The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

Communication Arts and Sciences

PRESIDENTIAL IMAGINARIES:

NARRATIVE, *PHANTASIA*, AND THE HISTORICAL

U.S. PRESIDENT IN FICTIONAL FILM

A Thesis in

Communication Arts and Sciences

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

May 2014

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ABSTRACT

Presidential Studies represents a robust facet of the field of rhetorical studies. Numerous distinguished scholars have shaped their entire career around the study of the United States presidency. Many other well-respected scholars of rhetoric focus their studies on the analysis of film. Both these areas of study have enriched rhetorical scholarship over the decades. Rarely, however, have studies of fictional film and studies of the historical U.S. president met. This is the intervention of this thesis. This thesis provides an in-depth examination of this phenomenon through an analysis of twelve feature-length fictional films. The project seeks to uncover the ways these fictional films portray the historical U.S. presidency, aided by the interactions of narrative and *phantasia*.

After laying the preliminary theoretical background and structure of the thesis in chapter one, chapter two investigates the historical and contemporary presence of the U.S. president in popular culture, as well as the ways the president often becomes popular culture through various media portrayals. Chapter three of this thesis analyzes ten fictional films that feature historical U.S. presidents as characters, such as *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*. The analysis follows two emergent criteria for analysis, exploring (1) *phantasia*-influenced portrayals of access to the president and (2) Walter Fisher's narrative rationality and the creation of "realistic" presidential interactions in the films. I argue that these ten films bend or break either narrative fidelity or rationality in a way that disrupts what viewers believe makes sense or know to be true. This gap created—between reality and the images brought "before the eyes" onscreen—creates space for viewers to use *phantasia* to "see" the U.S. president and presidency engaged in non-historically sound actions. The fourth chapter in this thesis presents a detailed examination of *Abraham*

Lincoln: Vampire Hunter and *FDR: American Badass!*. Here I argue that these two films represent the entelechy of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film. These two films push the boundaries of how far the historical-president-as-character in fictional film can go and demonstrate the limits of *phantasia* in truly altering viewer understandings of the presidency and its interactions with popular culture.

This project ultimately demonstrates three things: First, although the phenomenon of including the historical president as a character in fictional film outwardly appears to be reaching exceptional new levels, representations of the historical president in fiction tend to be remarkably conservative, reifying audience preconceptions of presidents like Abraham Lincoln. Second, considering the rhetorical concepts of narrative and *phantasia* as symbiotic facilitates an enriched understanding of each. Third, traditional boundaries protecting the president from the low-taste elements of the entertainment industry have deteriorated, creating the presidency as an extra "hook" for Hollywood films and ultimately opening the door for the president to become personally involved in fictional acting endeavors. By appropriating the historical president as a character, fictional films collapse the metaphorical distance between the president and the people.

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Chapter 1

Introduction:
Imagination, Popular Culture, and the U.S. President

You finally find that you have a free afternoon and an extra ten dollars to spend, so you pop over to the cinema to see that new bank heist film. The theater darkens and the previews roll: a romantic comedy, an animated feature for children, and then…the ominous sound of thunder booms around the theater. You feel a chill down your spine as you wonder what horror movie this sound portends. You are then barraged with images of our nation's capital city, replete with monuments and historic sites. As you see images of President Lincoln and the Civil War flash across the screen, a gravelly, male voice narrates:

> History prefers legends to men. It prefers nobility to brutality. Soaring speeches to quiet deeds. History remembers the battle but forgets the blood. However history remembers me *before* I was a president, it shall only remember a *fraction* of the truth.[1]

At the word "fraction," a younger, barefaced Lincoln aims a gun and shoots someone. The body drops, and he walks away. When he happens to glance over his shoulder, though, the body is gone. Suddenly, someone…or something…attacks Lincoln, making you jump in your seat. You then see a rapid succession of action-packed clips that portray a young Lincoln wielding an axe with super-human strength and speed. He declares, "I will kill them all." A gunshot rings, Lincoln stands triumphant, and the movie title appears on-screen: *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. VAMPIRE Hunter? No, your eyes are not tricking you: vampires.

In this theatrical trailer for *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* (2012),[2] audiences see "Honest Abe" portrayed in a unique and distinctive fashion. The president who has sustained the most intense scholarly and cultural attention of any other is now the subject of

a big budget, feature-length film that combines the genres of historical fiction, superhero action, and science fiction into one mediated vehicle. At one level, this collage of genres makes economic sense. Vampires have been in vogue since the early 1990s, as evidenced by their presence in many television shows and feature films, e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Vampire Diaries*, the *Twilight* saga films, etc. Additionally, the pop-culture entertainment industry has, of late, blended the supernatural with history and literature, as evidenced by books like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a surprising blend of Jane Austen sensibilities and a zombie apocalypse. Books and films such as this continue to appear in ever-greater quantities.[3]

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is part of this entertainment trend, but in this thesis, I contend that *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is more than just a popular culture pastiche. This film is the latest iteration of a long-standing rhetorical phenomenon, the rewriting or (more accurately) the *re-envisioning* of presidential personae and political histories through the medium of popular entertainment. In this film, "Honest Abe" is no longer just a young man working on the rails of Illinois. Instead, the movie portrays him as an axe-wielding assassin of evil creatures who are driven by lust, gluttony, and greed. In contrast to his nightmarish foe, Lincoln is a heroic figure initially driven by vengeance for his mother's murder. Eventually, however, he is motivated to become the savior of the entire nation from the thrall of vampires who use slaves as food and slavery as a tool to sustain their authoritarian grip on the Southern states. This project began with a simple question: What does this new interpretation of Lincoln *mean*? Through the course of researching and writing this thesis, my initial question has expanded considerably: What do contemporary films that feature historical presidents in fictional plots *do*?

While Lincoln may be the most popular presidential figure for authors, filmmakers, and producers of popular culture, references to and uses of other U.S. presidents also are pervasive. In a November 2012 *Slate* article, Aisha Harris, Natalie Matthews-Ramo, and Katie Kilkenny found in the *Internet Movie Database*—currently the most exhaustive public database of film—that 682 movies feature historical U.S. presidents. This number does not include "cameos by presidents playing themselves, or the cinematic use of archival footage."[4] Presidents in film are so numerous that it has become possible to sub-categorize these films into: (1) films about the real lives and/or presidencies of presidents (e.g., the recent presidential biopic *Lincoln*[5]); (2) films that create fictional presidents for a fictional plot (e.g., *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*[6]); and (3) films that depict actual, historical presidents in fictional stories that depart from known history or that rewrite the historical record in a counter-realistic way.

With nearly 700 films featuring the historical U.S. president, this "excess of the executive" in cinema poses a number of questions. Where does our pop cultural fascination with the American presidency come from, and why have presidents been appropriated in this manner for nearly 250 years? Why do producers and audiences want to place the president in roles that he has never and often could never occupy? Perhaps most important, how does using the president for entertainment purposes shape our potential understanding or perception of the presidency and the individuals that have held it? The possible implications of popular culture on our memory and understanding of presidents have led me to focus on the third sub-category, films that place historical U.S. presidents in fictional narratives. In the pages to follow, I discuss the focus, scope, and methods for this study as well as its rationales, followed by chapter previews.

Focus

Although I have identified already several questions that surfaced at the conception of this project, I want also to identify three research questions that reveal both the focus and the theoretical perspectives that inform my study. These questions are:

1. In fictional films featuring a historical president as a character, how and in what ways does "fantasy" operate to offer viewers new understandings of individual presidents, the presidency, and/or the history that surrounded a particular president?

2. What rhetorical strategies or practices do such films employ to make the president's presence in the fictional plot (a) believable, (b) at least partially-realistic and/or (c) engaging and worthy of extended consideration by the audience?

3. In pushing the boundaries of the historical-president-as-fictional-film-character, how do these messages offer audiences new ways of perceiving the president and their relationship with him? What do these different perceptions look like?

The exploration of historical presidents in fictional film presumes that the role and function of the presidency as an object of popular culture is important. In particular, I contend that although presidents have been fixtures in pop cultural since the early days of the Republic, the production of movies, especially films that portray a president in an unexpected or remarkable mode, extend the commodification of the presidency to a new level. By combining modern techniques of cinema and special effects with culturally determined norms of comedy, fantasy, the supernatural, and dramatic narrative, "we the people" are offered an opportunity to re-envision who and what our political leaders are and who we are as citizens in relation to them. Although the fantasies about presidents presented in such films may have little connection to the public policy and administrative power that

constitutes the institutional presidency, these films do shape how we perceive and relate to the individuals who occupy the office. In fact, I believe that for the many Americans who admit that they dislike or are neutral toward politics, a Lincoln who hunts vampires and a Lyndon Johnson who saw Forrest Gump's bare bottom are far more interesting, accessible people than the Commander-in-Chief who suspended *habeas corpus* during the Civil War or the president who proposed a "Great Society." Many Americans "learn" about presidents from the films they watch, and often the films they watch make no pretense of being accurate or historical. That said, we cannot assume that "learning" stops because a film's narrative is fictional rather than historical. I would rather ask us to consider *what* we learn about actual presidents from fictional movie narratives.

<div align="center">Narrative and Phantasia</div>

There are multiple concepts and rhetorical theories that inform different aspects of my project, but two specific ideas are central to the project as a whole: the influential power of narrative and the classical concept of *phantasia*. The criticism in chapters three and four relies heavily on these theoretical concepts to interrogate the ways in which fictional films re-inscribe or re-interpret the roles and characters of historical U.S. presidents. Thus, it is important to have a clear definition of how I interpret and employ these concepts. What follows situates my understanding of first narrative then *phantasia* within the scholarly conversations of both. I conclude this section explaining the role of these concepts in the analysis chapters.

Narrative

Some of humanity's best stories are fictional, and storytelling has been an important part of the human *modus operandi* for centuries. Since Ancient Greece, however, scholars have often insisted on splitting narrative and history to separate the imagined from the real or "true." For example, Herodotus "disparages poetic narrative frequently, and remarks on one occasion that 'the Greeks in general have a weakness for inventing stories with no basis in fact.'"[7] Herodotus's statement seems tolerant when compared to Plato's declaration that "all poetical imitations are ruinous to the understanding of the hearers, and that the knowledge of their true nature is the only antidote to them."[8] By calling truth an antidote, Plato implies that poetics are poisonous to audiences' understanding of truth. In his view, *episteme* stems from reality, not imitations of it.

Others, however, have argued persuasively that the "imagined" can create *episteme* and have a legitimate influence on readers' realities. Narrative is but one aspect of poetic; lyric and epic are traditional poetic forms, as well. Jeffrey Walker conceptualized poetic as essentially epideictic in nature[9] and posited narrative and epic as expanded versions of lyric.[10] Walker argued for lyric-as-enthymeme, a concept that suggests poetry can argue and reason.[11] Such an assertion seeks to reunite the split worlds of the imagined and the real. Similarly, Wayne C. Booth explored what he calls "an ethics of fiction," and posited that fictional stories—even fantastical stories not rooted in the real world—can influence people's lives and behavior.[12] For example, a viewer might watch *Hair* and, consequently, her understanding of what Vietnam-era politics was may shift so profoundly that she might refuse (as I did) to get a haircut for almost a year afterward. This decision was meant as a show of solidarity with a historical moment that was long past. Numerous studies

(particularly those in communication science) have empirically examined the psychological influence of fiction on reality.[13] While this study does not measure audience experience, it does examine potentially reality-influencing messages produced by fictional films with a historical U.S. president.

The tradition of scholarship on narrative is extensive, and for the purposes of this study, I limit my theoretical focus to explanations of narrative's influence on readers' perceptions of reality. In their canonical work, *The Nature of Narrative*, Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg argued against "the novel-centered view of narrative literature"[14] and spend their pages trying to "put the novel in its place."[15] Scholes and Kellogg focused on non-novel-based narrative, tracing its historical development from its poetic roots in Ancient Greece, interrogating the split between empirical ("real") and fictional ("ideal") work in both Ancient and more modern writing.[16] The enterprise of their book was to explore the interactions of "allegiance to reality and to the idea" by analyzing authors such as James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and Ian Fleming. More simply, they considered narrative outside the framework of the novel, asserting that empiricism and fiction are not mutually exclusive. My understanding of narrative aligns with this hybridized model of narrative as both working toward and against the imitation of "reality."

Scholes and Kellogg's overall enterprise and major claims differ from those of this project, however. *The Nature of Narrative* (and much of Scholes's other work) asserted that meaning is contained within a text and that readers ought to glean the meaning of a text by synthesizing the author's real world and the world the author created, which suggests that there is "a single, right way" to read a narrative.[17] Other scholars prefer to read texts as sending different messages depending on the audience.[18] Understanding narrative in this

way allows the scholar to seek multiple interpretations of a message. For example, in the movie *Annie*, it is doubtful that the film's primary reason for including FDR was to attempt to change audiences' views of President Roosevelt. Instead, my reading seeks to understand just one possible audience interpretation of historical U.S. presidents and viewers' perception of their relationship with the president within this text.

In this study, I borrow from Scholes and Kellogg's thoughts on meaning in narrative. They argue: "Meaning, in a work of narrative art, is a function of the relationship between two worlds: the fictional world created by the author and the 'real' world, the apprehendable [*sic*] universe. When we say we 'understand' a narrative, we mean that we have found a satisfactory relationship or set of relationships between these two worlds."[19] In other words, they argued that the narratives a reader can believe or understand strike a balance between the real world and the fictional one. Aspects of Walter Fisher's narrative paradigm interact well with this stance.

Walter Fisher contributed to the theory of *Homo narrans* (or human storytellers) when he postulated his narrative paradigm. The overarching enterprise of Fisher's narrative paradigm aimed to create a new framework for understanding human communication and behavior that exists outside the traditional paradigms of rationality and logic.[20] While an interesting concept, his framework of "human communication as narration" is not my concern in this project. In creating this new paradigm, Fisher looked to move past the master-narrative of rationality in human communication, but ended up replacing one master-narrative with another.[21] It is outside the scope and focus of this project to make claims about the nature of *all* human communication; my focus instead lies in narrative itself.

One particular dimension within Fisher's narrative paradigm will play a large part in this thesis, however: His theory of narrative rationality. Narrative rationality contains two parts: narrative probability ("what constitutes a coherent story") and narrative fidelity ("whether or not the stories [people] experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives").[22] Fisher argued that these concepts are vital in creating a narrative listeners (or viewers) will accept. He suggested that humans can tell the difference between realistic and fictitious stories and can tell when a story makes sense or does not, and that they are more likely to accept stories that maintain both narrative probability and fidelity. Robert Rowland took issue with these qualifications, however, bringing up the excellent point: "Not all good stories contain coherent plots and consistent characterization."[23] *I.Q.*, for example, is a charming romantic comedy whose story makes sense but whose characterizations of President Eisenhower (and of Albert Einstein, for that matter) do not synchronize with the public image or official histories of these individuals.

William Kirkwood posited a "rhetoric of possibility," which looked to the limitations of Fisher's narrative paradigm and narrative rationality and the ways narrative opens up possibilities for new imaginings and understandings of stories.[24] Similarly, I argue in this thesis that narrative probability and narrative fidelity are often stretched or broken in fictional films with a historical president character. This stretching to the point of rupture is, I argue, rhetorically productive, because it creates a space in which viewers must use *phantasia* to make the story make sense. Thus, the interplay of narrative and *phantasia* guide my analyses of the selected films. To understand this interplay fully, I must detail my understanding of *phantasia* as not only a vital concept for this thesis but as a rhetorical

"solution" to narratives that intentionally break Fisher's expectations of narrative probability or fidelity.

Phantasia

I understand *phantasia* to be the human faculty of thinking in the subjunctive to make decisions or judgments about the present and/or future. To comprehend this definition, one must understand its component parts of "the subjunctive" and "human faculty." Many languages have a subjunctive mood, facilitating speakers' expressions of uncertainty. The subjunctive mood allows for speculation about "what if" situations or things that potentially may (or may never) be. Though rarely used in English, other languages frequently use the subjunctive. For example, the Spanish phrase "Ojalá que vaya al Cielo" ("Hopefully I will go to Heaven") uses the subjunctive mood to speculate about an uncertain eternal fate. This phrase expresses a wish that has no guarantee of fulfillment. The subjunctive mood gives speakers the ability to converse about the uncertain (or imagined) and, I argue, to think and act on the uncertain as well.

Phantasia also must be considered as a human faculty, one that differs from idle or creative imagination. This is critical for understanding fictional narrative's ability to influence judgment, something discussed by Ancient rhetoric scholars such as Aristotle and Quintilian. Labeling *phantasia* as a "faculty" likens it to other Aristotelian faculties, such as reason.[25] The word "faculty" is the key to differentiating between idle imagination and *phantasia*.[26] While "faculty" connotes a necessary cognitive element, imagination often is equated with unfocused cognition or mere entertainment. I understand *phantasia* to be an active human mental capacity used to make judgments or inspire actions, a position aligned

with scholars like Michele Kennerly. In her work on "rhetorical transport," Kennerly

discussed this aspect of *phantasia,* arguing for its ability to inspire individuals to real-life

action in the present or future.[27] I accept this assertion about *phantasia* and furthermore

note *phantasia*'s interaction with persuasion.

  Though similar, *phantasia* and persuasion are not synonymous but are, instead,

symbiotic. If *phantasia* is its own faculty, persuasion needs *phantasia* to work when the

world that a speaker envisions is not immediately visible or present to the audience.

Without persuasion, *phantasia* reduces down to idle imagination, but without *phantasia*

certain acts of persuasion become difficult or even impossible, because the outcome remains

too uncertain to facilitate action. For example, when discussing Cicero's vilification of

Verres in *In Verrem* I, Kennerly demonstrated how Cicero used *phantasia* and persuasion

both: *phantasia* helped jurors make judgments about the uncertain and persuasion helped

argue for the "truth" of the court case at hand.[28] Though the concepts are different, they

necessarily worked together to inspire both a judgment and action, in this case, against

Verres. For the purposes of this thesis, I choose to modernize, in a sense, *phantasia*'s

relationship with persuasion, expanding the term to include influence on *episteme* and how

public perceptions of reality, history, and memory operate.[29]

  To illustrate my understanding of *phantasia*'s ability to influence perceptions of

reality in simple terms, consider a minister delivering a sermon about the consequences of

sin. In the sermon, she argues that extramarital sex is a sin that will send you to Hell, and

she describes the horrors of Hell in detail for her congregation. Even though her

parishioners have not been to Hell, the minister's description paints a picture that her

congregants use to imagine the horrors of Hell. Hell, in that moment, becomes "visible" to

the church-goers. It is not a realm of uncertainty or possibility, but an actual place where suffering and pain exists externally. The parishioners, at least those who actively engage the *phantasia,* may then choose to alter their current behaviors to avoid going to Hell in the future. The minister is persuading her audience not to sin and inspiring them to use their faculty of *phantasia* to make a decision about the present and future based solely on this potentiality she placed "before their eyes."

This notion of "bringing before the eyes" is a feature of *phantasia* that appeared frequently in the writings of Aristotle and other Ancients. The "eyes," in the Aristotelian sense, refer to the external as well as the internal (mind's) eye. Debra Hawhee argued that both the internal and external eyes play a part in *phantasia.* She explained this distinction further by talking about the differences between visual rhetoric and what she called rhetorical vision or "the visual work of rhetoric and language, the complex ways that words—oral or written—form perception."[30] Hawhee's stance on "sight" and *phantasia* aligns with Ned O'Gorman's; both argued that images (photos, film, etc.) can be useful for *phantasia*, but these mediated objects are not *necessary* for *phantasia* to function nor are the two mutually exclusive.[31] Hawhee acknowledged Cara A. Finnegan's "Recognizing Lincoln" as a study that unified the rhetorical vision of *phantasia* with a mediated text, for example. It is this mediated version of "bringing before the eyes" that is most useful for this thesis.

It is beyond question that *phantasia* has operated outside the strictly visual for centuries, but the expansion of *phantasia* through modern mediated texts also deserves credit and further exploration. Visual rhetoric scholar Cara Finnegan explored how concrete images (daguerreotypes) of young Abraham Lincoln created "image vernaculars," or

enthymematic springboards, that allowed viewers to make judgments about who Lincoln was as a man.[32] While Finnegan herself did not align her project with *phantasia*, Hawhee recognized that Finnegan's work highlights a valuable interaction between concrete image and *phantasia*. [33] I find Finnegan's work (and its pertinence to *phantasia*) useful in two ways. First, she articulated a striking example of the imaginative potentials within mediated texts, something I extend out to film in this thesis. Second, understanding the mediated text as an enthymeme opens space for *phantasia*. Linking the enthymeme in mediated texts with *phantasia* may give rhetoricians a new way to consider the ways films (and other art or pop cultural objects) invite readers to see more in a text than is explicitly presented on-screen. While this project will discuss this at length in the chapters to follow, one may consider it simply: even if filmmakers did not include President Clinton in *Contact* to try to change viewers' perception of Clinton (which likely was not their purpose), viewers' perception may still be altered by the president's involvement in a fictional plot. In the absence of narrative fidelity, *phantasia* steps in, inviting the audience to fill in a set of enthymematic logics that make room for President Clinton's reassuringly positive press event about extra-terrestrial, alien life forms that have sent a unique message to earth's inhabitants.

Narrative and *phantasia* act as the dominant conceptual framework for this study of how fictional films with a historical presidential character can facilitate new understandings of the U.S. president among viewers. In my analysis of the selected films, I consider narrative and *phantasia* interactively. I posit that *phantasia* in fictional film[34] relies on breaks in narrative rationality to open space for imaginative speculation and that narrative relies on *phantasia* in such films to bridge the gaps these breaks create in a way that

reimagines the president. Considering these concepts as interactive gives both concepts increased rhetorical power.

Scope

As I stated previously, many hundreds of films feature historical United States' presidents; consequently, I need to focus my project and establish boundaries that are both defensible and productive. While biopics of actual events and presidents and films that feature fictional presidents reveal much, I am limiting my scope to recent fictional films that contain real presidents. I have decided to focus on movies released in the last 25 years[35] because I believe that since the 1980s, the lines between entertainment, popular culture, and perceived presidential *ethos* have become increasingly blurry. Presidents as early as George Washington were rearticulated into popular culture in ways that were far from flattering. Nevertheless, when an actor can become president (à la Ronald Reagan) and uses his theatrical gifts as part of his presidential power or when a president or presidential candidate appears on late-night talk shows to play the saxophone or shoot a basketball, then something has begun to shift. I think this shift is evident both in how presidents intentionally use popular culture and in how presidents are used in today's fictional movie plots. Concerns over decorum, presidential authority, and "respect for the office" do not seem to have the same weight that they once did or, perhaps more accurately, they are not as widespread. As presidents have strategically involved themselves in popular culture for their own political gain, I contend that movies have increased their appropriation of past and current presidents for their own purposes, purposes that are primarily financial but that impact our understanding and appreciation of the presidency.

Furthermore, I am choosing to study fictional films that contain real presidents, because I contend that the juxtaposition between (1) fictional plots, events, and histories and (2) the personae of real, historical presidents provides an especially useful place to consider the powerful interplay of narrative and *phantasia*. In a biopic, audiences often become concerned with issues of historical accuracy, and the "misrepresentation" of a president's action or historical context becomes a reason for dismissing the movie's quality and resisting its influence.[36] In a purely fictional film with fictional presidents, no real connection is expected between the movie and the presidency. That is, audience members are not encouraged to re-envision a particular president or even the presidency. They may leave the theatre saying, "Wow, Harrison Ford made a good president," but the audience is unlikely to reflect on the presidency or their relationship to the president, because Harrison Ford did not play an actual president. In contrast to the biopic and the fully fictional president, fictional films with actual historical presidents invite audiences to a new world, a new set of imaginings in which "known" presidents with "understood" character qualities are put in contexts that did not happen. Watching how a president responds to and behaves in these fictionalized situations becomes an opportunity to fantasize about a real leader, potentially altering or extending the audience's perceptions of that president or reshaping the relationship citizens perceive they have with their president.

For example, I acknowledge that audiences likely do not believe that George W. Bush smokes marijuana on his ranch in Texas as he does in *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay*. Nevertheless, the fictional, absurd behavior of President Bush in that movie *does* extend many of the character qualities that Americans suspect of the 43rd president: the "bro" or frat-boy image that plagued candidate Bush during the first election

cycle; the suspicion that Dick Cheney was the real power in the Oval Office; the idea that Bush did not enjoy and sometimes even avoided the responsibilities of the presidency; the secret thought that Bush would have preferred to be "kickin' it" with some slacker stoners like Harold and Kumar. This film acts out for audiences all of these suspicions, allowing for fantasies about how we imagine President Bush and what it might be like to meet him "in his own element." Free of the constraints and duties of the Oval Office, the "fantasy" George W. Bush articulated in *Harold & Kumar* becomes a pot-smoking frat-boy slacker who can clean up another bro's international mess with just a phone call. This is the terrain—the area between recognized fictions and presumed reality—that my study examines.

As previously stated, I focus on twelve, American-made, feature-length/cinema-released movies from the past 25 years. Each film features one or many U.S. presidents as characters in either purely fictional or contrived historical plots (e.g., the Civil War fought by vampires). The twelve films span the generic range from comedy to drama to a hybrid of both (also called "dramedy"). They also include both high- and low-budget productions and exist in both color and black-and-white. There are nearly countless examples of actual presidents appearing as characters in television series (*Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park* are constant contributors), and scholars would do well to explore this medium. For this project, however, I am not examining the "small screen." Not only would the inclusion of television expand the project beyond the traditional confines of a Master's thesis, but the format, production process, and material economies of television do not map well with the elements that constrain Hollywood movies.

I utilize a number of methods and strategies to explore these films. The first step to my process was extended exposure. I scrutinized each film by watching it from start to finish at least two complete times. Each viewing was accompanied by extensive note taking. As my interest in these artifacts lay in the messages they may send to audiences, I wanted the films to "speak for themselves," allowing the films to dictate their criteria for analysis rather than imposing my own criteria on them.[37] I used the multiple viewings and corresponding notes to mark emergent patterns in the films as a group. Two distinctive patterns emerged: (1) *phantasia*-influenced portrayals of access to the president and (2) opportunities to use *phantasia* to resolve violations of narrative rationality—often complicated by the use of fictionalized "realism" in the films—thereby allowing the audience to negotiate known facts and real histories with imagined, fictional events and behaviors.

To supplement the broader research questions and to better guide the project as a whole, a number of questions shape each specific area of inquiry. For example, what circumstances govern who accesses the president in these fictions? What does non-traditional access suggest to viewers about their relationship with the president? Does this film manipulate real, historical footage of the president? If so, how does using such techniques combine narrative and *phantasia* to invite the audiences toward altered or even new understandings of the president? These and numerous other questions help produce a thorough exploration of the historical president as a character in fictional film.

Rationale

Up to this point, I have hinted at why this study is worth doing. Now that I have identified the scope, research questions, and theoretical concepts that guide my analysis, I would like to be explicit about the contributions and goals of this project, Specifically, I would like to identify two equally important rationales for this project.

First, this project seeks to make a unique contribution to multiple, ongoing conversations in rhetoric. I examine two popular areas of inquiry for contemporary rhetoricians: presidential studies and the articulation of Classical concepts such as *phantasia* through modern rhetorical objects.[38] Using fictional films featuring historical president characters as analytical objects will extend conversations on presidential studies, a branch of rhetoric that does not widely utilize film for analysis. As I will elaborate in greater detail in the following chapters, numerous studies focus their interests on the president in popular culture, but few explicitly concern themselves with the historical president in fictional film. Thus, this project both fits into the conversation about the president in popular culture while, simultaneously, introducing some innovation. I also hope to introduce new perspectives on this interplay of narrative and *phantasia*, extending the scholarship on both concepts and putting them into conversation with one another. Furthermore, because I explore theories and artifacts appealing to different subsets of scholarship, this study can appeal and be useful to a wide audience of scholars, including presidential theorists, scholars of narrative and *phantasia*, and rhetoricians looking to explore a rhetorical concept through a film text. For a wider rhetorical audience, this thesis will be useful not only in exploring movies and presidents in a unique way (through imaginaries), but just as importantly in its attempts to

understand what these imaginaries are doing. Pursuing a multifaceted approach allows the study to have a wider reach and, hopefully, a longer shelf life.

Second, this project not only explores public perception of the "the most powerful man in the world," but it also lends itself to a rhetorical understanding of how fictional stories can create new imaginations of reality. Fictional movies exist in the realm of fantasy and imagination. Though imagination is by no means reality, the faculty of *phantasia* allows people to make judgments about reality based on the imagined. NBC's *The West Wing* was immensely popular during its seven seasons on television, and even though it has been off the air for more than seven years, people still voice their support for fictional President Jed Bartlet. A recent *Wired* article compared the current, real-life government shutdown with the Bartlet administration's handling of the fictional shutdown in season five.[39] The article juxtaposes President Bartlet's behavior during the fictional shutdown with the real-life behavior of President Obama and the current Congress to highlight the partisan stubbornness at work in our real-life shutdown situation. Even though Bartlet—and all his intelligence, suave handling of Congress, and savvy staff—is completely fictional, he is often a standard by which the American public judges the real-life U.S. president.   Fiction has the potential to influence lived reality, and a study that explores how this actually works is certainly of great value, both to scholarship and daily life.

Chapter Previews

Chapter two of this thesis, "The President As and In Popular Culture," explores the history of the American president in popular culture and his history as popular culture. Popular culture itself has long looked to the presidency as a source for inspiration.

Numerous books, television shows, and films have explored the historical lives and times of different presidents, created new dramas with fictional presidents, and (most relevant to this project) cast historical presidents into fictional roles. Thus, the president becomes a role *in* popular culture. Additionally, the modern presidency in many capacities has been a popular culture office, making the president a veritable celebrity in the public eye. The historical American presidency also held high pop cultural standing, very often through presidential kitsch. Thus, the presidency acts *as* popular culture. Both the "in" and the "as" are important to this study and are explored at great length in chapter one.

