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Inhalt

Staging Politics in Television: Fiction and/or Reality?

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1. Introducing the problem

Recent research points to huge ongoing changes taking place in the perception and representation of politics, and in the expectations addressed to politicians (e.g. Corner/Pels 2003; Fairclough 2001; Weiss 2003; Wodak 2006a, 2008a; Holly 2008). Dick Pels has succinctly summarised this change in performance, style and perception while emphasising the inherent contradictions in the new roles of politicians, mostly due to the necessity of becoming media personalities:

> On the one hand, political leaders shed their elitist aura and try to become ‚one of us'. On the other hand, distance is reasserted by the remoteness of the star who, while dwelling constantly in the public eye, is still seen as untouchable and as ‚living in a different world'. In this sense, politicians increasingly share in the ‚extraordinary ordinariness' which characterises the modern democratic celebrity. (Pels 2003: 59)

Apart from the blurring of borders between celebrities and politicians, between information and entertainment, other salient developments have also taken place, including a form of colonization of politics and of political agendas by the media. Werner Holly (2008: 317) thus observes that

> [m]edia development has changed the structure of the public sphere fundamentally. Some speak of a ‚colonization' of the political system by the media system, of a ‚mediocracy' (Meyer 2001) that has allegedly replaced even democratically legitimated power. Just as the major mass media themselves increasingly follow commercial interests, politics too has become subject to a process of tabloidization, in that it caters to the taste of the masses and their entertainment needs, albeit for persuasive rather than commercial reasons. It is nowadays seen as sufficient for public communication to be ‚successful', irrespective of the quality of actual political decisions; ‚symbolic politics' functions as a replacement (Sarcinelli 1987). This process is accompanied by political communication becoming more visual, more performative, more theatrical and more aestheticized.

In my view, Holly has touched on a very important point (cf. also Corner/Pels 2003); much commercialization has indeed taken place and some genres of political discourse increasingly draw on promotional and business discourses. Nevertheless, the main trend in politics is towards the symbolic and the ‚performance-conscious‘ and less towards the perceived needs of the market although these two phenomena cannot really be held totally apart. Politicians succeed better if supported by tabloids; indeed they lean towards policies which might be supported by the tabloids (in Germany, the *Bild-Zeitung*, in Austria *Die Neue Kronenzeitung*, and in the UK, *The Sun* have acquired huge importance: Elections can be lost or won, depending on their support; cf. Holly 2008; Jäger/Halm 2007).

Of course, strategic and planned performance in politics is not a new feature if one recalls the perfect staging of, say, Nazi politics (Maas 1984; Jäger 2004). What definitely has changed is the close collaboration with media and the impact media such as television have had and are continuing to have on politics (Stråth/Wodak 2009; White 2004). Holly (2008: 317) rightly observes that this alignment does not per se signal a deterioration of politics:

> [a]n orientation towards more entertainment and clarity does not necessarily lead to a loss in quality and in turn to more trivial, banal and, ultimately, seemingly ‚depoliti-cized‘ politics (which nevertheless have strong political implications). As long as po-litical communication remains true to the basic categories of all good communication, i.e. stays informative, true, relevant and comprehensible, politics with a broad impact could signal a modernization, popularization or even democratization of political communication rather than its tabloidization. Thus, the development of public com-munication, up to the recent impact of electronic media, continues to be ambivalent.

Hence, how we interpret the (mediatised) presentation of politics in action must necessarily depend on understandings about the range of functions of televised politics, the specific socio-political context, and the demands and needs of the audience (cf. below; Dörner 2001; Klein 1997).

This chapter addresses one genre which has become particularly successful: TV soap operas, such as *The West Wing* or *Im Kanzleramt* which portray the ‚backstage‘ of politics. These programmes represent what is assumed, presup-posed or even known about the everyday life of politicians; about their private lives, their advisors, possible scandals or conflicts, as well as the strategies and processes of political problem-solving (cf. Crawley 2006; Parry-Giles/Parry-Giles 2006; Challen 2001). I am particularly interested to discover the sociocul-tural place of such fictional dramas as a form of ‚politainment‘ (Holly 2008; Richardson 2006): How do they represent the world of politics? How might such representations in turn influence popular beliefs about politics? I assume that the

worlds created in such fictional dramas might serve as a second reality or a myth (Barthes 1957); a reality the audiences would like to believe in, precisely because complex problems find a solution thanks to seemingly wise politicians who adhere to values which are deemed positive by hegemonic elites (Lakoff 2004). I propose the term ‚fictionalization of politics‘ for this on-going process.

