Seeing Obama, Projecting Kennedy: The Presence of JFK in Images of Barack Obama

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Abstract
During the 2008 election campaign Obama's youth, his glamorous wife, young children and liberal politics resuscitated the memory of Kennedy, who remains the benchmark of the presidential image. This article explores how Obama shapes himself in Kennedy's image. Employing Freud's concept of the 'ego-ideal' the article examines how Obama has sought to establish himself as the Kennedy's natural successor through his presentation and performance. The article compares the representation of the two Presidents in the work of Annie Leibovitz, Stanley Tretick and Richard Avedon, as well as the documentaries *Primary* (1960) and *By the People* (2009).

Keywords
Kennedy, Obama, Freud, president, father, nostalgia

Barack Obama's ascent to the presidency is one of the more unlikely success stories of recent times. Although the tidal wave of joy and excitement which accompanied his extraordinary campaign and ultimate victory has now begun to recede, it still feels like a gross understatement to describe his achievement as merely remarkable. In his review of Jonathan Alter's *The Promise: Barack Obama – Year One*, Frank Rich (2010) suggests of Obama's election 'Only Hollywood might have the power to create a superhero who could fulfil the messianic dreams kindled by his presence and rhetoric, maintain the riveting drama of his unlikely ascent, and sustain the national mood of deliverance that greeted his victory'. While the rise of the populist Tea Party might be indicative of frustration with the inexorable decline of the United States as a global power, as well as a riposte to the pervasive belief that Obama's election had ushered in a 'post-racial' era, the movement's tone and flavour illustrate perhaps more explicitly the persistent, quixotic belief in the perfection of America's past. It should primarily be seen as an eruption of nostalgia for a time in which America, as a nation

and concept, was uncomplicatedly prosperous and content. Such outpourings of nostalgia often employ as their inspiration images of America's founding fathers and former presidents: political action heroes who set about the task of making America 'a more perfect union' (Obama, 2008) through their grit, strength, and sheer force of will.

With regard to the representational successes of Ronald Reagan's presidency, Susan Jeffords (1994:5) argues that despite America's pretence towards detached sophistication, 'underneath, we want a daddy, a king, a god, a hero, a champion who will carry that lance and that sword into the field and fight for us'. This observation succinctly summarises the role which the American president is expected to play in the national consciousness as a strong, dynamic, and (crucially) masculine leader. John Orman (1987: 1) demonstrates this by comparing the perceived effeminate weakness of Jimmy Carter's presidency, an administration which until recently was synonymous with failure, with the strident, robust, masculine force of Reagan. Despite the founding fathers' intention to move America away from its dependence on an omnipotent monarch through a balancing of power between three branches of government, the presidency has, in the last century, become the public face of the United States. The perception of the nation, and its potential for success, will be largely dependent on the fortunes of this one individual. The president must use his office as a pulpit to celebrate the people's successes in the good times, and assuage their fears when times are tough. He must exude a conventional masculine strength to exert his will upon the nation and the world, while simultaneously being a nurturing and reassuring presence, approximating the expectations of a traditional father figure. The increased dominance of the media in the past seventy years has played a significant role in the establishment of this impression. From Franklin Roosevelt's use

of radio to broadcast his Depression-era 'fireside chats', through John F. Kennedy's televised press conferences, to the present saturation of our televisions and computer screens with images of the president on twenty-four hour rolling news, the image of the American presidency is at the forefront of our consciousness. The arrival, and continued presence, of the president in the domestic realm has made him even more akin to what we think of as a good father – ever-present, always attentive, appearing primarily concerned with the prosperity and health of his people. Taking in conjunction Orman's suggestion that 'the president of the United States is the quintessential symbol of the country' (1987: 1) with the resolutely masculine character of the presidency, therefore, it is possible to conclude that the president is the nation's father.