Chapter three, "The President-as-Character in Fictional Film," analyzes ten of the twelve films on which this project focuses. Each of the ten films features a historical U.S. president in fictional situations or plots. Such roles include Franklin Roosevelt's musical showstopper with Little Orphan Annie in *Annie* and Nixon's conspiring with masked vigilante, The Comedian, to assassinate JFK, assume the presidency, and ultimately serve five terms in office in *Watchmen*. In examining these films, I look to the different means of access to the president and the different methods the movies use to achieve a realistic feel. In this chapter, I am particularly concerned with the ways *phantasia* interacts with narrative to help viewers make judgments about reality.

Chapter four, "Hail to the Vampire Hunter: Entelechy and the President-as-Action-Hero in Supernatural Fiction," focuses on the final two films, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!*. These two movies act as the entelechy—or the dynamic movement towards the *telos*—of the historical president in fictional film, as well as demonstrate the limits of *phantasia*. The films re-explain two major periods of American history—the Civil War and the start of World War II—through the supernatural and cast the

president as the only hero capable of physically delivering the nation from utter ruin. I add

the concept of entelechy to narrative and *phantasia* to explore the implications of such

extreme presidential imaginaries. This chapter considers these two films holistically, as well

as marshaling the same framework as the previous chapter—fantasies of presidential access

and narrative and *phantasia* in suggesting realism. Chapter five, the concluding chapter of

this thesis, draws major conclusions, explores scholarly implications of the research, and

makes recommendations for future research on this subject.

The president's role in American life always has been a multifaceted one, and the

United States presidency is not simply an office of governance. I believe that the president

is also a cartoon character singing a show tune, a hero or anti-hero in a novel, or even a

machine gun-wielding warrior who uses silver bullets to mow down the werewolves that

threaten America's future. Casting historical American presidents into fictional roles—

whether slightly authentic like *Forrest Gump* or totally off-the-wall like *FDR: American

Badass!*—uses narrative to "bring before the eyes" of viewers an opportunity to see their

presidents in different ways. Audiences can see their Commander-in-Chief as someone who

loves classic romance, as someone with a sweet tooth for cookies, as someone whom

Chance may one day allow them to meet. By putting these fantasies before viewers' eyes,

fictional films featuring a historical president as a character present a fascinating new

perspective for inquiry worthy of scholarly attention.

Notes

1 BMTPTrailerCentralV4, "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter (Theatrical Trailer 1),"
YouTube, 20 March 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guW0sVDECY4>.

2 *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*, directed by Timur Bekmambetov, 2012.

3 Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Philadelphia: Quirk Books, 2009). This author, Seth Grahame-Smith, also conceptualized *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*.

4 Aisha Harris, Natalie Matthews-Ramo, and Katie Kilkenny, "Presidents in Movies: The All-Time Leader Board," *Slate*, 8 November 2012,
<http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/
11/08/presidents_in_movies_which_american_president_appears_in_the_most_films.html>.

5 *Lincoln*, directed by Steven Spielberg, 2012.

6 *National Treasure: Book of Secrets*, directed by John Turteltaub, 2007.

7 Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 60.

8 Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archive*,
http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.11.x.html. Aristotle echoed and extended his teacher's thoughts on the reality/narrative split. For his stance, see Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, introduction by Edward P.J. Corbett (New York: The Modern Library, 1984).

9 Jeffrey Walker, *Rhetoric and Poetics in Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10 (for example).

10 Ibid 165.

11 Walker, chapter 6: "Lyric Enthymemes," 154-84.

12 Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 8-9.

13 See for example Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic, "Fictionality and Perceived Realism in Experiencing Stories: A Model of Narrative Comprehension and Engagement," *Communication Theory* 18 (2008), 255-80; Seymour Feshbach, "The Role of Fantasy in the Response to Television," *Journal of Social Issues* 32.4 (1976), 71-85; Richard J. Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds: On the Psychological Activities of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

14 Scholes and Kellogg 8.

[15] Ibid 3. While this book is dated, it had enough influence at its time to be considered within this thesis. Furthermore, studies of narrative would be remiss without consideration for this work and Scholes's wider contributions. A "fortieth anniversary edition" of this book was published in 2006 after Robert Kellogg had passed away. James Phelan was added as an author, contributing his own preface and a concluding chapter, "Narrative Theory 1966-2006: A Narrative," which explored how narrative progressed over the forty years past. See Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative: Revised and Expanded (Fortieth Anniversary Edition*) (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[16] Ibid 12-15.

[17] Scholes made similar claims to those in *The Nature of Narrative* in his *Structural Fabulation*. See, for example, chapter three of Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation: An Essay on the Fiction of the Future* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 45-75. Ibid 84-85.

[18] The sizeable conversation on polysemy is not within the scope of this thesis. A brief definition, however, may be gleaned from Leah Ceccarelli, who defined polysemy, stating: "with polysemy, distinct meaning exist for a text, and they are identifiable by the critic, the rhetor, or the audience" (395). A polysemous text is one that can be interpreted differently by different audiences; essentially, the same text gives more than one message. Leah Ceccarelli, "Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 84.4 (1998), 395-415. Also see William G. Kirkwood, "Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992), 33-34.

[19] Scholes and Kellogg 82.

[20] Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 47.

[21] In conversing with her about Fisher's narrative paradigm, Dr. Rosa Eberly called it a "master-narrative *about* narrative." Robert Rowland expressed his concerns about the scope of the narrative paradigm as well. See Robert Rowland, "Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 39-41.

[22] Fisher 64-65.

[23] Rowland 51. William G. Kirkwood shared a similar stance on Fisher. He pointed out another limitation of the theory as a whole: that Fisher seemed to imply that people will only accept stories that satisfy both narrative probability and fidelity, something Kirkwood identified as problematic for understanding what rhetoric can do to alter perceptions.

[24] Kirkwood 30-47.

[25] Dorothea Frede problematized the idea of *phantasia* as a singular or unified concept. She understood *phantasia* as a multi-definitional word, similar to the English word "sight," in its

ability to act as a "capacity" (if you can see, you have the capacity for sight), an "activity or process" (you are using your sight to read these words) and as a "product or result" (you take in the breathtaking sight of the Grand Canyon). Thus, *phantasia*, considered as faculty, is the ability to imagine, imagining, and what we have imagined. This tripartite definition of *phantasia* is thought-provoking, but in this thesis I will not focus on *phantasia* in its three Fredean parts. To use her terminology, I consider *phantasia* mostly as a capacity (that is, films create space for that capacity which can then be the process or the product). See Dorothea Frede, "The Cognitive Role of *Phantasia* in Aristotle," in *Essays on Aristotle's* De Anima, eds. Martha C. Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 279.

[26] Ned O'Gorman argued similarly in noting the differences between *phantasia* and idle imagination. See Ned O'Gorman, "Aristotle's *Phantasia* in the *Rhetoric*: *Lexis*, Appearance, and the Epideictic Function of Discourse," *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 38.1 (2005), 16-40. Kenneth Burke also engaged the difference between *phantasia* and idle imagination. He cited Aristotle himself as well as Pico Della Mirandola as he noted that reason intervenes with *phantasia* to help inform (or stay) judgments/actions based on it, whereas reason does not always intervene with mere imagination. See Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 80.

[27] Kennerly, Michele, "Getting Carried Away: How Rhetorical Transport Gets Judgment Going," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 40.3 (2010), 269-291.

[28] Ibid 272.

[29] Classical thought tied *phantasia* to traditional notions of persuasion, in which persuasion would lead to action. In most literature on *phantasia*, *phantasia* is said to influence "judgment or action." While traditional conceptions of these terms within rhetorical theory are doubtless valuable to scholars, I contend that *phantasia* is applicable beyond such fixed terms. By considering how *phantasia* may influence public knowledge or perception, this concept may have a wider applicability to more modern definitions of persuasion within rhetoric.

[30] Debra Hawhee, "Looking Into Aristotle's Eyes: Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Vision," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 14 (2011), 140.

[31] O'Gorman 19 and Hawhee 139-165.

[32] After viewing daguerreotypes of Lincoln, 19th century viewers made inferences about Lincoln's personality traits and other non-physical attributes, drawing such conclusions from their knowledge of physiognomy and phrenology and the legacy of Lincoln. See Cara A. Finnegan, "Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.1 (2005), 34.
[33] Hawhee 140-41.

[34] I speculate that this assertion is applicable to other forms of fictions and perhaps even to other forms of communication. However, the focus and scope of this project limits my ability (and comfort) in asserting such generalizability at this time.

[35] This description excludes *The Littlest Rebel* (1935). Though it is from an earlier time in film, it fits the generic patterns of the other films selected in addition to presenting viewers with an earlier version of a concept gaining ever more popularity it contemporary film.

[36] The 1944 film *Wilson* may come to mind here. Watching it today, sticking to the historical facts becomes subordinate to the "reverence for the presidency" in a way that, as the film concludes, is nearly comical.

[37] I align this choice with a form of analysis discussed by Edwin Black in a 1980 article. In the article, Black interrogated the differences between "etic" criticism ("which approaches a rhetorical transaction from outside of that transaction and interprets the transaction in terms of a pre-existing theory") and "emic" criticism ("which approaches a rhetorical transaction in what is hoped to be its own terms, without conscious expectations drawn from any sources other than the rhetorical transaction itself"). He argued that an emic approach allows the rhetorical critic to shape the theory as the endpoint of the analysis the text itself has yielded. See Edwin Black, "A Note on Theory and Practice in Rhetorical Criticism," *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980), 331-32. For more on Black's etic/emic distinction in rhetoric, see Michael C. Leff, "Interpretation and the Art of the Rhetorical Critic," *The Western Journal of Speech Communication* 44 (1980), 337-49.

[38] For example, during her 2012 job-talk at Penn State, Michele Kennerly presented her work, "The Mantel of Colbert, The Mantle of Cato" (originally debuted at the 2012 Rhetoric Society of America conference) in which she framed her discussion of a classical figure, Cato, through the pop cultural icon of the "mantel" from *The Colbert Report*.

[39] Graeme McMillan, "What *The West Wing* Can Teach Us About the Government Shutdown," *Wired* 3 October 2013, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2013/10/west-wing-government-shutdown/?mbid=social12695104>.

Chapter 2

The President In and As Popular Culture

In the age of *Twitter* and reality TV, educators unfortunately must resign themselves to the fact that students are far more likely to know who Kim Kardashian is than who General George Armstrong Custer was. Citizens of the United States, particularly young adults or adolescents, are more likely to satiate their entertainment craving through mediated gossip about the (currently) rich and famous than through a stodgy, historical account of a nineteenth-century U.S. Army general. The social columns in newspapers, reality TV shows, and proliferation of gossip programs not only provide the subject of America's popular culture craving, they affirm and reaffirm the "importance" of such entertainment. Yet as much as we hunger for "real" information, we also love to flex our imaginations. On occasion, the gossip magazines and tabloid press will include stories about the politically powerful, and, in the United States, few are as powerful as the Commander-in-Chief. Indeed, the companies and individuals that constitute the popular culture "industry" in the United States have a rich tradition of creating imaginaries about presidents.

Popular culture is a 'popular' term used by scholars and the general public alike, but it isn't easily defined. The Oxford English Dictionary defines popular culture as "the cultural traditions of the ordinary people of a particular community." Being "of the ordinary people," popular culture often connotes "low" taste or "commonness." For example, the art curated by the Smithsonian is of high taste, whereas TLC's *Here Comes Honey Boo-Boo* is of low taste. While this definition seems straightforward, the distinctions made by the OED are not as easily sustained as one might first believe. For example, how does one classify

Bob Ross's *The Joy of Painting* on PBS? This show brings to viewers the high tastes of learning to paint through the "low" medium of an entertainment television show.[1] It is thus important to understand that, though popular culture may connote commonness, it may be counter-productive to approach popular culture as a distinction between high and low, between common and elite.

For the sake of this project, I approach the notion of popular culture as the synthesis of cultural artifacts that reach a wide public audience, artifacts that encourage audiences to engage in both private and public consumption, and artifacts that sustain a community of shared experience despite the fact that members of the community often do not know or relate to one another in any significant manner. Furthermore, one must note that the norms of popular culture develop contextually. In other words, popular culture norms link closely with the "when" and "where" of the individuals who produce and consume the popular culture of a given time. Today, such artifacts are inextricably linked to the mass media. As media scholar Michael R. Real noted, "Media invade our living space, shape the taste of those around us, inform and persuade us on products and policies, intrude into our private dreams and public fears, and, in turn, invite us to inhabit them."[2] The notion that people who do not know each other personally but all engage cultural artifacts more or less collectively actually *create* a common or shared *habitus* is essential to the notion of popular culture that I embrace. As Real argued, popular culture is often manifest in mediated form, but it moves well beyond the mediated form itself to a world of symbols, ideas, and values. This chapter is particularly interested in how popular culture becomes a common site of the negotiation of political ideas and understandings of the president.

John Hartley noted that the ability of something like Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* to spread to a vast audience of common persons clearly demonstrates one dimension of popular culture.[3] Sheer popularity is often a factor in naming something "popular" culture, but one should understand the empirical status of popularity as a secondary component when compared to how the circulation of an artifact sustains a community of "the popular." For the purposes of this chapter, that "community" is "we, the people," the citizens of the United States governed by the elected president. To be clear, I am not arguing that every citizen of the United States must have personal experience of a cultural artifact before it is understood to be part of our political popular culture. Rather, I am arguing that the widespread public circulation and consumption of artifacts maintains and sustains a community that is often mapped on top of U.S. citizens generally and each citizen's relationship to the State, specifically. Thus, references to presidential popular culture in this chapter refer to the rhetorical means by which the people "interact" with the historical or contemporary U.S. president. A giant novelty penny featuring Lincoln's visage would be as much a part of presidential popular culture as a White House paperweight and the historical presidential character on television, in a book, or on the big screen. Presidential involvement in mass media also would fall under this definition. As "news" media becomes ever more entertainment focused, presidential appearances on television and other media often align more with the "Bill Clinton the saxophonist" entertainer than the Lincoln/Douglas model of deliberative democracy. Presidential popular culture helps mediate the people's understanding of their president as they interact with such popular culture, and presidents may influence and be influenced by this same popular culture.

From decorative lanterns to pin-on badges to playing cards to Halloween masks and nearly anything else one can think of, presidents have been regular features of popular imagination since the earliest years of the Republic. Presidential kitsch was a hallmark of elections from the late 1800s through the late 1900s. Other important facets of older elections included musical jingles and catchy slogans.[4] Even the estates of those who held the highest executive office were, and in many cases continue to be, an architectural popular culture reminder of presidents' legacies.

More recently, U.S. television has featured the president in its programming. Programs like *The West Wing*, *1600 Penn*, *House of Cards*, and *Political Animals* feature plots that focus on the lives and goings-on of fictional presidents and presidential candidates, often with a particular spin towards the personal elements of their lives. But not all televised presidents are fictional. Other programs focus on the real-life presidents and First Families. Historical and biographical programs continue to enjoy airtime popularity. For example, in February 2013, *The History Channel* featured programs that ranged from Civil War documentaries, to biographies of Mary Todd, to conspiracy theory programs about Lincoln's assassination.[5] *The History Channel* itself is a remarkable blend between history and popular culture as it marshals historical, or historically based, narrative for popular cultural purposes. Thus, even though *The History Channel* offers viewers a great deal of Lincoln history, its mediated programs, its financial goals, the widespread consumption of its artifacts, and, finally, its capacity to create a common community of American interested citizens transforms historical narratives into the substance of a political popular culture. In this culture, *The Bible* dramatic mini-series resides next to a fictionalized portrayal of anti-heroes Bonnie & Clyde and an exploration of the conspiracies surrounding

JFK's assassination. No significant distinction between these artifacts is offered and none seems required, because they meld together into a more or less coherent popular culture that audiences seem to love.

This chapter examines the primary and secondary literatures involving the relationship between the presidency and popular culture artifacts. This relationship is so extensive that an initial consideration of that relationship is necessary before the subsequent chapters can address the specific phenomenon of how fictional movies portray historical presidents. In the pages that follow, I first explore the ways that U.S. presidents— particularly early presidents—were rearticulated as popular culture icons. These rearticulations, I argue, blurred the lines between hagiography, entertainment, commercialization, and moral education. After I address examples that involve early presidents, I turn my attention to presidents in television and film. As the visual media of film and television evolved in the twentieth century, characterizations of the president continued and, I contend, expanded to meet the needs of a new visual medium. I conclude with some observations about the relationship between popular culture and the presidency that will leverage my analyses in chapters three and four.

<div align="center">

The President *as* Popular Culture

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The president's role *as* popular culture is not a new one. Early presidents were "pop-culturized" as much as modern presidents, though often via different media. Early presidents like Washington, Adams, and Jefferson were popular with the people not only for their presidencies, but also for their role as Founding Fathers. In the popular cultural record, this popularity was best recorded through painting and sculpture.[6] Hanna Miller suggested,

however, that the earliest presidents and presidential candidates might have actively tried to avoid the commercial side of popular culture, specifically trinkets and memorabilia, in an effort to protect the office from abuse.[7] That is, the presidents feared that a commercialized representation would taint both the honorable image of the presidency and, perhaps, undermine a political culture that professed to eschew celebrity in favor of democratic representation and deliberation. In the early Republic, there was little room for the celebrity president, though it is difficult, in retrospect, to understand George Washington as anything other than that.

Dana D. Nelson asserted that the formation of public perception of the president—both the literal president of the day and the synecdochal president, the representative of the U.S. government—is nearly as old as the United States itself. She stated, "[George] Washington was created as an action hero within a few years of his death."[8] To illustrate this, Nelson included in her book a photograph of a statue of Washington in which only the head looks like Washington while the body—from build to posture to garb—is that of Zeus.[9] Nelson posited that the popular press of the early Republic was instrumental in inventing the notion that the U.S. government could not exist without a president.[10] Contrary to at least some Founders' wish that Congress and, in particular, the Senate be viewed as the seat of American power, the presidency came to embody the very character of the nation. Miller argued that even if presidents individually resisted the lure of popular media attention, these presidents' images were appropriated soon after their deaths. She wrote that "christening cups, snuff boxes, tankards, and fawning biographies," and portraiture were only the tip of a larger iceberg that, for a growing American culture, found both community and profit in presidential memorabilia.[11]

By the mid-nineteenth century, the invention of photography brought a new dimension to the relationship between popular culture and the presidency. For example, Cara A. Finnegan discussed how a reprinted version of the earliest daguerreotype of Lincoln in an 1895 issue of *McClure's* magazine prompted numerous letters to the editor exclaiming how, within the face of young Lincoln, viewers could see the virtuous leader they knew and loved.[12] Finnegan explored how photography in the nineteenth century allowed everyday people not only to see their leader, but also to be active participants in the *mythos* of presidential leadership and of specific leaders like Lincoln. By claiming that they can see in young Lincoln's face evidence that he would grow to be a great man and a great leader, letters to the editor writers used their knowledge of older Lincoln as a lens through which to reflect upon young Lincoln. Furthermore, these letter writers employed the then "popular" sciences of physiognomy and phrenology to strengthen the *mythos* of Lincoln and to demonstrate their apparently deep, personal knowledge of him.

Ritual events and innovations in literature and fiction were also important parts of nineteenth-century popular culture and its representation of presidents. Barry Schwartz argued that presidential funerals—particularly that of Lincoln—were of national and social importance.[13] Not only were these events covered in newspapers of the time, but they also were hugely attended.[14] Photography of these events likewise gained in popularity.[15] Photographs of national events simultaneously commemorated the event and granted a form of access to the event. That is, even if one could not attend the funeral parade for Lincoln, one could demonstrate devotion to Lincoln and his memory by displaying a photograph of that parade in one's home.

Merrill D. Peterson recounted the proclivity of literature by and about early presidents—particularly Jefferson.[16] This type of literature existed as popular culture in that it was consumed by the people in the hopes of gaining more intimate knowledge of their former leader and Founding Father. Novels in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries continued to marshal presidents to expand their plots. For example, *George Washington's Horse Slept Here* (1956) takes both its title and many major plotlines and character traits from the Washington *mythos*.[17] More recently, the *American Girl* books—novels that tell the stories of the company's historical dolls—also make frequent reference to presidents contemporary to the characters. The story that accompanies the first *American Girl* doll, Felicity, reveres George Washington, whereas the doll Addy and her mother, as escaped slaves, idolize Lincoln, and Samantha's tale addresses, in part, the Depression and FDR's New Deal.

Presidential estates and their accompanying collections also at times served as popular culture. Malcolm Kelsall suggested that "pilgrimages to Monticello" were "romantic and quasi-religious." Many dignitaries of the day regularly flocked to Jefferson's home.[18] Other estates of early presidents—such as Washington's Mount Vernon, Adams's estate at Peace field, and Madison's Montpelier—were similar to Monticello in their draw.[19] These places are more than architecturally intriguing; these buildings endure as physical testament to the memory of the Founding Fathers.[20] However, gift shops truly facilitate presidential popular culture in these historical locations. Visitors like my seven-year-old self to Monticello can leave with a wildly overpriced bag of marbles branded with likeness of the estate and a seal reading "Thomas Jefferson's Monticello." The architecture itself, a representation of the president, in this way takes on a kitschy, popular cultural form.

Andrew Jackson was the first president to insert himself purposely into popular culture through campaign memorabilia, upsetting tradition as he did in numerous other instances, and incidentally beginning the trend of pin-on campaign badges.[21] Knickknacks associated with presidents—campaign buttons, coloring books, and action figures—soon became a normal and expected part of political popular culture.[22] Lincoln memorabilia was particularly popular in the nineteenth century for both (re-)election and commemorative purposes. Lincoln knickknacks ranged from paper parade lanterns and scrimshaw portraits to badges and boxes of "Mary Lincoln" candy.[23] One particularly interesting artifact is a bronzed plaster casting of Lincoln's right hand, distributed as memorabilia in the 1860s by sculptor Leonard Volk.[24] Volk turned a profit off this sculpture: Purchasers were able to touch, virtually, the very hand of their leader—a leader elevated to near demi-god status by popular memory after his death. Lincoln also inspired a number of musical pieces and songs.[25]

Even teddy bears originated as presidential popular culture. When rumors surfaced—at the hands of political cartoonist Clifford Berryman—that Theodore Roosevelt had spared an aged bear from being killed for sport,[26] shopkeeper Morris Michtom got presidential permission to call his stuffed toy bears "Teddy's Bears."[27] While most of us have owned at least one teddy bear for some portion of our life, few people realize that this popular children's toy is actually an example of presidential popular culture. Furthermore, the teddy bear consolidated the *mythos* of Teddy Roosevelt into a cuddly piece of popular culture that could easily enter American homes. In its original iteration, the teddy bear was a symbol of TR's rugged yet compassionate personality. Today, even though "Teddy's" origin story has faded from commonplace knowledge, teddy bears are, at their root, an

enduring object of presidential popular culture. In general, presidential bric-a-brac took a

back seat when candidates began to use "new" media as a means to gain popular support.[28]

Just as presidents recognized the power of using these media, so too did print, radio, and

television recognize the power of using the president.

Newspapers are responsible for fueling many generations' popular obsession with

presidents' personal lives. Elliot King noted that presidents as early as Grover Cleveland

played party to a host of newspaper reporters on important personal occasions like

weddings.[29] After Cleveland's wedding, newspapers featured articles not only on the

wedding but also on the bride's hairstyle and the city that served as the honeymoon

destination.[30] Not only were the president's political decisions and official actions made

known to the interested public, but newspapers also were anxious to discuss his personal life

and that of his family.

Dana Nelson argued that new media of the 1930s and 40s blended mythologized

former presidents into superhuman roles. She wrote:

> In the era that FDR accomplished the transition to the modern presidency through the crises of the
>
> Great Depression and World War II, the nation also began its pop-culture love affair with superheroes
>
> of every order, in novels, cartoon magazines, radio, television, and movies. The mythical associations
>
> of iconic dead presidents fused to real-world crises and popularly trained desires to transform civic
>
> expectations for real-world, living presidents.[31]

Former presidents became superheroes, raising expectations for current presidents. FDR,

she argued, worked to encourage the people to believe that his power was extraordinary.

FDR worked with this popular belief to help increase his own popularity, rather than

inventing new narratives about himself to accomplish this goal.

Becoming president, since the office's inception, has been a difficult and competitive endeavor. Perhaps excepting George Washington, never in U.S. history has the entire nation united around a single candidate for the job. Many factors contribute to the "electability" of a person to the presidency, from such obvious qualifications as political savvy and experience and the ability to handle domestic and foreign affairs to other perhaps less obvious traits.

While it is neither a guarantee of success nor a ubiquitous trait of those who have become president, being likeable is a characteristic many former presidents have possessed—and one that has been noticed by scholars. Books such as *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency* are dedicated entirely to the sometimes-extreme efforts of presidential hopefuls to control how the public perceives them. Of course, public perception is often mediated through some form of popular culture. Authors Richard W. Waterman, Robert Wright, and Gilbert St. Clair cited, for example, the extensive work that John F. Kennedy did to promote his image and how the public had—and continues to have—a nostalgic remembrance of this youthful, handsome president.[32] Carol B. Schwalbe suggested that the personage of Jacqueline Kennedy was crafted carefully to help further promote her husband's image and his Cold War agenda to the public.[33] Jacqueline Kennedy demonstrates how the First Lady has often been a prop, or "prop" culture, if you will, in the popular culture articulations of the president.

Arguably no president before Richard Nixon was more actively and personally dedicated to public perception and "image." Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair attributed the creation of the "image-is-everything presidency" to Nixon. Nixon was neither as young nor as handsome as Jack Kennedy; consequently, he had to work harder to establish a glowing

popular image for himself.[34] Edwin Black argued that Nixon was almost constantly "inventing himself," usually with great success.[35] Nixon did all he could to display the character and attributes he wanted the American public to see in him.[36] The public persona of Nixon dominated Nixon's "true" person.

Perceiving the president as "an Average Joe" or as someone you could "have a beer with" has evolved in to one of the most important current elements of presidential electability.[37] Appearing as an average person helped ensure the elections of presidents like "Dubya" and Jackson, whose "everyman-ness" captured America's attention—and votes.[38] William Hart quoted Joe Eszterhas who wrote, "According to some critics, Mary Matalin, who ran the Bush campaign, along with people like Lee Atwater and Roger Ailes, Bush's 'image adviser,' transformed Bush from 'an East Coast preppy into a country music-loving, pork rind-eating Texan who went down to J.C. Penney to buy himself socks.'"[39] This is symptomatic of the public's need to feel, as Roderick Hart suggested, an intimacy with their leader.[40] This craving for a relationship with the president has been present in both past and recent times and has been noted in both popular and scholarly outlets.

A study currently in progress by Bryan Blankfield, a Ph.D. candidate at Penn State University, focuses on the very different popular cultural phenomenon of "presidential pets." His work examines, among other things, the letters written to FDR's Scottish terrier, Fala, who received numerous pieces of fan mail over FDR's presidential tenure and had a considerable popular following. The ability to relate to the president through his dog ownership helped to create an aura of "normalcy" during a period when many Americans desperately needed such stability.[41]

Many generations of United States citizens have looked to the First Family to inspire their own personal lives. King wrote, "The president not only influences popular culture but his persona and, sometimes, private life has become part of the culture."[42] Mary Stuckey and Greg M. Smith agreed: "[Presidents'] hobbies can become national hobbies; their likes and dislikes can influence the behavior of the nation's citizens; their endorsement of causes can increase the attention paid to those causes and the donations they receive."[43] From which dog breed President Obama prefers to how "Lady Bird" Johnson prepared her Thanksgiving turkey to the way John or Jackie Kennedy wore their hair and far more, Americans gain a sense of intimacy with the president and First Family, whether through newsprint, radio, television, or the Internet.

Roderick Hart discussed television's ability to increase the perceived level of intimacy between the people and the president in his book *Seducing America.* He suggested, "When we become familiar with a person in these day-in and day-out ways [through television], we develop the sorts of expectations that any intimate association promises. But intimacy with a politician is a special sort of intimacy. . . . It is intellectual intimacy, not affection based. We come to *know* politicians, not necessarily to like them."[44] It is also worthwhile to note that radio accomplished the task of intimacy prior to the advent of television. One need only look to FDR's Fireside Chats to see how the intimacy of the medium helped increase Americans' perceptions of a relationship with the president.[45]

In suggesting that, even if we do not like him, we demand to know everything we can about our president, Hart highlights that transparency—particularly of character—is of the utmost importance to U.S. citizens. I believe that this craving for information about the president helps Americans feel that the space between the people and the leadership is less

than it is in reality. As a simplified example, the idea of using the same cologne as the Commander-in-Chief or the same recipe for holiday cookies as the First Lady is a tempting one. It creates a sense of equality between the president and the people, but also instills in the people a sense of access to power. Stuckey and Smith second this; they argued, "While citizens are fascinated by power and the powerful, they are also leery of that power" and thus presidents use popular culture to help strike a balance.[46] Furthermore, presidents harness their absorption in popular culture to continue the trend of creating familiarity with the people. The people can find common ground with their chief executive when the president demonstrates knowledge of some popular cultural phenomenon, such as viral videos. However, the people's perception of intimateness with their leader is not the sole contributing factor to the popularity of a president.

Aside from being generally likeable, certain traits often make candidates more or less suited for the office of the president in the popular culturally-mediated public opinion. Harold F. Bass Jr. and Charles C. Euchner stated, "Academic studies conclude that nonverbal signs, such as physical appearances, have four to ten times the effect of verbal signs on 'impression formation.'"[47] That is, the actions of presidential hopefuls often speak louder than their words. Basic charisma, as suggested by Dana Nelson, is undoubtedly one of these traits.[48]

Miller stated that military service has been an important candidate trait for U.S. voters for at least the past century, and kindliness joined the ranks as Eisenhower took office.[49] People associate military service with a host of other traits such as "tough," "strategic," "honorable," and having "good leadership qualities." King noted that newspapers helped bolster support for William Henry Harrison by highlighting his

impressive military career, his humble lodgings, and his affinity for hard cider. This helped

the "common man" relate to Harrison in a way they could not relate to Martin Van Buren.[50]

Kindliness perhaps joined the ranks of preferable presidential traits to counterbalance the

potential lack of sympathy or empathy that could come from military service, preferring

strong, yet merciful leaders.

