliberal subjects strive to maintain a government in which individual rights are valued above all else. When applied beyond the purview of policies that directly impact individuals's private lives (at least on the surface), such logic facilitates the proliferation of rights for corporations (themselves viewed as people since the 2010 Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission Supreme Court decision) in the form of deregulatory policies, and increased opportunities in the form of government contracts as social services are increasingly privatized.

Lincoln

As of the time of writing, the Lindy West quotation—drawn from her review of the Steven Spielberg-directed *Lincoln*—that serves as the epigraph to the introduction of this dissertation contains the only published example of the term "democracy porn" used in roughly the same way that I theorize it here. As such, *Lincoln* has held a prominent position throughout my thinking on this project, constituting something like the apex of democracy porn in my mind. In many ways, the film earns its place as the consummate example of the discourse at both the level of form and in viewers' engagements with it. Yet, in analyzing so many other media texts throughout the writing of this dissertation, it has become clear that other examples are more

[199] Ibid., 226.

illustrative of the ways in which the formal qualities of democracy porn lend themselves to the imposition of neoliberal subjectivity, diegetically speaking. Media texts like *Swing Vote, Scandal,* and *John Adams* have proven much more useful conduits through which to explore those aspects of my argument. However, in all the research and resulting structural permutations that have gone into the writing of this dissertation, no title has unseated *Lincoln* as the preeminent example of how democracy porn operates as a discourse that seeps beyond the media texts in which it lives. More specifically, *Lincoln*'s marketing outside of theatrical and home video distribution harnesses a logic that is typical in responses to democracy porn and distills it into a corporate strategy. Targeted to teachers and lifelong learners, this strategy works to frame *Lincoln* as an educational resource that can serve as a hub around which to teach the history of the American Civil War. Replete with corporate branding, this project signals a collision of the neoliberalization of education and, somewhat curiously, the contemporary Hollywood process described by Henry Jenkins as transmedia storytelling. The synthesis produced by such a collision has significant implications for impacting viewers' (especially those within in educational setting) understandings of their own citizenship; furthermore, it illuminates one way democracy porn is symptomatic of the ever-shrinking horizon of democratic potentiality under neoliberalism.

The brief description of *Lincoln* that West includes in her review of the film provides an incredibly succinct summary of its plotting; she calls it "a wonky political procedural about the mad scramble to pass the 13th amendment."[200] Indeed, the bulk of the story told by the film revolves around the political maneuvering President Lincoln led in Washington, DC as part of his efforts to abolish slavery through a constitutional amendment, all set against a backdrop of

[200] West, "Democracy Porn."

the ongoing Civil War and Lincoln's familial relationships. As the title suggests, the film is a biopic, although the entire diegesis spans a mere four months—the last of Lincoln's life, ending with his death on April 15, 1865. Penned by playwright Tony Kushner, the script is technically an adaptation of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln,* to which Spielberg had purchased the film rights in 2001, four years before it was published.[201] Goodwin's book covers the entirety of Lincoln's presidency, from 1861-1865, but Kushner's choice to focus on an even shorter period in a life containing a multitude of accomplishments is exemplary of a recent trend in the narrative structure of biographical film, which has proven a welcome refresher to a frequently snoozy genre, and also a way to bring the biopic into democracy porn's terrain. For rather than covering accomplishments like bullet points in the long life of a Great Man, focusing in on one particularly hard-fought political battle allows Kushner's script to dig into the wheeling and dealing that is the lynchpin in Lincoln's political genius—that is to say, into the minutiae of the democratic process. And Kushner is rivaled only by Aaron Sorkin in the level of meticulousness with which he approaches the process of doing democracy; the script includes extended discussions of whether or not Lincoln should spend his political capital on attempting to pass the amendment, very detailed considerations of how to form alliances between the conservative and radical abolitionist factions of the Republican party, philosophical mediations on the limitations of presidential war powers, fiery debates on the floor of the US House of Representatives, and political operatives hired to wrangle House votes to ensure the amendment's passage.

For his part, director Steven Spielberg brings the "schmaltz" that West mentions in her review, which is tantamount to saying that he shrouds the story in nostalgia. Schmaltz, like

[201] Michael Fleming and Michael Fleming, "Lincoln Logs in at DreamWorks," *Variety* (blog), January 12, 2005, https://variety.com/2005/film/features/lincoln-logs-in-at-dreamworks-1117916168/.

nostalgia, is characterized by excessive sentimentality, a descriptor that could also easily be applied to Spielberg's signature, one might even say auteurist, style. Part of the reason nostalgia has proliferated since the late 20th century, Boym and others have argued, is as a response to the stresses of modern life; it is a defense mechanism that longingly looks to an imagined simpler time for solace during a contemporary crisis. It follows, then, that the nostalgic mode entails minimizing or erasing entirely the more troubling aspects of the past in order to serve its ameliorative function. As I discuss throughout this chapter, democracy porn's uncritical relationship to both neoliberalism's incursions on democracy and the heightened material inequalities resulting from that infiltration, make a nostalgic imagining of the past an ideal setting to depict a romanticized American democracy enacting its declaration that "All men [sic] are created equal." Under Spielberg's direction, *Lincoln* engages with the originary assurance of a democratic society living up to its discursive ideal as put forth in the spirit (and sometimes, when amended, even the letter) of our country's founding documents. Paradoxically given that *Lincoln*'s narrative is driven by the abolition of slavery, its horrors are conspicuously absent—nostalgia at work. Operating in the nostalgic mode, Spielberg creates a sanitized, Disney-fied (fitting, given the film's DreamWorks production credentials) vision of 19th century America in which good triumphs over evil through the efforts of a mythically Great Man.

While *Lincoln* does in many ways evince the formal qualities that constitute democracy porn within the film itself, what makes it such a remarkable text is the way it has been positioned as part of a larger transmedia narrative and explicitly branded as an educational tool. As defined by Henry Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes it own unique

contribution to the unfolding of the story."[202] Applying Jenkins's concept to *Lincoln* requires a bit of adaptation, but is ultimately a useful hermeneutic for viewing the film within its broader neoliberal context. The biggest hiccup in reading *Lincoln* as transmedia is that it is not entirely a work of fiction. Yet, while it is based on actual historical events, their temporal distance and transmutation into a feature film necessitate a degree of fictionalization (as, indeed, does any nonfiction narrative). That said, the fact that the film is about a person who did actually exist and was an integral part of many much larger historical narratives makes it a perfect property (to use industry parlance) through which to leverage the synergistic potential of a transmedia storytelling strategy. *Lincoln'*s transmedia narrative is primarily constructed through educational tools created by DreamWorks for distribution to educators. These materials flesh out larger stories of both the end of slavery in the United States and the Lincoln presidency, and in so doing engage in precisely the kind of multi-channel world-building that Jenkins cites as a major tenet of transmedia. Another important component of transmedia storytelling, for Jenkins, is the way it reflects the economics of media consolidation, in that "a media conglomerate has an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible."[203] The transmedia strategy around *Lincoln* certainly reflects that assertion and even goes beyond the usual platforms Jenkins discusses by infiltrating the educational system, which I will discuss in greater detail below.

