

THE CANDIDATE: AN ELLULIAN RESPONSE TO MCGINNISS'S THE SELLING OF THE PRESIDENT 1968

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The Candidate (1972), written by Jeremy Lerner, directed by Michael Ritchie, and starring Robert Redford, is a so-called “message” film, and unapologetically so. It takes up the theme of American politics in the age of television and effectively illustrates something that has become painfully obvious in the nearly three decades since the film’s release: campaigns and elections—the flashpoints of our political culture—are dangerously shallow and cynical exercises in technique and propaganda.

Of course, the fact that *The Candidate* was consciously and passionately crafted to convey any message or engage in any sort of social criticism at all distinguishes it from most Hollywood films made today. *The Candidate* was released in 1972, near the end of a crucible of American trauma and tumult and, not coincidentally, during what many critics regard as the last wave of intelligent and relatively uncompromising Hollywood filmmaking.¹ It shares with many of the films from that period a somewhat raw and naturalistic look, an engagement with the issues of the day, and an unsettling denouement. What makes *The Candidate* so satisfying and ultimately powerful, however, is that, unlike several explicitly political films of that period (*Medium Cool* [1969], *Zabriskie Point* [1970], and *Executive Action* [1973] among them), it often manages to be both didactic and subtle at the same time.² (An exaggerated and humorous indication of that subtlety, or, more to the point, polysemy, is suggested by the number of high-profile figures, among them Dan Quayle and John F. Kennedy, Jr., who have made clear by their references to the film that they completely missed its point.)³

To some extent, the didacticism of the film is inherent in the story it tells. At the beginning of the film, Redford’s Bill McKay is a principled legal aid lawyer fighting for the rights of farm workers, and unabashedly and uncompromisingly progressive in his politics. But when he gives in to the seductive appeal of a Mephistophelean strategist who recruits him—as a sacrificial lamb—for a senate race against popular Republican incumbent Crocker Jarmon, McKay descends into a murky hell of cynicism and compromise. After briefly and clumsily trying to keep his principles and politics intact, McKay slowly begins to do whatever seems necessary to win, or at least avoid a landslide. He gets a haircut, fudges his stance on some issues, and lets advisors and strategists manipulate his image through the use of (and for the use of) *The Candidate*’s chief villain, television—and by extension, propaganda. By the end of the film, after McKay has pulled off an upset victory, he asks a very uncomfortable rhetorical question, addressed to the devil-strategist (and possibly, the American audience and electorate): “What do we do now?” The meaning of the question, and the message of the film, is fairly clear: McKay has won, but he knows he has sold his soul to do so.

To speak today of souls—cinematic and otherwise—lost to a degraded political culture is of course nothing new. Countless news stories detailing only the latest campaign fundraising violations have by now blended in with myriad films and TV shows about government corruption and conspiracy, forming a depressingly American political pastiche. In fact, it was not even particularly new in 1972, when *The Candidate* was first released, the subject having been memorably addressed at the movies as early as *State of the Union* in 1948 and, most explicitly, *A Face in the Crowd*, in 1957. That said, to fully appreciate the

unique contribution *The Candidate* made to our understanding of politics and propaganda in a saturated age, it is essential to place the film in its specific historical context.

The Selling of the President 1968

The original screenplay for *The Candidate* was written by first-time screenwriter Jeremy Lerner, who one assumes got his political inside-dope in 1968 as press secretary for Eugene McCarthy's campaign to win the Democratic nomination. (Although there is little evidence to suggest that McKay was actually modelled after McCarthy, the similarities of the last names and the rough agreement of their political views suggest a certain connection.) More importantly, the film was produced less than three years after the publication of Joe McGinniss's best-selling 1969 book about Richard Nixon's media consultants in the 1968 presidential campaign, *The Selling of the Presidency 1968*. (The title was a play on the famous books Theodore White had written about presidential races, the first being *The Making of the President 1960* [1961].) In fact, one can see, when comparing the two, that *The Candidate* in many ways seems to be responding quite directly to McGinniss's take on the nature of propaganda and its role in American politics, one that framed the debate—at least the popular debate—in the late '60s and '70s.