Physical ability is another characteristic valued in presidential hopefuls, though it is

less overtly discussed today than it was in the past century. FDR, for example, went to great

lengths to avoid the exposure of his polio affliction.[51] Proving that he was physically fit

served to ensure voter confidence in his ability to govern. It is important to note that it was

the public perception of this trait that was the issue, not the trait itself. That is, FDR could

have lead as effectively sitting in a wheelchair as he could do standing up, but the voting

public did not perceive this, making FDR's (dis)ability an issue.

Furthermore, a public image of morality affects presidential hopefuls and even

presidents themselves. Andrew Jackson, for example, was accused in a newspaper of

having an affair with a married woman. The newspaper's accusation was that Jackson was

unfit to be president because he was immoral.[52] Much more recently, the Bill

Clinton/Monica Lewinsky sex scandal represented another instance of a president engaging

in behaviors that were deemed by the public to be inappropriate and unacceptable of their

leader. The results of both these accusations of adultery—be it a vote cast for the opposing

ticket, a huge drop in approval ratings, or facing impeachment for lying about the scandal—

did not reflect the president's or candidate's actual ability to execute effectively the office of

the president, but rather evidence the popular perception of the president's ability to lead.

Both the Jackson and Clinton infidelity scandals received media attention—engendering, in

the Clinton case, boundless gossip. Media, then, fostered popular understandings of these

presidents and "acceptable" presidential behavior.

The President *in* Popular Culture

In a 2013 lecture, Sanford Levinson, a scholar of the United States Constitution

stated that citizens hope their president will not only be a strong leader, but also a very

intelligent person.[53] He then said, with humor, that we tend to look to fictional President Jed

Bartlet from *The West Wing* as the model of what we wish we had. The audience laughed,

and my thoughts immediately jumped to a Twitter hashtag I have seen on more than one

occasion—"#Bartlet2016." I believe Levinson's comment fell into the nebulous realm that

exists between humor and seriousness. While the audience heard this comment as a joke

and laughed, the implications of the statement are perhaps more profound.

When considering the "most popular" presidents through the lens of public memory,

Lincoln, FDR, Kennedy, and Reagan will most certainly make the list. Surprising, though,

is the similar nostalgic longing for Jed Bartlet, a man who was only ever president of a

fictionalized United States. Blurring the boundaries of the historical and the

fictional/imagined is both a pre-existing phenomenon and one of vital importance to this

study. The idea that viewers could smile as fondly upon Bartlet's second term as they did

on the Kennedy presidency significantly demonstrates how television and film narratives

can open up the possibility of new perceptions of the "real" world.[54]

To show the public how the world could be with them as chief executive, many

presidents or presidential hopefuls in the past century look to media outlets to help augment

their chances. Whether it is newspaper, radio, television, or *YouTube*, presidents often use

the popular media outlet of the day to reach the people and their positive opinions and votes.

Presidents often insert themselves into popular culture in an attempt to increase their

electability. Lynn Spigel discussed the ways presidents and presidential candidates have

marshaled television to their side during election seasons. She recounted that President

George W. Bush endorsed numerous TV ads for his 2004 campaign that "showed historical

footage of the firefighters [of 9/11], implicitly equating their heroism with his presidency."[55]

Bush used visually striking popular culture images to relate to the public and to show that

his administration could be likened to the heroes of 9/11.

Numerous other recent presidential hopefuls attempt to harness the power of popular

culture to their own ends. One ad, sponsored by John McCain's 2008 presidential election

committee, references popular celebrities with wild streaks, i.e., Britney Spears and Paris

Hilton, alongside then Senator Barack Obama in an attempt to call his ability to lead into

question.[56] The ad calls Obama "the biggest celebrity in the world" and asks "but is he

ready to lead?" before going on to suggest why he is unfit ("higher taxes, more foreign oil").

Though the ad specifies why Obama is unfit to lead, the presence of Hilton and Spears act as

an enthymeme, prompting viewers to apply Hilton and Spears's immorality or wild behavior

to Obama.[57] This ad is particularly interesting in its subtle self-contradiction. Placing this

enthymeme before viewers, McCain seemingly dismisses the "celebrity" (or popular

cultural) president as a negative role that voters should mistrust. However, marshaling

televised media for his own purposes—and visiting a number of talk shows during his

campaign—simultaneously portrays McCain as an anti-popular culture president candidate

who still engages popular culture as a presidential hopeful. Even in his attempt to dismiss

the "celebrity" president, McCain was unable to avoid the very processes of celebrity that are essential to the modern campaign.

Even more recently, President Obama appeared in a video spoof for the White House Correspondents Dinner. In this video, Obama pretends to be method actor Daniel Day-Lewis as he is interviewed preparing for the role of Obama in the newest, fictional, Steven Spielberg film. Obama pokes fun at himself through the video. A mere two days after its 27 April 2012 upload date, the video had nearly 2.3 million views—and it is not the only copy of the video on *YouTube*.[58] In this instance, Obama inserted himself into a popular cultural outlet (viral video), pairing popular media with self-humor (laughing at himself) to make himself seem more "real" and more likeable. This video operates on the assumption that it is much easier for the people to relate to a leader with a good sense of humor than to a stuffy, tight-lipped one, and attempts to harness that for increasing the president's popularity.[59]

Popular culture, however, is not a fool-proof tool for creating presidential popularity. In their attempt to appear like "Joe Everyman," many 2012 presidential hopefuls and their running mates tried to seem relatable, but with sometimes negative or even humorous consequences. One memorable story involved a publicity stunt by Governor Mitt Romney's running mate, Representative Paul Ryan. During a visit to Youngstown, Ohio, Ryan stopped for a photo-op in the local St. Vincent de Paul soup kitchen. Photographers snapped pictures of Ryan washing dishes with the other volunteers. This would normally have been successful in demonstrating the Romney campaign's dedication to service and their ability to actively help the poor. However, the move was spoiled when the operators of St. Vincent de Paul revealed to the local newspaper and local television stations that Ryan not only came

in unannounced—violating the organization's policy of refusing to support politically motivated volunteering—but he actually only re-washed dishes that were already clean for the photo-op.[60] Popular culture, thus, can work for and against presidents as they attempt to wrangle this nebulous phenomenon.

Real presidents get plenty of attention on television, whether for good or ill, that they themselves did not orchestrate. Satire has been an integral mode of political commentary for centuries, and it continues to enjoy popularity today. Some of NBC's *Saturday Night Live*'s most memorable sketches in the past three decades, for example, have come from its political spoofs, such as Dana Carvey's and John Lovitz's George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis, Tina Fey's Sarah Palin, and Will Ferrell's George W. Bush. The tradition of imitating presidents or candidates through parody extends back almost to the show's advent.[61] Though the president is not their only source of content, *SNL* has been known both to exploit the foible of the president of the day and sometimes to include satirical commentary in the sketches.

Fox's *Family Guy*, however, tends to take a more partisan attitude in its regular featuring of presidential characters. The left-leaning nature of the creators' political beliefs is reflected in the representation of the different presidents. Bill Clinton, for example, is usually "roasted" by *Family Guy*; that is, the show often teases him in a non-malicious way about the silly things he has done or about his reputation. Such roasting includes portraying him as naked in inappropriate situations or locations, such as in the White House's War Room, or as overly attracted to overweight women to highlight his popularized sexual interests.[62] George W. Bush, however, is often satirized, as the show makes blatant suggestions that Bush is childlike, unintelligent, and is an overall unfit leader and a

bungler.[63] *Family Guy*, though not always the most subtle, uses comedy to criticize what they perceive as the president's wrongdoings.[64]

Fictional presidents have also been popular facets of television of the past few decades. Perhaps no fictional president enjoyed as much attention and affection as Jed Bartlet from *The West Wing*. Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles found *The West Wing* so compelling that they wrote *The Prime-Time Presidency:* The West Wing *and U.S. Nationalism*.[65] This book explored the ways that *The West Wing* is a reflection of various issues of United States nationalism, as well as the ways in which it is a projection of what America could instead be.

Stuckey and Smith argued that television projects this "brighter future" motif to help citizens hope for, and perhaps act towards, such change in real life.[66] For example, fictional presidents on television also often represent a more egalitarian perspective about who is allowed to be president. Female presidents, like Geena Davis's character in *Commander in Chief*, and minority presidents, like Jimmy Smits's character in *The West Wing*, are rather common on television. I agree with Stuckey and Smith's claim, but I believe there is more to it. Although these portrayals certainly attempt to broaden the American perception of the executive branch, one must consider that this is a mediated portrayal of (an alternative) reality. All this progress—that is to say, having someone "new" in office—is situated on television, firmly in the realm of the imagined. Television provides a safe space for viewers to see how the United States would look with a different kind of president, i.e., those other than wealthy, middle-aged, white males, without having to elect a "nontraditional" candidate in real life. One has only to consider the racist and sexist hoopla that cropped up during Barack Obama's and Hillary Clinton's campaigns to know that, for many Americans, the

idea of a nontraditional president scares them to death, even if they boisterously supported Jimmy Smits's President Matt Santos on *The West Wing*.

Using the president as a character in and as a subject of television and film is both an enduring phenomenon and a changing one. Whether depicting a fictional White House's daily goings-on or the intimate inner-workings of a fictional First Family or parodying the latest political faux pas of the current president, television has rarely lacked a presidential presence on its airwaves. The big and small screens are equally various in portraying presidential lives, careers, and other personal dramas or conspiracy theories.

Over the years, there has been a proliferation of American film featuring presidents in both historical and fictional narratives. Much of film that features presidents tends to reflect the current concerns of the United States' people and our attitudes about the president. In times when the nation needed a hero, the president in film was that hero, when the nation needed an adventurer, the presidential characters would oblige, and when the nation lost faith in their chief executive, film reflected their disappointment and lack of trust. Furthermore, cinema is not confined to the realm of what *is*, but rather to what *could be*. Therefore, presidential characters in film were not only a reflection of certain leaders or national moods, but also projections of what the people hoped to see or what they expected to see from the president.

Historical U.S. presidents-as-characters were a regular feature of the black and white film, and, during the years of the First and Second World Wars, presidents in film often played heroic roles, the saviors of the nation. Some of the earliest films featured historical plotlines with presidential characters, such as *Washington Under the American Flag* (1909), sequel to *Washington Under the British Flag* (1909). Biographical films, such as D. W.

Griffith's *Abraham Lincoln* (1930), were popular during this time. Fictional movies, too,

often included presidents. Period pieces and historical fictions like the 1935 film *The*

Littlest Rebel (detailed in chapter three) showed the president as benevolent, powerful, and a

force of good, particularly during wartime.[67]

War films, Westerns, and frontier films gained and maintained popularity between

the World War I and Vietnam War eras. Though they did not always involve a presidential

character directly, these plots implied presidential involvement by centering on the

government. Examples of such films include *They Died With Their Boots On* (1941), *Brave*

Warrior (1952), and *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* (1955). Stephen Prince

suggested, "The best examples of American topical filmmaking succeed as narrative film

and portraits of the nation and society."[68] In other words, these films blended fiction and

storytelling smoothly into the preconceived perception of the "American fabric."

After the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War, U.S. film reflected popular

skepticism of government, portraying presidents and the surrounding bureaucracy as

conspiratorial and secretive. In this era of presidential secrecy, many films have dedicated

themselves to showing the public what *might* be going on behind the closed doors of the

Oval Office. Some films, like the aforementioned *All the President's Men* or *Frost/Nixon*,

focus their attention on rehashing a presidential conspiracy that has come to public light or

has been confirmed.

Absolute Power (1997), *Interview with the Assassin* (2002), and *Death of a President*

(2006), by contrast, are all fictions that involved a massive-scale presidential cover-up.[69]

These cover-ups include, respectively, a president murdering his mistress, JFK's assassin

secretly confessing to a neighbor, and a U.S. government-planned assassination of the

president for political ends. All of these films operate in the realm of the speculative. A large part of these pictures' appeal comes from the sheer *possibility* of the plot. Even though the truth of JFK's assassination is still murky after half a century of investigation, it remains seductive to imagine a plot that identifies a killer and then explains why U.S. citizens are still in the dark.

Recent films with a presidential character have used new media technologies to rearticulate the role of the historical president in the plot. Film of the past forty years has seen an increasing popularity of many film techniques like manipulating actual, historical footage and giving super-human traits or companions to the president. By manipulating real footage for fictional purposes, filmmakers can lend increased believability to their world of "the possible." Some recent film fully disregards the possible, imbuing presidents with superhuman traits, including the 2012 films, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!*. I discuss these films—the entelechy of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film—at length chapter four.

This thesis draws upon the work of scholars like Peter C. Rollins and Charlene Etkind.[70] Rollins looked at the function of character, meaning both character as role and character as moral or ethical quality, in four films in detail—*Wilson* (1944), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *Nixon* (1995), and *The American President* (1995).[71] Etkind juxtaposed two films that involve the president or the U.S. government—a comedy, *Dick* (1999), and a drama, *The World of Henry Orient* (1964)—to prepare a comparison between films of two different eras that rely on the same "trope of lost innocence" to achieve their very different ends.[72] Both of these studies explored certain themes within presidential films and, in part, look to the ways these films project America's expectations of presidents, like Nixon, into fiction.

Such themes (and many others) play an important role in chapters three and four of this thesis.

Conclusion

Popular culture has been and continues to be a fickle friend of the executive branch. Presidents regularly seek to marshal popular culture for their own ends—often for elections or popularizing policy—and to increase their own *ethos* in the public eye. Popular culture, however, often bites at the president, ferreting around in the private or imagined lives of presidents and First Families, much as it does with many other celebrities. Popular culture also has the power to help mold the public's perception of the president—or even how a president is remembered.

But the president is not only in popular culture; the president is popular culture. From TV to film and beyond, presidents have been regular facets of the entertainment world for at least a century. Though near countless presidential films of all kinds populate the vaults of film history, historical presidents in fictional narratives exist as a hybrid that demands scholarly attention because it exists in the realm of the plausible. By situating a historical president within a fiction, these films open up new possibilities for viewership of both the film and of history. By pushing the boundaries of "what if," these films invite us to reimagine our Commander-in-Chief.

Notes

[1] For a similar, more detailed argument, see John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 4-8.

[2] Michael R. Real, *Exploring Media Culture: A Guide* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1996), xiii-xiv.

[3] John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture* (New York, St. Martin's Press Inc., 1996), 9.

[4] Presidential rhetoric scholar Denise Bostdorff has a large collection of presidential memorabilia filling her bookshelves alongside her works on U.S. presidents. Her collection includes just a small sampling of the numerous objects available such as action figures, Halloween masks, maps depicting things like "The World According to Ronald Reagan, " playing cards, and mechanical, metal banks. Also, some useful information about early American public political culture can be found in David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fêtes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

[5] America's fascination with Lincoln has, if anything, strengthened in the past ten years, perhaps in the wake of the election of our first Black president (associated with Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator"). *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* premiered in 2012, as did *Lincoln*, for which Daniel Day-Lewis won an Oscar for his portrayal of the president. I recently spotted a bag of pre-popped, American Farmer-brand, "movie theatre-style" popcorn for sale that featured Abe in 3D glasses on the front of the bag. I speculate that this increased "Lincoln-mania" may stem from America's dissatisfaction with the current Congress and its lukewarm feelings for President Obama. The *mythos* of Lincoln is that he was a man-of-action who firmly led the nation through crisis when seemingly no other could. This *mythos* is very tempting to a public under constant reminder that their present Congress is ineffective.

[6] Juilee Decker, "Paintings and Sculptures," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005).

[7] Hanna Miller, "Memorabilia," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 1-2.

[8] Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 30.

[9] Nelson 46.

[10] Nelson discusses the use of nation-wide celebrations of Washington's birthday and portraits of the president for these ends. She argues that people in the early years of the U.S.

were much less election-obsessed and were instead Washington-obsessed, centering the popular public eye on the president himself. See Nelson 35-40.

[11] Miller 2.

[12] Cara A. Finnegan, "Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.1 (2005), 31-57.

[13] Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 39-48.

[14] As with modern presidents, the people's ability to claim to have been a part of an event creates it as popular culture. Here, I am reminded of my older relatives reminiscing about where they were the day President Kennedy was killed as if their ability to recall this connects them to the event and to the President.

[15] See Schwartz 53.

[16] See Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960).

[17] Pauline McConnell, *George Washington's Horse Slept Here* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1956). Pages 17-24 feature a lovely scene where a father describes a run-down barn (where George Washington's horse supposedly lodged) to his sons with misty-eyed nostalgia. For information on the *American Girl* book series, see http://store.americangirl.com/agshop/ html/thumbnail/id/253/uid/143.

[18] Malcolm Kelsall, *Jefferson and the Iconography of Romanticism: Folk, Land, Culture and the Romantic Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 3.

[19] More can be found on these estates by visiting their official websites: http://www.mountvernon.org/ (Washington), http://www.nps.gov/adam/index.htm (Adams), and http://www.montpelier.org/ (Madison).

[20] A consistent theme on these websites is the reinforcement of the *mythos* of the Founding Fathers through narrative. The websites tell the story of the early presidents through their "daily lives" at their estates and invite tourists to physically interact with history by visiting these estates and presidential artifact collections.

[21] Miller 4. While there was a resistance to allow materialism to infiltrate the early presidency, U.S. interest in posthumously allowing this "stuff" culture to flourish could be considered a material form of public memory, a way to preserve the former president's good deeds and traits through collectibles.

[22] A thank-you to Bryan Blankfield for naming this notion "pop-aganada" aka the use of popular culture outlets for propagandist purposes.

[23] "Lincoln Objects" on *Lincolniana at Brown* presented by Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, http://library.brown.edu/cds/lincoln/objects/browseobjects.html.

[24] Ibid.

[25] "Lincoln Sheet Music" on *Lincolniana at Brown* presented by Brown University Library Center for Digital Scholarship, http://library.brown.edu/cds/lincoln/sheetmusic/.

[26] Roosevelt opted instead for the injured, old bear to be euthanized. Though it was still murdered, the bear's life was ended to spare it from a slow, painful death—a merciful gesture by turn-of-the-century standards (and likely today).

[27] http://www.theodoreroosevelt.org/kidscorner/tr_teddy.htm. This website directs those interested in learning more about the origins of the teddy bear to Linda Mullsin, *The Teddy Bear Men: Theodore Roosevelt & Clifford Berryman, Historical Guide for Collectors* (Cumberland, MD: Hobby House Press, Inc., 1987).

[28] See Miller for more.

[29] Elliot King, "Newspapers," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 103-104.

[30] King 103-104.

[31] Nelson 47-48.

[32] Richard W. Waterman, Robert Wright, Gilbert St. Clair, *The Image-Is-Everything Presidency: Dilemmas in American Leadership* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), 48-49.

[33] Carol B. Schwalbe, "Jacqueline Kennedy and Cold War Propaganda," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 49, no. 1 (2005), 111-27.

[34] Waterman, Wright, and St. Clair 50-53. Also see Nelson 54-59.

[35] Edwin Black, "The Invention of Nixon," in *Beyond the Rhetorical Presidency,* ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 105.

[36] Black 106-107.

[37] As the United State has yet to elect a female president, I used "him." I am not suggesting that the presidency is a male-only office or that we will never have a female president. Rather, I am simply reflecting what has been fact up to the present.

[38] See Miller and William Hart, "The Country Connection: Country Music, 9/11, and the War on Terrorism," in *The Selling of 9/11*.

[39] William Hart 158.

[40] See Roderick P. Hart, *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter, Revised Edition* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1999), Chapter 2.

[41] Bo, President Obama's Portuguese Water Dog, likewise enjoys a similar popularity. Indeed, Bo got his own White House Christmas 2012 video and has numerous fan-operated Twitter accounts and Facebook interest pages. More often than not, presidential pets of the past half century have been dogs—something about as American as apple pie.

[42] King 105.

[43] Mary Stuckey and Greg M. Smith, "The Presidency and Popular Culture," in *The Presidency, the Public, and the Parties, Third Edition* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 211.

[44] Roderick Hart 26.

[45] For more, see Harold F. Bass Jr. and Charles C. Euchner, "Presidential Appearances," in *The Presidency, the Public, and the Parties, Third Edition* (Washington D.C.: CQ Press, 2008), 11. Also see Stuckey's work, for example, Mary Stuckey, "FDR, the Rhetoric of Vision, and the Creation of a National Synoptic State," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 3 (2012), 310.

[46] Stuckey and Smith 211.

[47] Bass Jr. and Euchner 2.

[48] Nelson 42; She argues that when voters seek charisma in candidates, we are actually harkening back to the mythologized version of George Washington.

[49] Miller 5.

[50] King 106. These popular characteristics were echoed through the medium of song. The campaign song, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," praised those same traits of Harrison's as the newspapers did, though in catchy jingle form.

[51] For more on FDR and ability, see Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), particularly chapter four ("In Sickness and In Health").

[52] King 106.

[53] Sanford Levinson, "Four Tropes of *The Federalist*: What meaning do they have for us today?" (Twenty-first Annual Kenneth Burke Lecture in Rhetoric, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA, 18 April 2013).

[54] This argument is seconded in Patricia F. Phalen, Jennie Kim, and Julia Osellame, "Imagined Presidencies: The Representation of Political Power in Television Fiction," *The Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 3 (2012).

[55] Lynn Spigel, "Entertainment Wars: Television Culture after 9/11," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity,* ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 145. This use of televised media and a national event for political purposes did face numerous criticisms. Although Bush did, of course, win the 2004 election, Spigel cites a CNN interview with a 9/11 widow who "spoke quite articulately of her disgust for the president's use of 9/11 footage for political ends."

[56] fdh413, "John McCain Celebrity Ad – Feat. Paris Hilton," *YouTube*, 7 August 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KOrmOvHysdU.

[57] These two celebrities were likely chosen because of their "falls from grace." In 2007, during the McCain campaign for the 2008 election, Paris Hilton's sex tape leaked and Britney Spears had her episode, resulting in a shaved head and substantial weight gain.

[58] whitehouse, "Steven Spielberg's 'Obama'," *YouTube*, 27 April 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZyU213nhrh0.

[59] Alan Schroeder argues that, at least since the first White House-organized press dinners (like the White House Correspondents Dinner itself), presidents are nearly expected to have the ability to be entertaining or funny. He points to G.W. Bush's "parod[y of] Johnny Carson's Karnak the Magnificent fortune-telling routine" (267). See Alan Schroeder, *Celebrity-in-Chief: How Show Business Took Over the White House* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2004), particularly chapters 11 ("Is Everybody Happy? Presidents as Entertainers") and 12 ("'I'm Gerald Ford and You're Not': Presidents as Entertainment").

[60] David Skolnick, "Soup kitchen visit by Ryan stirs anger," *The Vindicator*, 16 October 2012, http://www.vindy.com/news/2012/oct/16/soup-kitchen-visit-by-ryan-stirs-anger/.

[61] Alan Schroeder also discusses elements of the history of presidential sketches on *SNL* (see Schroeder 283-85) as does John Matviko, "Television Satire and the Presidency: The Case of *Saturday Night Live*," in *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 333-48.

[62] For examples, see "Bill and Peter's Bogus Journey" (Season 5, Episode 13), "E Peterbus Unum" (Season 2, Episode 18), and "You May Now Kiss the…Uh…Guy Who Receives" (Season 4, Episode 25).

[63] For examples, see "Don't Make Me Over" (Season 4, Episode 4) and "Excellence in Broadcasting" (Season 9, Episode 2). For more on the "president-as-fool" trope, see Stuckey and Smith 217-18.

[64] Sometimes *Family Guy*'s president material is just plain silly. In one episode, "New Kidney in Town," President Obama is to speak at James Woods High School. After being introduced with an essay written by two of the Griffin children, Obama comes out with an acoustic guitar, dressed in shiny gold, Elvis-style clothes and performs Presley's signature gyration move. While the social commentary in this episode is nebulous at best, the silliness seems to be both playing up Obama's "celeb status" popularity as well as demonstrating that no person or subject is off limits to the show's comedy writers.

[65] Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn J. Parry-Giles, *The Prime-Time Presidency:* The West Wing *and U.S. Nationalism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006).

[66] Stuckey and Smith 213-14.

[67] For more on the "president-as-hero" trope, see Stuckey and Smith 214-16. For more specific information on depictions of the president in 1930s film, see Michael G. Krunkones, "Motion Picture Presidents of the 1930s: Factional and Fictional Leaders for a Time of Crisis," in *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003).

[68] Stephen Prince, "Political Film in the Nineties," in *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays,* ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 65.

[69] For more on the "president-as-villain" trope, see Stuckey and Smith 216-17.

[70] As elaborated in chapter one, I draw a sharp distinction between biopics and fiction and between historical and fictional presidents. These distinctions allow for a more focused scope to the project. An examination of biopics would, for example, include much on public memory, asking questions like "How do the representations of Van Buren in *Amistad* (1997) affirm the historical perception of the President or create a new public memory of him?" Looking to fictional presidents would likely focus on the projections of how U.S. citizens think the office of the president could *potentially, maybe*, *one day* be, without grounding it in historical fact. By instead emphasizing historical presidents present in fiction, this thesis can marry these two other views in addition to working in the realm of the plausible.

[71] Peter C. Rollins, "Hollywood's Presidents 1944-1996: The Primacy of Character," in *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*, eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 251-62.

[72] Charlene Etkind, "Richard Nixon as *Dick* (1999) and the Comedic Treatment of the Presidency," in *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History*,

eds. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2003), 263-74.

Chapter 3:

The Historical-President-As-Character in Fictional Film

The presence of historical American presidents on the silver screen enjoys a longstanding tradition in American film, and, as discussed in the previous chapter, the use of presidential imagery and artifacts in popular culture has existed since the birth of the country. As cinema gained mainstream popularity, American film often featured a president as either a character in or a subject of film. Though historical fictions and biopics have been the most common forms in which presidents have appeared over the years, another trend, featuring real presidents in fictional film, has slowly emerged over the past half century.

Fictional films with historical presidential characters have risen in popularity since the 1970s, with a particular spike since the late 1990s. The historical-president-as-character in fictional film has been present in comedies, dramedies, and dramas; that is, this character's presence is not confined to any single film genre. These films span numerous sub-genres, from the more dramatic genres of action, adventure, comic-book-to-film, and horror to the comedic genres of comedy, romantic comedy, and musical.

For this analysis, I focused on ten, American-made, English language films produced between the 1980s and 2012.[1] I have made this selection for multiple reasons, most importantly that the films represent the numerous genres that place a real president into a purely fictional plot. To save space here, I have relegated the plot synopses of the ten films—*Annie* (1982), *Contact* (1997), *Dick* (1999), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (2008), *I.Q.* (1994), *Jonah Hex* (2010), *The Littlest Rebel*

(1935), *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (2011), and *Watchmen* (2009)—to Appendix A of this thesis.

The films analyzed in this chapter are all works of fiction; the events they portray did not really happen, although each contains a recognizable, often popular American president. What makes these ten films exceptional is their ability to create plots that include such a notable public figure in ways that audiences have accepted and enjoy even when these plots contradict or dramatically rewrite history. Through an intersection of warped narrative rationality and *phantasia*, these films allow audiences to see events, literally, which have not and will never occur in reality.

In chapter one, I explained how narrative and *phantasia* play a vital role in this thesis. This thesis operates within an understanding that fiction is rhetorical in its ability to create *episteme* and alter worldviews and behaviors. Scholars like Booth and Scholes and Kellogg have explored such notions at length.[2] To understand how fiction potentially influences reality in the selected films, an important concept for this analysis is Walter Fisher's concept of narrative rationality—the two component parts of which are narrative probability (does this story make sense?) and narrative fidelity (does this story align with what I know to be real/true?).[3] Fisher argued that these concepts must work together to create stories that listeners will accept. Several scholars including Rowland and Kirkwood have noted the limitations of such a rigid framework.[4] Indeed, I do not follow Fisher's larger philosophy, which extends narrative to apply to all forms of human communication; rather, I focus solely on his concepts of probability and fidelity. In addition, I problematize Fisher's theory by arguing that fictional films often bend or even break either narrative probability or fidelity on purpose. By dramatically violating probability or fidelity, film can

create a rupture and a tension between known political reality and the reality of the film's

fictional world, requiring the audience to bridge this gap using *phantasia*.

Phantasia—or the human faculty of thinking in the subjunctive to make decisions or

judgments about the present and/or future—completes my conceptual framework. Recalling

the example from chapter one of the church sermon, the minister preaches about the horrors

of Hell and the sin of extramarital sex, putting the possibility of Hell before the congregants'

"eyes," allowing them to imagine an eternal future that differs from their current reality and

thus choose to alter their behaviors in the present to avoid that future possibility. As

scholars like Hawhee have argued, this "putting before the eyes" is an essential element to

phantasia in which the rhetor uses words or images to create in the listener or viewer a

"fantasy" upon which to base judgments.[5] "Eyes" here may refer both literally to the

physical structures for seeing and metaphorically to the mental eye, as noted by O'Gorman,

among others. Hawhee acknowledged the important interactions of *phantasia* and visual

images in Finnegan's exploration of enthymeme in these images. Finnegan posited that

viewers often "fill in the blanks" when presented with visual images, assigning more

meaning to an image than it actually offers in its own "substance."[6]

This notion of a visual enthymeme is helpful for understanding the claims made in

this chapter. I contend that the president-as-character in these films acts as, what Finnegan

called, "the enthymematic springboard" from which viewers make the leap between what

they know to be true of historical American presidents and what the films offer as an

alternative vision of the same. The need for such a leap comes when these films violate,

however mildly or radically, either narrative probability or narrative fidelity. By asking

viewers to confront images of the president outside what "makes sense" or what they "know

to be true," viewers must engage in *phantasia*. By imagining new possibilities of presidential actions or behaviors, viewers' perceptions of the historical president have the opportunity to shift. Most notably, such altered understandings of the president—facilitated by these fictional films—challenge the perceived role of the U.S. presidency. That is, putting before audiences' eyes altered realities of citizens' access to and "realistic" behavior of presidents, these fictions present audiences with opportunities to redefine who the president may or may not be, what he may or may not do, and how they can or cannot interact with him.