Before we can delve deeper into *Lincoln*'s afterlife in viewers' minds and as an educational commodity, it will be useful to briefly sketch its contours as democracy porn at the

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[202] Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia 202: Further Reflections," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog), July 31, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

[203] Henry Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan* (blog), March 21, 2007, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html?rq=transmedia.

formal level. As with all of the other texts I consider in this dissertation, *Lincoln* centers on a meticulous, spectacular representation of the democratic process, mobilizing it in the service of a story that provides intense narrative and visual pleasures. And as with other examples of democracy porn that narrativize real historical events, *Lincoln* approaches its protagonist as a Great Man, and further valorizes him by filtering the story through nostalgia's gauzy, pacifying lens. The film evinces the formal qualities that define democracy porn more broadly as well. Most significantly, the main thrust of the narrative is an extremely meticulous retelling of the *process* by which President Lincoln and his political operatives work to get a constitutional amendment abolishing slavery passed through the US House of Representatives during the final days of the Civil War. In addition to depicting this process as it unfolds through democratic procedure, *Lincoln* also imagines the extensive political maneuvering and many backroom deals necessary for facilitating the bill's successful passage, epitomizing both the meticulous focus on process and illumination of democracy's inner workings that is characteristic of democracy porn. The film is so committed to this aspect of the narrative that the scene dramatizing the House vote on the amendment consumes over 16 minutes of screen time. When at the conclusion of this epic sequence (spoiler alert!) it has become clear that the Amendment has passed, the Speaker of the House requests to register his own vote; a pro-slavery Congressman objects, and the Speaker responds by noting that procedure allows him to vote if he so chooses. The objector retorts that it is "highly unusual," to which the Speaker responds, "This isn't usual, Mr. Pendleton. This is history."[204] Beyond making the stakes of the situation abundantly clear in this particular example, this kind of attention to procedural detail, which occurs throughout *Lincoln,* cements the film's status as democracy porn.

[204] *Lincoln,* directed by Steven Spielberg, written by Tony Kushner (Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2013), Netflix.com.

Lincoln further typifies democracy porn in the way its subplots detailing the Lincoln family's personal lives—Mary Todd's mental health, Robert's desire to fight in the Civil War, Tad's grief over the death of his brother William, Abraham's role as a husband and father—and several other key players are interwoven with the larger narrative following the legislative ground game to pass the 13th amendment. As I will argue further below in considering responses to the film, this combination lends itself to affects that circulate subterraneously, moving freely between the way viewers feel about the characters and the way they feel about the political process, thus conflating affective relations to interpersonal relationships with those linked to citizenship. This process in Lincoln is exemplary of the unique way in which democracy porn more broadly seems to foster affective engagements with character-driven plots alongside wonkish stories detailing the minutiae of the democratic process; it also works to bring the mythical figures it represents down to earth for viewers, to populate the corridors of power with real human beings who have feelings.

While for the most part, the threads in *Lincoln*'s narrative that serve to alternately humanize and mythologize the President and his cohorts are woven together over time throughout the film, one scene neatly encapsulates how democracy porn's two main narrative modes—depicting meticulous, spectacularized democratic processes and humanizing the individuals who run those processes—intersect. It is also perhaps where those subterraneous affects may surface as part of the film's cathartic climax. Immediately following the House's historic vote passing the 13th amendment, Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones)—a Republican representative from Pennsylvania and the most prominent abolitionist of his time—borrows the official copy of the bill from Congress and walks it home amidst celebrations in the streets of Washington, DC. Stevens has been an important, if fringe, figure in the film thus far, offering

fiery rhetoric, and some comic relief while advocating for slavery's abolition in Congress and assisting the President in his politicking at key moments of the operation. When he arrives at home, he is greeted by who we assume is his housekeeper (S. Epatha Merkerson), an African American woman who takes his hat and coat. He then hands her the bill as a gift, calling it "the greatest measure of the 19th century" as she stares at it in awe. After a cut, we see Stevens putting his wig on its stand and climbing into bed. The camera follows him there, and reveals the housekeeper in bed next to him, still staring at the bill in awe. The housekeeper, it turns out, is Lydia Hamilton Smith, with whom Stevens is rumored to have had a 20-year relationship, though its exact nature is unclear.[205] Once in bed, they have the following exchange:

> THADDEUS: I wish you could have been present.
> LYDIA: I wish I'd been.
> THADDEUS: It was a spectacle.
> LYDIA: You can't bring your housekeeper to the house. I won't give them gossip. This is enough. This is…it's more than enough for now. [They kiss.][206]

The specific language of this brief interaction and the choice to depict Stevens and Smith's relationship as romantic despite inconclusive supporting historical evidence serves several dramatic functions: First, it fosters stronger affective ties to Stevens, whose politics have been presented as progressive but comes off as more than a little gruff. Second, in placing the reveal after the successful vote, the scene humanizes the amendment itself through the figure of Smith, one of a very small handful of African American characters in a film that is more than incidentally about slavery. And third, by depicting Smith's gratitude for Stevens's efforts to pass the amendment, it excuses the film for having included so few African American perspectives.

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[205] Thomas Frederick Woodley, *Thaddeus Stevens* (Harrisburgh, Pa: The Telegraph Press, 1934), 149.

[206] *Lincoln.*

Moreover, the fact that this scene is Smith's only appearance in the film is also demonstrative of the way *Lincoln*'s Great Man perspective obscures the significant contributions African Americans made to the abolitionist movement, instead entirely attributing the amendment's success to the prowess Great Men like Stevens and Lincoln possess in navigating the democratic system.

In addition to the features that define democracy porn as a whole, *Lincoln* also exhibits the narrative tropes that characterize the discourse's historical texts, including presenting Abraham Lincoln as a Great Man. Indeed, the facts of Lincoln's biography (and their mythologies) are ideally suited to illustrate Carlyle's original contention that Great Men innately possess the qualities necessary to change the course of history, and the film makes sustained use of those facts (and their mythologies) by frequently emphasizing his inherent greatness. For example, in a conversation with a young engineer, Lincoln casually brings up Euclid and mentions practically in the same breath that he never had much schooling. The educated young man, however, confesses that, though he did go to school, he does not remember much from those days. A more substantive example of Lincoln-as-Great Man comes later in the film when it becomes clear that, though the lobbyists hired by Lincoln's chief of staff work diligently, they are not up to the task of securing all of the votes necessary to get 13th amendment passed—Lincoln himself is the only one who can get the job done. And indeed he does, by using his natural negotiation skills to make personal appeals to the congressmen who still intend to vote no. Lincoln's backroom dealings are then emphasized as integral to the amendment's success when it later passes by a margin of two votes, and Lincoln had made personal appeals to three congressmen. And when Stevens hands Smith the bill as a gift in the scene described above, he

says it was "passed by corruption, aided and abetted by the purest man in America."[207] Not even knowingly participating in corruption can take away Lincoln's greatness! Or rather, from the Great Man perspective, Lincoln's inherent greatness justifies or at the very least excuses a bit of corruption for the greater good.