In the following, I first provide some theoretical background on the notions of backstage and frontstage; then I focus briefly on some links between politics, journalism and the media. Furthermore, I illustrate these considerations with some examples from *The West Wing* which has achieved cult status not only in the US but across many countries worldwide (Rollins/O'Connor 2003). Of course, due to space limitations, I will not be able to present a thorough critical discourse analysis of *The West Wing*, its history, marketization and construal as brand, and will necessarily restrict myself to a few examples and one specific focus: the portrayal of the president, Bartlett, as hero. For this, I employ concepts from the *Discourse-Historical Approach in Critical Discourse Analysis* which has been elaborated in detail elsewhere (Wodak 2001, 2004, 2006b, 2008b). More specifically, the concept of *four levels of context* will be presented as well as the notion of *recontextualization*. I will consider in detail the narrative structure and functions of just one episode – although it is typical of most episodes – while applying the theoretical approach of W. Wright (1977). I will have to neglect the vast literature on narrative analysis in films and other oral genres and refer readers to such excellent overviews as those of Bordwell (1985) or Bamberg (2007). Construing the president of the US in the *White House* as a hero means presenting to the public (or viewing audience) the figure of a wise man who is able to solve the huge problems of a complex world; a man with some (humanizing) faults yet much strength. Through this romanticizing fiction particular myths about politics and values in politics are globalised and thus become hegemonic. We are finally left to speculate what such globalised views and beliefs about politics and politicians might imply; what are the consequences when our understandings of politics stem largely from this world of ‚fictionalised politics‘?

2.   Staging politics

It used to be the case, when thinking about politics and political discourse, that political speeches were considered to be the most salient genre (Chilton 2004; Ensink/Sauer 2003; Reisigl 2004, 2007, 2008). Many speeches have become famous throughout the centuries (e.g. ‚I have a dream‘, delivered on 28 August 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C. by Dr. Martin Luther King,

Jr.[1] or ,Blood, Sweat and Tears', one of the most famous calls-to-arms in history, delivered 13 May 1940 by Sir Winston Churchill[2].

Speeches are usually written by ,spin-doctors', but performed by the politicians themselves. Nevertheless, the audience and the media identify the particular speech with the speaker and her/his style (Pels 2003), and usually do not ask who the author is (Goffman 1981). Spin doctors have become ever more important, increasingly taking on the role of ,mediators' (Laux/Schütz 1996), linking the fields of politics, administration, media, and so forth. ,Spin' is not a new phenomenon – politicians have always used persuasive strategies and tactics; recently, however, in opposition to Blair's policies related to the war in Iraq, the notion of ,spin' acquired a more strongly negative association with the cynical and disingenuous manipulation of the truth by untrustworthy politicians. The central role of ,spin' in the New Labour government is perhaps best embodied in the huge power wielded by Alistair Campbell, Tony Blair's press advisor and ,arch spin doctor'. However, if one is to believe recent opinion polls in the UK, public tolerance has reached its limit, with a majority of the electorate demanding, doubtless in vain (because of the inherent necessity of ,spin' in political rhetoric), a ,politics without spin'.

In our daily lives, we are confronted with many other genres of political discourse apart from speeches, e.g. with televised press conferences, with political on radio and TV, with snippets on *You-Tube*, or with reports on political events in the press. Moreover, slogans and advertisements stare at us when walk down the street, leaflets from political parties or interest groups come through the post, and during election campaigns we can hear politicians campaigning in town halls or at election rallies. Nowadays political parties appear rather like corporations, with their own logos, brands and websites where we can download relevant documents and photos as well as (manifesto) programmes. On some websites we can even listen to pop songs specially commissioned to promote politicians (e.g. H.C. Strache, the Austrian extreme rightwing politician).[3] If we wish to contact members of parliament or even the president of the *United States*, we can simply send them an email them or chat with them on discussion forums specifically constructed for such purposes (S. Wright 2005).

The BBC and other national broadcasting programmes have special programmes dedicated to bringing parliamentary debates right into our living rooms (BBC Parliament). Such programmes appear to grant the viewer direct access to

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1   See: http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm
2   See: http://www.historyplace.com/speeches/churchill.htm
3   See: http://www.hcstrache.at

the decision-making processes and debates at the heart of politics, although in reality we are seeing only a few snapshots of the politician's life:

> And after spending an entire day campaigning with the Conservative leader William Hague, the presenter of Channel Four News, Jon Snow, calculated that the total amount of time spent with members of the ‚public' was a mere forty minutes. (Paxman 2003: 93)

Blogs of individual politicians give insight into almost daily and quasi private thoughts, some even provide video footage of their ‚backstage' activities (e.g. the UK Conservative leader's aptly named ‚Webcameron'; www.davidcameronmp.com). At the same time fictional films about important political events (‚which nobody will ever forget') construct plausible narratives to keep memories alive or to offer explanations of unsolved cases (e.g. ‚JFK' by Oliver Stone or ‚The Life of a President' by Aaron Sorkin). Whatever else we learn from them, these examples all point to an almost symbiotic relationship between the worlds of politics and media.

Hence, Siegfried Weischenberg (1995: 239) claims that two social systems interpenetrate (in Niklas Luhmann's sense); i.e. are intricately linked with each other: „Media communication follows the logic of political decision-making and leadership, and political processes follow the media institutions' logic of selection and construction." This opinion relates well to Pierre Bourdieu's observations about the interdependency of the fields of politics, media, and economics:

> Those, who deal professionally in making things explicit and producing discourses – sociologists, historians, politicians, journalists, etc. –, have two things in common. On the one hand, they strive to set out explicitly practical principles of vision and division. On the other hand, they struggle, each in their own universe, to impose these principles of vision and division, and to have them recognized as legitimate categories of construction of the social world. (Benson/Neveu 2005: 37)

Of course, market interests prevail once the logic of the media takes over which leads to the market oriented, careful selection of images, rituals, and events represented and depicted in the media (cf. Meyer 2001; Meyrowitz 1986). In recent research, Josef Klein contrasts the Gricean categories of information with entertainment categories and finds important similarities and correspondences, as well as distinctions.