Analysis

I will not repeat here the method that I described in chapter one, but I do wish to remind the reader of the two themes that emerged during my initial engagement with these films, which eventually became the framework through which I examine *phantasia* in this chapter. These frameworks are: (1) access to the president and (2) realism as a mode and a style of movie representation. In the pages that follow, I explore each of these patterns in turn.

While these patterns overlap, it is advantageous to dissect the films according to access and realism precisely because each of these themes reveals a distinct dissonance that the films manufacture for audiences. Access to the president is extremely rare for most people; consequently, how each film's characters gain an audience with the president becomes an important part of how each film imagines the relationships that exist between presidents and citizens. Second, because the actions that occur in these films are fictional and often an elaborate fantasy, the audience must constantly negotiate the violation of a

presumed historical reality. How the film treats presumed "reality" in fiction reveals a great deal about how the movie attempts to re-envision not only a president and the presidency, but also the circumstances and contexts that specific presidents encountered.

Access to the President

Since 9/11, it is even more difficult to obtain direct access to the United States' president. When touring the White House in 2000, my family and I were excited to see President Bush leave the White House and board Marine One. One year later, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, my school canceled our eighth grade class trip to Washington D.C. due to tightened security in the nation's capital. Post-9/11, everywhere the president is not only surrounded by Secret Service detail everywhere he goes, he often stands behind protective glass or rides inside a reinforced vehicle. For example, at the Spring 2013 commencement celebrations of The Ohio State University, President Obama stood behind protective glass simply to deliver the commencement address, and he promptly exited the stadium at the conclusion of his speech. It is rare that an average citizen gains access to the U.S. president outside of planned public appearances. However, the opportunity to access the president is a theme that runs through most of this study's films. Such access varies from interactions earned through service to the State, to interactions gained through powerful networks of connection, to outrageous interactions based solely on chance. I explore each of these forms of access in detail in the following pages.

Interaction Based on Merit

The most realistic depiction of access to the president—and thus the one that requires the least intervention of *phantasia*—in these fictional films is access through accomplishment. That is, a character performs some great deed within the plot development of the film; consequently, s/he earns an audience with the president as a reward and a confirmation of her/his unique abilities and/or remarkable behavior. This depiction of access takes two forms: the characters who meet the president through their own merit or deeds are (1) shocked or awed at their luck and/or (2) appreciative that their contribution has been recognized. Only Forrest Gump's reaction does not fit these categories; I will explore his differing experience as well.

A form of merit-based access that appears consistently in these movies shows the characters' surprise at their luck and their awe that "someone like me" could get to meet the Commander-in-Chief. Rather than entering the chief executive's presence with an expectation of equality with him, the traditional respect for the office is maintained, conforming to the audience's sense of narrative fidelity. For example, Sam from *Transformers: Dark of the Moon* (henceforth abbreviated as *Transformers 3*) was an average, unknown young man who saved the world, alongside the fictional aliens, the Autobots. *Transformers 3* opens as Sam reflects on his visit to the White House, where he met with Barack Obama, who gave Sam a medal for his services to the United States. After he leaves the Oval Office, a dazed-looking Sam mutters, "That's the coolest thing that ever happened to me." Sam's reaction expresses what most audience members likely would feel if they ever had the opportunity to meet the president: shocked pleasure. Similarly, in *I.Q.*, Ed suddenly finds Secret Servicemen in his sunroom. President Eisenhower then walks into

the room. Ed earns this visit by supposedly inventing cold fusion, an asset to the United

States in the Cold War. Like Sam in *Transformers 3*, Ed is shocked at the president's

presence. But unlike Sam's visit with Obama, Ed's sense of awe mingles with horror

because he knows he did not invent cold fusion; consequently, Ed did not legitimately earn a

visit from the president.

  Contact demonstrates the second form of merit-based access. Dr. Arroway

understands that she earned the right to be in the presence of the president and other White

House officials. Intercepting the alien message around which the movie's plot revolves was

her discovery, making *her* the expert and the most qualified to brief the president and his

executive staff. That said, Ellie's dialogue and facial expressions reveal her anxiety about

interacting with the White House personnel. She must take deep breaths to calm and center

herself before she begins. In this manner, *Contact* acknowledges the power differentials still

at play when an accomplished citizen meets with "the most powerful man in the world."

This scene does not seem outrageous or unexpected. Indeed, by showing Dr. Arroway's

anxiety, *Contact* makes clear the perceived sense of space between the president and the

people, even exceptional people like astro-scientists. In other words, even those who have

made a significant contribution to the world are still not the president's equal.

  Forrest Gump offers the differing perspective on merit-based access. Because of

Forrest's social/mental disorder, the appropriateness (or not) of certain behaviors or

emotions is lost on Forrest. As part of the All-American Football and National Ping Pong

Teams and after earning the Medal of Honor in Vietnam, Forrest visited the White House

three different times, meeting three different American presidents. Unlike characters in the

other films that were nervous to be in the president's presence, Forrest seems to consider all

these visits to be unremarkable. He states in his heavy, Alabama accent: "So I went…*again* [to D.C.]. And I met the President of the United States…*again*." Forrest understands that his accomplishments warrant recognition, but unlike Ellie Arroway, does not see presidential recognition as something exceptional. In Forrest's mind, everyone is equal, and adapting his behavior to accommodate power differentials does not seem to cross his mind. Thus, the president is just another person, no matter how important others consider him. The narrative fidelity within the text is maintained so long as the audience considers Forrest and his disorder to be out of the ordinary.

In all these films, an ordinary individual accomplishes something extraordinary, earning the attention of the chief executive and, thus, an audience with him. This is precisely how many citizens do obtain access to the president. That said, access to the president is never as simple as these movies might suggest. What precisely constitutes sufficiently meritorious behavior to earn a presidential audience often has less to do with the behavior of the individual than with the political utility of the meeting for the president. In other words, part of Ellie Arroway's access to the president came from the government's need to be part of, or even control, the decoding of the aliens' message. Because these films "put before the eyes" merit-based access, audiences can engage in *phantasia* to see the films as enthymeme. The enthymeme presented in this film may invite viewers to engage in the fantasy that, if they perform a great deed, they too may meet the president. Merit-based moments of access to the president furthermore emphasize the high-ranking, official status and power of the Commander-in-Chief, affirming the literal and figurative sense of distance between the president and the people, even people well-qualified to meet the chief executive.

Interaction Based on Equal Power

Other films, spanning the generic range, warp narrative fidelity rather than breaking it when they involve the president with characters of equal power or status. In many of these films, access to the president is granted to those who possess exceptional, even supernatural power that can aid the president during some national crisis. For example, in *Jonah Hex*, President Ulysses S. Grant hears of Hex's ability to use his connection with the spirit world to bring in even the most vicious of wanted criminals; consequently, Grant summons Hex to the White House to aid the federal government. Hex's skill at catching the nation's worst criminals earns him presidential attention. I discuss in this section each of the two forms of this type of access to the president: (1) equally powerful characters, like Hex, who gain direct access to the president or (2) characters that access the president because of their relationship to another powerful character.

Watchmen is a prime example of equal power-based access to the president. This film illustrates how mere association with the presidency suggests a sense of power; if one is important enough to be the president's equal, one must be very important indeed. At the start of the film, shows police officers encountering a photo of the deceased, Edward Blake (a.k.a. The Comedian), shaking hands with President Nixon.[7] The officers comment:

> Officer Gallagher: See this? Shakin' hands with the President.
>
> Officer 2: Whoa. Think Blake was a spook? Government or…black ops?
>
> Officer Gallagher: I think…this [murder] is way bigger than both of us.

The awe and even fear present in these few lines of dialogue show that these officers understand that to have accessed the president, Blake must have been very powerful himself. In other words, Blake's association with President Nixon gives the officers cause for

concern that his murder was politically motivated or that Blake was part of the corrupt

Nixon administration.[8]

Also in *Watchmen*, the superhuman Dr. Manhattan works alongside Presidents

Kennedy and Nixon as a weapon of war.[9] These presidents need him to perform actions

neither they nor their armies can perform. During the course of the film, different

flashbacks show Dr. Manhattan's actions in Vietnam and different images of him interacting

with the presidents. By showing the presidents' dependence on a superhero's help, this film

asks audiences to reimagine the limits of presidential power. Without Dr. Manhattan,

Watchmen suggests, the victories of the United States might have been impossible. The

exceptional superhero is necessary for presidential foreign policy to succeed.

This juxtaposition of president and superhero is even more striking for Dr.

Manhattan's physical appearance. After being obliterated by nuclear energy and reforming

himself, Dr. Manhattan glows with blue skin and pupil-less eyes. Because of his

superhuman understanding of the time-space continuum and immense power, he does not

bother with clothing except for small, Speed-O-style briefs, which leave his incredibly

muscular physique exposed. His lack of clothing illustrates just how different he is and how

he is above human rules and norms. The positioning of such an extraordinary-looking,

powerful character next to traditional presidential images—black suit, white shirt, red tie, a

USA insignia pin—creates a juxtaposition audiences need then negotiate. Even though the

two types of men do not seem to go together, an audience may conclude that, in films like

Watchmen, the Commander-in-Chief requires someone else's (super)powers, granting

access to individuals normally barred from presidential access, i.e., dangerous persons like

Hex or scantily clad persons like Dr. Manhattan. Placing true superheroes next to the "hero"

in a blue suit with an American flag pin may invite audiences to question not only the limitations of presidential power, but also the trope of the president-as-hero. In other words, Nixon looks feeble and hopelessly corrupt when juxtaposed with Dr. Manhattan.

Jonah Hex and *Watchmen* show the president as dependent on the (super)powers these individuals or groups can lend him. *Watchmen*, especially, downplays the "heroic" nature of the presidency identified by Dana Nelson.[10] Nixon's covert behavior, however, nearly destroyed this image of the hero-president; the American people learned that the president may not be trustworthy. By juxtaposing the president with true superheroes, audiences confront images that may challenge understandings of the president as a force of good. *Phantasia* may facilitate audiences' reevaluation of the limitations of the president's abilities, as the impossible is placed before audiences' eyes in the form of true superheroes. Presidents Grant and Nixon seek the help of superheroes in crises—crises which, on paper, seem the very foundation of presidential duty, protection of the nation and the preservation of peace. Indebting the president to another character's power in such circumstances bends narrative probability. The films invite audiences to engage in *phantasia* as they negotiate images of the president as incapable of doing his job without other-worldly help.

A second form of equal power-based access in these films shows a main character accessing the president through another character's power. As the audience meets Oliver Warbucks in *Annie*, they learn that President Roosevelt regularly telephones Warbucks, seeking advice and support for the New Deal, clearly demonstrating the scope of Warbucks's power. At Annie's request to visit with the president, Warbucks and Annie take a trip to the White House where they spend an afternoon in the Oval Office with the president and Eleanor. Annie impresses FDR so profoundly that he asks if she will be

special council for one of the New Deal committees. The whims of Little Orphan Annie—

and not the insistence of Warbucks or FDR—are the motivation that bring her and

Warbucks to the White House to visit the president, but it is the power and authority of

Warbucks that actually gains them access, since this is something Annie could never have

accomplished without him.

Virgie in *The Littlest Rebel* is another character who gains access to the president

through another character's power. Enamored of the little Confederate girl's charms, the

Union military official imprisoning Captain Cary and Colonel Morrison takes pity on

Virgie's plight and sends her and the Cary's slave, Uncle Billy, to visit President Lincoln.

In this situation, a secondary character, the military official, has no stakes in this matter

other than his love for Virgie. Without this man's love, Virgie—and by effect, her father

and Colonel Morrison—would have had absolutely no way to access the president.

It is noteworthy that, in these films, a female child character accesses the president

through the vehicle of a powerful, older male character for personal ends that have political

outcomes, rather than for political ends in and of themselves.[11] Susan A. Sherr noted that

presidential interactions with children (or references to children) are loaded with symbolism

as children represent both innocence and the future of the nation.[12] Gender norms also may

play a role in these films. If the children in these films were males, their access to the

president may have been very different. However, both Virgie and Annie violate gender

norms of the period when the movies were made by correcting the older men—Virgie

indicating it is her turn to have the apple slice—and chattering rather than speaking only

when spoken to—Annie. Both female children are, in other words, precocious.

These scenarios of presidential access through another's power certainly resist narrative fidelity. Audiences likely believe that reality precludes orphan children from asking their wealthy benefactor to drop by the White House for a visit totally unannounced, resulting in a song-filled afternoon with the president and First Lady. Further, though heartwarming, an American president would never ask a ten-year-old to occupy a major policy-making office in his Cabinet and would not likely sit with a young child to discuss the fate of two soldiers during a civil war, unless it was a photo-op. Bending reality, these plots ask audiences to use *phantasia* to reimagine possible presidential behavior. Instead of mere campaign-style "kissing babies," these versions of Lincoln and FDR engage with these little girls on a very personal, emotional, and intellectual level. Showing the president in such domestic, personal interactions invites audiences to humanize the president; "the most powerful man in the world" becomes more emotionally accessible to the people. In all its counter-reality, the fictional expression that a person—particularly a youth—might gain presidential audience if they have a powerful connection goes before the audience's eyes. This invites three audience conclusions: (a) networking with the right people could earn one an audience with the president, (b) that the president, in taking time to interact with lowly little girls, is truly accessible to the public on a metaphorical or emotional level, and (c) that at least some presidents, e.g., FDR and Lincoln, were personally affectionate individuals in addition to being powerful leaders.

Interaction Based on Chance

In many instances, the reality that merit does not automatically, or even consistently, grant access to the president prevails; consequently, access to the president in these films is

portrayed as a matter of chance. This is the most fantastic form of access to the president in that it requires no exceptional accomplishment or particular skill set for characters to interact with the president. Rather, the characters in these films, which are typically comedies, find themselves in just the right place at just the right time. Furthermore, this form of access creates the biggest rift between what the audience knows to be true of access to the president and what they see on the screen, snapping narrative fidelity and warping narrative probability.

As a genre, comedy allows wacky, unexpected circumstances to occur and chance or fate is often the device the moves the plot forward. In Ancient Greek or Shakespearian conceptions of the genre, comedy indicated a story where the characters are spared utter ruin or the plot features a romance and a happy conclusion.[13] Comedy today is far more expansive. Steve Neale noted that comedy is perhaps the most versatile and multifaceted film genre in its ability to touch on aspects of many other genres as it spans the range of "jokes to intricately plotted narratives, from slapstick to farce, from satire to parody, from shorts and cartoons to features."[14] In comedies like *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (henceforth abbreviated as *Harold & Kumar*) and *Dick*, the genre allows for silliness or the unexpected, making room for breaks from reality. Of course, audiences expect that these breaks and the unusual circumstances in comedies will inspire a laugh or two. The genre, thus, dictates much of the imaginary's ability to function in these films, allowing chance an opportunity to fiddle with the characters' lives.

Harold & Kumar features the wackiest of these chance presidential meetings. In the moments preceding their encounter with George W. Bush, Harold and Kumar find themselves betrayed by a fickle friend who puts them on an airplane back to the

Guantanamo Bay detention facility. In their desperation to escape, the dynamic duo trick

their guards, don a tandem parachute, and jump from the plane. As they parachute down,

they realize that crashing through the roof of a house is inevitable. After celebrating that

they are both unharmed by the fall, Harold and Kumar survey their surroundings. They spot

a series of photographs on the mantelpiece. Picking up a photograph of President Bush and

the First Lady, Harold's eyes widen in horror as he realizes they have crash-landed through

the roof of a building on the Crawford Ranch.

During their initial interactions with President Bush, two important breaks with

narrative fidelity occur. Bush enters the room alone and on the offensive; he is annoyed

rather than surprised to see two strangers standing in his living room covered in debris from

his roof. The president, wearing a hunting jacket and holding a bottle of beer declares,

"What the hell are y'all doin' in my office? You'd better start givin' me some answers!"

Audiences may reasonably expect any person to be surprised or afraid if strangers crashed

through their ceiling. Instead, Dubya overlooks the bizarre circumstances that brought these

strangers to his house by focusing instead that his turf has been infiltrated. Furthermore, in

real life, Secret Service would likely intercept any parachuting people before they had a

chance to hit the president's roof, let alone allow the intruders one-on-one time with the

president. However, no guards or secret service members appear during Harold and

Kumar's interactions with President Bush.

When Bush hears a male voice calling for him from the other room, Harold and

Kumar become Bush's allies. He hunkers down and runs toward them exclaiming, "Shit!

It's Cheney! Come on, you guys. Keep quiet, and follow me. That guy scares the crap

outta me… We can hide in the guest house. Come the fuck on!" This marks a second

break with narrative fidelity: that a president should fear his vice president may clash with audience's understanding of presidential authority.

To the tune of a heavy metal guitar riff, Harold, Kumar, and Bush enter the guesthouse, which is decked out with swimsuit model posters, pinball machines, and drug paraphernalia. Bush then invites them to join him in a beer and a blunt as they explain their story to him. This represents a third violation of narrative fidelity by perverting the traditional image of the president as straight-laced, formal, and respectable. In this case, Bush's physical image and behavior patterns become dissonant with audience expectations of his role as president of the United States.

In each instance, *Harold & Kumar* breaks narrative fidelity and bends narrative probability by showing audiences the impossible chance meeting of two stoners with President Bush that, then, becomes a mid-day drug party. By violating narrative rationality, the film asks audiences to use *phantasia* to bridge this rift between what they are seeing, what they know to be real or true, and what they think makes sense. The film further facilitates *phantasia* by including visual "confirmation" of rumors about the Bush presidency. For example, the initial interaction with Bush may actually affirm narrative fidelity, because many Americans suspected that Dick Cheney pulled the strings in the Bush White House. Furthermore, *Harold & Kumar* maintains Bush's iconic speech style and even throws in a few "Bushisms." *Harold & Kumar* puts before audiences' eyes a picture of the president that differs from the "official" public narratives about President Bush and, in presenting "confirmations" of suspected presidential behavior, invites the audience to conclude that Bush may actually act this way outside the public eye.

In *Harold & Kumar*, the drugged-out duo needed to do no more than jump from a plane to interact with the president as if they were old friends. Similarly, teen-aged Arlene and Betsy are in all the right places at all the right times in *Dick*. On their class trip to the White House, they accidentally obtain one of the secret CREEP documents of the Nixon administration, but because they are young, white, female teens, the power-sodden Nixon does not consider them a serious threat to his secret. Only in comedy would the president choose to keep an eye on the girls by naming them the Official Presidential Dog Walkers rather than, for example, using a legal gag order. This special position allows the girls to come and go from the West Wing of the White House and even the Oval Office at will. With this level of unsupervised access, Betsy and Arlene become instrumental in peace talks with the Soviet Union, when they give the president cookies accidentally laced with marijuana,[15] and in breaking the Watergate case to *The Washington Post*.

This film warps narrative probability and bends narrative fidelity nearly to its breaking point. Although a 1999 audience would not have known Deep Throat's true identity was Mark Felt, the idea that two giggling girls could be Deep Throat disrupts narrative rationality. Thus, audiences could *possibly* have believed individuals within the White House, like Arlene and Betsy, could have been the Deep Throat informant, but it is extremely unlikely. Furthermore, the average American can only speculate on the inner-workings and rules of the White House. *Dick* does not present audiences with a "realistic" answer to this speculation, but instead filters the experience through the genre of comedy. *Dick* asks audiences to use *phantasia* to "see" the remarkable chance encounter of Arlene, Betsy, and Nixon as plausible within comedy. Because they were the right kind of people in

the right place at the right time, Betsy and Arlene not only witness history, but also the shape that very history.

By portraying presidential access as governed solely by the rules of chance, *phantasia* in these films may inspire viewers to "fill in the blanks" to conclude that being in the right place at the right time could gain them access to the president. Furthermore, by allowing fate to pull the strings as much for the president as for average persons, these circumstances again collapse the distance between the president and the people. These films may challenge audiences' notion of the president as "untouchable," re-configuring the president's humanity. Chance creates "equal footing" between this man of high office and average citizens; the designs of (comedic) fate bring together the experiences president and the people.

Each of these methods of presidential access is distinctive, offering different opportunities and rules that govern a citizen's access to the Commander-in-Chief. However, these methods share a similarity: all bend either narrative probability or narrative fidelity, necessitating audience's *phantasia* to make sense of their viewing experience. Presenting audiences with depictions of presidential access that ruffle or even violate viewer expectations of the rules governing presidential access invites audiences to reconsider these rules, thus reassessing the perceived relationship between them and their chief executive. As these films tweak narrative rationality in their depictions of presidential access, other films lessen audience burden for *phantasia* by creating a sense of realism in the films themselves.

"Realism" and the Historical President in Fictional Film

If you asked someone to describe the U.S. president in a general way, a respondent would likely note that the presidents are, or should be, clean cut, wear a suit and tie, show their emotions appropriately, depending on context, and always follow the rules/behave decorously. A team of public relations personnel carefully crafts the image of a president or presidential hopeful presented to the people, rather than showing the people their "real" personality. That a president once used drugs, for example, would be carefully managed or hidden to create an aura of near-perfection around the president. Such images generate a sense of distance between the president and the people, portraying him as apart from and above the people.

We know that presidents, like all of us, have skeletons in their closets, but these carefully managed public presidential images are so pervasive that they shape what the people "know to be true" of presidential behavior. A number of these films maintain narrative fidelity by including the expected form of the president-as-character in the film. By having Sam visit President Obama in the Oval Office, for example, *Transformers 3* maintains narrative fidelity. When films like *I.Q.* and *Harold & Kumar*, however, place the president in a role outside the audience's expectations—for example, intervening in a lovers' quarrel or smoking weed with two strangers—the image violates what we know to be true, requiring *phantasia* to negotiate the resulting gap in logic. Most importantly, these moves within fiction present challenges to audiences' perception of these presidents and, more generally, the role of the U.S. president.

Although all of the films under consideration here are fictional, the directors and producers of these films attempt to capture some "reality" about the presidents or the

presidents' times. In the next section I will argue that how these films attempt to make their

presidential subjects "real" and why this is important. Further, I argue that the films attempt

to capture known or presumed presidential "characters" via three means: (1) showing the

"personal" side of the president through comic or sweet moments, (2) playing to existing

stereotypes of a particular president, and (3) attempting to create circumstances in the plots

that imitate real presidential interactions.

Personalizing the President

Many of the films discussed to this point have reified the image of the president as a

high ranking office and as separate from the people by barring all but the lucky and the

powerful from presidential access. Though this is a popular and realistic theme, other films

with presidential characters prefer to highlight the "Average Joe" qualities of the president

himself, often through comedic or heartwarming moments. In these cases, audiences use

phantasia to bridge the gap created when the president acts outside his traditional role as a

reserved, decorous, and impersonal leader. In this section, I explore the ways different films

emphasize the president's humanity through both comedy and sentiment.

Comedic Moments

Comedy long has been a tool for emphasizing the quirks or inadequacies of people in

power through light-hearted entertainment or, in contrast, through sharp edged satire. The

American president has received such comedic attention even in fictional film. By playing

up the average qualities or actions of presidents, these films invite audiences to make

judgments about who the president is and how he is allowed or expected to behave. Such

depictions show the audience that the president is an average, run-of-the-mill person rather than merely the unapproachable leader he often seems to be.

Comedy humanizes Richard Nixon in *Dick*. One scene in *Dick* shows the president gluttonously ingesting Arlene and Betsy's homemade cookies. . .which accidentally contain marijuana.[16] The president compliments the delicious cookies, requesting that they bring him more. As they discuss peace and the Cold War, Nixon shares the next batch of cookies with the Soviets, including Brezhnev, and both heads-of-state become incredibly high. When told that the cookies are named Hello Dollies, Nixon, Brezhnev, and Kissinger break into the *Hello, Dolly!* theme song together. Nixon later tells Arlene and Betsy, "You know, girls. . .I think your cookies may have just saved the world from nuclear catastrophe."

These moments are more than funny, though; the Nixon in *Dick* violates viewer expectations of the president and his behavior. The cookie scenes portray Nixon with a naïveté not often associated with his reputation as a shrewd schemer. His behavior is nearly heartwarming. Furthermore, portraying Nixon's banal interests in cookies and musicals makes him appear more like an average person. Audiences, then, must reimagine both Nixon and the presidency to accommodate this new version of the presidency with what they already know.

Harold & Kumar features similar themes, but to a lesser extent. From his use of profanity from the start of their interactions to his "man cave"-style guesthouse, the film portrays Dubya as your average frat boy who gains office through his father and his father's connections. The guesthouse humanizes Bush in a comedic way. The walls are plastered with posters of swimsuit models and large game tables and the tabletops feature porn magazines and drug paraphernalia. In addition to sharing their drug hobby, Bush and

Kumar bond over their domineering fathers. Kumar even persuades Bush to call George H. W. Bush to declare his independence from his father's legacy. Portraying the president as *far* less than perfect—whether through exploiting a fictional foible or playing up popular stereotypes about the president—facilitates *phantasia* and allows viewers to conclude that the president is an average person who might possibly share their hobbies and attitudes.

Heartwarming Moments

Sentimental moments in these fictions also can personalize the president. In *I.Q.*, for example, President Eisenhower has his motorcade stop so that the young lovers, Ed and Catherine, can declare themselves to each other—although, in reality, they argue, because Catherine has discovered that Ed lied about inventing cold fusion to win her respect and love. Through the whole scene, Ike smiles happily as he watches the lovers from a distance, and at one point states with another smile, "I felt the same way when I proposed to Mamie." By portraying Eisenhower as having a fondness for love stories, *I.Q.*'s version of Ike appears well rounded and personable. He is not only a tough leader for America; he also has a sensitive side. This echoes Hannah Miller's assertion that sensitivity became an important trait in presidents and presidential hopefuls around the time of Ike's presidency.[17] The ability not only to *imagine* the president as a "hopeless romantic," but also literally to *see* his more personal side allows viewers to connect with the president and to view him as far more average or human.

Annie normalizes President Roosevelt in two distinctive ways. By speaking to FDR as if he were just another friend, rather than the Commander-in-Chief, Annie treats the president as her equal. Both the content and tone of her speech evidences this, as does the

president's presence at Annie's adoption party as just another face in a large crowd of guests. He is normalized in a second way through the show tune, "Tomorrow." It seems unlikely that an individual who just met the president would be able to get that president to belt out a show tune in the Oval Office. At the same time, this quirky performance is also banal, because normal people certainly feel free to be moved to song in their own homes. The FDR character takes on traits of the average citizen, showing the audience a side of a president they rarely see—a president moved to song. *Annie* gives balance to the picture of FDR by portraying him as willing to seek the help of others and to, as the saying goes, let his hair down, rather than being solely a tough, straight-laced leader.

The pinnacle example of the heartwarming personalization of the president is *The Littlest Rebel*. Lincoln's role in *The Littlest Rebel* effectively makes Lincoln appear average and affirms the popular image of Lincoln as an Everyman. In her scene with Lincoln, Virgie enjoys a one-on-one audience with the president. Not only does this challenge the historical reality of access to the president, but it also allows for a more realistic example of Lincoln as a man not just a president. The scene's key examples of humanizing Lincoln are the shared snack, the conversation's tone, and the physical interaction between Lincoln and Virgie.

Having a snack. As they chat about the Union colonel and her father, Captain Cary, Lincoln sets little Virgie on his desk in front of him and pulls out an apple and a knife. Lincoln slowly cuts the apple, piece-by-piece, into slices, sharing every other piece with Virgie. At one point, he forgets whose turn it is to have a piece. As the president prepares to eat the next slice:

> Virgie: No, that's mine. [signature Shirley Temple smile] You had the last piece.
> Lincoln: [warmly] Beg your pardon. [Hands Virgie the apple slice.]
> Virgie: [smiles] You forgot. That's all.

While this scene is adorable, its importance is that Lincoln, hero of the nation, takes time to

share a snack with an average little girl. Lincoln's engagement in this commonplace

exercise puts before viewers' eyes the image of the president doing the same activities as the

average citizen. Furthermore, this scene illustrates that even a president can make mistakes,

though Lincoln's mistake is simple and without risk.

Setting the tone. The tone of Lincoln's conversation with Virgie similarly

personalizes the president. For example, the apple cutting scene features this conversation:

> Lincoln: [while cutting an apple] Your father is a captain in the Confederate Army.
> Virgie: Yes, sir.
> Lincoln: [still cutting] Arrested as a spy.
> Virgie: [indignantly] My daddy isn't a spy!
> Lincoln: Do you know what a spy is?
> Virgie: I know it's something bad, because they shoot you for it, and my daddy couldn't do anything
>   bad.
> Lincoln: [benignly] I don't see how he could either [slight pause; hands Virgie an apple slice] with a
>   little one like you.
> Virgie: [signature Temple smile] Thank you kindly, sir. [eats]

The tone of this dialogue's delivery has a humanizing effect for Lincoln. So often

presidents are portrayed as strong and sure. But just as *I.Q.*'s Eisenhower demonstrated that

the president can be both strong and feeling, so too does *The Littlest Rebel*'s Lincoln. Even

though they are discussing matters of war, Lincoln recognizes the innocence of the child.

His tone shows caring for this little girl who is worried for her father, even though her father

is an enemy of the Union. Furthermore, by sparing Virgie the pain of disillusionment—that

is, learning her father is a traitor to the United States—Lincoln demonstrates his profound

wisdom and inspired leadership when he chooses to protect the child's innocence rather than

destroy it with the hard truth. And, of course, Lincoln's ability to appreciate the typical

Temple cuteness may endear him to the audience.

Sitting and talking. Lincoln's physical interaction with Virgie also shows him as a

caring person, as someone who is willing to act as a father-figure to this sad girl. At the start

of their interaction, Lincoln places her on his desk and shifts his chair so that he is facing

her, putting them at eye-level with each other. Rather than reinforcing the power differential

between the president and a citizen, particularly a young girl, Lincoln's actions seem to say

that nothing is more important to him in that moment than what Virgie has to say. Twice,

later in the scene, Virgie sits on Lincoln's lap. The first time, Lincoln pulls Virgie onto his

lap to comfort her when she cries. The second time, however, Virgie climbs into Lincoln's

lap when he tells her that he will spare both Colonel Morrison and Captain Cary. The

physical interactions Lincoln and Virgie in *The Littlest Rebel* again emphasize Lincoln as

the Everyman—and how exceptional Lincoln truly was—by showing him engaging in

interactions worthy of any parent, ingratiating him to the audience through sentiment.

