

Title: Constructing an Intertextual President: *The West Wing*'s Josiah Bartlet

Abstract:

*The West Wing* was a television series on NBC that ran for 7 years (1999-2006) and included 154 regular episodes and two special episodes, one in the wake of 9/11. Based on fictional President Josiah ('Jed') Bartlet, the show began midway through Bill Clinton's second term as president and concluded near the halfway point in George W. Bush's second term. Although *The West Wing* has often been regarded as a liberal fantasy, offering a counterpoint to the reality of the (second) Bush presidency, it is also part of a dense network of intertextual references rooted in how the American presidency has been represented in cinema and tv. Movies have been produced related to many real presidents: Lincoln (from D. W. Griffith's biopic of 1930 to Spielberg's *Lincoln* in 2012); Andrew Johnson (*Tennessee Johnson*, 1942); Theodore Roosevelt (*My Girl Tisa*, 1948; *The Wind and the Lion*, 1975); Woodrow Wilson (*Wilson*, 1944); John F. Kennedy (*JFK*, 1991; *Thirteen Days*, 2000); Richard Nixon (*All the President's Men*, 1976; *Nixon*, 1995; *Frost-Nixon*, 2008) and George W. Bush (*W*, 2008). Fiction presidents have also been constructed in cinema as action heroes (*Independence Day*, 1996; *Air Force One*, 1997), as comedic or romantic figures (*Dave*, 1993; *The American President*, 1995), as victims of rogue militarists with nuclear weapons (*Fail-Safe*, 1964; *Dr Strangelove*, 1964) and as sinister, sometimes homicidal figures (*The Pelican Brief*, 1991; *Absolute Power*, 1997; *Head of State*, 2003). Television series other than *The West Wing* that deal with the presidency range from *John Adams* (2008) to the lurid fiction of *Scandal* (2012-). Actors sometimes crossover from film to tv and vice versa in these productions: Martin Sheen, having played White House Chief of Staff A.J. MacLnerney in *The American President* became the president himself in *The West Wing*; Tony Goldwyn, Chief of Staff in *The Pelican Brief*, became President Fitzgerald Grant in *Scandal*.

This paper will explore the intertextualities between *The West Wing* and other depictions of American presidents, real and fictional, in cinema and on tv. It will speak to three aspects of the conference theme: seriality and narration; seriality and adaptation; and the relationship between cinema and tv series. It will demonstrate that Josiah Bartlet was much more than an icon of liberal fantasy. During the course of the seven series of *The West Wing*, he evolved from an indecisive responder to state-sponsored terrorism into an advocate of aggressive American intervention abroad (a kind of "Monroe Doctrine" for the world), and from a respecter of civil liberties to a man who orders an assassination. He also (like Grover Cleveland and John Kennedy) concealed his true state of health from American voters. Bartlett expresses and embodies some of the worst features of the less savoury presidencies shown in movies and other tv series.

Biography:

Melvyn Stokes is Professor of Film History, University College London, UK. His most recent books include D. W. Griffith's "*The Birth of a Nation*": A History of "*The Most Controversial Motion Picture of All Time*" (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), *Gilda* (London, 2010) in the British Film Institute Classic series, and *American History in Hollywood Film: From the Revolution to the 1960s* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). He has edited the proceedings of three SERCIA conferences, most recently (with Zeenat Saleh) *Cinéma et mémoire dans le cinéma Anglophone/Memory in/of English-speaking Cinema* (Paris: Michel Houdiard, 2014). He has edited or co-edited 9 other books, including a four-volume series on Hollywood's audiences for BFI Publishing (1999-2004). In 2013-15, he directed a major Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded research project on "Cultural Memory and British Cinema-going of the 1960s." He has been vice-president (2004-2008) and president (2008-14) of SERCIA.