As is often the case in Spielberg's oeuvre, *Lincoln* also does considerable work toward facilitating a nostalgic experience, so much so that it at one point depicts the exact image Boym uses to illustrate how nostalgia operates through film. She notes, "A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images—of home and abroad, of past and present, of dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface."[208] One of the film's final shots enacts Boym's metaphor with an almost eery precision, when Lincoln posthumously materializes in the flickering flame beside his deathbed to give one last, inspirational speech. The double exposure seems to say: Lincoln may be gone, but his spirit lives on. But by Boym's logic, the suggestion that we can hold on to that spirit and mold the present in its image is the essence of nostalgia's false promise. The film seems to heed Boym's cautioning, though, and instead of trying to bring Lincoln's spirit into the present, it suggests that we as a nation return to it as it was in his time. The superimposition thus soon gives way to Lincoln at his oratorial best, surrounded by a riveted crowd, as he makes an appeal to the nation to adhere to Christian values in order to heal the nation. This is restorative nostalgia par excellence.

A closer textual reading of *Lincoln* could illuminate some of the subtle ways neoliberalism's imprint can be found in its pre-neoliberal narrative. Though, I will admit that

[207] *Lincoln.*

[208] Boym, xiii-xiv.

would be a difficult task given screenwriter Tony Kushner's thoughtful script and his vocal transparency about his own political investments, which are certainly opposed to neoliberalist principles. A more useful way to demonstrate how *Lincoln* has been harnessed in the service of neoliberal values and principles is to look at a remarkable example of the film's life after its theatrical and awards season runs.

As with democracy porn writ large, I argue that the formal features of *Lincoln* as described above facilitate a particular mode of viewing engagement that offers satisfaction—pleasure, positive affects—in the form of apparent knowledge gained about the inner workings of American democracy. When considered in relation to the explicitly political subject matter, such affective engagement can work to inform viewers' conceptions of their own citizenship, as evinced in reviews posted to social networks and ecommerce sites such as Amazon. Throughout this dissertation, I have drawn on concepts from recent work in affect theory that Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar describe as "invested in how concepts like affect, emotion, and feelings aid in comprehending subject-formation and political oppositionality for an age when neoliberal capital has reduced possibilities for collective political praxis,"[209] The hope in interrogating affective engagements with democracy porn is to understand the always already political relationships between and among people, things, and ideas, with a specific focus on viewers' understandings of democratic citizenship. To return to West's review of *Lincoln*: her second sentence—"I fucking loved it"—suggests that her viewing experience was not a middling one. Her word choice is instructive here: she does not just love *Lincoln,* she "fucking loves" it. Like the "porn" of democracy porn in West's previous sentence, "fucking" is not used literally, but rather as an adjectival intensification of West's declaration of love for *Lincoln.* Its literal meaning, however,

[209] Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar, "Affect," *Social Text* 100 (Fall 2009), 37.

also resonates in such close proximity to the word porn, imbuing West's love with a sexualized and aggressive tone that suggests a more complex interaction with the film than explicitly articulated in the words themselves. Taken together, West's response to *Lincoln* indicates that something about its status not as a Spielberg film, or a film starring Daniel Day-Lewis, or even a film about Abraham Lincoln, but *as democracy porn* created an excess of affective engagement for the author. Indeed, West acknowledges throughout the piece—which was posted on November 9, 2012, days after Barack Obama was elected to his second term as President—that the intensity of her feelings about *Lincoln* stem in part from her "post-election glow." She says:

> It's impossible to resist the urge to draw comparisons between Lincoln and Barack Obama—however tenuous those comparisons might be. But both, in their respective times, were/are wildly popular and violently hated by racists. And it's pleasant…to think that even a flawed president can accomplish some magnificent shit. At the end of a starry-eyed election week, I'll take it.[210]

This slippage between Lincoln and Obama comes up frequently in the discourse surrounding *Lincoln,* but West's comments are of particular interest here as she directly links her viewing of a film set in 1865 to a shift in her views on the current president in 2012. In other words, West acknowledges that viewing *Lincoln* has impacted her own relationship to democratic citizenship.

That the shift in West's views about President Obama seem to be in his favor—all mentions of contemporary politics in this post and others by West locate her among liberals who supported Obama, but were increasingly disappointed by him over time—is significant, and illustrative of the way nostalgia functions in democracy porn, especially when it is set in the historical past. One of the many pithy descriptions of nostalgia Boym provides, characterizes it as "a sentiment of loss and displacement, but…also a romance with one's own fantasy."[211] For

[210] West, "Democracy Porn."

[211] Boym, 11.

West, that fantasy could be her ideal vision of an Obama presidency, or an ideal vision of a Lincoln presidency, or, most likely, some conflation of the two.

Indeed, as illustrated by other viewers' responses to the film, West was not alone in connecting *Lincoln*'s depiction of its subject with Obama's performance as President. Amazon user Dr. Laurence Raw, for example, notes: "Interestingly, I think that its contemporary message is an important one, as Lincoln uses his political skills to overcome resistance to his amendment and eventually wins the vote. Would that Barack Obama could do the same in implementing his government policies in his second term of office. Perhaps he should follow Lincoln's example."[212] JTP expresses a similar sentiment, "How interesting in a time when there is no political will to change the status quo - we idolize, and idealize, a president who was all about change and taking a stand to force it. Maybe it is human nature to try to avoid change, and maybe Lincoln was as demonized then as President Obama is now. What I liked about this movie was the portrayal of what "democracy" really is…"[213] But JTP's comments also include another major theme in users' reviews of the film, and it is also among the most prominent sentiments expressed by democracy porn's viewers across the board: the admission that the access and insight these texts provide regarding the more opaque aspects of democratic governance is a major source of pleasure. And JTP is not alone; hollywoodoutsider similarly compliments *Lincoln*'s processual threads: "It's no mean feat to make a gripping movie about democracy's legislative process but Spielberg has managed to do it. Gripping and relevant,

[212] Dr. Laurence Raw, "Beautiful Film with a Sharp Contemporary Resonance," review of *Lincoln,* Amazon, February 10, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/RINKTGSEM4TRR/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00BOLE7X0

[213] JTP, "The fascination with Lincoln continues…" review of *Lincoln,* Amazon, June 23, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R1K6UEEWDW3W6J/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00BOLE7X0.

Lincoln shows the mess of a people compromising in pursuit of their ambitions and their most sacred ideals."[214] Perhaps more significant in hollywoodoutsider's comments, though, is how they directly connect *Lincoln*'s depiction of the legislative process with an affirmative view of the mythology of the American democratic process ("their most sacred ideals").

It is thus clear that *Lincoln*'s nostalgic gaze impelled viewers to reflect on their own place within contemporary American democracy, often through making connections between the presidencies of Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama. While those connections alone suggest the projection of a certain amount of neoliberal subjectivity onto Lincoln from the vantage point of the present, simply viewing the film on its own does not expose viewers to the full extent of *Lincoln*'s relationships to neoliberalism. As briefly discussed at the beginning of my analysis of *Lincoln*, the primary way this film reflects its neoliberal context of production is through a marketing strategy that, using the industry practice of transmedia storytelling, positions it as an educational tool. In keeping with the logic of transmedia narratives, this project is enacted on across several platforms. The strategy is centered on the "Lincoln Learning Hub," an online portal containing a variety of resources for middle and high school educators, created by Disney Education in partnership with DreamWorks (a Disney subsidiary, and the film's primary financial imprint) and Participant Media, a production company that brands itself as creating entertainment that inspires and compels social change.[215] Among the interactive materials on the hub are: a timeline titled "The Long Path to End Slavery and Restore the Union," a game called "What Would Lincoln Do?" that asks students to speculate as to how Lincoln would have acted

[214] hollywoodoutsider, "One of Spielberg's Best," review of *Lincoln,* Amazon, April 9, 2013, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R23B3UJVVWP1LC/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B00BOLE7X0.