This scene bends narrative fidelity in a way that reifies the audience's image of

Lincoln. Lincoln's interaction with Virgie enhances his magnanimousness, and,

paradoxically, the distance between the people and the president collapses. More clearly,

much of the Lincoln *mythos* comes from his Everyman status, so any interaction that

confirms this *mythos* will also confirm his status as a great president and hero. Thus, *The

Littlest Rebel* increases the legend of Lincoln, raising him to even higher mythical levels by

portraying his magnanimousness translated into the protection of a child's innocence.

The interaction between young, female child—so often the embodiment of innocence and the future—and the president—a wise, older male—creates a sense of confidence in the president. These fictional representations of historical American presidents portray the president as balanced: He is a strong, yet compassionate leader who does not overlook things as simple as the whims of a child or the passions of young love. Within all these films, such humanizing moments open space for *phantasia*'s ability to sway judgment. These scenes place before viewers' eyes a possible perception of the president's behavior that allows viewers to reimagine possible presidential behavior. While they will mostly likely not make judgments such as, "Oh, President Bush smokes weed just like me!" or "Lincoln cut up apples just like I do for my kids," these scenes open up for viewers the ability, literally, to see new ways to imagine their presidents. He is a real person who pursues real past-times, not just the occupier of a mythologized office. Furthermore, by placing the president in these commonplace situations and ascribing banal traits to him, the metaphorical distance between the people and the often-mythical office of the president collapses; the president and the people share common ground.

Use What You Know: Stereotypes of the President

Much of *The Littlest Rebel*'s success in humanizing Lincoln resides in the film's use of pre-conceived notions of who Lincoln was and what traits he possessed. Many of these fictional films play to the audience's pre-existing knowledge of or stereotypes about historical presidents. Using this common knowledge as a starting point, these films show audiences altered images of the historical president that still resonate with what they audience thinks they understand or expect from the "essential" character of that president.

In the following pages, I explore how these films maintain narrative fidelity via: (1) general stereotypes of what generally makes a "good" president or (2) stereotypes about a particular president or presidency.

General "Good" President Stereotypes

Fictional films with historical president characters tend to affirm commonly accepted traits for a "good" president, such as stoicism and military or strategic prowess, among numerous others. As expressed in the preceding chapter, next to military service and kindness, an image as "the common man" and the perception of physical ability and morality are important traits the people seek in their president.[18]

Often, the president character in these films fits the prescribed roles of the "good" president. Excepting *Annie*'s depiction of a wheelchair-bound FDR, all these films depict the president as a physically able man. In each, the president stands or walks more often than he is seated.[19] Thomas A. Bailey argued that how a president or presidential hopeful looks can make a great difference in his or her perception. He stated, "The White House is not—nor should it be—a hospital, an outpatient clinic, or an old-soldier's home."[20] In this, he argued that Americans tend to feel more confident in a healthy, vivacious candidate for their presidency. Additionally, many of the presidents display sensitivity. From Ike's appreciation for romance in *I.Q.*, to Lincoln's ability to share an apple with a little girl in *The Littlest Rebel*, to the heartbroken look in Grant's eyes as he imagines the loss of innocent American lives in *Jonah Hex*, these films thoroughly exploit the trope of a leader who can be sensitive.

The presence of moral qualities appeared widely in these films. In their content analysis of presidential candidate traits, William L. Benoit and John P. McHale found that morality was the top personal quality candidates expressed during television appearances.[21] In *The Littlest Rebel*, Lincoln not only greets Virgie, but he also greets and shakes the hand of Virgie's slave, Uncle Billy, even when Uncle Billy himself is aware that the physical contact is perhaps unprecedented.[22] In this display, Lincoln shows morality—standing by his professed principles in his commitment to "equality for all"—even if, in both the civil war-era and the 1930s, such action would be considered inappropriate. He also does this when he spares both a Union and a Confederate soldier their lives. FDR's morality shows both through Eleanor's constant presence at his side in the film—showing that he values all opinions, including those of women—and through his willingness to be bipartisan to help end the Depression. Ulysses S. Grant appears moral in *Jonah Hex*. The audience watches as he agonizes over the decision to acknowledge his limitations and seek the help of someone outside the White House; he decides to shelve his pride for the good of the country. This morality extends to Grant's discomfort in the presence of the apparently immoral Hex. *Watchmen* implies Kennedy's morality by juxtaposing him with the immoral Nixon on the issue of using nuclear power, a.k.a. Dr. Manhattan, to win the Vietnam War. These films demonstrate an understanding of the different popular perceptions of the presidency and play to the audience's understanding of these characteristics. Preserving, in many cases, the expectations of "good" presidents, these films have a wider opportunity to present viewers with a perspective by incongruity: juxtaposing the familiar—e.g., the magnanimous Lincoln—with the unfamiliar—e.g., eating an apple with the daughter of a Confederate spy—invites viewers to expand their definition of the president's role.

Individual President Stereotypes

When historical-presidents-as-characters violate the "good" president roles, often the films are playing to an individual president's stereotypes. A great many of these films employ individual presidential stereotypes to help build up the historical-president-as-character into a believable representation of the president. For example, Americans are fond of remembering Lincoln as a strong leader and yet a man of compassion and of feeling, a theme reflected in films like *The Littlest Rebel*. Cara A. Finnegan argued that the mere image of Lincoln lead people to extol Lincoln's virtues as possessive of "'natural character, strength, insight, and humor'" based on the strength of the *mythos* surrounding Lincoln.[23] However, Lincoln is not the only president who has his own set stereotypes. In this section, I detail a number of different presidents' stereotypes before focusing on the major example of Richard Nixon.

JFK. A popular stereotype of John Kennedy, the JFK-as-playboy stereotype, makes an appearance in *Forrest Gump*. After Forrest drinks too much Dr. Pepper at a White House party, he asks to use the restroom. In the president's private bathroom, Forrest ogles a framed, signed photograph of Marilyn Monroe in a typically sexy pose that reads "To Jack with Love, Marilyn." The presence of the photograph and the suggestive caption—for example, use of the nickname "Jack"—reminds the audience of JFK's alleged affair with the famous actress, highlighting his playboy reputation.

Dubya. As Joe Eszterhas suggested, the 2000 George W. Bush campaign went to great pains to package him as an Everyman who might well go "'down to J.C. Penney to buy

himself socks.'"[24] While Bush's "Average Joe" performance likely helped his image, it also made him the brunt of many jokes about his intelligence. Through his own verbal slip-ups during his two terms as president, made more embarrassing by media attention, Dubya seemed to earn this reputation that he was of sub-par intelligence. Furthermore, as the mudslinging raged during the 2000 election, Bush's alleged past use of cocaine and marijuana came to the public's attention. *Harold & Kumar* not only embraces this stereotype, it pushed its boundaries. *Harold & Kumar* takes the audience's background knowledge and puts on to the screen that which an audience of Bush's critics only imagines to be true.

"Bushisms" and Bush's apparent lack of presidential agency are vital parts of *Harold & Kumar*'s "Bush-as-Idiot" motif. From their first encounter with the president, it is apparent that those within Bush's Cabinet and his family run the presidency. Bush shows little presidential agency through his fear and avoidance of Cheney and the president's annoyance at his father's attempts to run his White House. "Bushisms," as Dubya's made-up words came to be known, are another feature of *Harold & Kumar* that portray the president as unintelligent. For example, President Bush uses "hypocritizer" at one point in the film. By playing up Bush's foibles—often those that are already present in the public's mind—the film need do far less to create a funny and relatively believable depiction of the second President Bush.

Obama. Playing off stereotypes associated with both President Obama and black men in general, *Transformers 3* portrays Obama as being "cool." Donnell Alexander's *UTNE Reader* article, "Are Black People Cooler Than White People?" discussed the

phenomenon of "cool" and its association with the Black community. He wrote, "Cool has a history and cool has a meaning. We all know cool when we see it, and now, more than at any other time in this country's history, when mainstream America looks for cool we look to black culture. Countless new developments can be called great, nifty, even keen. But, cool? That's a black thang [*sic*], baby."[25] He made a critical argument of a popular stereotype, arguing that "cool" comes with being an outsider.[26]

Barack Obama could certainly be said to have "outsider" status as the first president of color in a line of 44 white predecessors. Indeed, much of Obama's public image emphasizes his coolness, particularly when running against the very "uncool," elderly-looking John McCain or when giving dap to his wife. In depicting Obama as "cool," *Transformers 3* stays within a framework that viewers already understand even as the plot moves into a clearly fictional realm. To put it in Fisher's words, *Transformers 3* maintains the audience's sense of narrative fidelity. While a plot about alien robots will never be plausible, the film's characterization of Obama according to the audience's "common knowledge" of the president's personality keeps this science-fiction action film from delving completely into the absurd.[27]

Nixon. Perhaps no president has been subject to more consistent stereotyping than Richard Nixon. His reputation as a bad-tempered, power-hungry, conspiratorial sneak has endured through the past four decades, and many films about or that feature Nixon have been remarkably consistent with using this image of the former president. Four films in this study—*Dick*, *Forrest Gump*, *Watchmen*, and *Transformers 3*—perpetuate this reputation. I

first investigate stereotypes of Nixon's bad attitude before considering the Nixon-as-schemer motif.

The exploitation of Nixon's reputation as a grouchy and quick-to-anger man appears most vividly in *Dick*, when numerous scenes show Nixon losing his temper at the drop of a hat. One scene uses viewers' previous knowledge of Nixon's history as it follows Nixon's relationship with his dog, Checkers. The scene shows a frustrated Nixon attempting to play with a totally disinterested Checkers. The president paces the Oval Office, trying to engage the dog. Nixon's White House Counsel, John Dean, enters:

> Nixon: [distractedly] Kennedy and Johnson had dogs that liked them. That's the problem.
> Dean: With all due respect, Mr. President, maybe you should show, uh…the dog more affection.
> Nixon: Maybe I oughta fire you!

From Nixon's famous "Checkers Speech," one would hardly imagine that a president would struggle for love from his own pet. The scene implies that Nixon only made Checkers a member of his family for the positive publicity owning a pet may engender. The tone of this interaction also plays to Nixon stereotypes: Nixon's first sentence is quietly consternated. His second line, however, is delivered at greater volume and faster rate, demonstrating the intensity of his anger. This scene riffs on the stereotype that Nixon was ill-tempered, particularly as the increased stress of the Watergate scandal weighed upon him.

This theme returns as the movie nears its climax, showing Nixon coming unhinged as the pressures of the Watergate scandal increase and his co-conspirators slowly are caught and prosecuted. This also corresponds with Betsy and Arlene's disillusionment with their hero. For example, the girls choose to confront Nixon after they overhear some of the Watergate tapes, in which Nixon swears, is insulting to Jewish people, and kicks Checkers. As they sit across from Nixon in the Oval Office:

Nixon: [impatiently, but not unkindly] You were saying, Arlene?
Arlene: [quietly, but stern] We don't think you've been completely honest with us.
Nixon: [voice immediately raises; angry] If this is about that Watergate *nonsense*… let me say *once again*,

> I had nothing to do with it, okay?" [raps knuckles on desk at "nothing"] It's a plot created by my enemies to disgrace me! Those radical, muckraking bastards, Woodward and Bernstein, over at *The Washington Post*! They're the liars here, you know! [raps knuckles on desk again on "they're"] Always hiding behind the goddamn First Amendment! [even angrier] Well, let me tell you something! [points at the girls; nearly shaking with rage] It won't protect them from me!

Arlene: [looking slightly disgusted; slight pause] Actually, it was just about the dog.

Nixon's quick-to-anger attitude and his reputation for being overly suspicious characterize this scene. Even though Arlene and Betsy wanted only to confront him about kicking Checkers, Nixon immediately overreacts, losing his temper and frightening the two girls.

Later in that same scene, Nixon reveals he had a background check done on both girls, and in his anger, he insults Arlene's late father. The girls stand up, yelling in rage:

> Betsy: We heard that tape!
> Nixon: What'd you hear?!
> Betsy: [nearly screaming] You kick Checkers, and you're prejudiced, and you have potty mouth!
> Arlene: [slowly] You're a *bad man*.
> Nixon: [very short pause; rises, yelling] You stinkin' little idiots! Get the hell outta here! [chases the girls out as they squeal with fright] And don't ever come back here again, okay?! [Fiercely; brandishes fist] You don't mess with the big boys!!

This scene demonstrates the extreme end of Nixon's bad temper. When the schemer feels he is out-schemed, he immediately goes berserk. "Nixon unhinged" may be somewhat familiar to anyone who has watched Nixon's farewell to his staff.[28] Through *Dick*'s exaggerated depiction of Nixon, the film invites viewers to take what they already know or suspect about Nixon and add to it this fantasy that may change or confirm their judgments of Nixon.

The Nixon-as-schemer stereotype is an even more popular theme. As demonstrated by the scenes discussed above, *Dick* relies heavily on Nixon's historical reputation as a man deeply entrenched in covert operations. Always suspicious and quick to accuse, the Richard

Nixon of *Dick* exemplifies the historically supported scheming behaviors of the 37th

president of the United States. This plotline is not confined solely to *Dick*, however. The

initial minutes of the *Transformers 3* plot submit that the Space Race began so that the

United States could secretly intercept the wreckage of an alien spaceship on the Moon

before the Soviets got there. Only in the face of a great crisis, a Decepticon attack, in the

film's present-day is it revealed that this was a Nixon-sanctioned covert operation. When

news breaks of the spaceship on the Moon, the government interviews Buzz Aldrin:

> Present-day Buzz Aldrin: We were sworn to secrecy by our Commander in Chief. [Cut to flashback of Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin sitting in a White House room.]
> Nixon's Aide: This was a mission you will *never* speak of.
> Astronauts: I understand, sir.

Aldrin's recollection shows these astronauts, two beloved figures in American history, as

complicit in Nixon's deception of the American people. Furthermore, the film augments

Nixon's reputation for knowing more national and international secrets than he ever shared

with the American people.

Similarly, Nixon's role in a cover-up is a central plot point in *Watchmen*.[29] In

numerous scenes in the film, disillusioned characters refer to the president by his historically

accurate, pejorative nickname, "Tricky Dick." Nixon's scheming earns him three extra

terms as president in *Watchmen*'s world. *Watchmen* argues that Nixon's five total terms

resulted from the United States winning the Vietnam War under his leadership. As Dr.

Manhattan explains, "President Nixon asks me to intervene in Vietnam, something that his

predecessors would not ask." The choice of words in this line emphasizes Nixon's

willingness to do anything to win or to come out on top. By using Dr. Manhattan, a source

of near-limitless nuclear power, the Cold War escalates until the Doomsday Clock reaches

five to midnight, placing Nixon at the eye of the storm of likely nuclear obliteration between the U.S. and the Soviets.

By choosing to illustrate the tensions between Nixon's scheming side and his fear of nuclear war, *Watchmen* also seems to hint at Nixon's reputation as corrupt and quick to anger, but not a truly evil man. Indeed, many times in *Watchmen*, the film shows Nixon struggling with the demands of his office and the results of his schemes. *Dick* seems to argue similarly. Although *Dick*'s Nixon eventually yells at the girls, he is generally portrayed as obsequious in his efforts to win Arlene and Betsy's favor. To keep them silent, he tries first to win them with kindness. He only results to potentially deadly measures— that is, sending hit men after the girls—when he feels the girls are no longer his allies and may expose his secrets. These depictions of Nixon in many ways confirm the image of Nixon as a *bad* man, but not an *evil* one. In other words, these depictions in some ways uphold, at the very least, a shadow of the popular understanding of the president as the nation's hero or father.[30]

Though many films have certainly portrayed presidents as truly evil, these fictions seem never to go so far as to obliterate all sense of "goodness" from these historical presidents. I suspect that, were these films fully to villainize the president in addition to the fictional breaks already occurring, viewers would be confronted with too wide a break with narrative rationality to bridge with *phantasia*. Instead of considering the "evil" historical president in fiction as off-limits in these films, it would be best understood as not being these films' enterprise. Too extreme a break with reality might cause viewers to reject such fictions wholesale; by instead focusing on only one major break—for example, including

true superheroes in a pseudo-historically fictional plot—audiences confront the major violation of reality that forms the film's core.

Traditional images of the president, both of "good" presidents and of specific American presidential stereotypes, are a powerful symbol and an asset to fictional film looking to insert a presidential character into their plotlines. By riffing on pre-established understandings of the president, these fictions maintain narrative fidelity, even if only pseudo-realistically, with less effort than films which reinvent the president's image. These presidential images facilitate *phantasia* because viewers are working from preconceived notions of reality. As these kernels of preconception serve to stimulate *phantasia*, they exist as an enthymeme; a morsel of truth blends with fiction to invite audiences to draw new conclusions about historical presidents. Other plot techniques do similar work in creating presidential realism and opening the door for enthymematic decision-making about U.S. presidents.

Creating Realistic Moments or Plots in Fiction

Films with a presidential character secure an aura of realism when they use historical fiction to insert the president believably into the plot. Fisher posited that viewers prefer stories that make sense and mesh with what they know to be true; historical fiction is the chosen method of many of these films to achieve narrative rationality. Whereas some films like *Harold & Kumar* randomly toss the president-as-character into their comedic plot, something comedy affords, historical fiction often plays on situations and architecture with which audiences are likely already familiar and, thus, more likely to accept. Historical fiction plots insert fictional characters and their corresponding plotlines into real, historical

accounts, as films like *Titanic* (1997) demonstrated.[31] For example, both *The Littlest Rebel* and *Jonah Hex* use the American Civil War as the backdrop for their plots. *Annie*, by contrast, features Depression and New Deal-era America with particular emphasis on the differences between the economic classes. Presidential iconography, like the Oval Office, also makes regular appearances.

Presidential Images

Employing static images of presidents and Washington D.C. is a particularly popular method of establishing the presence of presidential authority in these films. Use of these images and architectural marvels help shape viewers' experiences of the presidency. Malcolm Kelsall suggested that people, even today, make "pilgrimages" to spaces that represent the president or presidency, like Jefferson's estate, because such places are so steeped in the personal history of our presidents.[32] The physical popular culture of presidential architecture is ripe with presidential symbolism; seeing images of the Washington Monument or the Oval Office can be as powerful as seeing an image of the president himself.

Just as a presidential candidate rarely delivers a speech without an American flag in the background, films like *Jonah Hex*, *Annie*, *Dick*, and *Transformers 3* place the fictionalized president on an appropriate backdrop of presidential symbols. *Jonah Hex*, for example, shows us Washington D.C. as it existed during Ulysses S. Grant's presidency. Viewers observe the half-completed architecture of the Capitol building's dome and of the Washington Monument, and in *Annie*, a portrait of George Washington seems to be the fifth

voice in the group as the Roosevelts, Annie, and Warbucks sing "Tomorrow" in the Oval

Office.

An aura of power deeply infuses presidential imagery, especially the Oval Office.

By taking the public behind the closed doors of the president's private office, these films

violate the daily reality of most Americans. In some cases, these films go further by

warping the representation of presidential power via the backdrop by showing, for example,

the presidential character interacting with an unusual, fictional character, such as spirit-man

bounty hunter, Jonah Hex, or performing an unexpected act, like singing show tunes with

redheaded orphans. By placing these nontraditional actions or people in juxtaposition with

the president and within the symbolic and power-laden space of the Oval Office or other

White House locations, these scenes give audiences a glimpse of what might possibly go on

in the president's daily life. These films offer a different way for viewers to perceive the

literal seat of the Commander-in-Chief and the president himself.

Film Manipulation

Most of these fictions with a historical presidential character rely on the audience's

ability to believe the president's involvement in the plot. To create the appearance of

realism, a number of these films utilize the manipulation of real footage of historical

presidents to augment viewers' experiences and make this falsely realistic depiction

possible. Use of this technique began in the 1980s, although the inclusion of non-

manipulated stock footage in films started slightly earlier.[33] Filmmakers use strategic

editing, focus, and, later, technologies such as computer-generated images or CGI to include

pieces of stock footage out of their original contexts. Once computer technology became

more mainstreamed and more nuanced in its capabilities, the manipulation of stock film for fictional use increased.

Some films alter the historical record by simply adding new elements to stock footage. For example, *Watchmen* uses a reel of stock footage during the film's opening credits. One clip included in this montage is the assassination of President Kennedy. The scene cuts between the Zapruder footage and shots of The Comedian leaving the grassy knoll with a gun in hand. Rather than actually manipulating the footage, *Watchmen* inserts The Comedian into this historical moment with strategic cuts.

Forrest Gump uses stock footage manipulation liberally so that Forrest appears to interact with presidents and take part in other historical events. The *Forrest Gump* filmmakers took stock footage of JFK, LBJ, and Nixon and added CGI to the presidents' mouths. Then, voice actors lent their talents to the characters, allowing the film to depict the actual personages of these three presidents doing and saying things they did not historically do or say. Indeed, this CGI is so effective that a viewer who did not know that it was fiction might easily believe that Forrest was a real man who really interacted with three presidents and played a role in significant historical events. Of course, the audience for these films is in on the joke. They know that the footage has been altered, and that knowledge creates an additional layer of entertainment, as the audience evaluates how skillfully the footage has been changed.

Unlike the basic manipulation of stock footage and jump cuts used by *Watchmen*, *Forrest Gump* depicts Forrest interacting for lengthy periods of time the president. For example, Forrest visits the White House as an honored guest for the second time after his

service in the Vietnam War. He converses with President Johnson as Forrest receives a

medal for his service:

> LBJ: America owes you a debt of gratitude, son. I understand you were wounded. Where were you hit?
> Forrest: [in his heavy Alabama accent] In the butt-tocks sir.
> LBJ: Well, that must be a sight. I'd kinda like to see that.
> Forrest: [looks momentarily confused, then pulls pants down and moons LBJ, displaying wound]
> LBJ: [laughs in disbelief] God damn, son. [incredulously smiles and shakes head as he walks away]

While it is *possible* that President Johnson once had such an interaction, it is highly unlikely.

To make this scene happen, *Forrest Gump* filmmakers employed both tactics of CGI and

voiceover to make this interaction with Johnson appear real. This interaction is outrageous

not because the footage appears to be falsified—it actually appears to be very realistic—but

instead because the circumstances *within* the scene are so outrageous. The film deploys

similar editing and film manipulation techniques earlier in the story, both when Forrest tells

President Kennedy he has to "pee" and later when he greets President Nixon who offers to

move Forrest into more grandiose accommodations at the new Watergate Hotel.

CGI also allows Forrest to take part in many different important historical events.

The *Forrest Gump* filmmakers manipulated historical footage to depict Forrest in the first

row of the crowd assembled to witness the enforced integration at the University of

Alabama. CGI inserts Forrest into the crowd, and body double actors portray Vivian

Malone Jones and others in the non-newsreel scenes so Forrest can interact directly with the

newly integrated members of the university. During part of this edited scene, Vivian drops

her notebook, and Forrest quickly moves forward, bending to hand it back to her. To match

edited elements to the historical footage, filmmakers used special camera lenses or editing

features to blend the film styles of the 1960s and the 1990s.

Contact also manipulates presidential stock footage for its film, though to a lesser degree than *Forrest Gump*. Rather than using CGI on the stock footage, *Contact* strategically edits pieces of President Clinton's news conferences, specifically his statement after the Oklahoma City bombing. Filmmakers spliced together vague and non-situation-specific parts of the conference to simulate that Clinton really did give a press conference ensuring the people that the government was handling the alien situation. The film uses a body double for distance shots and for shots of Clinton's back. As with *Forrest Gump*, someone who had not seen the Oklahoma City press conference could easily fall for the film's trick.

By manipulating presidential stock footage to put the president quite literally into the movie, films like *Forrest Gump, Contact,* and *Watchmen* take the appearance of realism to a highly believable degree. Instead of asking audiences to bend their sense of narrative fidelity, these films bend history. Inserting characters into real footage of presidents via computer manipulation and strategic editing allows these movies to reshape history. These three films, particularly *Contact*, offer viewers the option of wondering if their Commander-in-Chief volunteered to be a part of a film as a mere actor.[34] Believability in these films invites informed viewers to reimagine or rethink the historical record in question by literally putting the alternative before audiences' eyes. Furthermore, because these film manipulations are so well executed, younger viewers or those unfamiliar with these particular moments in history may truly believe these fictional presidential interactions historically occurred, reshaping their understanding of American history.

Additionally, these computer-altered interactions may facilitate viewers' ability to redefine their relationship to the U.S. presidency. Particularly in *Contact* and *Forrest Gump*,

the altered footage inserts the protagonist of the film, and viewers very likely feel a kinship with the protagonist. As audiences follow Ellie and Forrest quite literally into real or imagined presidential history, they step into someone else's perception of the president in ways that may open to viewers altered perceptions of their own relationship with the Commander-in-Chief.

Conclusion

The ten films discussed in this chapter place before audiences' eyes new ways to imagine historical presidents. I have cited numerous examples from these films to argue that fictional films with historical presidential characters often violate an element of narrative probability, requiring audiences to use *phantasia* to make sense of the stories and, by extension, reimagine or renegotiate their perceptions of their own relationship to or understanding of historical presidents and the U.S. presidency in general. In this chapter, I assessed different types of access to the president and the methods of inducing a sense of realism in fictional film.

I contend that these films act as a sort of enthymeme. Placing the fantastic next to audiences' preconceived understandings of the president invites viewers to use *phantasia* to make seemingly illogical jumps from their current reality to a fantasized, new understanding of reality. Making these illogical jumps, the audience might infer that their president could be a stoner, a singing sensation, or a secret criminal mastermind intent on staying president for life.

Even if viewers do not accept such a reality in full, seeing fantasies of the president may influence lived reality particularly by collapsing the perceived distance between the

president and the people. Demonstrating ease of access to the president is an important theme in many of these fictions with a presidential character. The American viewing public receives an invitation from these films to view their relationship to the president as more intimate than it is in reality. In giving the president Everyman traits or banal pastimes, the near-legendary status of the chief executive diminishes, even if only slightly. The perceived distance between president and people collapses further when audiences see the president act or dress outside the formal and distinguished stereotypes of his office. More simply, seeing President Bush run away to his man cave to hide from Dick Cheney in many ways knocks the president off his proverbial pedestal, decreasing the perceived power differential between him and the American public.

Most important, the judgments of viewers stem from *phantasia*, the realm of the "maybe" or the "just not yet." These films put before our eyes different "what ifs" about our presidents that still coalesce with our understanding of presidential histories. The judgments that an audience might make are variable, depending largely on how each film portrays the presidential subject and how that portrayal corresponds to known or understood aspects of the president's character and behavior. Bending and stretching narrative rationality creates room for *phantasia* to reshape how the people contemplate the president, extending "what we know" about him. Moreover, these subjunctive moments open the door for the people to interact with history differently and even to alter judgments on presidential politics, based solely on fantasy. A number of these films presented in this chapter certainly push the boundaries of the "presidential possible." However, the films discussed in the next chapter push these boundaries nearly to their breaking point in their re-interpretation of the American presidency and its role in history.

Notes

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[1] The exception is *The Littlest Rebel* (1935), which fits the generic patterns of the other films selected although it comes from an earlier period of American film. Including *The Littlest Rebel* in this analysis helps articulate that this concept of the historical president character in fiction is not unique to the 1980s and beyond.

[2] Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), and Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[3] Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 64-65.

[4] Robert Rowland, "Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 39-41, and William G. Kirkwood, "Narrative and the Rhetoric of Possibility," *Communication Monographs* 59 (1992), 33-34.

[5] Debra Hawhee, "Looking Into Aristotle's Eyes: Toward a Theory of Rhetorical Vision," *Advances in the History of Rhetoric* 14 (2011), 139-65.

[6] Cara A. Finnegan, "Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.1 (2005), 31-57.

[7] Based on other contextual elements in the film, the plot implicates that The Comedian earned this souvenir for his services to the Nixon supporters in assassinating JFK. The graphic novel further implicates The Comedian in the murders of *Washington Post* reporters, Woodward and Bernstein, contextualizing Nixon's ability to stay in office. The film does not include this aspect of the graphic novel.

[8] In this film, Nixon is in his fifth term in office, and the USA has fallen into a state of dystopia.

[9] One should note that the distortion of narrative fidelity I consider in *Watchmen* regards realities of access and not realities of superheroes because (based on genre) audiences come prepared to see superhumans and normal humans interact.

[10] See Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 59.

[11] One might also consider Dr. Arroway's access to President Clinton as earned through the authority of another. Although she is an astro-scientist, she is not taken seriously by the U.S. government until Dr. Arroway and her team intercept the alien message. In this case, the female scientist, regardless of her own qualifications, requires the help of a higher authority to access the Commander-in-Chief.

[12] Susan A. Sherr, "Scenes from the Political Playground: An Analysis of the Symbolic Use of Children in Presidential Campaign Advertising," *Political Communication* 16 (1999), 53.

[13] See Aristotle, *Poetics*; and Arthur Asa Berger, *Popular Culture Genres: Theories and Texts* (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1992), xiv.

[14] Steve Neale, *Genre and Hollywood* (London: Routledge, 2000), 65-68 (full comedy section 65-71).

[15] While it seems ridiculous, the cookies are "accidentally" drugged because the naïve girls add the pot to the cookies thinking it was another ingredient.

[16] As previously mentioned, the "accidental" marijuana keeps to the film's theme of the girls' naïveté. The good-natured youths want only to add extra flavor to the Hello Dollies by adding walnuts. They do not realize that the walnut jar is the marijuana hiding place for Betsy's brother. Thinking they are walnut leaves, they add them to the cookies.

[17] Hanna Miller, "Memorabilia," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005), 5.