Revisiting *The Selling of the President 1968* today, one is struck by the following: Although McGinniss's analysis of the Nixon propaganda campaign was obviously meant as a revealing cautionary lesson about the way we were selecting our political leaders, in the end it was primarily a story about Richard Nixon. Given this, McGinniss—an avowed Democrat and Nixon-hater at the time—leaves the impression that the Nixon propaganda machine was so objectionable mainly because its messages were deceptive and divisive, and its ends were the election of such a dangerous, empty candidate. True, McGinniss does convey a certain sense of outrage at the way the propaganda campaign was conducted, but most of that outrage is directed at Nixon the person. McGinniss tips his hand in this respect during a rare passage in the book about Nixon's opponent, Hubert Humphrey, and one of his campaign films. Although McGinniss ridicules it as poorly made, he notes that it “showed Hubert Humphrey as a person. It began with the assumption that of course he had faults as a politician and of course he made a lot of mistakes, but it said again and again that Hubert Humphrey, at least, is a person. Here he is sweating, laughing, crying, out in the open air. The contrast with Nixon was obvious. Nixon, who depended on a television studio the way a polio victim relied on an iron lung.”⁴ McGinniss is stacking the deck by contrasting a half-hour campaign film with Nixon's sixty-second ads and studio shows (as if Humphrey did not do sixty-second spots or Nixon did not have longer, more “human” films made). But most telling here is that, because Humphrey seems to come across effectively as a real person, and because McGinniss seems to sympathize more with Humphrey's politics than he does with Nixon's, to McGinniss that somehow makes the propaganda less problematic.

An Ellulian Response

The Candidate bears the unmistakable influence of McGinniss's book. Echoing McGinniss's thesis, it features a Howard K. Smith television commentary (“The Madison Avenue commercial has taken over as his standard means of persuasion. The voters are being asked to choose McKay the way they choose a detergent.”), and in its look at a fictional advertising group's work for McKay, features a clone of Nixon ad-man Harry Trevealen who, like Trevealen, thinks he's almost entirely responsible for a campaign's success (“I [brought] Jarmon [his lead] down from 20 points to 4 points”). Despite these superficial similarities, however, *The Candidate* is best interpreted as a critique of McGinniss's implied view of propaganda, a critique that has much in common with the work of French sociologist Jacques Ellul. Ellul argued in his book *Propaganda* that it matters little what propagandists stand for or what their ends are, they are all taking part in an exercise that is fundamentally dehumanizing and anti-democratic.⁵ While McGinniss implies that Nixon propaganda in the 1968 campaign was so objectionable largely because Nixon was a shallow, hateful Republican, *The Candidate* presents the viewer with a principled,

progressive Democrat (played by an attractive, sympathetic icon of liberalism and virtue), and says, in effect, that these virtues are not particularly important; McKay and what he stands for will inevitably be overcome by the necessarily harmful structure of propaganda.

The film conveys this idea by positioning McKay and Jarmon as candidates on opposite ends of the political spectrum and then showing that as propagandists, there is actually little that separates them and very much that they have in common. McKay's advertising guru Howard Klein might oppose Jarmon and "[. . .] like what [McKay] stand[s] for," but he crafts commercials and slogans at least as inane as those of his competitors. Similarly, McKay is seen in the same sorts of situations as Jarmon, at one point cracking a silly joke to a middle-aged women's group ("First I'd like to say I'm sorry I ate all the shrimp") much like Jarmon had earlier in the film, and at another point using a swell of music to slowly come under the end of a speech, as Jarmon had earlier. The fact that McKay was speaking to unionized workers and saying something very different is beside the point, the film implies; structurally, he and Jarmon were doing exactly the same thing.

There are two sequences in *The Candidate* which, when compared and contrasted, bring this idea into sharp focus and convey a sense of why the filmmakers, echoing Ellul, see something above all else structurally wrong with propaganda. Near the beginning of the film, during McKay's first attempt to meet the public as a campaigner, he stops a worker coming out of a factory and tries to speak with him. The man is initially suspicious, if not hostile, but he and McKay eventually have an awkward, human exchange, despite Klein's cameras hovering nearby, and they shake hands before the man leaves. We are not meant to think that this bit of dialogue is some kind of model of discourse, but to some degree, despite the false pretenses, it does come across as communication. Later in the film McKay meets Jarmon for a debate, during which, after several minutes of canned answers by both candidates to the questions posed, there is a break for a commercial. As the debate is about to come back from the break, there is a shot of the director's monitor in the control room, which has the views of separate cameras trained on McKay and Jarmon merged, one shot blended into the other. The camera shots are soon separated so that McKay and Jarmon are on different sides of the monitor, just as the debate comes back, but the implication is clear: McKay and Jarmon are at this point one and the same. They may have different answers to the questions posed—even after watering themselves down for television—but in a fundamental way, they are carrying on a similar exercise in propaganda, and, with each other's opponent, the questioners, and the television viewers, the same exercise in one-way, pseudo-communication.