[215] "About Us," Participant Media, November 29, 2013, https://www.participantmedia.com/about-us.

in situations faced by other presidents, and two separate activities designed to familiarize students with Lincoln's "Team of Rivals," (recall that is the title of the Doris Kearns Goodwin book on which the film is based) and the members of the House of Representatives during the time the film took place.

A 28-page "Educator's Guide" is available as a PDF download from the portal as well. Heavily branded throughout with images from the film and logos from the corporate producing partners, the guide opens with:

> Dear Educator,
>
> Whether he was standing up to his adversaries or to members of his own political party, our 16th president was not afraid to make difficult choices. His story, documented in the new movie *Lincoln* (in select cities November 9th, everywhere November 16th) is one of leadership, strength and courage in the face of opposition. Indeed, without Abraham Lincoln, the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery may not have come to pass.[216]

As if including the film's release date in the second sentence was not a clear enough signal that these materials are intended to tap into a new generation of consumers as much as they are meant to educate, the next paragraph drives the point home. After the subheading, "Educational resources just for you!", the guide states, "We've worked with historians and social studies curriculum experts to create original classroom materials that connect you and your students to the movie Lincoln and its historical relevance."[217]

In addition to the Lincoln Learning Hub, multiple books are billed as companions to the film, one released by each of the corporate partners involved in creating the Learning Hub. The Disney-created book is titled Lincoln, *A Steven Spielberg Film: A Cinematic and Historical*

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[216] *Lincoln* Educator's Guide, DreamWorks Distribution, 2012, 1, http://dep.disney.go.com/lincoln/Educators_Guide_Lincoln.pdf.

[217] Ibid.

Companion, and is described in its marketing copy as "presenting a popular historical narrative that focuses on the main storyline depicted in the film. It will also build on what is covered in the film, including more extensive information about the issues and events of the time while describing important related topics that could not be accommodated or fully explored in the script."[218] The other, released by Participant Media, explicitly aims to bridge the temporal gap between Lincoln's time and the present: "Timed to complement the new motion picture Lincoln, directed by Steven Spielberg, *Lincoln: A President for the Ages* introduces a new Lincoln grappling with some of history's greatest challenges. Would Lincoln have dropped the bomb on Hiroshima? How would he conduct the War on Terror? Would he favor women's suffrage or gay rights? Would today's Lincoln be a star on Facebook and Twitter? Would he embrace the religious right—or denounce it?"[219]

Though presented essentially as public services provided for free by benevolent corporations seeking to educate and inspire as well as broaden and complicate the narrative told by the film, the transmedia materials created in association with *Lincoln* are ultimately tantamount to marketing that works to lengthen *Lincoln*'s long tail. As such, they reflect and reify neoliberal ideology in two key ways: first, corporate conglomeration that allows for such extensive reach is the product of neoliberal policies that continuously work to expand corporate freedoms. Second, and perhaps more significantly, they reflect the neoliberalization of public

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[218] David Rubel et al., Lincoln*, A Steven Spielberg Film: A Cinematic and Historical Companion*, (New York: Disney, 2013), https://www.amazon.com/Lincoln-Steven-Spielberg-Film-Historical/dp/1423181999/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1530742397&sr=8-2&keywords=lincoln+the+movie+book.

[219] Participant Media, *Lincoln: A President for the Ages*, ed. Karl Weber, Media Tie In edition (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012), https://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1610392639/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1610392639&linkCode=as2&tag=participroduc-20.

education in the United States, which has in part been defined by the kind of philanthrocapitalism of which the Lincoln Learning Hub is an example.

The long tail educational marketing strategy associated with *Lincoln* was not exclusively targeted at educators. So I want to close with a brief discussion of "Life and Times of Abraham Lincoln," an exhibition held at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in 2013. which told the story of Abraham Lincoln's legislative life while billing itself as a space "where Hollywood meets history."[220] The exhibit featured original artifacts gathered from collectors around the country displayed alongside sets and costumes from the film *Lincoln.* Such juxtaposition raises myriad questions about democracy porn, not least of which concerning the relationships between the film, the exhibit, and Ronald Reagan's significant role in the proliferation of neoliberal policies.

Upon arriving at the Reagan Library, visitors had to walk through all of the extensive galleries on permanent display in order to access the Lincoln exhibit. The Reagan Library is quite a spectacle of democracy porn and worthy of discussion itself, but, like *Hamilton,* falls outside the scope of this dissertation. After having traversed the Library's treasure trove of propagandistic bombast, visitors arrived at the Lincoln exhibit, which featured a slew of rare artifacts, especially for those on the West coast who do not make it to Illinois or Washington, DC with any regularity. One of Lincoln's own stovepipe hats was there, along with an original signed copy of the Emancipation Proclamation…and the actual pillow on which Lincoln died at a boarding house near Ford's Theater. The pillow was displayed in front of a recreation of the room Lincoln died in, which appears in *Lincoln,* though the display was not a set from the film.

[220] Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute, "Twenty-Five Renowned Lincoln Collectors and DreamWorks Studios Join Reagan Library for Major Abraham Lincoln Exhibit," press release, May 20, 2013, https://www.reaganfoundation.org/media/15151/lincoln_lead_release_5-1-13.pdf.

These rare and rarely seen artifacts were displayed alongside sets and costumes from the film, however, including recreations of Mary Todd's dressing room and Lincoln's office. Video monitors distributed throughout the exhibit played the film on loop, and John Williams' score was piped in, too. Though the The final room in the exhibit, which literally divided Abraham Lincoln's life into named and numbered chapters, marked by wall text, was a testament to the myriad films that have paid tribute to Lincoln's legacy. And the last images visitors saw upon leaving were the *Lincoln* poster displayed next to one from *Saving Lincoln,* a 2013 film that tells the story of Lincoln and his US Marshal bodyguard.

On one hand, the slippage between fact and fiction that pervades the transmedia storytelling of the long tail marketing strategy associated with *Lincoln* can be seen as a tangible way for viewers to translate their affective engagements with the film into civic action. On the other hand, it signals an ever-shrinking horizon of potential for critical engagements with history outside of the predetermined narratives written by corporate entities in pursuit of profit under the neoliberal educational model. What would Lincoln do in the face of such a quandary?