For example, media tend to substitute ‚truth' and ‚relevance' with ‚lightness' and ‚interest' respectively because the latter two categories seem more appropriate for media consumption (Klein 1997: 182). Emotionalization, personalization, aestheticization, decreased distance, and dramatization allow for easy identifica-

tion by viewers and for comprehensibility. This does not imply, however, that all deception and lies by politicians are accepted or acceptable. If specific lies or deception seem to threaten the public order instead of stabilizing it, scandals evolve, often created or supported by the media.

The above media examples all cast their gaze on the work and life of politicians from outside, rather than within, the world of politics. These are official genres, designed for the public; sanctioned public arenas in which politicians like to present themselves, stage their work and ‚perform‘, and be perceived by their various audiences (‚frontstage‘; Goffman 1981):

> A correctly staged and performed character leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a product of a scene that comes off, and not the cause of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (Goffman 1959: 252–253)

These activities follow specific norms and rules, are part of the ‚field of politics‘ (in Pierre Bourdieu's sense) and are ritualized, as Murray Edelman claimed in his seminal book The Symbolic Use of Politics (Edelman 1967). However, we have no real access to the ‚backstage‘, to the *politics du couloir*‘, the many conversations and the gossip in the corridors when politicians meet informally (Wodak 2008a; Krzyżanowski/Oberhuber 2007).

Back stage is where performers are present but the audience is not, and the performers can step out of character without fear of disrupting the performance; „the back region is the place where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (Goffman 1959: 112). It is where facts suppressed in the front stage or various kinds of informal actions may appear which are not accessible to outsiders. The back stage is completely separate from the front stage. No members of the audience can or should appear in the back. The actors adopt many strategies to ensure this; thus access is controlled by gate keepers (for example, visitors to the European Parliament are issued with special ‚back stage‘ entrance passes which must be worn visibly like an identification card). Putting on a performance becomes a more difficult matter once a member of the audience is backstage. Politicians would not want to be seen by a member of the public practising a speech or being briefed by an advisor (see Wodak 2008a).

Of course when performers are in the wings, they are really just engaged in a different type performance: that of a loyal team member; a member of the field of politics and – in this field – of a particular community of practice (a parlia-

mentarian from a specific party; or a member of the advisory team); „most fre-
quently, communication out of character occurs backstage among team-mates;
treatment of the absent, staging talk, and team collusion are examples of such"
(Branaman 1997: xvi).

‚Backstage' is a relative concept; it exists only in relation to a specific audi-
ence, at a specific time and in a specific place. In its truest sense there can almost
never be a genuine access ‚behind the scenes'. This is why ethnographers rarely
have genuine access to the backstage even if they have gained access and the
trust of the professionals they observe. However, as has been frequently stated in
ethnography and in sociolinguistics, the observers' paradox can be partially
overcome when the participant observation continues over a certain length of
time; for example the pressure of urgent events and the complex demands of
their daily routines may lead the performers to drop their ‚performative guard'
(cf. Wodak 1986, 1996; Krzyżanowski/Oberhuber 2007).

This is perhaps why the media have started to recreate the ‚backstage' via
films, soap operas, and other media, in order to satisfy the widespread demand,
as expressed in opinion polls and surveys, to know more about how decisions are
taken, how politicians live, and what their every day lives might consist of. By
providing an apparent window into the ‚realities behind politics', such pro-
grammes construct a proximity that allows viewers to identify with politics and
politicians.

Moreover, the media have created specific cinematic devices linking front
stage and back stage; usually by introducing long corridors which lead from one
location to the next (for example from a back stage room to the ‚front stage'
press conference). Advisors accompany politicians running to a specific event
and briefing them on the way; a specific sub-genre termed ‚walk and talk'
(Wodak 2008a). The walk and talk scenes not only link front and back stage;
they establish hierarchies of knowledge and information (who talks about what
to whom; who is informed about what and is allowed to pass on information to
whom; who briefs whom; who addresses which topics; and so forth). In this way,
walk and talk scenes establish the social order in the *White House* team, set the
agenda, deliver important knowledge on events and social relations, and create a
sense of urgency, of ‚doing', of the immediate fast working of politics and politi-
cal decision making.[4]

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4 This is, by the way, also true for the everyday life of politicians in huge organizations such as
the European Parliament. In my own observations, briefing and updating of politicians by their
advisors takes place in the long corridors, running from one meeting to the next (Wodak
2008a).

Picture 1:   The *West Wing* advisors rushing through the corridors of the
                  White House

2.   The Construction and Representation of Everyday Politics in the Media

Although the media focus primarily on the kind of ‚grand politics‘ well docu-
mented in M. Edelman (1967), its more recent preoccupation with the cult of
celebrity has led to huge interest in the private lives of politicians (Talbot 2007).
Thus, scandals are perceived as newsworthy and set the agenda, while news sto-
ries try to plot the genesis of important political decisions, searching for intrigues
and conspiracies, especially at times of crisis or controversy (Machin/Niblock
2006). However, journalists' investigations are only ever as good as their (often
anonymous) sources, whose unreliability means it is often impossible to validate
such stories. Generally, journalists and the media do not have access to the
‚*politics de couloir*‘, to the backstage and everyday life of politicians and their
advisors; hence rumors, secrets, and speculations prevail.