This entire debate sequence, in fact, is rich in the effective use of film language to convey the fact that the ostensibly sympathetic McKay is now part of a disquieting unreality and is slowly sinking in propaganda quicksand. Although the sound in this sequence does not play a particularly large role in carrying meaning, on one occasion it does prove important. Toward the end of the debate itself, after McKay and Jarmon have for the most part proved equally banal and propagandistic, the telecast goes to a commercial break, and McKay is left alone to look and listen at the scene in front of him. As this happens, the sound makes a transition (with the help of camera work to be addressed below) in such a way that makes it clear that we are now hearing what McKay hears—namely, what sounds like conspiratorial whispering on the other side of the studio. This use of sound is disquieting and points to the way in which McKay feels he is taking part in something over which he has little control. He can sense himself becoming drawn into a dangerous, unreal world (the words he has been speaking are not his own), and the whispering he hears and his obvious unease at being unable to make it out speaks to a certain fear, perhaps even paranoia, that exists in him—and, the filmmakers might hope, in the film's audience. (Feelings of unease and even paranoia were of course thought to be understandable, given the tenor of the times, and were evoked on screen by a number of films of the period, most notably, *The Parallax View* [1974], *Three Days of the Condor* [1975], and *The Conversation* [1974].)

The lighting of the actual debate scenes during this sequence, and the way it is contrasted with the lighting of the green room scenes before and after the debate, carries meaning as well. The studio in which the debate takes place is quite dark, lending the proceedings an ominous feel. There are fairly harsh lights on the questioners, and on Jarmon and McKay, but for the most part nothing but black appears in the background of these shots. Although footage of actual political debates from this specific period are hard to come by (largely because both Nixon and Lyndon Johnson had no interest in taking part in any from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s), it is worth noting that in neither the Kennedy-Nixon debates (1960) nor the Ford-Carter debates (1976) was the debate environment anywhere near as dark as the studio in this sequence.⁶ The stylized quality of this lighting—perhaps the only instance in the entire film in which the filmmakers do not seem to strive for authenticity—implies or signifies that it is being used not only to create a mood of unease in the audience and convey the fact that something “dark” is transpiring, but also to tie this unease to the message that what is taking place in the studio is fake. This darkness is effectively contrasted with the scenes before and after the debate in a well-lighted green room (where we can see action going on out the door and far into the background), where we are not meant to find the proceedings quite so disturbingly artificial.

Camera movement is at a minimum in this sequence, but there are two instances of movement that call attention to themselves and seem clearly intended to highlight the film’s message. In one of them, a slow pan of Jarmon and the questioners during a commercial break serves to link everyone in the studio together (except McKay), before cutting to McKay as a means of isolating him and letting him ponder the odd predicament in which he finds himself. The other example is more important. Near the beginning of the debate, McKay is asked whether he has anything significant to say about crime because, as he is reminded, Jarmon has implied that he does not. Earlier in the film McKay is shown being prepped by his handlers, who give him a simple-minded “five-point plan” on crime and tell him to “work it into the debate.” In response to this debate question, McKay begins to speak smoothly, in a way that makes it clear that he is simply rattling off this poll-tested plan, a plan that does not really reflect his views. As he speaks, the camera begins to track away from McKay and ends up behind one of the studio’s television cameras, where it focuses in on the camera’s viewfinder as McKay continues to talk. The implication here is clear: When McKay begins to speak words that are not his own in the hopes of appealing to as wide an audience as possible, he is making a dangerous, dispiriting compromise: shaping his political candidacy to fit the structural biases of television as an image-based mass medium.

Finally, the editing of this sequence also makes a subtle contribution toward conveying the fact that there is something mysterious and unreal about this world of televised politics and propaganda. Only after several viewings does one notice that, without any cues such as dissolves, shots of clocks, or anything else, the filmmakers manage to compress an event that would have taken at least half an hour into approximately eight minutes. We are given no indication, once the debate begins, that we are not witnessing all the proceedings in real time, and yet it is all over impossibly quickly. In other words, the filmmakers were able to have their cake (the naturalistic cinematography that characterizes the film and which dissolves or obvious jumps in time might have interrupted), and eat it, too (the compression of time is disorienting and unnerving, and contributes to the sense of the above-mentioned unreality).

