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Jacqueline Kennedy, or “Faciality”:

Media Icons and Political Iconography in *Jackie* (2016) by Pablo Larraín

Abstract: *Jackie* (2016) is the seventh film by Chilean director Pablo Larraín. It is inspired by the events immediately following the assassination of U.S. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and is entirely focused on the figure of the first lady: Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy, one of the most important media icons of the twentieth century, whose elegance and fascination turned her into the “other Marilyn” – a charismatic and influential character, not only aesthetically but also culturally and politically.

This article offers an analysis of Larraín’s film, by focusing on the female character of Jacqueline, played by Natalie Portman. What emerges is a reflection on the relationship between the production of the female body as a media icon, which characterizes capitalist society, and the forms of political iconography that find expression in state ceremonies.

Keywords: Assassination of John F. Kennedy; Political Iconography; Representation of Power; Sovereignty and Governmentality; Biographical Film

Jackie (2016) is the seventh film by Chilean director Pablo Larraín. It is inspired by the events immediately following the assassination of US President John Fitzgerald Kennedy and is entirely focused on the figure of the first lady: Jacqueline Lee Bouvier Kennedy, one of the most important media icons of the twentieth century, whose elegance and fascination turned her into the “other Marilyn” – a charismatic and influential character, not only aesthetically but also culturally and politically.

When the film begins, everything has already happened: the visit of the presidential couple to Dallas, the sequence of shots, the instinctive gestures of Jacqueline, who tries to protect and save her husband, the oath of President Lyndon B. Johnson, and the sumptuous state funerals. However, unlike what takes place in Larraín’s *No* (2012), focused on the 1988 Chilean Plebiscite, which merges historical archival material with film fiction, *Jackie* does not make use of the most famous amateur clip in 20th century history – the “Zapruder film,” shot by Abraham Zapruder on top of the embankment on the right side of the Dallas street where the presidential procession would pass¹. Rather than limiting himself to the chronicle of events or to the investigation of an “American mystery,” Larraín takes this opportunity to reflect on the relationship between image and power: the United States as a nation and ceremonial apparatus in the days immediately following the death of the president; the United States as a media and commercial power that finds expression and renewal in the “face” of Jacqueline Kennedy.

¹ On the forms of representation of history and the use of archival material in *No*, see for example Benson-Allott, 2013, and Zucconi, 2016.

The following pages offer an analysis of Larraín's film, by focusing on the female character of Jackie, played by Natalie Portman. What emerges is a reflection on the relationship between the production of the female body as a media icon, which characterizes capitalist society, and the forms of political iconography that find expression in state ceremonies.

1. Shot/Countershot

Hyannis Port, Massachusetts, December 1963. The man who arrives by taxi at Jacqueline Kennedy's house is the reporter Theodore H. White, summoned to the estate of the powerful Irish Catholic family to write an article on the tragic days that have just ended. His focus is primarily on the legacy of the former president, after articles in *The New York Times* by Arthur Krock and Albert Merriman Smith had questioned its greatness and historical importance. The article is to be published in *Life* magazine which, in previous years, had contributed to the construction of the Kennedy myth.

The dialogue between the two characters is a point of anchorage throughout the film, out of which everything develops in the form of flashbacks. The conversation takes place outdoors, continues inside the house and then goes outside again. A panoramic shot shows the architectural space and the position of the two figures. Along the entrance porch, White sits on the left, while Jackie is on the right. Afterwards, the conversation develops through the shot/countershot technique.

The setting under this arcade represents one of the most traumatic moments in the protagonist's life: the attempt to remember and tell the tragic events of Dallas; but it is also one of the darkest passages in the history of the United States of America. A moment in which the sumptuousness and pastel colors that accompanied the rise to power of the Kennedys and brought about the renewal of the entire country's image seem to have been lost. If the encounter between Jackie and White is to serve precisely this purpose – to re-establish the “chromatic range” – Larraín stages this critical moment of personal and collective history as a face-to-face that seems to be inspired by Grant Wood's *American Gothic* (1930) and the hieratic postures that characterized the American pictorial iconography prior to the avant-garde.

As in some of Larraín's previous films, in this sequence, too, the codes of cinematic language traditionally used for the filmic articulation of a two-way dialogue are pushed to the limit.² Instead of alternating oblique shots of the characters – where the cameras form an angle of about one hundred and twenty degrees – the cameras are placed on the line of the one hundred and eighty-degree rule. As Stéphane

² For further discussion on this aspect, see Coviello, Zucconi, 2017.