      Our natural curiosity for this unknown realm perhaps accounts popularity of
other media forms that use an alternative, fictional, route by which to represent
and construct the everyday lives of politicians and the intricacies of decision-
making: namely films and soaps such as ‚*Yes Minister*‘, ‚*The West Wing*‘ or ‚*Im
Kanzleramt*‘. Although quite different in many ways, these three TV series have
attracted huge audiences; for example, the series *The West Wing* has continued to
attract over 14 million viewers every week since it was piloted in 2000. What
makes such series so attractive? Which interests and needs among mass audi-
ences are they satisfying? As Rollins/O'Connor (2003) elaborate, there is no
simple answer to these questions. There are many possible factors motivating

audiences to watch these programmes, ranging from simple curiosity to the identification with ‚alternative‘ politics.

I quote one sequence from *The West Wing*, Season 3, Posse Comitatus, 4th Cut, as a first example. Josh and Amy, both advisors (or spin doctors) to the president of the *United States* are having lunch, have just ordered egg white omelette and (burnt) toast, and are discussing the upcoming presidential campaign for President Bartlett's re-election:

Text 1

> J: We're gonna win the vote.
> A: We'll see
> J: We will but we're gonna. I've got a nine vote margin.
> A: I think you're gonna lose Burnet, Bristol and Keith
> J: They're on the fence
> A: Yeah
> J: You understand we have to authorize welfare one way or another, you have to do it every six years […].
> A: Have I done something to make you think I'm dumb?

This text sequence illustrates the kind of casual conversations full of fast and obscure strategic decision making which advisors and so-called spin-doctors enjoy while having their quick lunch. We can also observe the rapid frame shifts between work-related talk and interpersonal communication that alludes to the specific relationship between Josh and Amy. There is a constant shift between these different frames, interspersed with humour and gendered discourses (see Ch. Lane for a detailed investigation of *White House* gendered discourses, Lane 2003). In her chapter ‚Narratives Journalism can't tell‘, Donnalyn Pompper (2003: 26–27) summarizes some of the viewers' needs very well indeed:

> The West Wing teleplay writers enable viewers to eavesdrop on the Oval Office, witnessing a myriad of contemporary social issues and dramatic complications faced by policy workers on the job. For example, plots involve love-hate relationships between White House staff and press corps, partisan backbiting, and personal sacrifices for public service, as well as issues like substance abuse, interracial dating, and gender issues in the workplace. Through it all, White house staffers are portrayed as witty, sarcastic, and intelligent, yet frail, vulnerable humans who sometimes ride their bike into a tree while on vacation, humbly pray to God for guidance, argue with their ex-wives, work at being involved with their children in spite of hectic schedules, suffer from debilitating diseases, are jealous of their spouse's former lover, and solve crossword puzzles over morning coffee.

In short, politicians are portrayed as normal human beings; including their advisors. However, M. A. Levine (2003: 62) rightly states that „curiously, it [*The West Wing*] turns a blind eye to the stories of staff politics and factionalism inside the White House". This indicates that – although politicians are depicted as emotional, irrational, and ambivalent human beings – they all seem to identify with the ‚noble cause' and do not compete with each other or contradict each other. Some authors claim that this representation of everyday political life does not resemble the ‚real' everyday life of the *White House* staff or any other political organization (cf. Podhoretz 2003; Quiring 2003).

In sum: *The West Wing* produces a specific perspective (event model; cf. van Dijk 2004) on how ‚politics is done' for the American lay audience (and because the series has been dubbed in many languages, also almost world-wide). That is, this is how all of us are supposed to believe politics is done! However, while watching this series (and similar productions in other countries), we might ask ourselves if this is the ONLY way or whether it is instead just ONE of the ways of ‚doing politics' and of arriving at key political decisions. We might even question whether the story (the representation of ‚doing politics' in soap operas like *The West Wing*) does in fact (as some authors claim) resemble the ‚real' everyday life of politics at all? And if it does not, we need to ask the question WHY ‚the media' represent politics in this way.

If we look through the abundance of web pages related to *The West Wing*, the clever marketization of this series, and the broad range of reception modes, it becomes obvious that such series are situated between the fields of politics and fiction media. The following image (*Picture 2*) shows the brand, a flag in the foreground and the contours of the *White House* in the background, accompanied by the typical signation. This depiction relates well to M. Billig's (1995) analysis of ‚Banal Nationalism'. Advisors and staff of the Clinton administration were consulted by the series producers. The film crew was granted access to the *White House* at least once a year by then President Clinton; although this positive attitude towards the series changed significantly once G.W. Bush became president (O'Connor 2003). The series has been identified largely with the US Democratic Party; not the Republicans. We might therefore even speculate whether viewer allegiance to the *The West Wing* could be interpreted as a desire for a new government. Some critics have, however, pointed to the many myths constructed through the series: The characters are depicted as ‚noble' figures fighting for ‚noble causes', striving to build an ‚ideal world'. The president and his team are represented as ‚a family' protecting each other and the country. The president, as *pater familias,* is in the centre of the family and fulfils the role of the wise father. In *Picture 3*, even the colouring suggests the ‚sacred order', the good tradition, as

ancient scrolls are depicted in the background and everybody stands flanking the president in the centre, loyal wife at his side.