Charlie Wilson's War

Like *John Adams* and *Lincoln*, *Charlie Wilson's War* is a story about actual historical events that adopts the form of democracy porn and uses it to construct a Great Man out of a sometimes troubling political figure. Though Charlie Wilson takes place in much more recent times than the other two texts considered in depth in this chapter—the 1980s and 90s—the film also features heavy doses of nostalgia, this time harnessed in the service of crafting an overwhelmingly uncritical narrative about a major touchstone in the proliferation of US neoliberal policies around the world—Operation Cyclone. The program was spearheaded by Democratic Congressperson Charlie Wilson of Texas (Tom Hanks) with the help of CIA

operative Gust Avrakotos (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and worked to arm and otherwise support the Mujahideen during the Soviet-Afghan war. *Charlie Wilson's War* is unique among historical examples of democracy porn in that it addresses a relatively recent set of events; fictional democracy porn narratives are much more likely to take place in the late 20th century. Released in 2007, the film reflects way neoliberal ideology is often used to bolster the long history of US interventionist foreign policy. Though the events on which the film is based took place within the living memory of the adult population that makes up its target audience, *Charlie Wilson's War* nonetheless presents its story using the same narrative tropes of other historical examples of democracy porn.

Penned, like so many of democracy porn's key texts, by Aaron Sorkin, *Charlie Wilson's War* presents its protagonist as a Great Man, but with a distinctively Sorkinian spin. The film opens in 1980 with Wilson engaging in all manner of hedonism on a visit to Las Vegas, introducing him as quite the Congressional bad boy. Like so many men in the Sorkin oeuvre, Wilson is allowed to behave badly with few repercussions. His ribald behavior is approached with a "boys will be boys" attitude that is not afforded to the non-white and non-male characters in the film. In a narrative tactic Sorkin frequently employs in his work, democracy porn and otherwise, Charlie's womanizing is excused by what is later revealed as his legislative prowess. That is to say, his inherent capacity to become a Great Man. This technique allows for the narrative to be operating on several levels at once: first, the rehabilitation of Charlie's character; second, presenting a meticulous, fetishistic vision of the democratic process; and third, in the collision of those two aims, the making normal of a fully neoliberalized democratic system. Before Charlie proves himself to be worthy as a Great Man, though, the film evinces restorative nostalgia for a time when white men's power manifested in peak decadence, another theme in

Sorkin's work (and, one might argue, his life as well). In many ways, 1980 was a decadent denouement for white male hegemony, among the last moments when men could behave as badly as they wanted without being taken to task (or so we might have hoped). And yet, once reformed, Charlie waxes nostalgic about a time when white men had still more power, his childhood, presumably in the 1950s or 60s. He tells a story about a neighbor growing up who didn't like the neighborhood dogs messing with his flower beds, and fed Charlie's dog a bowl of dog food with a ground-up glass bottle in it, which killed the dog. Charlie's response was to burn down the neighbor's flower beds, "but that wasn't satisfying enough." He goes on:

> And then I remembered Mr. Hazard was an elected official—he was the head of the town council. His reelection every two years was a foregone conclusion. So come election day, I drove over to the black section of town—these people hadn't voted in any of these elections, so… I was only 13 but I had a farmer's license. I filled up the car with black voters and drove them to the polling place, then waited and drove them on home. But before they got out of the car to vote, I said, 'I don't mean to influence you, but I think you should know that Mr. Charles Hazard intentionally killed my dog. About 400 ballots were cast in that election, and I drove 96 of them to the polls. Hazard lost by 16 votes. And that's the day I fell in love with America.[221]

The way Charlie explicates his love of country here is exemplary of both the character's and the film's individualist logic. Which is to say, their neoliberal ideology. Charlie's love for America is premised not on the country's ongoing project to live up to the ideal of equality as represented by his efforts to drive African American voters to the polls, but on the way American democracy facilitated his personal vendetta—the voter enfranchisement was merely a by-product.

This emphasis on Charlie's own needs drives much of the narrative in *Charlie Wilson's War.* Even once invested in the project of funding the Mujahideen, he revels in the prestige his success provides for him among his fellow Representatives. Yet, while a film celebrating such an

[221] *Charlie Wilson's War,* directed by Mike Nichols, written by Aaron Sorkin (NBCUniversal, 2007), Amazon.

exemplar of neoliberal subjectivity would be enough to merit our consideration here, what is ultimately the deepest neoliberal imprint on the film is its treatment of the Mujahideen in relation to their Soviet enemies. Throughout the film and despite the fact that their struggle constitutes the film's inciting incident, the Mujahideen are never presented as fully formed characters. Indeed, they are barely presented as human, and appear infantile when attempting to use the weapons Charlie works to provide for them. Their Soviet enemies, on the other hand, whose inclusion is in no way necessary to the narrative, are presented as fully-formed characters with backstories despite less than a minute of screen time. For example, when a Soviet helicopter flies over Mujahideen territory, we hear a whole conversation between the pilots about problems one of them is having in his relationship, and then the helicopter is shot down. The scene's narrative function is to demonstrate how the Mujahideen's combat abilities are improving as Charlie procures them more and more weapons, yet the Soviets are the ones whose humanity is emphasized. Such a narrative priority evinces the US's long history of using populations of color as pawns in the service of the larger project of attempting to maintain its status as a global superpower. Indeed, such was the logic of supporting the Chilean coup d'état that put General Augusto Pinochet in power in 1973, which David Harvey marks as the start of neoliberalism. *Charlie Wilson's War* not only uncritically shores up the logic underpinning this brand of US foreign policy, it does so wrapped up in nostalgia for unchecked white patriarchy.

It is not insignificant that the three films and miniseries that makeup the case studies in this chapter were produced within five years of each other, and all after 2007. There are very few examples of democracy porn texts dramatizing actual historical events that predate the examples I have chosen to focus on here. There are myriad biographical films and miniseries about political figures throughout the history of the moving image, but not until *Bobby* (Esteves, 2006)

could any of them be described as democracy porn. Prior to that film, which itself is located on the fringes of the discourse due to its omnibus narrative structure that focuses on several characters only peripherally involved in political processes, depictions of US democratic history on film largely took the form . A clear explanation as to why democracy porn adapts to enfold stories about actual historical events has not emerged, but my speculative assessment is that it is an attempt to reinvent a perennially viable but stale genre in the image of *The West Wing* following that program's cancellation in 2005. Whatever the reason, democracy porn proliferates among films and miniseries (notably not a full television series) telling stories drawn from real historical events in the mid-2000's and early 2010's, and by most accounts produces a surplus of affect among viewers. In taking the form of democracy porn, such stories work to anachronistically align the historical figures on which they center with neoliberal ideology while also injecting that ideology into the myth of American history.

Conclusion:
Democracy Porn After Trump?

On November 8, 2016, everything changed. In an upset that shook the world, Donald Trump beat out Hilary Clinton in the Electoral College (Clinton won the popular vote by nearly three million votes, or about 2% of the total votes cast) to become the 45th President of the United States. The historic election and the unorthodox and often unpredictable activities of the resulting administration have and continue to rethread the very fabric of American life at practically every level—banning citizens of predominantly Muslim countries from entering the US, repealing environmental protections in the face of growing climate change-induced catastrophic weather events, and broadly fostering an atmosphere that enables violence against already disenfranchised groups cast as threats to the republic are just a few of the countless tangible ways the Trump administration has earned comparisons to authoritarian regimes in its first year alone. Making sense of Trump's emergence as a political force in the United States is well beyond the scope of this dissertation and will no doubt be the subject of ample scholarship for generations to come, but it is safe to say for our purposes here that his imprint on the political system in this country will work to reshape the meanings and values associated with democracy porn as they circulate in American culture.