Fontaine, the film operator, enthusiastically explains, “we placed the two rooms behind each other between the actors, so that they could not be seen by each other. This allows you to do real shots/countershots at one hundred and eighty degrees with strange looks as if everyone were looking into the room” (Tessé, 2017, p. 20). From the very first shots, the spectator is therefore captured by the power of this dialogue, which will last until the end of the film. Through this technical choice, Larraín respects the reciprocity of looks that defines the conditions of diegetic intercourse and, at the same time, calls into question the spectator, whom he drags into the staging.

Jackie’s face is pale, hollowed out, deeply marked. The insistence on this detail is not a simple strategy to exalt the actress’s diva status, nor is it a lingering on the trauma experienced by the character. Rather, it takes on a broad function. In a nutshell, the public display of power and its effectiveness are the very theme of the confrontation between Jacqueline and the journalist and the entire movie. What should be revealed about a traumatic experience so that the public image of the former presidential couple can go down in history? What, instead, should be hidden, denied, against all evidence, so that the discourse does not take a wrong turn, deconstructing a political myth built over the years? Hence, what did the viewers of Kennedy’s funeral think? And what impression did the image of Jacqueline’s dress completely smeared with blood make on public opinion? How can you control your own image at a time when nothing inside you seems to hold?

2. On faciality

If the shot/countershot at one hundred and eighty degrees of the first sequence defines the enunciative regime of the entire movie, *Jackie*’s protagonist is the face itself. Jacqueline is the earliest first lady in the history of the United States to take on prominent public visibility functions. The Oscar-winning Natalie Portman is called upon to enter into the character, to make herself equal to one of the most famous female icons of the twentieth century. The heart of the film is the face and, along with the face, the close-up, even if it is close-up of a salon, the White House façade, or a parade, i.e., the funeral of the President. The face is not so much considered in itself as something pre-established, a fact, a part of the subject, but as everything that, having been subjected to a certain visual treatment, is constituted as a *public interface*: an instrument of expression, interaction, communication, or governance.

Jackie could thus be called “faciality,” referring to the work by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari on the face as an emblem of the effectiveness and power of images in Western culture. Before developing an abstract conceptualization on the topic, they list some of its figures:

the maternal power operating through the face during nursing; the passional power operating through the face of the loved one, even in caresses; the political power operating through the face of the leader (streamers, icons, and photographs), even in mass actions; the power of film operating through the face of the star and the close-up; the power of television (Deleuze, Guattari, 2004, p. 194).

It is therefore from Jackie's face and "faciality," understood as the ability to produce faces and interfaces from any subject, object or situation, that Larraín seemingly pursues his cinematographic research into the relationship between aesthetics and political power. On the one hand, then, there is Jackie's *visage* and its micro-movements: the intensity of the pathos of those who are upset, on the verge of giving up or withdrawing; on the other hand, there is Jackie's *face*, and its effectiveness. On the one hand the *visus*, past participle of *videre*, "seeing," and on the other hand, the *facies*, the "aspect," the external limit that opens the subject to sociality and that can stiffen until it coincides with a mask.³ It is precisely around the idea of trauma that these oppositions are articulated, as well as that between private and public life. This double articulation of the face – as something profoundly intimate and inevitably exposed – is therefore what the director guides the spectator's gaze toward.

From a symbolic point of view, for that matter, how is one to interpret the murder of John Fitzgerald Kennedy if not as an attempt to destroy the face of power? What happens to the image that expresses and identifies political power when violence unexpectedly breaks out? If, as highlighted by historians and theorists such as Ernst Kantorowicz (2016) and Louis Marin (2005, p. 186), the figure of the powerful man and, in the broadest sense, the images that participate in his glorification constitute a secularized form of transubstantiation – a "political Eucharist" – how is one to interpret, to manage, psychologically and through media, the irruption of a stream of blood that pierces the image? What social meaning should be given to the lay variant of the 1263 "Miracle of Bolsena" – when a consecrated host began to bleed – only this time consisting of the Zapruder film, now imprinted in the collective memory of the whole world as a critical moment of political iconography?

In the reconstruction proposed by Larraín, it is therefore Jacqueline who takes on these issues. If the identification with Lincoln's wife in the sequence shot inside the White House and the foreshadowing of Kennedy's death seemed to give her the tragic and melodramatic role of a modern Andromache, the

³ For a distinction among the different terms referring to the "face", see Magli, 1996, pp. 9-15. On the face and the mask see also Belting, 2017.

murder of her husband transforms her icon into a holy Veronica: the pious woman who – according to the Gospel of Luke and especially the Apocryphal Gospels – wiped the bloody face of Christ with a linen cloth during the Passion. Saint Veronica, venerated by the Catholic Church and considered the protector of photographers, specifically because of her gesture, which had the power to leave a trace – the Trace – on the white cloth. With this film, the director explores and shows spectators a case of semantic inversion of the female figure and her pathos, like the inversions investigated by Aby Warburg (2000) in his *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*.