Another reading suggests that the series complies with wishful thinking and visions of what politics *should* be, thus serving as a distraction from the ‚real‘ everyday life of US politics.

Picture 2 and 3:   Opening shots of one of *West Wing* episodes

4.   Constructing the modern hero

4.1.   Methodological Considerations: The Discourse Historical Approach and Narrative Theory – From Vladimir Propp to William Wright

4.1.1.   Text and Context

Critical Discourse Analysis provides a general framework for problem-oriented social research. It allows the integration of different dimensions of interdisciplinarity and multiple perspectives on the object investigated. Every interview, focus group debate, TV debate, visual symbol, or in this case, episode of the TV series, is conceived as a semiotic entity, embedded in an immediate, text-internal co-text and an intertextual and socio-political context. Analysis thus has to take into account the intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between utterances, texts, genres and discourses as well as the extra-linguistic social/sociological variables, the history and archaeology of an organization (the US media), and institutional frames of a specific context of situation (the *White House*).

Intertextuality refers to the fact that all texts are linked to other texts, both in the past and in the present. Such links can be established in different ways: through continued reference to a topic or main actors throughout the TV series; through reference to the same events; or by the transfer of central arguments from one text into the next. The latter process is also known as *recontextualization.* By taking an argument and restating it in a new context, we first observe the process of de-contextualization, and then, when the respective element is implemented in a new context, of recontextualization. The element then acquires a new meaning because meanings are formed in use (Wittgenstein 1967). *Interdiscursivity*, on the other hand, indicates that discourses are linked to each other in various ways. If we define discourse as primarily topic-related, i.e. a discourse on X (on a political event), then a discourse on terrorism, for example, may typically refer to the topics or subtopics of other discourses, such as religion, gender, threat, security, or racism.

One of the most salient features of the discourse-historical approach (Wodak 2001, 2004, 2008b; Reisigl/Wodak 2001) is its endeavour to work interdisciplinarily, multi-methodically and on the basis of a variety of different empirical data. Depending on the object of investigation, it attempts to transcend the purely linguistic dimension and to include more or less systematically historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimensions in the analysis and interpretation of a specific discursive event. This approach is based on a concept of context which takes into account four levels:

1. the immediate, language or text internal co-text (the specific scene, episode);
2. the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses (relationships between episodes);
3. the extra-linguistic social/sociological variables and institutional frames of a specific *context of situation* (the location of the White House, the US, etc.; the TV broadcasting channel; and so forth);
4. the broader socio-political and historical contexts, to which the discursive practices are embedded in and related (other aspects of foreign or internal politics which impinge on the specific episode).

Finally, in this very brief methodological section, let us turn to the concept of *genre*. A genre may be characterised, following Norman Fairclough, as the conventionalised, more or less schematically fixed use of language associated with a particular activity, as „a socially ratified [RW: that is socially accepted] way of using language in connection with a particular type of social activity" (Fairclough 1995: 14). Russian Formalists (Propp [[1]1929] 1968; and much later, Bakhtin 1981) elaborated important notions of genre. Propp, in the early 1920s (cf. below) focussed on functions: the constitutive functions to be fulfilled by any story or narrative; an early version of actor analysis (van Leeuwen 1995). The analyses in this chapter focus primarily on the functions of the genre of *The West Wing* and on its most important character in the plot: President Bartlett.

4.1.2.   Wild West and *The West Wing*
William Wright (1977) has analysed the genre of Wild West films in detail and provided interesting evidence that this genre is constructed according to very clear rules, forms, and functions which draw on American culture and traditions. Wright follows Vladimir Propp's important narrative theory of the 1930s (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1928), which also heavily influenced Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes. Propp's approach failed to attract much attention in the West until it was translated in the 1950s. His character types are now often used in media education and can be applied to almost any film, television programme and story.

Propp extended the Russian Formalist approach to the study of narrative structure. In the Formalist approach sentence structures were broken down into analysable elements termed *morphemes*. Drawing on this approach, Propp devised an analogous method for analysing Russian fairy tales. By deconstructing a large number of Russian folk tales into their smallest narrative units – *narratemes* – Propp was able to arrive at a typology of narrative structures:

thirty one generic narratemes for the genre of the Russian folk tale. While not all are always present, he found that all the tales he analysed displayed the thirty one genericfunctions performed in a fixed sequence by eight archetypal characters (hero, villain, victim, and so forth). Among these functions are the following which W. Wright has applied to the analysis of Wild West films (see below):

1. A member of a family leaves home (the hero is introduced);
2. The interdiction is violated (villain enters the tale);
3. The villain gains information about the victim;
4. Victim taken in by deception, unwittingly helping the enemy;
5. Villain causes harm/injury to family member;
6. Misfortune or lack is made known;
7. Hero leaves home;
8. Hero acquires use of a magical agent;
9. Hero is transferred, delivered or led to whereabouts of an object of the search;
10. Hero and villain join in direct combat;
11. Villain is defeated;
12. Initial misfortune or lack is resolved;
13. Hero returns;
14. Task is resolved;
15. Hero is recognised;
16. Villain is punished.