Indeed, while at the time of writing it remains to be seen how this new American epoch will impact the production of democracy porn moving forward, it is clear that the Trump era has already begun to influence viewers' relationships to extant examples such as those discussed in this dissertation. In the weeks around the November 2016 election and following inauguration in January 2017, Google Trends recorded unprecedented spikes in the search terms "west wing

netflix," and *Vice* reported on similar spikes in illegal uploads of full *West Wing* episodes to YouTube.[222] The resurgence of interest in *The West Wing* had not faded as of a year and a half into the Trump Presidency, as reported by the *Washington Post* in July 2018. Under the headline "'It's the president we all want': The melancholy world of Liberals watching 'The West Wing' in 2018," reporter Zachary Pincus-Roth further investigates the relationship viewers have with the show in the current political climate by interviewing fans attending a live taping of the *The West Wing* Weekly Podcast, discussed in chapter two. Though not especially dissimilar from reporting about the show operating as a liberal fantasy during the George W. Bush years, coverage of this new moment in *West Wing* viewership like Pincus-Roth's evinces a different affective relation to the show among viewers than during its original television run. Of this, Hirshikesh Hiraway, one of the co-hosts of *The West Wing* Weekly Podcast (along with *West Wing* cast member Josh Malina) says, "People tell us they turn to 'The West Wing' these days as some kind of salve."[223] And audience member at the podcast taping Dan Friedman, a government lawyer, describes his relationship with watching *The West Wing* in 2018 as "in some ways depressing, that we're fighting these same battles."[224] Such language speaks to what many Americans perceive as the gravity of the political situation under Trump as compared to the second Bush, whose failures can sometimes be seen as quaint from a post-Trump vantage point.

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[222] David Bixenspan, "People Are Binging 'The West Wing' to Cope with the Trump Presidency," *Motherboard* (blog), February 15, 2017, https://motherboard.vice.com/en_us/article/gvmpab/people-are-binging-the-west-wing-to-cope-with-the-trump-presidency.

[223] Ibid.

[224] Zachary Pincus-Roth, "'It's the President We All Want': The Melancholy World of Liberals Watching 'The West Wing' in 2018," *Washington Post*, accessed September 27, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/tv/in-the-trump-era-some-find-escapism-in-the-west-wing-its-the-president-we-all-want/2018/07/19/05c40fd4-89bb-11e8-85ae-511bc1146b0b_story.html.

Yet, despite the depressive aspects to revisiting the series, Friedman is also quoted as having one major reason to keep watching: "It seems like more of a normal White House. Whereas the current White House seems stranger than fiction."[225] Unpacking the ways in which the Trump administration uses its bully pulpit to blur lines between truth and fiction is, again, the subject of another project altogether, but Friedman's comments suggest watching *The West Wing* in 2018 can be as much about immersing oneself in a liberal fantasy world as it can be about nostalgia for a time when the executive branch operated in keeping with established rules of logic and precedent, perhaps even regardless of partisanship. In other words, viewers seem to be engaging with the fictional world of *The West Wing*—the paradigmatic fictional democracy porn text—through the lens of nostalgia, which, as I argue in chapter three, is characteristic of examples of democracy porn based on actual historical events. Pincus-Roth provides additional evidence for a contemporary nostalgic engagement with the series in his assessment of a possible *West Wing* reboot, which he frames as part of "Hollywood's nostalgia fever."[226] Though the fever to which Pincus-Roth refers is a broader phenomenon that has manifested in the proliferation of series reboots and period pieces set in the 1980s and 1990s—meaning it is a nostalgia that is as much about the televisual past as much as it is about the actual past—when considered in light of Friedman's and Hiraway's comments, it is clear that something about the Trump era has created space for viewers to experience a slippage between fact and fiction that allows them to revisit the fictional world of *The West Wing* as though it depicts an incarnation of the real West Wing as it actually existed in the past, which of course, it does not. For many of the viewers Pincus-Roth spoke to, this complex engagement with the series seems to result in an

[225] Ibid.

[226] Ibid.

affective response best described, as the headline suggests, as melancholy; and yet they keep watching. The rationale behind willfully engaging in viewing practices that produce melancholia will likely become clearer with time, but from where I sit in 2018, amidst a national atmosphere dense with anger across the political spectrum, it seems that perhaps mournful nostalgia is the best feeling these viewers can manage for the time being.

Another major trend in media consumption that will likely impact democracy porn's discursive position in the Trump era is the widespread national obsession with the news that took hold during the 2016 election and shows no signs of slowing down. As Friedman's comments succinctly put it above—truth is stranger than fiction when it comes to political goings on under Trump. Ratings for cable news programming shifted dramatically during the election and first year and a half of the Trump administration. While the Fox News Channel has been the most-watched cable news network since 2001—which has not changed during the Trump presidency as of the time of writing—rival networks MSNBC and CNN have witnessed marked increases in their ratings. For example, MSNBC's star anchor, Rachel Maddow, has in 2018 seen the largest viewership in her show's 10-year history, frequently beating out Sean Hannity on Fox News to land the top spot in cable news ratings for the 9:00PM timeslot, virtually unheard of for Maddow or MSNBC prior to Trump's appearance on the national political stage.[227] Though *The Rachel Maddow Show* is the only individual program that has been able to beat out Fox in the primetime cable news ratings, viewership for MSNBC writ large saw 30% year-over-year growth between the first quarter of 2017 and that of 2018, compared to 16% and 13% drops for Fox News and

[227] A.J. Katz, "August 2018 Ratings: MSNBC Posts Year-Over-Year Total Audience Growth," accessed October 2, 2018, https://adweek.it/2MVHkC6.

CNN, respectively, in the same period.[228] Fueled by a near-constant stream of controversy and an acute awareness of the White House's reliance on "alternative facts" in its official press communications, it seems that liberals are seeking solace in the way the left-leaning MSNBC anchors, particularly Maddow, break down the issues of the day, frequently parsing out complicated and obscure facets of democratic procedure in meticulous detail—the stuff of democracy porn.