[18] See Dana D. Nelson, *Bad for Democracy: How the Presidency Undermines the Power of the People* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 42; Davis W. Houck and Amos Kiewe, *FDR's Body Politics: The Rhetoric of Disability* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003), chapter four; and Elliot King, "Newspapers," in *The American President in Popular Culture*, ed. John W. Matviko (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2005),106.

[19] By depicting FDR in his "private" persona (that is, in the wheelchair), *Annie* suggests that Warbucks (and thus, Annie) is part of FDR's inner circle, those privileged enough to know the severity of his polio affliction.

[20] Thomas A. Bailey, *Presidential Greatness: The Image and the Man from George Washington to Present* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967), 129-131.

[21] William L. Benoit and John P. McHale, "Presidential Candidates' Personal Qualities: Computer Content Analysis" in *Presidential Candidate Images*, ed. Kenneth L. Hacker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 49-63, Table 2.2. One will note that, amongst qualities valued by voters, morality ranked lower than sincerity.

[22] Similarly playing to the audiences preconceived notions, in *The Littlest Rebel*, Uncle Billy is portrayed as understanding the immense class differences between him, a slave, and the president, a white man. Uncle Billy vigorously wipes his hand off on his pants before shaking Lincoln's hand.

[23] Cara A. Finnegan, "Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8.1 (2005), 40.

[24] William Hart, "The Country Connection: Country Music, 9/11, and the War on Terrorism," in *The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity,* ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 158.

[25] Donnell Alexander, "Are Black People Cooler Than White People?" in *UTNE Reader* (November-December 1997), http://www.utne.com/1997-11-01/are-black-people-cooler-than-white-people.aspx.

[26] Alexander.

[27] Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 64-65.

[28] Nixon seems off-kilter during this address (likely from the stresses of the near-impeachment), which I first viewed in Dr. J. Michael Hogan's Contemporary Public Address class. For the video, visit <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32GaowQnGRw>.

[29] To encourage viewers to engage with the Nixon character, the actor playing Nixon wore a prosthetic of Nixon's trademark nose that actually over-exaggerated the feature, making it nearly a caricature. Thus, even Nixon's facial features were stereotyped to maintain narrative fidelity in *Watchmen.*

[30] Although scholars have noted, at length, the exhausted disillusionment most Americans have felt post-Nixon, I do not believe that the majority of U.S. citizens would label the presidency as an evil office filled with evil people. Naturally, there are always those who believe the president's policies go against citizens' best interests, but more radical stances—such as Obama "Birthers"—seem to be a vocal majority, rather than the honest opinion of most citizens.

[31] In *Titanic*, the main characters, Jack and Rose, are composite characters made from synthesizing the different class and occupational characteristics of the different passengers on the ill-fated ship. The sets and overarching plot (the sinking) matched the historical record at the same time as the main characters' plotline was a fiction.

[32] Malcolm Kelsall, *Jefferson and the Iconography of Romanticism: Folk, Land, Culture and the Romantic Nation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 3.

[33] Stock footage refers to video footage of places, events, and people that are often archived by private companies and sold to filmmakers looking to use the footage. For example, television shows or movies that require a panoramic shot of the New York City skyline may

opt to purchase some stock footage rather than pay for the helicopter and video expenses to do their own shot.

[34] Indeed, the first time I viewed *Contact*, I thought it really was Clinton appearing, in person, in the film.

Chapter 4:

Hail to the Vampire Hunter: Entelechy and the

President-as-Action-Hero in Supernatural Fiction

Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt are two of the most famous, beloved presidents of U.S. history. They both guided the United States through the immeasurable hardships of the Civil War and the Depression and start of World War II; consequently, they are prominent figures particularly in America's war-time memory. Two 2012 American-made films, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!*, take these iconic presidents to a remarkable new level by featuring the president as the hero of a science-fiction, action-packed representation of history. Armed with deadly silver weapons, *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln and *American Badass*'s FDR deliver the U.S. from supernatural forces of evil bent on world domination and the destruction of the human race.

All of the films considered in this thesis are noteworthy for including historical presidents in fictional films; however, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!* are unique even among the rather unusual cinematic fantasies I have studied thus far. Even though they are ultimately quite different, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!* share several key characteristics. Both films are immediately different from those discussed in chapter three, because the president is the film's protagonist and not a supporting character. Furthermore, both alter history by inserting science fiction and fantasy elements into well-known historical moments, i.e., the Civil War and the Depression/start of WWI.

In the previous chapter, I explored ten films featuring historical U.S. presidents as characters in fictional films. When analyzing these films, I considered two emergent foci for understanding the interplay of narrative and *phantasia* in these films: (1) *phantasia*-influenced portrayals of access to the president and (2) narrative probability and fidelity in the creation of "realistic" representations of presidential action in the films. While these two frameworks are not unimportant in the films and analysis of this chapter, it is essential to study the two films considered in this chapter holistically to understand what each is doing and what each accomplishes as a discrete text. Although they operate in very different ways and for very different purposes, both *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!*, I contend, exist as fantastical "entelechies" of the American president in fictional film.

Kenneth Burke noted that "Aristotelian *entelechy*…classifies a thing by conceiving of its kind according to the perfection (that is, finishedness) of which that kind is capable."[1] In another moment, Burke mused that "The depicting of a thing's *end* may be a dramatic way of identifying its *essence*."[2] Entelechy, then, the potential of a thing's furthest "endpoint," that never achieved stage of fulfillment according to an inherent impulse or dynamic movement that is moving ever forward. Simply, entelechy moves towards something's *telos*, but has not yet achieved it; thus a thing moves towards its "finishedness" but has not reached yet that point.

I contend that *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass*, at least at present, represent a "fresh extreme"—a movement towards a *telos* of the historical U.S. president in fiction, a movement that remains ever-progressing and still unfulfilled.[3] The previous chapters have elaborated the history, or "starting-point," of the historical U.S.

president as a character in fictional film and *FDR: American Badass!* and *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* are nothing if not "fresh extremes" of the historical president in fictional film. These "fresh extremes" act as an invitation to audiences to engage in *phantasia* to fill in the gaps created as the plots violate narrative rationality. Presenting viewers with the entelechy of this character type in fiction, these films simultaneously bring before viewers' eyes new ways to understand or reimagine two of America's most beloved leaders.

I argue that *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!* each craft a unique viewing experience that asks audiences to imagine the power of a president magnified exponentially until the president himself is a kind of national savior beyond traditional political methods. Though they use different means, these films place these iconic presidents into new, fantastical circumstances and imbue them with super-human (i.e., Lincoln) or near super-human (i.e., FDR) powers. Each movie puts "before the eyes" of viewers that which is radically and historically impossible for either Lincoln or FDR. In doing so, I contend, that these films do not challenge popular memories of these two well-loved presidents, but they do push the boundaries of expected or permissible presidential behavior, reconfiguring the executive into a singular heroic force that can save the United States from any evil or problem that the nation may face. In in this chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of each film, starting with a plot synopsis, which explores these films as the entelechy of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film. This analysis will consider the two criteria that served as chapter three's framework—access and realism—on an as-needed basis but will ultimately "read" each film as an organic whole to consider the ways narrative and *phantasia* interact to create new or altered understandings of Presidents Lincoln and Roosevelt.

Analysis

Vampire Hunter and *American Badass* are as remarkably similar as they are different as each acts as entelechy of the phenomenon of the historical presidential character in fiction, though by different means and for different ends. In the pages to follow, I analyze how each film uses different techniques to shape the viewing experience to one that pushes the abilities of *phantasia* to its very limits and what this means for viewers' understanding of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and of the office of the U.S. president more generally.

Plot Synopsis, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter (hereafter abbreviated as *Vampire Hunter*) is a high-budget drama—released in theatres on 20 June 2012—that rewrites the Lincoln *mythos* and the history of the civil war by depicting Lincoln as a man dedicated to the eradication of vampires. *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln enters politics as a means to demolish the vampire agenda, which, according to the film, is the primary reason why slavery exists in the South. Because slavery is managed and supported by vampires, Lincoln must engage not only the moral evil of slavery, but also its deeper roots in the bloodlust of a Southern vampire nation.

At the start of the film, a young Lincoln, aided by his parents, defends a black boy from the harassment of a white, anti-abolitionist man called Barts. Lincoln and his parents publicly humiliate Barts. That night, Abe witnesses Barts creep into his house and do something to his mother's arm. The next morning, a mysterious illness overtakes Abe's mother, Nancy, who then dies from the sickness induced by Barts. The audience later comes to understand that Barts, a vampire, had bitten Nancy Lincoln, with fatal, seemingly

poisonous results. Abe vows to avenge his mother by murdering her poisoner. The

narrative jumps ahead, showing a teenaged or twenty-something Abraham drinking heavily

at a bar. A youth next to him says, "A man only gets that drunk when he wants to kill a man

or kiss a girl. Which is it?" When the bar patron thumps Lincoln on the back, Lincoln drops

a pistol. That night, Lincoln attempts to kill Barts who reveals himself as a vampire in a

flurry of fangs and venomous spittle. Lincoln fails to kill the vampire and is nearly killed

himself.

The youth from the bar, whom we learn is named Henry, rescues Lincoln and

explains the truth about vampires—that they are real, that they are everywhere, that they are

the masterminds behind suffering including the scourge of slavery. Henry offers to teach

Lincoln the proper way to destroy vampires. In this film, vampires look just like humans;

they are capable of walking about during the day. When they want to bite you, however, a

vicious, toothy mouth dominates their faces. With Henry's help, Abraham becomes a man

of super-human strength and ability, wielding his silver-coated axe with impossible speed

and force. Henry sends Lincoln the names of vampire targets to destroy, and Abraham rids

Springfield, Illinois, of vampires including the fiend Barts who killed his mother. Goaded

by his deep-seated belief that slavery gives the vampires a secret, unregulated food source

that keeps their monstrous nature hidden from the world, Lincoln decides that his fight

against vampires also must become a fight against slavery.

As the film's plot develops, Abraham Lincoln allows more individuals in on the

secret of vampires' existence. This "team" is comprised of fictional characters such as the

young black boy that he rescued as a child and real historical figures like Joshua Speed. The

team also interacts with other historical figures, like Harriet Tubman. Eventually, Abraham

parts ways with Henry when he learns that Henry, his mentor and confident, is in fact a vampire hell-bent on revenge for the fact that they murdered his fiancé and turned him into a monster without his consent. Even though Henry is a "good" vampire, Lincoln does not immediately forgive the deception. Lincoln's rejection of Henry coincides with another decision, to hang up his silver-coated axe and pursue a political career. Lincoln concludes that as president, he can do "more good" for the country than he can as an axe-wielding super-hero. Whereas a super-hero can only defeat one or two villains at a time, a president can save an entire country from the vampire threat.

As the plot unfolds towards its climax, vampires continue to haunt Lincoln, attempting to ruin his life. Vadoma, an important, high-ranking vampire and Southern slave-owner, infiltrates the White House and murders Lincoln's young son, Willie. The civil war rages on and the South enjoys victory after victory, because a sizeable number of its soldiers are vampires; they cannot be killed by ordinary bullets in a traditional battle. It is at this point that Lincoln realizes that his super-hero agenda of killing individual vampires is not incompatible with his presidential agenda of saving the whole nation. Lincoln realizes both that to win the war, the North must use bullets and cannon balls of silver and Lincoln, himself, must "take up the axe" and return to the battle-field. A lengthy and action-filled train battle culminates in the murder of Lincoln's closest ally, Joshua Speed, and the death of Lincoln's primary enemy, the villainous vampire leader "Adam." Mary Todd Lincoln avenges Willie by destroying Vadoma, and the North uses silver weapons to win the battle at Gettysburg, turning the tide of the war. The film concludes on the night of Abe's assassination, when he refuses Henry's offer of immortality, to become a vampire that will never die. The film's final scene shows Henry, in a more present day-looking bar, asking

another young rogue, "A man only gets that drunk when he wants to kiss a girl or kill a man. Which is it?" He thumps the young rogue on the back, and a gun falls to the floor, leaving the audience to infer that this man will perhaps become the next vampire hunter.[4]

Hail to the *Vampire Hunter*

Despite its fantastical plot, I contend that *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is not meant as a joke or farce. The presentation of the film—its film styles, its editing, its lighting, and its music—all contribute to an unequivocally serious, dramatic action/sci-fi film. Indeed, one might argue that this is the film's real weakness. It is certainly an issue raised by critics: the style of its presentation and its absurd subject matter create such a perspective by incongruity that the film lacks coherence. I disagree. By choosing to proceed soberly with a fictional film about a historical president, *Vampire Hunter* encourages the movie's audiences to extend their appreciation of Lincoln's greatness to its natural "end" or conclusion—Lincoln was, in fact, a superhero fighting against super-villains. Interestingly, the "super-villains" of the confederacy were not the native Southern populace but, instead vampires. In this heroic narrative, Southerners are excused for their support of slavery, because the film suggests that they were under the thrall of vampire leaders and lieutenants. Even though *Vampire Hunter* puts an impossible version of the sixteenth president before the audiences' eyes, the film does not altogether violate viewers' sense of narrative rationality. Throughout the film, *Vampire Hunter* uses its "available means of persuasion" as it liberally employs different Lincoln stereotypes already familiar to the American people as a way to negotiate its sci-fi elements.

Images of Lincoln

Lincoln's presence on the penny and the five-dollar bill and his mammoth, iconic memorial in Washington, D.C. are but a few pieces of evidence that Abraham Lincoln is—alongside Washington, FDR, and John Kennedy—one of the most recognizable historical U.S. presidents. When I asked my students to describe Lincoln to me, they immediately provided such descriptors as "he was tall and skinny," "he had a beard," and "he wore that tall hat." When I asked them to describe James Buchanan, they said, "Who is James Buchanan?" Not only were they unable to describe our fifteenth president—which, admittedly, I could not do either—they did not even know who he was. They described Lincoln without hesitation. Visual images of Lincoln have remained part of American popular memory in ways that have endured time and generational differences.

Vampire Hunter highlights familiar images of Lincoln as "jumping-off" points or as enthymeme for its new take on Abraham Lincoln. Images 1-3 illustrate *Vampire Hunter*'s use of visual enthymeme.[5] Note how all three images present viewers with a perspective by incongruity as they juxtapose familiar images of Lincoln with unfamiliar ones.[6] For example, Images 1 and 2 use familiar images of Lincoln the president—the bony, bearded face or lanky frame, the stovepipe top hat, and tailcoat—while pairing them with non-resonant images of Lincoln the president—the axe and the misty, creepy backdrop. Image 3 presents viewers with young Lincoln in his rail-splitter outfit—the high pants, light shirt, and suspenders featured in Norman Rockwell's *Lincoln the Railsplitter*[7]—next to a non-resonant image—Lincoln chopping at a tree so hard that it nearly explodes in one whack.

Image 1 (left), Image 2 (center), and Image 3 (right)

In each of these images, the filmmakers bend aspects of narrative fidelity by providing viewers with kernels of the familiar, giving audiences something to grab onto as they see a radically unexpected image. Such a starting point allows *phantasia* to begin to negotiate the dissonance of the familiar yet unexpected image. Including familiar images of Lincoln, then, helps *Vampire Hunter* bend, rather than break, narrative fidelity; even though Lincoln is doing things the audience *knows* never transpired, *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln still looks like the Lincoln they know.

As the film progresses, this becomes even more important as Lincoln's actions take on an increasingly super-human quality. Anyone who has watched *The Matrix* (1999) or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) is visually familiar with a camera technique known as "bullet time." Bullet time refers to "the technique of going into slow motion while retaining the ability to move the camera's viewpoint at normal speed."[8] This occurs in *The Matrix* when Neo bends backwards and watches the bullets barely miss him in slowed time as the camera spins around him. This frequently used feature allows filmmakers to intensify certain actions and facilitates the use of computer-generated images (CGI) if necessary.

Vampire Hunter uses bullet time for both these reasons. Even the world's greatest stuntman could not survive the feats *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln performs. Combining bullet

time and CGI allows filmmakers to portray Lincoln performing super-human acts at super-human speeds. For example, as he attempts to kill his first vampire, young Abraham becomes entangled in a trap that suspends him by the ankles from the ceiling. As the vampire is about to drain Lincoln's blood, Abraham twitches to the side. The shot then switches between bullet time and real time quickly as a pocketknife falls from Lincoln's pants pocket, he catches it in his mouth, jerks outward to stab the vampire, jerks up, and slices his bindings, ultimately slaughtering the vampire just in time. A second example demonstrates how this technique is important to the film. Unable initially to kill the vampire, Barts, who murdered his mother, Lincoln chases Barts through a horse stampede. This scene uses bullet time when Barts kicks a horse toward Lincoln, who allows the horse to roll over him, and then pulls himself onto the horse's back as it stands. Lincoln then gallops off after Barts. Later in that same scene, bullet time facilitates CGI manipulation to simulate both Barts and Lincoln running across the backs of galloping horses. Nearly all the scenes in which Lincoln wields his axe use a combination of bullet time, real time, and CGI.

By manipulating the camera, *Vampire Hunter* alters the viewing experience, putting before viewers' eyes a historical president performing supernatural feats of speed and strength in a way distinctive from the experience of normal time. These actions would be astoundingly impressive actions of any human, and they are even more impressive coming from a president. By using bullet time, audiences not only see these astounding feats, but they also have before their eyes the slow motion close-ups of Lincoln—beard, hat, and face—leaving no doubt that it is indeed Lincoln performing these acts. By slowing the action down, the film presents viewers with images that they must confront and consider for several seconds. Abraham Lincoln becomes the center and focal point of the action, the

iconic image of Lincoln briefly frozen in a super-human killing frenzy. These scenes most clearly demonstrate how this film pushes the extreme boundaries of narrative rationality in fictional film.

Even with these radical portrayals of Lincoln, *Vampire Hunter* attempts to strike a balance between intense novel images of Lincoln and more familiar images. Instead of bombarding the viewer solely with Lincoln, super-human slayer of the undead (Image 4), *Vampire Hunter* also includes familiar or tame images of Lincoln. Image 5, for example, shows Lincoln bowing his head at the conclusion of his Gettysburg Address.

| *Image 4* | *Image 5* |

Before we see this image, we hear Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address as the camera shows the North overpowering the South with its silver weapons. All the while, triumphant and emotional string music plays. The scene cuts to Lincoln as he delivers the last few lines of the Address (". . .so nobly advanced. . ."), and the camera pans over a huge crowd, which bursts into applause as Lincoln concludes. The foregrounded Lincoln appears "larger than life" as he is framed against the majestically billowing American Flag, and his bowed head shows humility even while receiving tumultuous praise. This is the image of Lincoln that viewers expect. By balancing between such iconic images of Lincoln and the film's radical re-imaginings of our sixteenth president, *Vampire Hunter* facilitates *phantasia* so that viewers may similarly reimagine Lincoln.

The progression of this traditional image of Lincoln also facilitates *phantasia* by allowing the audience to connect with Lincoln as a person. The film begins by showing viewers a boy version of Lincoln, who grows into the young adult whom viewers follow as he matures into the man who would be the president. Watching this progression encourages viewers to feel personally connected; we see Lincoln grow from a young boy to adult man. Even the way Lincoln is named reflects such a progression. Before he becomes president, very few characters call him "Lincoln," unless addressing him formally as "Mr. Lincoln"; most call him Abraham or Abe. Even Lincoln lingers on his first name, twice introducing himself as "Abe. . .uh, Lincoln." After his election, "Abraham" takes on a Biblical significance evidenced by the film's epigraph: "'Your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.' –Genesis 17:5."

Furthermore, filmmakers' choices of how to represent this aging process reflect this connection: viewers do not see familiar images of Lincoln-as-president until more than halfway through the movie. For example, up to his inauguration, *Vampire Hunter*'s young Lincoln is always clean-shaven. According to standard historical reports, this is completely accurate; Lincoln did not grow out his iconic beard until after he was elected president, in late 1860. In *Vampire Hunter*, on the eve of his inauguration, Lincoln's voice overlays a shot of him packing his axe into a box, narrating from the Christian Bible's I Corinthians 13:11 (". . .put away childish things. . ."). We then see a doorway full of light in a dark room and a man walks toward the camera. The camera angle is lopsided, but slowly straightens as the man nears the screen and the now-bearded Lincoln shows his stern face (Image 6). Here, finally, is the iconic image of "President" Lincoln.
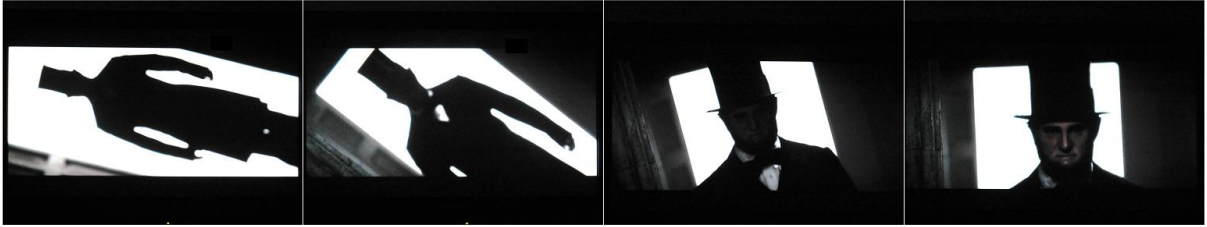
Image 6

By waiting to show the audience the familiar image of Lincoln as president, complete with hat and beard, *Vampire Hunter* personalizes this legendary president. Showing the audience how the man became the legend allows viewers inside Lincoln's world so they may connect with Lincoln as a human being.

This moment represents a transformation of Abraham, the idealistic youth and independent vampire hunter, into Lincoln, the father of a troubled nation and a man who must figure out how to rid an entire nation of the vampire scourge. The metamorphosis helps maintain the audience's perception of their distance from Lincoln. We are invited into Lincoln's world more deeply before his presidency than we are in many recent movie representations, and the filmmakers highlight the physical and personality differences between young Abraham and President Lincoln. In this way, I contend that the movie utilizes the activity of *phantasia* to comfort or support viewers, slowly walking the audience through Lincoln's evolution into the mythic figure that is placed on the pedestal of collective memory.

Furthermore, once we have seen Lincoln transform into the president, the perspective by incongruity that the "vampire hunter" image conveys is heightened (Image 7). The film's first half encourages audiences to reconsider the young Lincoln, the Lincoln that few contemporary audiences know much about, as a vampire hunter. When the known Lincoln, the president, is introduced it seems initially as though the fantastical has been left behind.

Lincoln "put[s] away childish things,"
according to the film. When,
however, President Lincoln again
takes up his axe and his super-human
capacities, the audience must again
take up their *phantasia* to negotiate a
vision of the president battling

Image 7

vampires. Narrative fidelity suggests that Lincoln the rail-splitter carried an axe, but

Lincoln the president did not. *Vampire Hunter*, however, asks audiences to blend these

images to form a new understanding of Lincoln. In this case, *phantasia* works with

narrative probability: viewers know that when Lincoln took the White House, Adam, the

head vampire and primary antagonist of the film, is not dead. Further, Adam's second in

command, Vadoma, has just murdered Lincoln's son Willie. These exceptional events

become the primary motive for Lincoln to return to his youthful career as a slayer of

vampires. The audience wants to see the story resolved, and thus, viewers are motivated to

see Lincoln return to his slaying ways as part of a fairly traditional revenge narrative.

Themes of Lincoln

The stark interplay of light and dark in Image 6 is evident throughout the film. Its

presence, I contend, suggests that Lincoln can deliver the United States back into the light

though he is a man who knows and understands the darkness. The light/dark tropes and

images that appear throughout the film act as a foundation for other themes, themes rooted

in mythical Lincoln traits. The characterizations of Abraham Lincoln as honest and good, as

the father of the nation, and as a friend to the slaves play out over the film's 100 minutes. While these themes are not unusual, what it distinctive about *Vampire Hunter* is how the movie maintains its narrative fidelity by linking these traditional Lincoln qualities to unusual circumstances and heroic action.

Honest Abe

Regardless of its specific historical origin, most people are familiar with Abraham Lincoln's nickname, "Honest Abe." The trope of Lincoln as an honest, good man has endured since the nineteenth century when Lincoln served as a store clerk, and it heavily influences popular memory of Lincoln. Keeping with this theme, *Vampire Hunter* takes on "Honest Abe" as a central plot theme. Popular memory of Lincoln (and *Vampire Hunter*) often expands this trope; the "Honest Abe" theme extends out to remember Lincoln also as a good and moral man.

Vampire Hunter introduces this theme in the second sequence of the film (the flashback to Lincoln's childhood in Indiana). As Barts bullies and beats Abraham's black friend, Will, Mr. Lincoln, focusing determinedly on his work, says, "Look away, Abraham." Disobeying his father, young Abe charges Barts with a weapon to save Will. Instead of rescuing Will, Barts thrashes both boys. Thomas and Nancy Lincoln come to the boys' aid and speak out against Barts's bigotry. Barts fires Thomas from his job, but Thomas takes the news gracefully. This sequence demonstrates for the audience that Abe's honesty results from his good parents and from a natural tendency to do what is right. Finnegan noted that viewers merely needed to see the Lincoln daguerreotypes to begin associating positive traits with him, and I believe these films similarly guide viewers' conclusions.

The theme of Lincoln's honesty appears many times in the film, but not necessarily in the manner that one might expect. Lincoln, for example, is never a simple sales clerk who walks miles to correct an error in his account books. In this film narrative, Lincoln's honesty and morality revolves around the ideas of justice and truth versus evil and lies. The vampires lead lives of evil, hiding in plain sight as plantation owners and merchants. In contrast, Abraham Lincoln's honesty becomes the source of his power. For example, when he goes through the process of "training," a narrative staple of almost every heroic or quest-oriented epic, Henry, Lincoln's mentor, goads Lincoln about his mother Nancy's murder until a furious Lincoln smashes through the tree (Image 3). Henry tells Lincoln, "Real power comes not from hate, but from *truth*" (emphasis added). When they are courting, Mary Todd asks Lincoln why he is always so tired. One might presume that Lincoln would keep his vampire-hunting behavior a secret, but, without hesitation, Lincoln immediately tells her that he hunts vampires with a silver-coated axe each night. Mary takes Lincoln's truthful statement as a jest, laughing rather than realizing Lincoln's honesty. Again, when Abraham marries Mary, he promises to "be honorable and honest with her in all things." Eventually this includes his decision to resume vampire killing after becoming president. After Willie's death, Mary accuses President Lincoln of lying to her about his vampire hunting. Even though he was indeed honest with her, his goodness shines through as he quietly and humbly takes Mary's angry blame. A final example is found when Lincoln and his confidant, Speed, are traveling to Gettysburg by train. Speed looks perturbed as he watches Lincoln journaling:

> Speed: I can't believe you still write in that thing.
> Lincoln: [looking up] It's all in here, Speed. The good with the bad.

Lincoln's dedication to recording the fullest, most truthful story is evident here; though it is ironic that in this instance the "truth" of Lincoln involved a train-top battle to the death with the leader of all vampires. All of these scenes reflect the honesty theme that carries through the entire film. *Vampire Hunter* is steeped in Lincoln's unwavering dedication to doing the right thing and being honest, even when doing so negatively affects him.

Lincoln's dedication to honesty and truth even brings him to sacrifice of himself. When Adam kidnaps Will, Lincoln and Joshua Speed travel alone to Louisiana to rescue him, at great risk to themselves. Lincoln narrates: "Speed deserved to know the truth of what we were about to face. I told him everything, not knowing if he would believe me or think me mad, not knowing if he would have the courage to face the monsters that I had come to know." Lincoln is willing to lose his friendship with Speed rather be dishonest with his friend. During the train sequence that constitutes the final showdown with the vampire Adam, Lincoln shares his axe with Will when Will is disarmed. Lincoln leaves himself partially unprotected rather than leave Will unprotected. Perhaps the most haunting moment transpires when Lincoln refuses Henry's offer to become immortal on the night of Lincoln's assassination. He tells Henry, "Vampires are not the only things that live forever." Here, Lincoln implies that he would rather live out his life as a human and become immortal through legend than become a creature of darkness.

Father of the Nation

Becoming a father—both to his son and to his nation—intensifies Lincoln's sense of self-sacrifice. The Lincoln-as-parent trope pervades *Vampire Hunter*. Viewers' first glimpse of Lincoln in the Oval Office begins as the camera pulls back to reveal Willie

Lincoln playing with toys in front of Lincoln's desk.[9] A preoccupied Lincoln looks devastated as he ponders a newspaper headline that reads, "20,000 SOLDIERS DEAD, Is It Worth The Price of Freedom?" Even when he is so busy with "business," he takes the time to kiss his son. This scene demonstrates the tensions Lincoln felt between his biological family and his national family.

Willie's death strongly contributes to Lincoln reclaiming his axe and turning back toward the life of a vampire hunter; Lincoln's sense of failed fatherhood haunts and taunts him. Music box music set in a minor key lends horror-movie creepiness to the scene where Vadoma enters the White House and bites Willie. This music continues as Lincoln recognizes Willie's wound as identical to his mother, Nancy Lincoln's. He feels he failed his son by allowing a vampire to infiltrate his family's home and to murder his child. In his devastation, he asks Henry why Vadoma did not kill him instead of Willie. Henry replies, "It is a fate much worse than death" for a parent to watch a child die. As Willie's death haunts Lincoln, the prospect of losing his other child—a free nation—begins to haunt Lincoln, as well.

Routinely, the dialogue frames Lincoln's national failures through parental language. Viewers see Lincoln agonizing over war tactics, weighing the loss of soldiers' lives against the loss of all innocent human life at the vampires' hands. After Willie's death, Mary demands that Lincoln win, for if the North loses, the war (read: Willie's death) will have been for nothing. An angry, distressed Lincoln desperately exclaims that he cannot save his nation if he cannot even defend his own family.

The Great Emancipator

Even with plenty of historical evidence to the contrary, *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln is a friend to all black Americans, both slave and free. Abe the boy defends Will from racist hatred. Nancy Lincoln disgustedly tells Barts, "Until every man is free, we are all slaves." This statement recurs numerous times in the film, such as during Lincoln's campaign. Abe the young lawyer articulates his moral objection to slavery to Will and Speed as well as to Henry. As the Civil War wages on, a resolute Lincoln bends over his desk to sign something:

> Will: If you do this…there's no turning back, Abe.
> Lincoln: [close-up shot focuses on the document title: "Emancipation Proclamation"] I'm trying to protect the freedom of a nation.