Propp's approach was frequently criticized for removing all verbal/textual/ discursive considerations from the analysis (even though the folktale's form is almost always oral) as well as considerations of tone, mood, and other distinctive features that might serve to differentiate one story from another. One of the most prominent critics of Propp was Claude Lévi-Strauss who used Propp's monograph on the *Morphology of the Folktale* to demonstrate the superiority of his structuralist approach (see Lévi-Strauss 1976). On the other hand, defenders of Propp claim that his approach was not intended to unearth meaning in the fairy tales he examined nor to find distinctive, differentiating elements, but to deconstruct the basic building blocks of their narrative structure.

Following Vladimir Propp, William Wright (1977: 143 ff.) proposed the following functions for the genre of Wild West films:

1. ,The hero enters a social group
2. The hero is unknown to the society.
3. The hero is revealed to have an exceptional ability.
4. The society recognizes a difference between themselves and the hero; the hero is given special status.

5. The society does not completely accept the hero.
6. There is a conflict of interests between the villains and the society.
7. The villains are stronger than the society; the society is weak.
8. There is a strong friendship or respect between the hero and a villain.
9. The villains threaten the society.
10. The hero avoids involvement in the conflict.
11. The villains endanger a friend of the hero's.
12. The hero defeats the villains.
13. The society is safe.
14. The society accepts the hero.
15. The hero loses or gives up his special status.'

Important for our analysis of *The West Wing* episodes below is the discursive construction of the hero, similar to the hero in Western films, who has both strengths and weaknesses. This construal of the hero relates to classical myths and sagas (Achilles, Siegfried). W. Wright was able to illustrate very succinctly that the genre of Wild West films fulfils important functions for American society in creating myths about the pioneers colonizing and exploring the frontiers. Moreover, the simple Manichean division of ‚good' and ‚bad' represented by hero and villain forms a basis for the perception and interpretation of historic events where the good win and the bad lose (G. W. Bush has clearly continued to draw on this Manichean distinction; cf. Chilton/Schäffner 2002):

> If the form of a myth as narrative is a model for making sense of experience, then the content of particular myths embodies and makes possible this model. […] The social meanings of myth may become identified with the fundamental organization of understanding by which the mind knows itself and its world. For this reason, it is apparent that if we are fully to understand and explain specific human actions, we must be able to relate those actions to the social narratives or myths of the society to which the actor belongs. It is at least partly through these myths that he makes sense of his world, and thus the meaning of his actions – both to himself and his society – can only be grasped through a knowledge of the structure and meaning of the myth. (Wright 1977: 194)

When viewing the enormously positive reception of *The West Wing* (cf. above) and the emotional identification with the character of President Bartlett, it makes senseto apply W. Wright's framework (i.e. Propp's modified framework) to this form of politainment. Indeed, M. Crawley (2006: 141 ff.) suggests that this fictional president conforms to stereotyped conceptions of a president for the show's American audience, with all his flaws as human being

and as president: He is intellectual, moral, fatherly, and authoritative, and creates a unique meaning system which complies with American traditions and viewers' expectations. Furthermore, Crawley (2006: 129 ff.) quotes several instances in the US where this fictional world is held up as an exemplary model to the real world of politics. Thus, organisations like, the teachers' union, the *National Education Association*, or journalists in the *New York Times* and the *Detroit Free Press* refer to Bartlett's policies as a good model to be followed, or mention characteristics of President Bartlett which the presidential candidates Gore and Bush ‚would be wise to copy'. In this way, fiction influences or even acquires the status of reality – a clear example of the fictionalization of politics! As Crawley summarizes:

> The lure of television is that it promises to bring a new opportunity that is as much about ‚intellectual intimacy' as it is about emotional closeness. Intellectually, the public may recognize the players of the familiar presidential performance but what allows them to repeatedly watch the ‚soap opera' is, in part, the hope that the next politician will make them feel better. (Crawley 2006: 128–129)[5]

In sum, a modern hero is constructed alongside the necessary functions of a story or myth. *Picture 4* portrays a typical still of President Bartlett in thinking pose.

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5   The most interesting case of this kind was the episode ‚Isaac and Ishmael', aired right after 9/11. In this episode, the educational function was fore grounded: A Muslim is first accused of terrorist intentions and sneaking into the White House but is later cleared of all suspicions. Indeed, stereotypes and prejudices towards Muslims are exposed in their dangerous potential. This episode was quoted frequently and even recontextualized in speeches of other politicians (the Canadian Foreign Minister John Manley) as a good example of consciousness raising and exemplary fight against unjust accusations (cf. also Crawley 2006: 134; Wodak 2008a).

Picture 4:   Martin Sheen (President Bartlett) in one of *West Wing* episodes

4.2.   One example: Genre and ‚Plot‘ – West Wing Episode ‚Commencement‘[6]

4.2.1.   The Context

The action takes place on the eve of Bartlett's daughter Zoey's ‚Commencement‘ (i.e., graduation ceremony). Bartlett briefs the staff on his past role in a covert killing after five alleged terrorists go missing. Fearing the controversy this may create, press secretary C.J. is forced to strike a deal with her former boyfriend and influential journalist, Danny, in order to keep the truth buried. Meanwhile, a new Secret Service agent is assigned to protect the graduate Zoey who wants to spend three months in Paris with her boy friend after graduation. Bartlett is represented on the one hand, as shrewd politician, coping with potential terrorists, and, on the other, as a concerned father who wants to persuade his daughter to stay in the US. However, Zoey vanishes. Meanwhile the President's personal advisor Toby's wife Andy gives birth to twins. Furthermore, throughout the whole episode we observe the president preparing for Commencement and the speech he is due to give there. His – African American – advisor Will helps him prepare the speech at the very last minute. A recurrent theme in *The West Wing,* is that Bartlett excels when giving speeches, even – and sometimes especially – when they are given spontaneously and without notes (compiled with reference to TV Guide.com).