This notion prompts discussion of the work of Sigmund Freud, and his concept of the primal father. While Freud's case studies demonstrated that *real* fathers were often disappointing, weak and ineffectual, the construction by the son of the idealised *primal* father following the actual father's death is of particular relevance here. Freud (1923: 376) suggests that the origin of religion lies in an infantile longing for the absent, idealised father figure because, while the son may have had an ambivalent attitude to his father in life, the guilt engendered by death results in 'the dead father becoming stronger than the living one had been' (1913: 204). This guilt is then internalized by the son in the form of his superego which, Freud argues, is the idealized version of the self in the guise of the dead father (1930: 325). Freud extrapolates this process into a more abstract formulation of the cultural superego, which posits that the 'impression left behind by the personalities of great leaders' fashions a collective superego for an entire epoch of civilisation. While these leaders may have been ridiculed, derided and generally maltreated in life, they 'attain

divinity' in death (1930: 335). This hypothetical dynamic appears to find a tangible embodiment in attitudes expressed towards America's former presidents. Although the majority of them remain definitively, and often disappointingly, human, a few are enshrined in American culture as truly great; their images are returned to and revered as subsequent commanders-in-chief pass through the Oval Office. An awareness of the role the residual power of these alleged giants plays in the nostalgic flavour of American political campaigning is often essential to the success of a candidate.

During his campaign for president, Obama was quick to develop his own image in relation to some of the commanders-in-chief perceived to have had the greatest impact on the United States. As a keen student of history, Obama chose to position himself in the enormous shadow of Abraham Lincoln. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama discusses in vivid terms his admiration for Lincoln and, in the book's final passages, describes the Lincoln Memorial in passionate tones verging on the Capraesque (2007: 361-2). Obama rightly suggested that, as an African American, his candidacy would not have been possible without the intervention of Lincoln, who freed the slaves by signing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862. However, when the global financial crisis descended upon the American economy in September 2008, it was the formidable figure of Franklin D. Roosevelt, America's benevolent guide through the darkest hours of the Great Depression, who was invoked as symbolic of the brand of leadership necessary to avert the impending catastrophe. Despite these persuasive comparisons, however – one explicitly chosen by Obama, the other thrust hurriedly upon him – I shall demonstrate that it is the image of John F. Kennedy which might provide the most compelling presidential antecedent to Obama's candidacy. As suggested earlier, if the image of the president is virtually omnipresent

in the contemporary period, then the most persuasive *visual* comparison one can make between Obama and presidents past is with the idealized figure of Kennedy.

In semiotic terms, the similarities between the two men are inescapable – like Kennedy, Obama is youthful, attractive, with a young family, and he appears similarly concerned with exuding sartorial elegance in his public appearances. As suggested by Mark Ellwood (2008), Obama's 'tightly tailored, slim-fit suits, crisp white shirts and dapper dimpled ties' draw instant comparison with Kennedy. Obama's two appearances on the cover of the now defunct *Men's Vogue* emphasize that, in terms of style, the Obama presidency is clearly indebted to the Kennedy legacy – elegant, stylish, disguising an enormous intellect beneath the veneer of relaxed sophistication.[i] I will examine the influence of Kennedy's image on Obama's candidacy and presidency. This will involve an analysis of the significance of Kennedy in relation to the modern presidency, particularly the memorialization of his image in a variety of media. I will look specifically at the representation of Kennedy in Robert Drew's documentary *Primary* (1960) and in the glamorous photographs taken by Richard Avedon and Stanley Tretick. The fetishization of his image forms part of what John Hellmann describes as 'The Kennedy Obsession' (1997), and I will examine these ideas in relation to our own fixation with representations of the Obamas. The significance of Kennedy's shocking death is crucial, as it allowed him to remain firmly ensconced within the supposedly stable and prosperous period of which he was a part. In relation to this, I will discuss how Obama has refashioned this frozen image in his own publicity, and how the magnetism of Kennedy impels us to fit Obama around this constructed image of the presidential ideal. Much like Bill Clinton before him, Obama sought to emphasize the mainstream nature of his value system through the invocation of figures from the nation's political past (Marcus 2004: 153). To

address whether or not Obama will be the president to fulfil the promise of Kennedy's tragically curtailed presidency is not my intention here. Instead, I will assess the process by which the presidency adopts and assembles images to fit its own purposes, and what role the nostalgic desire for the idealized father figure plays in this construction. The discourses surrounding Kennedy indicate a desire to believe in the myth of the ideal father, and in the case of Obama, the longing to believe the myth might be real.