Indeed, the Trump administration's tendency to test the legal limits of executive power has led journalists to cover political news in a manner that frequently constitutes democracy porn. Though the scope of this dissertation is limited to fictional texts, as I mention in the introduction, democracy porn may be located in other forms as well, including documentary and television news. As cable news networks report on the ever-proliferating litany of constitutional boundary pushing by the Trump administration, their coverage often delves deep into precisely the kinds of procedural minutiae that the democracy porn viewers I have cited throughout this dissertation identify as a major source of narrative pleasure. Take, for example, the Senate Judiciary Committee's confirmation hearings following Judge Brett Kavanaugh's nomination to fill the seat left vacant by Justice Anthony Kennedy on the Supreme Court. Upon hearing that Kavanaugh was on the President's shortlist for the seat, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, a professor of psychology in California, contacted her Senator, Dianne Feinstein, to express her concerns about the nominee, whom she alleged sexually assaulted her at a party when the two were in high school in 1982. Though Feinstein did not go public with either the accusation or Dr. Ford's identity, both were leaked to the press, and Dr. Ford eventually chose to reveal her identity and testify before the Senate Judiciary Committee. Already the focus of considerable national

[228] Jason Schwartz, "MSNBC's Surging Ratings Fuel Democratic Optimism," POLITICO, accessed October 4, 2018, https://politi.co/2v7eirs.

attention given Kavanaugh's controversial stances on key issues such as abortion and executive power, Ford's allegations struck a national nerve in the wake of the recent #MeToo movement's advocacy for survivors of sexual assault, and catapulted the Kavanaugh confirmation from an important story to *the only story.* Live coverage of the Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on September 28, 2018, which consisted of Dr. Ford's testimony and questioning, followed by a statement from and questioning of Judge Kavanaugh, drew MSNBC's largest daytime ratings *ever*.[229] And MSNBC was not alone in the ratings boon—Fox News, CNN, and MSNBC were the three-most-watched networks on cable for the entire week.[230] Altogether, the hearings reached more than 20 million viewers, no small feat in today's fractured media landscape for a nearly nine-hour event that took place in the middle of the day on a Thursday.[231]

What I am trying to suggest in detailing these trends in media consumption is that nature of political news in the age of Trump and the voracious appetite with which Americans are consuming it seems likely to bear considerable weight on whether or not those same Americans will choose to watch the kind of fictional and fictionalized democracy porn that I have assessed throughout this dissertation. My own personal and anecdotal experience has borne this connection out—since the 2016 election, paying attention to the news and staying on top of basic responsibilities such as work and caregiving have left little discretional energy for consuming media texts that require careful attention for myself, friends, family, and colleagues. Whether my

[229] Josef Adalian, "The Kavanaugh Hearings Gave MSNBC Its Biggest Daytime Ratings Ever," *Vulture*, September 28, 2018, http://www.vulture.com/2018/09/kavanaugh-hearings-cable-news-ratings.html.

[230] A.J. Katz, "Last Week, Fox News, MSNBC, and CNN Were the Three-Most-Watched Networks on Cable," accessed October 8, 2018, https://adweek.it/2PbwHcp.

[231] Michael O'Connell, "20 Million Watch Full Ford-Kavanaugh Hearing on Cable and Broadcast," *The Hollywood Reporter,* accessed October 8, 2018, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/live-feed/ford-kavanaugh-ratings-hearing-brings-20-million-viewers-cable-broadcast-1147785.

personal social network's media consumption patterns are exemplary of the nation's broader response to life in the Trump era, again, remains to be seen. What is immediately clear, however, is that the recent seismic shift in the political landscape has already produced significant changes in the way Americans engage with representations of the democratic process; and these shifts have already begun to provide perspective on many of the major claims I have made throughout this dissertation. Though my hindsight is still far from 20/20, thinking about the role of democracy porn from the vantage point of late 2018 has allowed me to approach the conclusions I have drawn here through what I believe to be a moderately clarifying lens, just as it has given rise to new questions.

A major goal of this dissertation has been to track the ways in which neoliberal ideology manifests within fictional films, television shows, and miniseries that can be described as democracy porn. We have seen how that ideology flows through the texts themselves, how it has governed their existence beyond the screen, and how it has shown up in viewers' responses in ways that suggest an impact on their own ideas of citizenship. In the wake of the 2016 election in the United States, these trends as I have attempted to articulate them are now historicized—they are a product of the neoliberal period before Trump. And the post-Trump neoliberal period will no doubt be distinct from that which came before. The president often serves as a synecdoche for American democracy itself; though far from the first neoliberal president, Donald Trump is certainly more forthright and unapologetic about his support for neoliberal policies than any of his predecessors. Indeed, his commitment to the neoliberal pillars of creating pro-business legislation and shrinking the role of government are among the most coherent aspects of his political agenda. It would not be much of a stretch, then, to view him as a synecdoche for neoliberalism itself. In bringing advocacy for neoliberal policy out of the shadows and into

spotlight of a political platform, one of the many imprints Trump's election will no doubt leave on the national consciousness is a shift in our collective understanding of and relationship to neoliberalism; this is a significant reason for my assertion that his election signals a break in the way democracy porn functions within the broader national discourse.

Since neoliberalism has passed a tipping point of sorts in Trump's election, looking back on the work these texts did in their own historical moment in some ways feels quaint. While I still believe these texts possess the capacity to attenuate democracy in both theory and practice through the making normal of neoliberal subjectivity and resulting disengagement from the public sphere, the view of them from 2018 is much different than it was when I began this project five years ago, when my cynicism was swaddled by what at the time felt like a relatively stable political climate in the United States. Of course, I know now that the perception of stability was only that, as evidenced by sizable and very angry population that made its voice heard by voting for Donald Trump as President of the United States, but I digress. From the vantage point of the present, having major concerns about the particular way democracy is fetishized on screen on one hand feels like a luxury for myself as a scholar, as well as for the makers and viewers of democracy porn's fictional texts. Now that the democratic system is being baldly, brazenly undermined by its own figurehead, should we not be celebrating even the most flawed attempts to cast it as sexy, as something in which it is exciting to *go deep*? From a different, more extreme, angle, democracy porn before Trump feels deeply sinister. For, as I have shown, these texts do significant work to equate neoliberal values with democratic ones, to obfuscate the incongruities between the two systems of thought, and to proffer notions of citizenship that are more closely tied to consumer capitalism than democracy. At the same time, the fetishistic treatment of the democratic process presented by democracy porn offers viewers

narrative pleasures that can *feel like* engagement with actually existing democracy. If all of these things are true, then it logically follows that democracy porn's existence constitutes one small piece of the conditions of possibility that led to our present moment.

As countless scholars have argued, the goals of the neoliberal project are fundamentally incompatible with those of democracy. And as I have argued throughout this dissertation, with the help of some of those scholars' work, the ideology that must necessarily take hold in order to achieve neoliberalism's goals circulates within democracy porn. Assuming both of those things to be true, it makes logical sense that consuming democracy porn could work to undermine, at the very least, the social stability of democratic ideals. Indeed, that was part of my own thinking in asking the project-forming question: how is democracy porn symptomatic of the erosion of possibilities for democracy under neoliberalism? Now, after thinking about that question over the course of five years, approximately two of those years while living under a New World Order, I find myself equally interested in another, related question, one that only occasionally surfaces in the body of this dissertation: Despite that inherent incompatibility, might the intense pleasures offered by these texts' spectacular, fetishistic representations of the democratic process also move viewers to action? My answer to that question today is a resounding "probably, sometimes!" Consider the example of *Swing Vote,* discussed in chapter one. Though the film is among the less celebrated examples of democracy porn in terms of cinematic prestige, responses to it provide some of the most concrete evidence that the film inspired viewers to take tangible steps to take their role as citizens more seriously. One Amazon user even explicitly stated that watching the film (which was released in August 2008) made them "stop and pause and really

listen to what McCain and Obama had to say concerning what they would do to help our country."[232]

Of course, "probably, sometimes" is not "definitely, yes, always," and my research did largely support the hypothesis that democracy porn has been utilized beyond the screen in a way is more closely attuned to the original formulation of my question than the more generous construction I have since also adopted. Take, for example, the educational campaign released by Disney and Participant Media in conjunction with the release of *Lincoln,* analyzed in chapter three. Creating curricular materials based on the film for the ostensible purpose of educating students about Abraham Lincoln's real historical contributions is problematic in both its less-than-subtle goal of lengthening the film's long tail profits, as well as in how it plays into the larger neoliberalization of the educational system in the United States. It does not take a particularly elastic imagination to see the way the corporatization of educational materials such as those in the Lincoln Learning Hub also operate as marketing that captures potential consumers in the powerful space of the classroom, which comes with built-in institutional legitimacy that adds credibility to the product being sold, in this case, the film *Lincoln,* but also the DreamWorks, Disney, Participant, and Ancestry.com brands, just to name a few.