From the public display of the blood imprinted on the fashionable suit to the organization of state funerals, Jacqueline does not just give vent to her vanity. If exposing the face to the cameras was one of the decisive elements of the Kennedys' political success, the choice to force her family, and with it American political power, to a *public re-exposure* after the outbreak of violence is the point of the greatest theoretical interest in the whole film. Jackie's strategy is to reaffirm the effectiveness of the image of power, to re-authenticate it in front of the masses, with all the risks this entails. Through the dialectic between Jacqueline's gaze, as the choreographer of the funeral, and Larrain's, as the movie director, *Jackie* represents the funeral service as an opportunity to re-mediate the violence itself and the images that document it: a great collective rite capable of putting back the *force suffered* as well as the *surviving force* contained in reserve in the image.⁴

The shot with Jackie's face looking out the window during the transfer of the coffin to the Capitol is one of the most impressive segments of the whole movie. While Mica Levi's original soundtrack superimposes high and low tones on top of each other, through the glass Jackie's eyes observe the huge crowd that has rushed to the ceremony. There is no need for a countershot to restore the orientation and effectiveness of this gaze. All it takes is a superimposition, a plastic montage of several images within the single shot: Jackie's face, on top of which run the silhouettes of the Americans who have come to pay homage to President Kennedy; a staging of the fictional film that is seamlessly merged with the archival document.

3. Camelot

Right in the middle of the movie, there is a musical sequence, a last-night dance before leaving the White House. Jackie wears a robe and wanders around the large halls, opens a door, slowly approaches a record player, turns it on...:

⁴ On "power as the placing in reserve of force in representation," see Marin, 1988.

It's true! It's true. / The crown has made it clear / The climate must be perfect all year / A law was made a distant moon ago here / July and August cannot be too hot / And there's a legal limit to the snow here / In Camelot! / The winter is forbidden till December / And exits March the second on the dot / By order, summer lingers through September / In Camelot! / Camelot! Camelot!

The cheerful music that resounds in the different rooms interrupts the dissonant tones of the soundtrack and seems to project the protagonist outside the drama that she is living through. She is seen returning to the bedroom, opening the treasure chest of precious objects, wearing a pearl necklace, a light red dress, then black, pouring gin, serving dinner, putting on lipstick, taking a series of sedatives and, finally, sitting at the President's desk. Her gestures are quick and nervous, though. The musical melody and the festive tenor of the outfits, worn one after the other, do not seem to offer a moment of escape. Rather, by passing from one side of the White House to the other and producing gestures of radical transformation, Jackie seems to experience the transience of the beautiful objects with which she is surrounded and through which she conceived her role as first lady. This is a nervous rehearsal session, one that ends with the woman taking the place of the president himself, sitting on his chair and agreeing to take control of the political and media event of the funeral.

If the meaning of this song in the story is not immediately clear, the last few minutes of the movie make it explicit. The final part of the confrontation with the journalist who went to the Kennedy residence in Hyannis Port points to the non-randomness of the musical reference. White is concluding his article when Jacqueline tells him that there is still one last thing to talk about, something that is probably more important than anything else: every night, before going to bed, she and "Jack" would turn on the old gramophone and listen to some records; above all, to *Camelot*, the 1960 Broadway musical inspired by the knightly legend of King Arthur. With no hesitations, Jacqueline remembers the last verse of the entire work and, while quoting it, dictates to the journalist the final sentence of the article that will actually be published in *Life* on December 6, 1963: "Don't let it be forgot / That once there was a spot / For one brief shining moment that was known / As Camelot." Her face is both pleased and sad at the same time: at the idea of having actually lived as if in a chivalrous novel, in a world full of ideals, passions and beauty; but in a world, alas, that will hardly return.

Jackie is about to end. Afterwards, a plaque affixed inside the White House recalls that "J.F. Kennedy and his wife Jacqueline lived in this room during the two years, ten months and two days he was President of the United States of America. January 20, 1961 - November 22, 1963." The movie seems to be over, when a further sequence extends beyond the margins of the story.

Exterior, night. A black car escorted by two motorcycles stops at a red light. Framed through the window, the face of Jacqueline is looking outwards. A countershot, compatible with her point of view, frames the window of an elegant boutique. A salesperson is setting up the window dressing, choosing how the clothes will be displayed. The sequence continues with the shot/countershot technique, and together with Jackie one sees the image of a van from which a series of mannequins wearing blue, white, pink and yellow suits are being unloaded. They are all wearing the same black wig: they are the many images of Jackie on display in the shop windows of the United States of America and the entire western hemisphere.