Applying Wright's functional model of analysis to this episode, we can identify the following narratemes:

▪ The hero (Bartlett) has to keep a secret;
▪ The hero protects his country;

- The hero has an exceptional ability (giving speeches);
- Everybody recognizes this ability;
- Villains are back-grounded (potential terrorists and kidnappers);
- Villains threaten society;
- Daughter (Zoey) wants to leave;
- Daughter needs protection;
- Secret Service protects daughter;
- Press secretary C.J. protects everybody from the press;
- Toby will soon be a father;

This plot continues over 5 episodes (villains endanger daughter, Zoey is kidnapped and found):

- Hero gives up his status – and, in the end, gets it back (Bartlett resigns briefly until his daughter Zoey is found);
- Hero succeeds in protecting family and country.

Although many different sub-plots run through the episodes, all of them are concerned with protection: the protection of the President's immediate family (Zoey), the protection of the president's reputation by feeding the necessary information to the press (C.J.), the protection of Toby's wife by her husband and the doctors assisting the birth, and finally the protection of the country from terrorists by the president and his team. The family metaphor frames this plot – a family which protects all members and metonymically represents the whole country protected by the government, i.e. the president. The president who is construed as hero necessarily possesses exceptional abilities. Bartlett is able to move and convince audiences through his oratory skills. What's more, he is portrayed as intellectually gifted; a former Nobel Prize winner in Economics, he is mentally agile, astute and extremely knowledgeable.

4.2.2.   Creating the hero

Text 2

>BARTLETT I've been thinking I'd like to talk about creativity. Why don't you get
>   started on some thoughts and I'll join you.
>WILL Yes sir.
>BARTLETT What do you think about using the Eudora Welty quote instead of the
>   Gandhi.
>WILL   Well I think they both wouldn't make any more with-work but since I
>   changes, I'd stay

> BARTLETT ‚You must be the change'– is that it – ‚You must be the change you wish to see in the world', it sounds too much like Eastern philosophy.
> WILL Well, it was bound to, sir.
> BARTLETT 'Cause Gandhi lived in India.
> WILL Yeah. Sir, this speech is about creativity and in my judgement it's a home run. Now what it isn't is a speech that will convince Zoey not to go to France tomorrow.
> BARTLETT Well let's write that one.
> *And we HEAR the double quintet strike up Pomp and Circumstance.*

In this scene Will is instructed to make a start on the speech. Bartlett casually throws out for consideration a number of historical quotes in a gesture that alludes to the broad reach of his knowledge. However, Will also reminds the president of his wish to convince Zoey to stay in the US, suggesting that the speech might be counter-productive; while the speech exhorts the nation to embrace change and adventure, Bartlett is concerned to keep his daughter safe at home. Nevertheless, Will observes that as it stands the first draft is a ‚home run'. This sports metaphor (from baseball) serves to create identification with the American audience, as perhaps does the protective urge to keep his daughter at home. The president's response is short and unequivocal: What's needed is a speech that will keep his daughter safe. When it comes to it, Bartlett's paternal instincts win out, creating yet a further point of identification for the audience. In this brief interaction, the structure and content of the speech are decided; now it only remains to be written. Although the aide Will addresses the president with the deferential epithet ‚Sir', the interaction nevertheless resembles a brain storming among peers; hierarchy remains latent, and the president readily accepts advice and criticism.

Text 3

> AIDE Mr. President?
> *BARTLETT understands it's time. He zips up his gown, which includes the requisite chevrons for his degrees, honors and disciplines and two cowls.*
> *The uniform of academic knighthood.*
> CHANCELLOR Are you ready, Mr. President?
> BARTLETT Yeah. Thanks, Will, for the help.
> WILL (smiles) Use the Eudora Welty, it's better.
> BARTLETT Thank you.
> *And BARTLETT and the CHANCELLOR, also impressively decked out in academic badges,*
> *lead the procession of FACULTY in their gowns and as they come out, the*
> *SPECTATORS all stand and APPLAUD.*
> CHANCELLOR I understand you're not using the Tele Prompter.

BARTLETT   Yeah, no, I've got it down here folder [...] and on some napkins in
     pockets. In this my
CHANCELLOR   Are you gonna be all right with that?
BARTLETT   Oh yeah, I'll be fine, you know unless something comes up.
CHANCELLOR   Like what?
BARTLETT   Well for instance I just realized I don't have access to my pockets
     anymore, but you know, what are you gonna do?!