Taken together, these two differing perspectives about the ultimate the way democracy porn represents and impacts notions of citizenship constitutes an ambivalent understanding of the discourse. In concluding her discussion of contemporary brand cultures, Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that brands, in their capacity to make "consumers feel safe, secure, and relevant," while simultaneously "[furthering] the building of the brand, and thus [adding] to the coffers of the

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[232] M. Harlan, "Great Movie," review of *Swing Vote,* Amazon, March 3, 2009, https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R337LCW2K3X7O/ref=cm_cr_getr_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B004LHMYAW.

corporate owner of the brand," are structured by ambivalence.[233] Indeed, over the course of writing this dissertation, the nature of democracy porn's specific representation of the democratic process, broadly situated within the context of neoliberalism, often presented itself as the branding of democracy. The choices that characterize democracy porn at the formal level—glossy production values, fetishistic attention to detail that valorizes a properly functioning democratic system as *the* solution to myriad human problems—along with the way citizenship is likened to consumerism, and the structural fact that these texts are created by large corporations seeking to profit from them, all cohere to present democracy itself as a desirable commodity. The questions to consider, then, are: who are the corporate owners of the American democracy brand? Surely the corporations that produce democracy porn are one answer to this question, but does the neoliberal ideology that is intimately bound up with the brand of democracy depicted in democracy porn also work to benefit corporate power writ large? And how do the intense affective pleasures viewers experience in consuming democracy porn measure up against those diffuse and wide-ranging corporate earnings?

Banet-Weiser also discusses political possibilities contained within structures bound together by affect and emotion, such as brands, as well as intimate publics as theorized by Lauren Berlant. As I have argued, democracy porn, too, is a structure defined in part defined by its capacity to produce affect, but here such affects arise directly from a sense of belonging to a concrete system of governance—American constitutional democracy—rather than the more abstract discursive groupings of intimate publics and brands. The different nature of these two forms raises the question: does the fact that democracy porn traffics in Politics in addition to politics impact our ability to view its ambivalences as generative? In other words, if democracy

[233] Banet-Weiser, *Authentic,* 215-216.

porn serves to both bolster the more egalitarian aspects of the American mythology by celebrating democratic ideals, and undermine them through acting as an interpellator for neoliberal subjectivity, can we embrace the former while still acknowledging the latter? Again, my thinking on this question has evolved along with the political landscape in the United States. Taking seriously the affects produced by democracy porn has always been a part of this project, but thinking of democracy porn as in part operating to construct democracy itself as a brand allows for us to take their *potential* seriously. That shift allows us to view the texts considered throughout this dissertation as possessing the capacity to subvert the neoliberal logics that they contain and produce affects that may be harnessed to those ends in the actually existing public sphere.

In citing reviews and other user-generated content as evidence throughout this dissertation, I hoped to access some understanding of the way viewers affectively engage with democracy porn's fictional texts as they relate to their own notions of citizenship. Though I have been careful to avoid mobilizing that evidence to draw conclusions about how those affective engagements might manifest in the form of tangible action (unless explicitly stated by the user/viewer), I must confess that my comfortable Obama-era cynicism often led to my own private assumptions that viewers' impassioned calls for civic engagement were not likely to translate into their own civic action. This cynicism surrounding online displays of political engagement was very much a product of the historical moment during which I began the dissertation process, a time when the activist utopian visions of the internet's potential were fading and new critiques of "clicktivism" had begun to emerge. While such critiques are certainly valid and useful, again, the stakes of the current political moment have forced me to reconsider the extent to which that continues to be the case.

Media makers seem to likewise be in a state of reassessment about the value of democracy porn. As I write this in October 2018, there is more televisual content being produced than ever before, and it is being distributed across an ever-growing number of platforms. But democracy porn does not seem to be thriving in this environment. Even Netflix, which this year will spend between $12 and $13 billion on original content, and has for several years been committed to creating prestige work, seems to have no interest in finding the ever-elusive heir to *The West Wing.*[234] Though it was not the streaming service's first foray into original programming, it made a big splash in the world of prestige content when *House of Cards* (Beau Willimon, 2013-2018)*,* a political drama charting the rise of Congressman Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey) and his wife, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright), was showered with critical praise and major awards beginning in 2013. Because the series focuses more on the Underwoods' will to power than on the processes of democracy, it is a limit case for democracy porn and as such not discussed in depth in this dissertation; but regardless, the series drew countless comparisons to *The West Wing* upon its release and runaway success. Despite significant setbacks resulting from sexual assault allegations made against Spacey as part of the #MeToo movement in 2017, Netflix continued on with the series with Wright as the single protagonist for a final season in 2018. Netflix famously does not publicly release its streaming numbers so there is no way to know with certainty, but given the series' longevity and the service's commitment to finishing the series without its central lead, one might surmise that *House of Cards* was on balance a success for Netflix. Yet after the release of its final season, there are no political titles on the streaming service's lengthy slate of original programming

[234] David Z. Morris, "Netflix Is Expected to Spend up to $13 Billion on Original Programming This Year," Fortune, accessed October 2, 2018, http://fortune.com/2018/07/08/netflix-original-programming-13-billion/.

currently in development.[235] Whether or not this absence signals a broader trend in the production (or lack thereof) of democracy porn in the Trump era remains to be seen, but it does feel conspicuous given the sheer volume of content Netflix is set to produce and their successful track record with political drama.

The future of democracy porn in terms of both production and consumption is thus unclear. Though I will continue to resist the urge to draw conclusions about how democracy porn's cultural meanings and values will shake out in the Trump era, from the immediate vantage point of late 2018, the extant texts analyzed throughout this dissertation feel both more urgent and more powerful than ever. More urgent because of the countless very real existential threats to democracy facing the United States at this moment in history, many of those threats originating from the actions of the President himself. And powerful, because those same threats appear to be galvanizing an atomized and complacent electorate to become something else. When looking back at the texts from the pre-Trump neoliberal period that I have analyzed throughout this dissertation and the way viewers affectively related to them in the contexts of their production and consumption, perhaps it will be of some use to understand the specific ways these texts interacted with and spectacularly represented the processes of democracy in meticulous detail, and how a dominant ideology of the period inserted itself into both the stories and the system itself. As the nature of citizenship changes, maybe it will also be of interest to examine the way these texts motivated some viewers to reconsider their own relationships to that facet of their identities. My hope is that both of these things are true.

[235] "Netflix Originals," Netflix Media Center, accessed October 2, 2018, https://media.netflix.com/en/only-on-netflix.

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