Firstly, however, it is important to establish what Kennedy represents within the lineage of American presidents. Historians have largely come to agree that Kennedy's assassination halted the progress of what *might have been* a successful presidency. The words 'might have been' are crucial here, as historians and cultural commentators from both sides of the political spectrum have repeatedly speculated as to what Kennedy might have done (or not) had he lived to win a second term. If we look at the facts, it shows that his legislative achievements were fairly limited, and the promise of his administration only saw substantial results during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. Kennedy's reputation for being a champion of the Civil Rights movement, for example, was largely superseded by Johnson's Great Society. Although he can take *some* credit for avoiding nuclear conflict with the Soviet Union over Cuba in 1962, the disastrous invasion at the Bay of Pigs in 1961 demonstrates that his foreign policy was not the glittering achievement many perceive it to have been. The slow drip of revelations about his private life in the years following his assassination might also have soiled his image in the eyes of many admirers.

Notably, it is Kennedy's *image* that is held up as the ideal. If the preoccupation with Kennedy was based solely on the modest accomplishments of his presidency, the continued nostalgic obsession would have little rational basis. John

Hellmann's analysis of the significance of Kennedy's image in the collective consciousness is of particular relevance here. Hellmann suggests that the idealization of Kennedy's image is indicative of what psychoanalysts describe as 'imago' or 'ideal love,' a notion which bears fruitful comparison with Freud's concept of the ideal father (1997: 113). According to Hellmann, falling in love involves a doubling in the imagination: the manufacture of an internal image of the ideal person, and then the shaping of our own perception of the real person in accordance with this construction. Norman Mailer's sprawling seminal essay 'Superman Comes to the Supermarket' (1960) is an excellent example of this process, illustrating explicitly the projection of the nation's hopes and ideals onto the figure of Kennedy. According to Mailer, Kennedy was the embodiment of what America wanted to be – young, idealistic, affluent and cosmopolitan. Having succumbed to the dull conformity of the Eisenhower era, America needed someone who could capture the imagination, and rouse the populace to become more extraordinary and adventurous. Faced with the choice between Kennedy and Richard Nixon, Mailer posed the question, 'Would the nation be brave enough to enlist the romantic dream of itself, would it vote for the image in the mirror of its unconscious,' or would it opt for 'the stability of the mediocre' (Mailer 1960). Given the hyperbole in which Mailer indulges, he too appears to have become intoxicated by the brilliant aura which surrounded Kennedy. His fervour is of import because he is not offering an objective and unbiased account of Kennedy's candidacy, but precisely the opposite. His willingness to embrace the mythological discourses which Kennedy inspired demonstrates the turn towards a perhaps irrational desire to believe in the promise of the image. Indeed, the construction of Kennedy as the image of the unconscious explicitly raises the spectre of Freud, positing Kennedy as the ego-ideal above Nixon's imperfect, human 'ego.'

The image which Kennedy projected was one of perfection, and would come to serve as the model for the popular conception of the president as leader, superhero and, subsequently, father.

Hellmann suggests it was Kennedy's ability to present himself as similarly mysterious and charismatic to Hollywood stars such as Montgomery Clift and Marlon Brando which enabled him to breach the stodgy and aged Democratic Party establishment. As Hellmann suggests, in Mailer-esque terms, 'like a film star, Kennedy became a mirror image of the citizen's desire, an idealized reflection' (1997: 96). Interestingly, this positioned Kennedy as the representative of a *new* generation. He would say as much in his inaugural address, arguing that his election demonstrated that 'the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans' (1961). It is intriguing to note that much of Kennedy's rhetoric and image construction appears to position him as the son – the youthful and dynamic inheritor of the legacy of the American frontier, who would seek to reinvigorate the American people. It was his untimely death which would calcify the image he had cultivated of an energetic and vigorous president at the forefront of a *New* Frontier. As suggested by Stella Bruzzi (2006: 157), Kennedy's death rendered his image consistent and unchangeable; the myth and the man becoming one and the same. According to Jon Roper (2000:1), Kennedy 'attempted to define and to personify a style of presidential leadership in an image which his assassination would both crystallize and mythologically confirm in the popular mind: the president as all-American hero'. In Freudian terms, then, Kennedy's death and the subsequent mythologization of his youthful image enabled him to become the idealized father to the later generation of Americans.