In sum, through almost every potential tool at their disposal, filmmakers Ritchie, Larner, and Redford are able, by positioning a kind of anti-Nixon at the center of its consideration of politics in a media-saturated age, to effectively illustrate the harm of propaganda while refuting the idea that propaganda is structurally benign. The problem with propaganda, the film makes clear, is not that it can help elect people like Richard Nixon or Crocker Jarmon; the problem with propaganda is that its very nature is antithetical to communication and discourse and dangerous to the health of our democratic processes. From the approach and ideological stance the filmmakers take toward this social problem, it seems clear that Ellul’s warnings have resonated. As he writes in *Propaganda*: “We must not maintain the illusion that

propaganda is merely a neutral instrument that one can use without being affected. It is comparable to radium, and what happens to radiologists is well known.”⁷

Conclusion

There are other problems related to propaganda and the modern American political campaign addressed in *The Candidate* as well, among them one that Ellul has also studied and defined in the past—“la technique.” Ellul discussed this idea in perhaps his most famous work, *The Technological Society*, arguing in essence that we are now so obsessed with technology and efficiency—with that one very best way to achieve a predetermined goal—that we have lost sight of our actions and, in a fundamental way, of what it means to be human.⁸ This idea is apparent throughout *The Candidate*, which comes complete with a campaign run by an army of specialized consultants and a candidate who misplaces some of his humanness once he becomes obsessed with getting his “numbers” to move in the right direction. After considering the national elections of recent years, defined as they have been by Dick Morris—ever-present poll numbers, soft-money loopholes, and attack ads—it is not difficult to see the continuing relevance of this problem and, in particular, that of the film’s main focus, propaganda, in America today. But as further evidence, one need only look at the plot-lines and messages in a number of more recent films about politics and media, including *Bulworth* (1998), *Wag the Dog* (1998), and *A Perfect Candidate* (1996), David Van Taylor and R. J. Cutler’s documentary about the 1994 Senate race in Virginia between incumbent Chuck Robb and the illustrious Oliver North.

In this last film, North political consultant Mark Goodin offered a particularly succinct, compelling, and depressing observation on the subject. Echoing the words of one of McKay’s handlers in *The Candidate*, who tells him after his debate with Jarmon, “Quite a show!” (to which McKay replies, “What does THAT mean?”), Goodin observes resignedly to the filmmakers that “we are obsessed with getting people elected, and we are obsessed with the show. And so are you, or you wouldn’t be here. So we provide daily entertainment. What we are not providing is serious solutions to what’s going on in the country. Not us, not Chuck [Robb, the incumbent], not Clinton, not Bush. Not anybody.” Given the poignancy of these comments, one wonders, naively, whether there is any chance someone like Goodin might decide to quit “the show,” and actually put his talents in the service of nurturing a viable public sphere. Not likely. Since the release of *A Perfect Candidate*, Goodin has made the rounds of the political chat shows again and again, even dishing politics and celebrity as an expert on ABC’s late night show *Politically Incorrect*, only the most self-satisfied example of television’s spectacular parade of pseudo-discourse and pseudo-communication. This parade, while intermittently entertaining, makes it abundantly clear that with friends like television—and its intimate, propaganda—American political culture needs no enemies. The question, to steal *The Candidate*’s last line, is, “What do we do now?”

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ENDNOTES

¹ For examples of such critical assessments of 1970s American film see Peter Biskind, *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) and Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *Hollywood Films of the Seventies* (New York: Harper, 1984).

² See Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *Hollywood Films of the Seventies: Sex, Drugs, Violence, Rock n' Roll and Politics* (New York: Harper, 1984).

³ See John F. Kennedy, Jr., "Editor's Letter," *George* Dec. 1995 / Jan. 1996: 7; see also Jeremy Lerner, "Politics Catches Up to 'The Candidate,'" Op-Ed in *The New York Times* 23 Oct. 1988, Week in Review: 23.

⁴ Joe McGinniss, *The Selling of the President 1968* (New York: Pocket Books, 1969) 141.

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1965).

⁶ See Alan Schroeder, *Presidential Debates: Forty Years of High-Risk TV* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

⁷ Ellul 242.

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964).