For *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln, the vampires' sickening use of the slavery system as an endless buffet helps him conclude that all slavery is evil.

Furthermore, *Vampire Hunter* liberally depicts Lincoln interacting with black characters even though this runs counter to the historical narrative. Will, for example, is a fully fictional character. Black historical characters rarely interacted with the historical Lincoln, though there are several notable exceptions including Lincoln's conversations with Frederick Douglass and his reception of a black delegation in 1862. In contrast, Lincoln and famous African Americans interact a number of times in *Vampire Hunter*. For example, Will, Lincoln, and Speed travel along the Underground Railroad to leave the South, and here they interact with Harriet Tubman. In the hiding place, Lincoln sees the world through African and African-American eyes, observing the sick and dying as well as an inconsolable infant, and the viewer sees Lincoln's resolve strengthen. As he speaks at political meetings, Lincoln declares, "I have seen the horrors of the South firsthand!" The truth behind this

statement stems from *Vampire Hunter*'s Lincoln's time at the Underground Railroad with Tubman.

Tubman holds a further role in *Vampire Hunter*. As the war neared Washington, D.C., *Vampire Hunter* shows a private meeting between Mary Todd and Harriet Tubman in a White House dining room. Mary asks Tubman to help her get out of Washington, D.C. As Tubman and Mary flee through a field, vampire villains Adam and Vadoma stop them. Tubman and Mary Todd are not detained long, because the vampires believe that the silver which will be used against them on the battlefield must be on a train headed for Gettysburg. After the vampires leave, dozens of black persons, all carrying packages, emerge from the fields to join Mary and Tubman. When a horrified Adam realizes there is no silver on the train he just won from Lincoln, Will, Speed, and Henry, Lincoln states, "There's more than one railroad." This double entendre indicates that the silver that will kill confederate vampire soldiers traveled via the Underground Railroad—courtesy of Tubman and Mary Todd. Lincoln thus trusted the fate of the nation to people of color.

The historical record shows us that Lincoln's choice to emancipate America's slaves was not fueled by unwavering abolitionist sentiments or by any particular fondness for black Americans. Indeed, Lincoln was by no means an abolitionist. He did not want Blacks to have the same rights as Whites in the United States, and, at the start of the war, expressed an interest in colonization as the best way to resolve the issue of African and African-American presence in America. Emancipation, then, was a strictly militaristic move to out-maneuver the South and potentially gain more soldiers and supporters for the North.[10] *Vampire Hunter* subverts historical fact to emphasize their portrayal of Lincoln as nearly saint-like.

Lincoln and General Stereotypes of the President

To obscure further any details about Lincoln's real life or presidency that might derail *Vampire Hunter*'s saintly image of Lincoln, the film shapes the movie character of Lincoln to affirm traits generally associated with "good" presidents. I have detailed already how the movie establishes Lincoln's moral character, and I have touched on his empathy and love—both important presidential traits. Three other traits of generally "good" presidents are evident in this move: able-bodiedness, military service, and appearing to be "a man of the people."

Vampire Hunter's Lincoln simultaneously demonstrates his able-bodiedness and military service as he wields an axe to defend his country. Neither the historical nor the fictional Lincoln served in the Union forces—except, of course, as Commander-in-Chief— but the fictional Lincoln does "go to war" against the vampire forces of evil. He does not simply make decisions from the White House, but enters the field, especially in the movie's dramatic climax where he engages in hand-to-hand combat against the leader of the vampire nation. In many respects, Abe serves his country twice—once as a young man protecting the citizens of Springfield and then, all U.S. citizens as president. Portraying Lincoln as a man full of vitality invites viewers to feel confident in this president's ability to protect his people.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, much of the contemporary *mythos* that surrounds a president involves the important role that he plays as "a man of the people." Although Lincoln is not always characterized as a "common man," the movie *Vampire Hunter* does involve this element in a number of ways. First, Lincoln's clothes reflect his Everyman status. In one scene, Speed and Lincoln attend a ball so Lincoln may woo Mary

Todd, and Lincoln declares his discomfort at being "a store clerk in a borrowed suit." Next to the well-dressed and stuffy Stephen Douglas, Lincoln is a much more relatable character. Similarly, unlike Douglas, who actively sought political power, the movie shows Lincoln entering politics merely as a means to help rid America of vampires. Instead of seeming the sleazy politician, then, Lincoln seems the democratic ideal, the man of the people called forth to serve the people as president. In this respect, the movie portrays Lincoln as another George Washington or "Cincinnatus" figure: He is a reluctant warrior leader, but a warrior leader of profound ability who wants nothing more than to accomplish his goals and retreat from the public eye.

Finally, it is important to recognize one final manner in which the Lincoln of *Vampire Hunter* conforms to general expectations of a "good" president. Lincoln is, in this movie, unambiguously male and heterosexual. In his article, "My Old Kentucky Homo," Charles Morris III recounted the outrage that arose when outspoken queer activist Larry Kramer "outed" Lincoln, calling into question Lincoln's sexuality based on his relationship with Joshua Speed.[11] Historically speaking, Lincoln and Speed's relationship has been questioned on occasion by historians, because, among other things, the two shared a small bed in the single room above Speed's shop in Springfield.[12] Morris suggested in this piece, and in others, that the wider U.S. public will often attempt to "murder the memory" of the existence of queers in history when it violates the comfortable notion that all important people are straight.[13]

Vampire Hunter flaunts Lincoln's heterosexuality and alters Lincoln's relationship with Speed. Lincoln meets Mary Todd in Speed's shop, and their eye contact and body language instantly reveal their attraction. After Mary abandons her courtship with Stephen

Douglas, *Vampire Hunter* features a number of courtship scenes between Lincoln and Mary. For example, the couple goes on a sunlit picnic in one sequence and, in a particularly adorable moment, petite Mary removes Lincoln's signature stovepipe top hat and stands atop it so she can reach to kiss him. The two eventually marry, both bride and groom garbed in white, perhaps to indicate their rebirth as a pure couple.

Speed's role in the film is as altered as is Mary's. When Lincoln arrives in Springfield, Speed offers the room above his shop to Lincoln.[14] Other scenes, however, show Speed leaving the store for the night, ostensibly heading for a different home. Furthermore, *Vampire Hunter* rewrites Speed's role in Lincoln's courtship with Mary Todd. Lincoln and Speed historically discussed marriage in letters exchanged during their respective courtships. *Vampire Hunter*, however, portrays Speed as Lincoln's "wingman." In the party scene identified earlier, Speed distracts Mary's fiancé, Stephen Douglas, so Lincoln and Mary can dance.

Vampire Hunter's assertion of Lincoln's straightness serves a number of purposes. First, it aligns with "good" presidential qualities and, thus, further demonstrates that Lincoln was a "good" president. Second, it aligns with viewers' likely narrative rationality. Though certainly not true of all viewers, those living in a heteronormative society and enjoying the genre of science fiction action are likely doing so with inherent assumptions about the straight, heteronormative qualities of the film's protagonist. In other words, viewers with a heteronormative worldview who see Lincoln deliver silver-clad justice to innumerable vampires will likely assume that he is straight because he is an action hero. Demonstrating Lincoln's sexuality through Mary further contributes to this assumption.

***Vampire Hunter*'s Big Picture**

So what does all this have to do with narrative and *phantasia*? Although *Vampire Hunter* may, at first glance, seem to be an alternative, anti-mythic interpretation of Abraham Lincoln, I contend that in many ways *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* actually affirms much of the Lincoln *mythos*. Even as it introduces audiences to a fantastical, impossible version of the president, *Vampire Hunter* maintains and reaffirms nearly every facet of popular public memory concerning Abraham Lincoln by exploiting familiar images, themes, and qualities of the martyred president.

This film is sincere in its attempts to blend history and sci-fi/action genres. Even if filmmakers do not literally want viewers to believe that Lincoln was a vampire hunter, *Vampire Hunter* uses these radical, heroic images to imagine Lincoln's life as not only worthy of worship, but worthy of superhero status and adoration. Even hunting vampires, *Vampire Hunter* affirms Honest Abe's status as the president of the people, the defender of equality, and the father of the nation. By pitting Lincoln against such dark, dangerous creatures and using reverential images of the president, *Vampire Hunter* frames Lincoln in a positive narrative that extends his virtues even beyond what a more traditional, historically accurate film could do. Even when Lincoln is "the bad guy" (e.g., when Mary berates the president for being the cause of Willie's death), the audience sympathizes with Lincoln who bears the burdens of both his personal and civic lives.

Furthermore, with the exception of the presence of vampires and Lincoln's super-human killing skills, the movie labors to avoid additional violations of narrative fidelity. The film inserts vampire villains by adding new characters into history rather than recasting historical figures like Robert E. Lee as vampires, which is, I believe, a strategic decision. It

is one thing to argue that Lincoln is a heroic vampire hunter. It would be financially and, perhaps, morally unwise to portray any real historical person from the civil war period as a vampire that fed on the blood of slaves. Memory of the civil war is gruesome enough without this addition. When the film does break narrative fidelity (e.g., Lincoln's superhuman axe skills), radical and familiar images of Lincoln are used, which in some respects comfort the viewer and assist the viewer experience. Putting this pastiche so obviously before viewers' eyes harkens to *phantasia*: Even as we see a very new Lincoln, the film's imagery and dialogue reinforce viewers' preconceptions of Lincoln and the presidency in general, affirming popular respect for Lincoln, his presidency, and the U.S. presidency as the protector of the people.

Plot Synopsis, *FDR: American Badass!*

FDR: American Badass! (hereafter referred to as *American Badass*) is a crass, crude, clearly low-budget comedy—released straight to on DVD 24 September 2012. Although no article or review of the film has noted the correlation, I strongly suspect that *American Badass* is, in many ways, a response to *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. Released several months later, *American Badass* is a comedic, absurd reflection of the premises and rhetorical forms of *phantasia* we see in *Vampire Hunter*. *American Badass* seems to say, "You're on, *Vampire Hunter*. We'll show you a superhero president!" *American Badass* abandons nearly all pretense to historical fact in favor of truly outrageous comedic style. Nevertheless, even in its absurdity and crude humor, elements of the real FDR and his presidency appear. For example, at several moments in the film, actual quotations from FDR's most famous speeches appear and the film contains a minor plot premise that

addresses the strained relationship and lack of intimacy that existed between Roosevelt and Eleanor. While the context for these quotations and the circumstances that lead to the estrangement between FDR and Eleanor are preposterous, this thin connection to the real FDR presidency is noticeable and, seemingly, intentional.

The primary plot of *American Badass* affirms that Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito were werewolves who wanted to take over the world and turn all humans into werewolves. The film, then, portrays World War II not only as an attempt by the Axis powers at world domination, but it also suggests that instead of traditional soldiers, the Axis countries used werewolf soldiers, whose bites and blood spread polio and created new werewolves. To spread lycanthropy to an unsuspecting United States, the werewolves use their own blood to taint shipments of alcohol (wine from Italy, beer from Germany, and sake from Japan) to the Prohibition-era U.S., knowing that many people will purchase the alcohol on the black market.

The story begins when then-Governor Roosevelt is out hunting with friends. A werewolf bites FDR, inflicting him with polio. Governor Roosevelt is able-bodied before this attack. While convalescing in the hospital, FDR and his advisors learn that the werewolf was a Nazi, purposely sent to eliminate FDR. Here, the film indicates that the Axis nations already saw Roosevelt as a threat to their power even before he became president. From the hospital, FDR declares his intention to run for president. Here, FDR utters his famous phrase, "Men are not prisoners of fate, but only prisoners of their own minds." The film follows FDR and his advisor, Louis, as they travel the campaign trail, interacting intimately—emotionally *and* physically—with the American people.

Perhaps the moment at which the audience *must* abandon all attempts to understand this film as a re-presentation of history occurs when FDR and Eleanor, their son James, and advisor Louis celebrate FDR's presidential victory. Rather than merely cheering, this foursome celebrates in radical, even grotesque ways. Louis pours a jar of M&Ms over his head, laughing madly. FDR dumps a jug of milk over his own head, rips open his shirt, and pretends to hump the empty jug. James Roosevelt, laughing, pulls down his pants and defecates into a flower vase. Even Eleanor, who prior to this moment has been the voice of reason and traditional presidential decorum, removes her bra and swings it around her head in celebration. Between Eleanor's bra and James's poop, *American Badass* leaves the audience with nearly no choice but to abandon attempts to understand this film historically or logically. Whether or not the audience can just "go along for the ride" will depend on the tastes and tolerances of that audience.

After FDR's election, the werewolf leaders of the Axis nations decide to go to war, and Winston Churchill seeks FDR's help. Conflicted and in need of guidance, FDR smokes marijuana apparently left in the Oval Office's desk by George Washington for future presidents' use. Subsequently, FDR hallucinates that he is hanging out with and getting advice from Abraham Lincoln. Encouraged by Abraham Lincoln, played by actor Kevin Sorbo, FDR declares war on the Axis powers. The military then enlists Albert Einstein's help to build "the Delano 2000," a rocket launcher-equipped wheelchair whose wheels turn into machine guns that FDR can use to shoot silver bullets. Using the Delano 2000, FDR kills Mussolini's mafia contacts as they smuggle alcohol (laced with werewolf blood) into the United States. FDR goes to the beaches of Normandy himself and, parachuting into battle in the Delano 2000, single-handedly defeats Hitler, Mussolini, and Hirohito who are

also personally present at Normandy. Eleanor and FDR's friends and staff rejoicing at his safe return, and the film ends as Louis declares: "He's Franklin Delano Roosevelt, motherfucker!"

<div align="center">One Badass Commander-in-Chief</div>

If *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* is a sober, inspiring re-presentation of the Lincoln presidency but with vampires, *FDR: American Badass!* is its drunk and disorderly step-cousin. This film's style, content, and dialogue combine to produce a viewing experience that leaves viewers asking, "What in the *hell* did I just watch?!" Whereas *Vampire Hunter*'s filmmakers carefully designed the film to resist a comedic reception and to promote an image of Lincoln that viewers could and would accept despite its supernatural elements, *American Badass* abandons all pretense, giving audiences a tripped-out disaster of a film featuring America's 32nd president. *American Badass* throws narrative rationality to the wind, showing FDR saving the world from fascist werewolves through many unbecoming and bizarre circumstances. *FDR: American Badass!* takes viewers on a nonsensical, irreverent trip, placing the president in circumstances never before imagined— and, once viewed, unforgettable.

For all its craziness though, *American Badass* makes some interesting, likely strategic moves to shape the viewing experience. Unlike *Vampire Hunter*, which favors a somewhat serious plotline but no recognizable actors, *American Badass* abandons seriousness, but features a cast of legitimate, recognizable actors. Barry Bostwick, star of *Spin City* (1996) and *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) stars as FDR. The film also features character actors Bruce McGill, Ray Wise, Deon Richmond, Keri Lynn Pratt, and

Richard Riehle, among others. Although viewers may not know these supporting actors by name, they likely will recognize their faces, as they have all performed in supporting roles for television and feature films. In addition, rather than subordinating Barry Bostwick to the role of FDR, forcing the audience to "see" FDR rather than an actor playing FDR, from its very first scene, *American Badass* creates a visual minefield that the audience must negotiate. Barry Bostwick's FDR looks far more like Barry Bostwick than like FDR. In the opening scene, Barry Bostwick/FDR stands in a forest with a shot-gun in his hand, and it is not immediately evident that he is playing the role of FDR. Indeed, the audience is unlikely to realize who Bostwick's character is until he is addressed as Governor Roosevelt. It is only after Bostwick/FDR survives a werewolf attack and, subsequently, contracts polio that the film attempts to portray Bostwick in a manner that looks like FDR.

This is but one of many complicated visual cues that *American Badass* presents to viewers; Eleanor Roosevelt's character is similarly noteworthy. There is very little attempt to make the actress playing Eleanor Roosevelt, Lyn Shaye, look like the First Lady. Initially, she looks like just another member of the cast or even an extra. In several ways, this choice may be intentional. Throughout the film, the Eleanor character routinely reminds FDR that his language or behaviors are not appropriate or befitting the office of the presidency. When FDR uses profanity (e.g., "fuck") or when he initially refuses to talk to a young boy who also suffers from polio, Eleanor becomes the voice of tradition, the voice of reason. She is, I contend, the voice of the audience who has specific expectations for what a president, especially FDR, should be and how he should behave. Eleanor gently corrects her husband, reminding him that he has a duty that requires him to rise beyond his own, selfish interests. Lyn Shaye and Eleanor Roosevelt both become subordinate to this mild, "voice of

decorum" personage. In response, FDR repeatedly dismisses Eleanor, marginalizing her interests and advice. He tells Eleanor several times to "shut up," "grown men are talking." If, as I suspect, Eleanor's voice in the film represents, at least initially, the movie's audience who wants FDR to behave in a presidential manner, then FDR represents the voice of the director and producer of *American Badass!*. Roosevelt refuses to play along with expectations and the rules of decorous presidential behavior. FDR, in other words, demands that Eleanor and, thus, the audience abandon their expectations of him and, subsequently, any sense of history or reason.

Reimagining the President of the People

When *American Badass* shows traditional presidential access (e.g., Oval Office meetings with generals, foreign heads-of-state, etc.), *American Badass* manages to violate viewer expectations. For example, the audience sees FDR meet with Winston Churchill, military officials including Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Albert Einstein, but instead of traditional, diplomatic interactions, FDR calls General MacArthur "Dougie Mac," and FDR routinely refers to himself as and answers routinely to "the Delano." In these situations, *American Badass* creates for viewers a perspective by incongruity through language. Throughout the movie, FDR speaks a "whitened" version of "ghetto" English. Viewers expect to hear First Inaugural FDR, not this bro-speak that is so informal it hardly remains Standard English.

Keeping with the comedy genre, *American Badass* violates most of the traditions that guide access to the president; random happenstance governs presidential access. At the start of the film, FDR interacts only with other elites. After his werewolf bite and subsequent polio infection, he humbles himself to become a "man of the people," interacting with a little boy with polio and a stutter. *American Badass* further shows FDR interacting with the common citizen in ways that run counter to history or tradition. *American Badass* takes "getting to know the voters" to an entirely new level as it depicts the president-to-be on the campaign trail alone or only with Louis. Historical presidential campaigns feature "photo-ops" in which the president-to-be interacts meaningfully with average citizens—nearly always so the image and story may be splashed all over the papers the next day. In *American Badass*, however, FDR sits and listens to the woes of the common citizen, even without media presence. FDR converses in one scene, for example with a small group of dockworkers as he helps them with their work (Image 8); the interaction repeats, verbatim, the lyrics of Bon Jovi's "Livin' on a Prayer" ("Tommy used to work on the docks. . ."). FDR also "gets to know the people" by engaging in sexual escapades with a swinging senator's wife and drinking homemade alcohol brewed in a toilet.

Image 8

After his election, FDR maintains popularity and thwarts the werewolves by ending Prohibition. *American Badass* shows these plot points in newsreel format—the film style switches to grainy black-and-white accompanied by 1930s-style music. This content is

unlike any traditional newsreel, however. Image 9 shows the series of images in the faux-newsreel, including FDR himself serving beer to citizens and doing a body shot off a half-naked woman on the bar.

A number of features make this sequence noteworthy. First, the top frame shows FDR essentially alone, humbling himself to the role of bartender. In this way, FDR

Image 9

demonstrates access and behavior that a candidate *might* engage in, but that is unlikely for a president. His un-presidential conduct does not end there. Part of a president's moral character is supposed to include marital fidelity; America's only bachelor president, James Buchanan, preceded FDR by nearly 75 years. The Clinton/Lewinsky scandal vividly demonstrated that presidents must not sexually or romantically touch any person but their wives—or, at the very least, such affairs should never become public knowledge. The middle and bottom frames of Image 9, however, portray FDR engaging in lewd, "frat-boy" behavior with an unknown blond. Furthermore, within the context of the film, these images are included as part of the newsreels. The film features these outrageous images in the numerous montages representing FDR's wildly successful campaign and presidency. *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* downplayed the respectful air that often

accompanies citizens' interactions with the president; *American Badass* blows it out of the water.

Violating Presidential Behavior

Though used sparingly, American Badass does draw on some traditional images of President Roosevelt. For example, when actor Barry Bostwick delivers the "only thing to fear" quotation, he attempts to modulate his voice so he will sound like the historical FDR. The film employs other traditional FDR images, such as the wheelchair/blanket combo and the hat, pince-nez, and cigar (see Image 10, the movie poster), intermingling them with unexpected images like machine guns. Although ultimately presenting different moods and

Image 10

messages, both *Vampire Hunter* and *American Badass* are similar in showing these familiar presidents doing impossible things. As in *Vampire Hunter*, *American Badass* shows viewers familiar images of the president, making the viewer at least visually aware that the character onscreen is supposed to be President Roosevelt. Some images of FDR in *American Badass* blend the realistic and the absurd. *American Badass*'s FDR shows kindness to the less-fortunate little boy, demonstrating the "good" president trait of empathy, but he does so reluctantly, only after being scolded by Eleanor for not wanting to meet the young boy. Most of the film departs from reality and abandons all attempts to appear realistic, maintaining only the skeleton of history's tale. As introduced in the previous section,

American Badass portrays FDR in situations unbecoming of the president and gives him dialogue not befitting his high office.

Conduct Unbecoming

While numerous presidents, FDR included, allegedly engaged in extra-marital affairs, these presidents are often still remembered as good men. *American Badass* throws morality out the window in favor of outrageous comedy. The American Badass fraternizes with adoring, sexually available women throughout the film. Images 11 and 12 are stills from a scene that features an unsettlingly pseudo-sexual encounter between FDR and his secretary. Due his polio, FDR has legs that constantly shake and look like "hotdogs." Eleanor is repulsed by his legs, and within the context of the film, this explains why she refuses to share a bed with FDR. In contrast, FDR's

Image 11 (top) and
Image 12 (dual image, center and bottom)

secretary has a hotdog fetish. In one scene, the secretary squirts FDR's legs with ketchup and mustard then licks it off, bringing both to the heights of sexual ecstasy. As Image 12 illustrates, when Eleanor Roosevelt walks in on the pair, she is less than thrilled about FDR's "sexcapades." In this film, FDR is so sex-obsessed that his only concern after the werewolf attack is if his (as he pronounces it) "cahck" will still work. When told it will, FDR is visibly happy and relieved.

Further countering traditional images of presidential behavior and of President

Roosevelt, *American Badass*'s FDR routinely

enjoys drug and alcohol use and delights in

violence. FDR holds a drink in his hand in many

scenes and even shares a blunt with Lincoln while

on a drug trip (Image 13). When depicting FDR in

Image 13

the Delano 2000, he always seems to enjoy gunning down werewolves, even exclaiming,

"Mussolini and Hitler? I CAPPED their asses!" Of course, presidents have engaged in

military violence to protect American people and interests, but they are expected to treat

violence with sobriety and solemnity. The American Badass, however, enjoys the thrill of

the kill.

Watch Your Mouth!

There is a general expectation that presidents should be well spoken, should speak

Standard English, and avoid inflammatory language whenever possible; in other words,

presidents must be judicious with their talk since their talk matters so much and is the voice

of the United States. Historically, FDR's distinctive speaking style was characterized by his

ability to clearly and concretely connect with the people while maintaining his signature,

East coast, upper class delivery.[15] *American Badass* rejects these expectations, presenting

viewers with a slang-using, profane, sexist, racist version of FDR. For example, FDR's

sexual promiscuity aligns with his use of sexist language. After the werewolf attack,

Eleanor stands next to FDR's hospital bed in hysterics about FDR's health. FDR looks up at

her and says, "I love you, Eleanor, but you gotta SHUT THE FUCK UP when men are

talking!" The "men are talking" theme crops up numerous times, and Eleanor does not stand up for herself until almost the end of the film.

FDR uses harsh language towards the leaders of the Axis nations as well. Image 14 features the letter FDR sent to Hirohito when FDR returned sake tainted with werewolf blood to Japan. From the phrase "pussy shit" to the "hugs and kisses" closing, this letter violates expectations of diplomatic
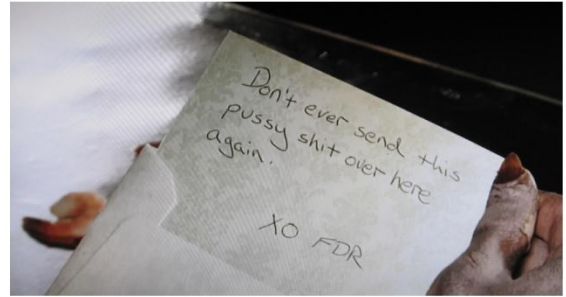

Image 14

communication. Furthermore, by implying that sake is "pussy shit," this message insults and denigrates Japanese culture. FDR expresses violent language after his son tells him that FDR won the election. Doubting the truth of his son's words, Roosevelt declares, "If you're sniffing glue again, I swear to God I'll beat you with a fat man's belt and wheel over you repeatedly until you bleed from your eyes, nose, and ears!" Even his own flesh and blood cannot avoid FDR's violent language.

President Roosevelt's dialogue in *American Badass* is shocking in both its content and delivery; his speech radically violates our historical understanding of FDR's presidency and general expectations of presidential decorum. By thus bastardizing expectations and memories of the presidency, one may consider that *American Badass* offers viewers the commentary that the subject of the U.S. presidency should not be off-limits from comedic critique or satire. All the characters, particularly FDR, routinely use profane language, and Bostwick delivers almost all FDR's lines in the aforementioned Whitened version of "ghetto" English. No scene exemplifies this better than the film's version of the Fireside Chat. FDR asks his black butler, George, to put a record on so his Fireside Chat will have

background music; George apologizes after accidentally "scratching" the record. FDR exclaims:

> FDR: No, no, no, George! Keep doin' that, I like that! The Delano needs to chat fireside up in this bitch. Let that beat riiiiiide out.
> Eleanor: Franklin…I think this is…inappropriate.
> FDR: Grown men conversing. Seen not heard, Eleanor. George! Keep scratchin' that. [To the American people] My fellow Americans, this is your new president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt A.K.A. the Delano A.K.A. Big Baby Juice Maker [chuckles] and I'm chatting to you, live, from the double O. First of all, I want to thank you for electing me as your president. Unreal. That was a smart play. Hoover was great. They'll probably name a dam or a vacuum cleaner after him someday, BUT he wasn't cut out for what lies ahead. I know times are hard. Some of you are probably wondering where your next meal is coming from [cut to child licking crumbs off a floor] or who your next employer is going to be [cut to a man managing a bathroom, all-male glory-hole service] or even if you're going to be able to buy your wife flowers anymore [cut to FDR's son, James, defecating in a flower vase for the second time in the film]. I want you to rest assured that the Delano is gonna handle shit. I've got a New Deal for you. I VOW to end the recession and get every American working again. [Glory-hole worker wipes his mouth and asks, "How the hell is he gonna do that?"] How the hell am I gonna do that, you ask? I'm going to close our borders and block foreigners from coming in and taking jobs away from Americans! I'm going to give incentives to farmers who provide us with healthy food. And last but not least, I'm going to end PROHIBITION! I want to be able to come home after a hard day's work and drink a glass of whiskey and milk like a goddamned man! Put the kiddies to sleep. Parents, push your beds together, and know when you wake up, you will wake up to a new America! THIS is the Delano…signing off. God bless.

By this point in the film, viewers are used to the speaking style of the film's version of FDR. However, this scene highlights how *American Badass* reframes and reimagines one of President Roosevelt's most well-remembered speeches—and his iconic speaking style—in a different and radically informal way. FDR's historical speaking style was one of the more iconic traits of this president. Instead of harnessing this attribute to anchor the film in reality as *Vampire Hunter* might have done, *American Badass* inverts the classic FDR speech, presenting the viewer with yet another violation. This violation of FDR's speaking habits, perhaps even more than the absurd and crass events that preceded it, undermines the connections between the real FDR and the actor playing the protagonist FDR in this film. In

some respects, the character of this movie is an anti-president. He is the seeming inversion of what we believe a president can and should be.

The crude, over-the-top content and delivery in this scene and throughout the film demonstrate, I contend, two things: First, the film points a finger at or even gives "the finger" to the underlying farcical premise of *Vampire Hunter*. By using nearly the same premise—the historical president, imbued with nearly super-human tendencies, as the nation's hero in the fight against supernatural villains—*American Badass* "exposes" just how silly the idea of the presidential sci-fi action hero is. Second, as is the case when many films and television shows that take on a presidential character in an absurd way, *American Badass* demonstrates that nothing is off-limits to the critique of comedy, nor should it be. By so radically re-presenting the history of one of the U.S.'s most beloved presidents— particularly known for his noteworthy speech acts—*American Badass* seems to send the message that unchallenged "hero worship" of a president is undesirable and worthy of further critique.

*American Badass***'s Big Picture**

As these outrageous images come before viewers' eyes, audiences of *FDR: American Badass* must abandon their attempts to engage in a proactive form of *phantasia* to see any connection between the movie and the historical dimensions of FDR because none truly exist. A viewer unaware of what *American Badass* was all about may spend the initial minutes of the film attempting to negotiate the perspective by incongruity created by the film. Familiar images of FDR juxtapose with outrageous images of werewolves and outrageous behaviors, leading the audience to understand that this is a reimagining of the

FDR presidency not meant to be taken seriously. Whereas *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* attempted to balance history with fiction, *American Badass* tosses history out the window, creating a new, clearly farcical history of the FDR presidency. Demonstrated by Image 15, *American Badass* snaps narrative probability and fidelity over its knee, creating a huge gap in logic that viewers are not intended to negotiate. Viewers *know* that Hitler, Hirohito, and

Image 15

Mussolini did not look like they do in *American Badass*. The entire film violates narrative rationality so thoroughly that viewers may find it difficult to finish the film.