In this scene, the hero's exceptional ability is fore-grounded. With the casual con-
fidence of a skilful orator, the president has not bothered to write up the whole
speech, he merely has notes written on napkins stuffed in his pockets. Unfortuna-
tely, by putting on his university gown, he cannot retrieve the notes, and thus he
will have to speak without consulting them. The rhetorical question at the end of
this brief sequence manifests both the president's witty self-irony (at not being
able to find his notes; a safe and humorous moment of human frailty) and his
jovial self-assurance that he will just have to manage without his notes, which
we are meant to infer will not cause any problems for him. Our hero's exceptio-
nal ability is further underlined in the preceding sequence, where the university
chancellor is surprised that the president will not make use of the tele-prompter
Earlier in the scene, we again see the human, approachable side of our hero as he
takes time to thank his aide Will, who in turn throws out a last minute word of
advice about which quote to use.

     These two sequences illustrate several important characteristics of the pre-
sident: He has a sense of humour, accepts advice and criticism, and is very
knowledgeable (even about Eastern philosophy), he also proposes the rather
abstract notion of ‚creativity' as the general topic for his speech, adding to this
portrayal of a liberal minded, intellectual hero. He interacts quite informally
with his aides and team; is spontaneous and flexible, capable of accommodat-
ing new situations very quickly; and subtly strategic (he would like to convince
his daughter to stay at home, so crafts a speech specifically tailored so as to
persuade his daughter). As we have seen, he is also self-confident (he knows
that he can manage without notes). Indeed, one might speculate if this perfor-
mance (speaking without notes) was staged so that he would have the opportu-
nity to display his oratory prowess.

     Through these two scenes and of course many more throughout this episo-
de, a wise, amiable and paternal hero is constructed who will ultimately protect
his daughter and save the country from terrorists. This basic plot structure is
repeated in other episodes, suggesting that the *The West Wing* genre resembles
both Propp's and Wright's models of fairy tales and Western films: Simple plots
where heroes save the country from dangerous villains and win in the end. This
also means, however, that the series implicitly constructs politics as a series of

stories where the good and the bad are easily distinguished and the wise president will finally make the right decisions.

5.   Conclusions

Throughout the TV series, politicians are constructed as (charismatic) authorities and assigned mythical qualities (like being able to solve the ‚big problems of the world'). The complexity of politics in a global world is thus simplified; complex, multi-dimensional processes across space and time, and a diversity of social fields are reduced to telegenic personalities, distinct events, and simple solutions. The reactions of the audience and press (see above) clearly demonstrate that such representations successfully produce and reproduce stereotyped expectations about politics, exploiting cognitive and emotional schemata or shared ‚mental pictures' of the behaviour and life of politicians, which in fact do not relate to the complex reality in political institutions. In effect, these programmes construct a banal and romanticised version of politics that often bears very little resemblance to the real world. Nevertheless, part of the appeal of these programmes is that they appear to offer viewers a ‚behind the scenes' look– whether dramatic, romantic or comic – at a familiar yet inaccessible social practice. For this reason they need to offer a recognisable representation of that practice.

Each episode of the TV series could be regarded as a snapshot of the political field in a given social and temporal context. The roles of advisors and powerful politicians are thus presented in culturally situated ways, depending on the respective political system: The *White House* differs from Whitehall and 10 Downing Street, as well as from the Chancellery in Berlin. Thus, in the British comedy series Yes (Prime) Minister, the administrators and bureaucrats seem to run politics and manipulate the prime minister, whereas the charismatic president (in *The West Wing*) remains the most important decision maker in the *United States*.

In these programmes politics becomes manageable in space and time, divisible into temporal sequences and units. Politics is thus packaged and glamorised through plot devices and dramatic tropes, taking place amid anxiety, panic, danger, imminent disaster, intrigue, illness, comic moments, love affairs, and so on. Problems are solved and each story given a moral. The hero wins and ‚good' values triumph. By contrast, empirical research on the everyday life of real politicians illustrates (Wodak 2008a) that their life is far from neatly packaged into stories, isolated problems, and straightforward plots. Rather, it is a very hectic life, filled with a variety of activities ranging from repetitive routines to complex decision-making and the management of urgent affairs. Themes, agenda, and

topics merge into one another; there seems to be no explicit temporal order when and how agendas are finalized and implemented; and many very different agendas are pursued at the same time. Disturbances can occur at any time.

The *fictionalization of politics*, therefore, serves several functions: Creating a world which is still manageable through the traditional routines of politics; through diplomacy, press conferences, speeches, and negotiations. This is a world where ‚good' values prevail – (where what is ‚good' is defined by the series and represented by Bartlett and his team). This world also serves an educational function, exploiting this passivating medium of televised politainment to socialise the audience into the ‚good values' it constructs and, perhaps, to stimulate greater interest in politics in an increasingly apathetic electorate. As the preceding analysis demonstrates, *The West Wing* creates a myth about the activities and characters of US politics, possibly as contrast to existing experiences of incomprehensibility that draws on particular schemata that have a long tradition in the US in the genre of Western (cowboy) films. In this way, this particular fictionalisation of politics is culturally situated by evoking notions of patriotism and heroism that are firmly embedded in the American ‚cultural vocabulary'. As *The West Wing* is also translated and aired world wide, the myth is then recontextualised in other countries and cultures. *Im Kanzleramt*, for example, is the German counterpart, produced by *ZDF*. As this fictionalized world of politics is recontextualised across different cultural contexts, it carries with it significant implications for audience beliefs about, and engagement with, the real world of politics. Given the manifest influence and popularity of this genre, it is to be hoped that critical reflection on the impact of the fictionalization of politics will inform future research

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