While the soundtrack again coincides with the last song of the *Camelot* record, Jackie's face appears slightly surprised but not displeased by what she has seen. When speaking with the journalist, she had brought the *Camelot* experience to a close, both in terms of the private game between her, her husband and the small circle of guests of the White House, and in terms of the political and social utopia of global happiness. Yet, there it is, before her eyes – Camelot's worldliness.

As is well known, the death of Kennedy was also pegged by Fredric Jameson (1991, pp. 354-355) as relating to the "birth of Postmodernism." According to the interpretation of the American critic and theorist, the death of the President marked a twofold entrance into a new era: it was the first media event understood as a collective experience; it was also the origin of all the conspiracies that would stir up the West in the following decades as well as giving rise to a "conspiracy aesthetic" (Knight 2015, pp. 164-177) to be found in many writers and filmmakers.

Throughout his entire filmography, Larraín has wanted to avoid the rhetoric of conspiracy and investigation, even when the historical event in question seemed inconceivable outside this interpretative framework. From Chilean dictatorship to American political murders, the director never claims to arrive at a final definitive truth about the logic of historical events; nor does he allow himself to be sucked in, however, by the sublime charm of the "still open case." Rather than investigating the single frame of the historical archive to produce insinuations about the referential reality to which it refers, he tries to give depth to the image; he imagines the polemical countershots of history.

If Larraín's cinema cannot be identified with, but rather opposes, postmodern paranoia, the idea of interpreting the entire 2017 movie on the basis of the final sequence and the mass commercialization of the "Jacqueline style" is also misleading. Of course, thanks to the deterritorializing power of capitalism, Camelot is now everywhere and nowhere, and perhaps thanks to this the protagonist will be able to temporarily recapture her private life. Still, to do justice to the highly elaborate structure of a film like *Jackie*, it is necessary to keep its starting point and junctions in mind. It should be remembered that, going against

many expectations, Larrain's Jackie is different from Warhol's silkscreen version. After Kennedy's death, the proudly designed interiors of the White House become uninhabitable; the pastel colors of the fashionable clothes run the risk of being euphemistic compared to the assertion of a "red trauma." Only through the choice of exhibiting her face and *wearing the trauma itself*, would Jackie be able, at least on the public side, to reaffirm the effectiveness of her icon: an icon of fabric, in which the graininess of the threads is the most important element.

This, then, is how the Chilean director manages to evade those theoretical shortcuts that lead to the identification of the death of Kennedy with the beginning of a capitalist and commercial domination; a domination understood as superseding the political and communicative forms of state sovereignty. As in other movies by Larrain, *Jackie* also focuses on the conflict between the logic of tradition and that of creativity, between political and commercial power; however, even more than in previous films, this conflict is not expressed in an opposing dialectic. The depth of the character coincides with his ability to conceive of the relationship between violence, aesthetics and power from a long-term historical and theoretical perspective: Jackie, the pop icon, the "Chanel model"; Jackie, who immediately understands the iconographic and political meaning of blood and summons the courage to orchestrate the public ceremony of a state funeral; Jackie, as the first public figure capable of giving "the American people something that they always lacked: majesty," to take up the words of a British newspaper of the time that the scriptwriter freely transforms by putting them in White's mouth.

As spectators exit the theater, two images of Jackie's face through the car window remain imprinted in their memory. The first, as seen in the previous paragraph, is the single shot in which the woman's face coexists in superimposition with the blurred image of the American people: a sea of crowds, a ritual response to a symbolic crisis of the state institution, a moment of reunification and inscription of the collective body in the individual body of power. The second is that of the mannequins, the final sequence that sets Jackie in front of her simulacra: the return effect of the success of the funerals, the media portability of her image, the commercial dissemination of her style. Compared to the first image from the window, the shot/countershot here opens up a space of social practicability, a normality of everyday life that takes shape and propagates through the articulation of media consumer goods.

Two glances from the window, then: the first one addressed to the people of the United States of America; the second to the people of Camelot. These are different looks, which are, nevertheless, closely linked in the movie, in which one is the support point of the other and not its opposite. Jackie, or "faciality": if Larraín conceived of this movie as a portrait of Jacqueline Kennedy, he definitely did so to investigate the

complex relationships that exist between the forms of political iconology and those of media communication, between the regime of effectiveness of state authority and that of the capitalist machine, between sovereignty and governmentality – a series of relationships that challenge history and theory while simultaneously giving shape to contemporary political and communicative practices.

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