Creating a "realistic" viewing experience is not, however, the enterprise of *FDR: American Badass!*. Particularly in the scenes in which James Roosevelt poops in flower vases, *American Badass* almost literally expresses to audiences that the entire premise of the movie is crap. By the point at which these scenes occur in the film, the audience will have already abandoned its attempts to rationalize the plot; seeing the "shit" of the film, then, acts as an understated message from filmmakers to audiences that this plot is not *meant* to make historical or logical sense.

American Badass clearly demonstrates that nothing and no one is sacred or off-limits. Putting such bizarre images before viewers' eyes may invite audiences to redefine the rules of respect surrounding the presidency. As argued in the previous pages, showing one of the United States' most beloved presidents in situations of conduct and language unbecoming of the office, *American Badass* may present a critique of uncritical respectful narratives or memories of the presidency, whether tied to a specific president or in general.

Rather than offering, I contend, a specific commentary criticizing FDR, *American Badass* seems to offer a dual commentary on (1) the co-opting of the historical U.S. president as a serious science fiction action hero and (2) the uncritical exaltation of the U.S. presidency itself.

Similar to *Evil Dead II* (1987), *American Badass* clearly does not take itself seriously, nor does it ask its audience to take it seriously.[16] Instead of honestly asking audiences to use this depiction of FDR as a proper reimagining of the president, *American Badass* creates a comedic viewing experience and a perspective by incongruity. This demonstrates that *phantasia* has its limits; some logical gaps cannot be overcome, even when the images are put before viewers' eyes, just as some are not *intended* to be overcome. Fully breaking narrative rationality can sometimes be a tool used to achieve specific ends in fiction.

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter and *FDR: American Badass!* are both very strange films, films that stretch the power of *phantasia* perhaps beyond its limits. Taking familiar elements from numerous genres—presidential biopic, war movies, horror, science fiction, and action—these films create a pastiche that pushes the very limits of the historical president-as-character in fictional film. Although many films feature the historical president in fiction, these two movies stand out as the entelechy of this phenomenon, presenting viewers with a reimagined history of the lives and times of Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Delano Roosevelt and a reimagined understanding of the roles the president may and may not play.

These films are as similar as they are different, representing a historical presidency through a science-fictional lens but via very different means and for different ends. I have shown how *Vampire Hunter* harnesses traditional images and behaviors associated with Abraham Lincoln in a way that reinforces and even augments a positive popular memory of Lincoln. I have also demonstrated how, by characterizing FDR in such an unbelievable, outrageous way, *American Badass* highlights the limits of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film and presents a critique of other films that valorize U.S. presidents. *American Badass* is silly where *Vampire Hunter* is serious and yet both films put before viewers' eyes new depictions of two beloved former presidents and their respective histories.

Each of these films radically alters narrative rationality in a way that requires viewers to engage in *phantasia* to understand the logical gaps the films create. *Vampire Hunter* attempts to bend and negotiate narrative rationality by anchoring itself in resonant physical and behavioral stereotypes of Lincoln. *American Badass*, by contrast, disregards narrative rationality, preferring to give viewers an off-the-wall adventure that makes no pretense of believability. The role of *phantasia* operates differently in these movies than the films interrogated in chapter three; *phantasia* interacted with warped narrative rationality in the ten films discussed in chapter three in ways that overtly inspire new imaginings of the U.S. president that challenge viewers' current understanding of the president. In *Vampire Hunter*, however, *phantasia* interacts with broken elements of narrative rationality, and *American Badass* viewers must abandon the attempt entirely. Because the rift created by these films is so large, *phantasia* does not necessarily engender *overt* challenges to our understandings of Lincoln or Roosevelt. Instead, these new, outrageous images of our

presidents subconsciously inspire viewers to reevaluate the limitations and popular memory of the presidency as well as how much popular culture can do with the historical presidency.

After perusing the Internet for reviews of these two films, I was astonished to see that *FDR: American Badass!* generally received more positive reactions than *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. Investigating further, I found that a common criticism of *Vampire Hunter,* and a common compliment to *American Badass,* was that it took itself far too seriously rather than giving viewers a more playful version of such a ridiculous concept as Lincoln hunting the undead. Although I am not concerned in this thesis with effect or reception, it is interesting to note that stories that facilitate *phantasia* and maintain reasonable boundaries of narrative rationality are not always the most popular or well received. Regardless, though viewers will not truly come to believe that Lincoln was a vampire hunter or that FDR massacred fascist werewolves, that the president is even a possible focus for such films is remarkable and may have profound impact on the public's understanding of the relationship between popular culture and the presidency and viewers' own perceived relationship with their Commander-in-Chief.

Notes

[1] Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 14, author's emphasis.

[2] Ibid 17, author's emphasis.

[3] The idea of the "fresh extreme" comes from Aristotle, *De Anima*, Book I Part III, translated by J. A. Smith, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/soul.1.i.html

[4] Immediately after this moment, the words "Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter" appear on a black screen as an excerpt from Linkin Park's "Powerless"—a song with hard rock and electronica qualities—plays. One may only speculate whether *Vampire Hunter* producers selected this song because of its powerful sound, to play to the Lincoln/Linkin homophone, or both. One may listen to the song by visiting http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gv4zGQ5feaY.

[5] Please note that I have lightened some of the darker images from these films for the reader's viewing convenience. Those stills that appear very blue in color display the film's use of the blue camera filter to simulate nighttime and to create an eerie coolness to the shot.

[6] For more on Kenneth Burke's concept, see Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1935).

[7] The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, currently owns the painting. Information and images on the Butler's collections may be found at http://www.cleveland.com/arts/index.ssf/2009/11/masterpieces_from_the_butler_i.html.

[8] Jeannie Novak, *Game Development Essentials*, 3rd edition (Clifton Park, NY: Delmar, Cengage Learning, 2012) 222.

[9] Though not an exact replica, the image of Lincoln working as Willie plays in front of the desk is reminiscent of the photos of JFK in the Oval Office while John Jr., and sometimes his sister, play. *Vampire Hunter* producers and director could not have exactly duplicated the Kennedy image, as the Resolute Desk did not come to the White House until the Hayes presidency in 1880. No matter how strong or weak the connection between the Kennedy and Lincoln images are, however, this visual allusion opens the door for the audience to associate Lincoln's fatherly behavior with the more recently known fatherly behavior of JFK.

[10] *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* hosted at least one special issue on Abraham Lincoln in 2000. Two articles in particular stand out as exemplary pieces of rhetoric scholarship that highlight the inconsistencies between Lincoln's image as The Great Emancipator and his true identity as a non-abolitionist. I recommend the interested reader to consider: Kirt H. Wilson, "The Paradox of Lincoln's Rhetorical Leadership," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2000), 15-

32, and David Zarefsky, "Lincoln's 1862 Annual Message: A Paradigm of Rhetorical Leadership," *Rhetoric & Public Address* 3, no. 1 (2000), 5-14.

[11] Charles Morris III, "My Old Kentucky Homo: Abraham Lincoln, Larry Kramer, and the Politics of Queer Memory," in *Queering Public Address: Sexualities in American Historical Discourse*, ed. Charles Morris III (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), 93-120.

[12] Morris 96-100.

[13] Morris 103. Also see Charles Morris III, "The Archival Turn in Rhetorical Studies; Or, the Archive's Rhetorical (Re)turn," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (2006), 113-115; and Charles Morris III, "Archival Queer," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9, no. (2006), 145-151.

[14] There are a few moments in *Vampire Hunter* that may suggest Speed's homosexual interest in Lincoln. For example, when Will comes back into Lincoln's life, Speed's body language suggests his extreme jealousy at being "replaced." Further, as Lincoln and Speed travel to save Will from Adam, Speed claps Lincoln on the shoulder and declares, "You and me, Abraham. Together we can accomplish anything." However, one must note that, even if these are expressions of attraction from Speed, Lincoln does not ever reciprocate nor show that he has read these moments as expressions of attraction. Lincoln's straightness, then, is affirmed even if someone exists to threaten it.

[15] For more on FDR's speaking style, see Keiko Aoki, "A Study of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Persuasive Communication within the Fireside Chat: An Analysis of Language and Style," *Human Communication* 9, no. 1 (2006), 71-81.

[16] *Evil Dead* (1981) attempted to insert itself as a new standard of zombie horror movies. The film was so incredibly bad, however, that it was a complete flop. Instead of abandoning the franchise, however, *Evil Dead* filmmakers decided to embrace its hokey reputation. The result was *Evil Dead II* (1987), a wildly successful cult-classic, which is "so good because it's so bad." Because it clearly does not ask viewers to take it seriously, audiences are free to enjoy the nonsensical mess of this horror-comedy.

Chapter 5:

Conclusion: Understanding Presidential Imaginaries

Of course it's happening inside your head, Harry,
but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?
       Albus Dumbledore,
       Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows[1]

Even though the words refer to different circumstances, Albus Dumbledore's wisdom to Harry Potter offers us a way to understand how presidential cinematic fiction both invokes and seeks to resolve cognitive dissonance. In everyday conversation, the word "fantasy" indicates that which is not and, in many cases, will never be real. The line between "real life" and "fantasy" is drawn hard and fast in most instances. Such a drastic distinction between the real and the imagined leaves little room to understand the effect fiction can have on human perceptions of lived experience. Herein lies the contribution of this thesis.

As chapter two sought to explain, the presence of the U.S. president in popular culture is not new. The people of the United States have had an obsession with their Commander-in-Chief since the nation's advent. We have attributed Zeus-like mythology to George Washington in literature, solidified in marble the paragon that is Abraham Lincoln, and maintained an unfalteringly love/hate relationship with infamous Richard Nixon through TV and film. For almost two and a half centuries, the American presidency has been a source of inspiration for our nation's cultural imagination. In its earliest forms, presidential popular culture involved kitsch—drinking mugs featuring the president's likeness—as well as high art—portraits and lithographs of presidential power. Early presidential popular culture developed into art and literature, reverence towards presidential artifacts and

architecture, and eventually film and television about presidents. Importantly, especially in the twentieth century, presidents were not only in popular culture, but they became popular culture as well. From inserting themselves into popular culture to their status as pop icons, presidents in many ways have gained a celebrity status that rivals any Kardashian. Presidents have been as much a part of popular culture as they are objects of popular culture.

Presidential popular culture is certainly not new, but it has evolved over the years. It is only in the past 25 years that American popular culture has seen a major increase in the presence of the historical U.S. president in fictional film. Such a shift marks a change in the viewing experience for audiences of these films. Neither wholly historical nor fully fictional, these films tack between the real and the imagined, requiring viewers to use *phantasia* to negotiate the narrative gap between what they know of historical presidents and the new depiction offered by the film. Chapter three explored ten fictional films with a historical presidential character, observing how these films reimagine the president in circumstances and situations that did not transpire. This chapter used two emergent foci for analysis: First, these films demonstrated the different ways citizens may access the president—from expected, merit-based visits to those governed solely by chance. The more absurd the form of access, the more an audience is constrained to use *phantasia* to navigate breaks in narrative rationality. Second, to create an aura of authenticity for the president's involvement in the film, many fictional films employed a type of visual enthymeme strategy: By pairing fictional action or dialogue with fragments of familiar imagery of specific presidents or aspects of presidential spaces (e.g., the White House), these films gave viewers grounds on which to reimagine the president/presidency.

The two films analyzed in chapter four, *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!*, represent the entelechy of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film, casting two historical presidents into the leading role of the sci-fi action hero. *Vampire Hunter* is a serious drama where *American Badass* is a nonsensical farce, yet both offer viewers a portrait of a beloved president that differs radically from historical fact or even realistic possibility. It is extremely unlikely that a viewer would walk away from either of these films believing that Lincoln or FDR really hunted sci-fi villains, and the films' creators likely did not intend viewers to do so. By employing narratives that the use of *phantasia* cannot negotiate, these films demonstrate the limits of *phantasia* and the limits of how far filmmakers can take the historical president character in fiction.[2]

The remaining pages of this chapter elaborate upon the overarching picture this project has painted. I first explore the different contributions of this thesis, including the three main implications of the work present here. I then look forward as I speculate about the future of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film and the relationship between Hollywood and the United States presidency.

The Presidency, Popular Culture, and *Phantasia*: Implications

These numerous representations of the president in popular culture demonstrate some interesting shifts in the interaction between the presidency, popular culture, and *phantasia*. First, the representations of the historical presidents in these fictions are actually far more conservative than they are "new." Second, there is great utility in pairing theories of narrative and *phantasia*, especially to explore fiction. Third, traditional boundaries protecting the president from the low-taste elements of the entertainment industry have

deteriorated, opening the presidency to Hollywood as an extra "hook" for films. This study illuminates these different implications for the study of rhetoric and the entertainment's interaction with the presidency, which I explore here.

Although these movies put new images before the eyes of the viewing audience, the messages that they communicate are not truly new. Conversely, they are but different iterations of a conservative message reinforcing current, popular knowledge of each individual president. Consequently, while the plots may seem innovative and the techniques masterful, viewers learn or imagine nothing from these films that fundamentally changes or challenges what audiences already know or suspect about our president or the presidency. The narratives offered by these films may seem to expand upon our understanding of these presidents, yet actually merely reinforce what we already know or suspect about the Commander-in-Chief.

Even as these films cast the historical president into roles or situations he may or will never occupy, the ultimate picture of the president is nearly always remarkably consistent with historical or popular memory of each president's public persona. For example, films such as *Watchmen* and *Dick* that present the historical president as the villain or anti-hero, the villainous president is Richard Nixon, a chief executive already remembered for being deceitful. On the other hand, Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy remain heroes, or at least likable, even in films where they do and say things that are historically inaccurate. George W. Bush smoking drugs with Harold and Kumar is certainly fictional, but viewers may connect these images with the popular rumor that a twenty-something Bush allegedly used drugs. The content of these images seem so new because audiences are actually able to see the president doing things they know he did not do, even if the underlying themes align

smoothly with popular and historical memories of these presidents. *Vampire Hunter* may be quite exciting because we *know* Abraham Lincoln did not hunt vampires, but is it really any surprise to see a film that valorizes Lincoln and his ability to save the nation?

Since they do not truly challenge the public personae of the historical presidents they feature, the only element of these films that one might identify as "new" is the ability to "fill in the blanks" of presidents' personal histories. While this "newness" does not challenge what we already know, it may be said to expand upon it. Much of popular memory of presidents revolves around these presidents' public personae. Thus, films that invite viewers into a fictionalized explanation of the personal lives of historical presidents provide "newness" only insofar as to provide audiences with a fuller picture of the president as a human being rather than just a historical entity or a body filling an office.

This study has also demonstrated the benefits of considering narrative and *phantasia* as interactive rhetorical processes in a symbiotic relationship. Theories of narrative are, in my reading, too thin in their rhetorical conceptions of imagination and, thus, too rigidly define the limits of what "counts" as a good story. Walter Fisher's notion of narrative rationality is not without its flaws.[3] As Robert Rowland articulated, Fisher seemed to implicate that only stories that abide by narrative rationality will be acceptable to audiences.[4] *Phantasia* enhances theories of narrative by creating room for the imagined in studies of narrative. In my understanding, narrative can strengthen *phantasia*, as imaginaries are so often connected to stories, particularly through popular culture. Considering these two rhetorical phenomena together enriches both. Furthermore, by considering the symbiotic relationship between narrative and *phantasia*, this project may

help extend the work of scholars like Wayne Booth in considering the ways the imagined or fictional may influence lived experience.

The presidency has always been an office of high respect. For decades, if not centuries, presidential presence in popular culture often involved a level of reverence or respect—as demonstrated by the portrayal of Lincoln in *The Littlest Rebel*.[5] Yet, when "the most powerful man in the world" is reduced to a character billed as a vampire hunter or a werewolf slayer, something has shifted. The highest office of governance in the United States becomes a piece of popular culture Hollywood may harness for entertainment purposes. For ten dollars apiece, citizens can nip over to the local cinema and see President Lincoln massacring vampires or a fifth-term President Nixon conspiring with masked vigilantes about doomsday. The historical-president-as-character is here, as Adam Lambert would say, for your entertainment. Images of the president shaking hands with foreign dignitaries and modeling the ideal American nuclear family must now share the spotlight with images of him drinking and smoking with strangers and singing with orphans. Though interesting, this form of president-as-commodity only represents the newest iteration of the centuries-old ability to "buy" the president in the form of kitsch. Hollywood's fascination with the president in fiction, however, points beyond this conclusion.

As previously established, only the most naïve viewer would watch a film like *Forrest Gump* and believe it to be historical fact; audiences are adept at using *phantasia* to navigate fictional representations of the historical presidents in film. This ability, then, makes room for Hollywood to take up the fictionalized historical president as a commodity to increase the film's appeal to audiences. From the very tame use of spliced news footage in *Contact* to the outrageous reimagining present in *American Badass*, Hollywood has an

extremely wide range of ways to include, and even exploit, historical-presidents-as-characters in fictional films.

Although the content of these numerous forms of presidential roles in fictional films do not challenge popular memories of these American chief executives, this project has demonstrated the interesting constraints Hollywood must navigate as it takes up the U.S. president as a character in fiction. These films may, and do, show the president engaging in historically inaccurate behaviors or dialogue, but it seems that filmmakers realize that audiences would reject plots that recast the president into a role that would radically challenge the ways they remember or understand the president.

Of the twelve films analyzed in this thesis, only *FDR: American Badass!* offered viewers a depiction of a former president that radically violates popular memory of that president. However, as chapter four made clear, it would seem that the creators of *American Badass* were far less interested in reshaping audience interpretations of President Roosevelt than they were interested in offering (1) a criticism of the premise of *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and (2) exploring the limits of the president-as-character in fictional film. I speculate that a fictional film that portrayed Abraham Lincoln or John Kennedy as the villain would so violently contradict viewer expectations and understandings of these presidents that audiences would likely reject the film's entire premise. Thus, even if Hollywood has nearly free rein in marshaling the historical president for entertainment purposes, it is constrained by the vital need to maintain, rather than challenge, audience preconceptions or understandings of presidents and their respective histories.

Though mobilized for nearly innumerable ends, the president's role in popular culture has been and continues to be pervasive. The contribution of studies like this one,

which explore the president-as-character in fiction, is certainly multifaceted. Not only does

this study lend insight into issues in rhetorical study—i.e., the intersections of narrative and

phantasia—it also challenges the disciplinary norms of keeping presidential rhetoric and

popular culture studies separate by illuminating the interesting results of considering these

phenomena together. The presidency and popular culture often have interacted, but the

historical presidential character in fictional film and the ever-growing trend of real

presidents acting as popular culture heralds a shift in the relationship between the highest

governing office in the United State, Hollywood, and, by extension, the American viewing

public.

No "End" in Entelechy: How Far Can Presidential Imaginaries Go?

Entelechy may be described as a phenomenon coming *most near* perfection or, as

Kenneth Burke put it, its "finishedness."[6] Entelechy is but the current endpoint of a

phenomenon; it moves purposefully towards a *telos* without reaching it. In chapter four, I

identified *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* and *FDR: American Badass!* as the entelechy

of the historical president-as-character in fictional film. Considering Burke's definitions of

entelechy, however, these films might be just the beginning of a new trend. Representations

of the historical president as a character in fictional film have become more extreme as time

has progressed. Given that the more extreme representations have come in the past 30 years,

there is no telling what the entelechy of the historical-president-as-character in fictional film

will look like in another 30 years' time, or if it might ever reach its *telos*.

As fictional and lived experiences interact and blend, understandings of the president

and presidency may expand. The historical president entertains us not only in cinema, but

also on television as he campaigns. Reflecting on every presidential election since Ronald

Reagan, the winning candidate has nearly always been the more colorful candidate capable

of connecting with the people. Bill Clinton, among others, has demonstrated how

presidential hopefuls create themselves as popular culture icons when they seek high office.

Future presidential hopefuls likely need to add "entertaining" to the list of general "good"

president traits as the office becomes as much an object of popular culture as of governance.

This trend already seems to be taking root, as Barack Obama's stand-up-style comedy at the

White House Correspondents' Dinner demonstrates.

The boundaries between the president and popular culture seem to be stretching as

the historical president becomes invested in "entertainment" both in real life and on the big

screen. From President Reagan to Arnold "The Governator" Schwarzenegger, government

office is now a "part" that actors may play. Many former presidents enjoy a lucrative "side

business" giving lectures and commencement addresses, and many appear in documentaries

on different social issues or public figures.[7] Other public political figures have also become

a regular feature of popular culture. Moving beyond Al Gore's presence on the

environmental documentary scene, figures like Larry King and Brian Williams have played

themselves in fictional film and television.[8] If entelechy is only a current iteration of a

concept moving towards its ultimate *telos* and not the ultimate *telos* itself, who can say that

the president or former president may not one day appear as an actor in fictional film?

Given the ever-expanding presence of the historical president in fiction in the past 30 years,

it seems like only a matter of time until a former president appears in the cast of a fictional,

feature-length film.

The twelve films considered in this project demonstrate how the metaphorical distance between the president and the people has begun to collapse, as the president becomes even more a part of the entertainment industry. Far removed from the lofty, nearly regal representations of the president in films from the past century, historical presidents on the silver screen today are humanized, satirized, and more. This high office is not off-limits for the entertainment industry, but rather is now an acceptable feature of fictional film. Through fiction and *phantasia*, the American viewing public may encounter their president in a seemingly more "personal" way as they view, for example, Nixon's inner anguish at the prospect of nuclear holocaust. Even if these portrayals do not challenge popular memories of these presidents, "witnessing" their personal lives and inner feelings shortens the gap between the president and the people.

Furthermore, through President Reagan, Americans have seen actors literally become president, and in the films considered in this thesis, audiences literally see the historical president become a character. As the president becomes popular culture—from appearances on *The Tonight Show* to the president-as-character in fictional film—the distance between the president and the people collapses. No longer does the presidency serve the American people solely in a governing role. Whether in fiction or reality, he must now entertain us too and, if trends continue, he may entertain us as an actor in fictional film some day in the future.

Although we have not yet reached the point where President George W. Bush is signing on for a role in the newest action flick, interactions between the United States presidency and Hollywood are becoming more frequent and are reaching increasingly higher levels of absurdity. This thesis explored just a sample of fictional films featuring a historical

U.S. president and how these roles in so many ways reify popular memory of different presidents. These twelve films are certainly not the only fictions featuring a historical president, and an expansive body of television programs exists for further scholarly exploration. From playing cards to statuettes to feature films, the United States has been and continues to be not only the highest executive position in the United States' government but also an important feature of popular culture. There is not definitive way to know what a possible future of presidential involvement in popular culture will look like; each of these films represents different possible route presidential popular culture may take towards a *telos.* Critics have much to learn from studying the interactions between presidents and the people as mediated by popular culture artifacts like films, but in some cases, for now, all we can do is grab some popcorn, sit back, and enjoy the show.

Notes

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[1] J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* (New York: Scholastic, Inc., 2007), 723.

[2] It is very important to reiterate that—as chapters one & two indicated—television has been placing different historical presidents in absurd, whacky, or even grotesque roles for nearly 30 years. Particularly in more adult-friendly cartoons—such as *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*, *South Park*, and the stop-motion action figure comedy, *Robot Chicken*—historical presidents are popular comedic targets and regular features on the show. *Family Guy*, for example, has a running joke of always portraying Bill Clinton naked and always casting George W. Bush into markedly childish situations. Furthermore, shows like HBO's *The Newsroom* feature a fictional TV news network's coverage of real, historical events such as the Romney/Obama Election 2012. While examining these kinds of shows would undoubtedly yield valuable results, including television in this study would have increased the scope to an unmanageable size.

[3] Walter R. Fisher, *Human Communication as Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value, and Action* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 47, 64-65.

[4] Robert Rowland, "Limiting the Narrative Paradigm: Three Case Studies," *Communication Monographs* 56 (1989), 39-41, 51.

[5] Also see Pauline McConnell, *George Washington's Horse Slept Here* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1956). Furthermore, obviously presidential images would be far less glowing when present in satire or other criticism of the man or the office.

[6] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I Part VII, translated by W. D. Ross, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 14.

[7] Bill Clinton, for example, appeared in NBC's 22 November 2013 TV-documentary, "Tom Brokaw Special: Where Were You?" which complied the memories of JFK's assassination from many notable public figures.

[8] Larry King played himself in *Contact*, interviewing Matthew McConaughey's character on *Larry King Live*. Brian Williams appeared on several episodes of the television sit-com, *30 Rock*, and lent his voice to a cartoon version of himself in *Family Guy*'s "Space Cadet" episode.

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APPENDIX

The following film descriptions appear in chronological order, starting with the earliest-made film. *The Littlest Rebel* (1935) is a black-and-white Shirley Temple film that features a few song-and-dance numbers. The film follows Virgie Cary (Temple), the young daughter of a Confederate officer and plantation owner, and her family's fall from grace as the Civil War ravages the South. Little Virgie wins President Lincoln's heart as she implores him to spare the lives of her father and a Union Colonel who are to be executed for treason. She is, of course, successful, and the film ends with little Virgie singing "Polly Wolly Doodle" alongside a unified mix of Confederate and Union soldiers.

Annie (1982) is a musical set in the 1930s and is based on the comic strip, "Little Orphan Annie." Wealthy businessman Oliver Warbucks looks to improve his image and takes the precocious Annie into his home for a week. Annie helps Warbucks see things through different eyes, even getting him to sing a musical number with President and Mrs. Roosevelt in the Oval Office. After she is kidnapped and ultimately rescued, Annie realizes that her place is with Daddy Warbucks, and the film ends with a musical number.

Forrest Gump (1994) is a historical fiction (based on a 1986 novel) that chronicles five decades of American history through the extraordinary experiences of a man named Forrest Gump. Young Forrest has a low I.Q. and a physical disability that requires him to wear leg braces, making him noticeably "slower" than and different from his peers. The main plotline that carries through the film is Forrest's unwavering love for Jenny, his oldest friend. The film depicts Forrest's experiences as shaping American culture. Forrest meets three American presidents: Kennedy for being an All-American football player, Johnson for his service in the Viet Nam War, and Nixon for his service on the US Ping Pong team.

Jenny and Forrest finally reunite as Jenny is dying of AIDS. The film ends with Forrest saying goodbye to his and Jenny's son before Little Forrest's first day of school.

I.Q. (1994) is set in the late 1950s, during the Eisenhower presidency. It is the story of a young mechanic who falls in love with a beautiful mathematician, Catherine, who happens to be Albert Einstein's niece. Einstein prefers the young man, Ed, to Catherine's fiancée and vows to help Ed win Catherine's heart. To impress her, Einstein helps Ed pretend to have developed cold fusion (really one of Einstein's own, disproved papers), and the president makes a personal visit to see Ed about his machine. Even though the deception comes to light, in true romantic comedy fashion, everything works out in the end.

Contact (1997) is set in the present of the film's production, the late 1990s (in other words, when *Contact* premiered, it was as if it could have happened any day in the 1990s). *Contact* follows Jodie Foster's character, Dr. Ellie Arroway, a nontraditional astro-scientist who has dedicated her life to locating intelligent life in space. Ellie and her team intercept a signal, in code, from outer space, which, when deciphered, is found to be an instruction manual for a teleportation machine. After a number of dramatic obstacles, Ellie goes on the machine's journey in which she travels and interacts with an alien for 18 hours. When she returns to Earth, government officials tell Ellie that her pod merely fell straight through the machine—though they keep secret that Ellie's radio transmission was 18 hours long. The film concludes with Ellie discussing her mission with a Congressional committee, then moving on with her life.

Dick (1999) is a spoof of the end of Nixon's time as president. Set in the months leading to *The Washington Post*'s breaking of the Watergate case, the story follows two 15-year-old girls, Betsy and Arlene, who accidentally become involved with the cover-ups in

the Nixon White House. The girls are also vital in breaking the Watergate scandal; among

many other things, the film identifies them as Woodward and Bernstein's "Deep Throat"

informant.

Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay (2008) is the second installment in

the "stoner flick" Harold & Kumar Go to Whitecastle franchise. When flight attendants

mistake Kumar's smokeless marijuana bong for a bomb, the government sends Harold and

Kumar to Guantanamo Bay as terrorists. The two escape the prison and spend the entire

movie attempting to clear their names. Through numerous and exceptionally crude

hijinks—including crashing through the roof of President George W. Bush's living room in

Crawford, Texas, and proceeding to smoke marijuana with him—Harold and Kumar clear

their names and Harold finally admits his feelings for the girl he loves…in Amsterdam, of

course.

Watchmen (2009), set in the 1980s, is the film adaptation of a nihilistic, dystopian

graphic novel, centering on the impending doom of an escalated Cold War. The film

follows the five remaining members of the masked vigilante group as they attempt to solve

the murder of one of their own, The Comedian. In the film, Nixon is in his fifth term as

president, and the superheroes are implicated in major military events in U.S. history,

including the assassination of JFK. Further, Watchmen fictionalizes American history, for

example stating that America won the Viet Nam War with the help of the supernatural Dr.

Manhattan (who acted on Nixon's orders). The film ends when the masked vigilantes

realize that one of their own is to blame for The Comedian's murder, and the villain releases

the world's nuclear warheads, killing many, but ending the Cold War in peaceful

negotiations between nations.

Jonah Hex (2010) is another comic-to-film adaptation. Set in the years just after the Civil War, the plot follows Jonah Hex, a half-man, half-spirit bounty hunter. President Grant hires Hex to stop a rogue ex-Confederate soldier bent on destroying the capital. In the end, Hex stops the villain and earns the thanks of the president.

Transformers: Dark of the Moon (2011) is the third installment in the *Transformers* series, which follows Sam Witwicky (Shia LaBeouf) and his friends, the Autobots (a type of alien that transforms from an automobile into a robot), in their battle to save Earth from the Decepticons (another kind of robot-like alien). In a flashback, the film characterizes the Space Race and the Moon landing expeditions as covert operations (involving both JFK and Nixon) to recover an alien spacecraft that crashed on the Moon. In this film, the government brings the alien spaceship to Earth where an Autobot traitor uses it to aid the Decepticons in their attempt to take over the world. Sam and the Autobots defeat the traitor and the Decepticons and save Earth once again.