This process of instituting Kennedy as the symbolic ideal father-leader was completed by Bill Clinton's employment of the Kennedy image during his 1992

presidential campaign.[ii] The footage of an adolescent Clinton meeting Kennedy in the White House rose garden in 1962 was explicit in its symbolism: as Kennedy had embodied the ideals of a new generation when he was elected in 1960, so Clinton would be the one to fulfil the promise of Kennedy, whose murder had 'come to symbolize the nation's thwarted hopes' (Brown 1988: 44). Indeed, his death is often viewed as the catalyst for the decline of the United States, as subsequent years would see the nation entrenched in the quagmire of Vietnam, and confidence in its democracy battered by the Watergate scandal. These events would irrevocably undermine the pervasive notion that America was an exceptional nation with a manifest destiny (Marcus 2004: 164). Bruce Miroff (1993: 306) encapsulates this impression as follows:

> Kennedy's death came to organize popular understanding of modern American history. Before his death, in this understanding, America was on the ascendant. After his assassination, the nation found itself spiralling downward, into race riots, overseas catastrophes, and economic stagnation. When Americans treasure the grace and glamour in stories or visual images of Kennedy, they treasure an imagined time when America, too, was suffused with grace and glamour. Nostalgia for Kennedy is nostalgia for an American dream that the decade of the 1960s first magnified and then exploded.

Simply put, the nightmares which followed Kennedy's death brought 'a special glow' to his years in office (Cull 2003: 17). In mythological discourse Kennedy represents a time before the American Dream began to sour, and this is perhaps why every president who has followed him has in some way had to deal with the image of the Kennedy legacy. As noted by Martin Walker (1993:14), the Kennedy era is 'the last time America felt genuinely good about itself, with prosperity and promise undimmed.' It is for this reason, Walker argues, that Hollywood continually returns to the Kennedy years as the 'point of departure' in its role as 'custodian of the national myth' (14). This astute observation offers the potential to draw an intriguing analogy

between the excitement generated by the images which Kennedy created, and the comparable enthusiasm which accompanied Obama's adoption of these images in his campaign, and later as president. It is arguable that, through the similar implementation of a star image, Obama presented himself as the man who would ultimately fulfil the promise of Kennedy's curtailed presidency, becoming the son to Kennedy's father. Of the persistent hope that someone would emerge to take up the reins left by Kennedy, Elizabeth Bird suggests, 'the notions of a dead mythic hero ... being alive and ready to return, or returning in the form of another person, are widespread heroic motifs' (quoted in Brigance, 2003). To paraphrase Obama's own campaign rhetoric, was he the one we had been waiting for?

During Obama's election campaign the mainstream press certainly seemed to hold this view. The British press in particular was universal in its adoration of Obama; *The Times* suggested that Obama generated an excitement not seen since Kennedy's candidacy in 1960. William Rees-Mogg (2008) argued that Obama's combination of personal magnetism and appeal to American idealism made him the natural successor to Kennedy. Even the Republicans were forced into acknowledging the similarities: Frank Luntz, a communications strategist who masterminded a string of victories for the Republican Party, noted of Obama's 2004 Democratic convention speech, 'I heard a future president [...] Here was the American dream embodied in a young man running for Senate, a new Jack or Bobby Kennedy' (quoted in Sherwell, 2007). Perhaps most significantly, however, were the comments made by close Kennedy aide Theodore Sorensen. Sorensen recognised in Obama the qualities that he valorized in Kennedy: his ability to inspire people and appeal to their emotions. Crucially, in relation to the politics of image, Sorensen argued that 'both Kennedy and Obama have fantastically winning smiles' and 'both are very relaxed in front of an audience and on

television' (quoted in Harnden 2007). This raises significant issues surrounding performance, and prompts comparison of documentary films of the two men on the campaign trail: Kennedy in Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960) and Obama in the 2009 HBO documentary *By the People: The Election of Barack Obama*, directed by Amy Rice and Alicia Sams.

An influential example of 'direct' cinema – a form of documentary which purported to be entirely objective – *Primary* follows Kennedy and fellow Democrat candidate Hubert Humphrey as they contest the Wisconsin primary election in ultimate pursuit of the Democratic nomination for president. As argued by Bruzzi (2006: 158), the film contains rather more 'emphasis on character and personality' than political issues, and it could be suggested that this results inevitably in a favouring of Kennedy over Humphrey. The cutting between the two campaigns cannot help but emphasize the presentational gulf between the two men. Kennedy is welcomed by adoring throngs, the camera almost crowd-surfing above him as though being propelled along by his charisma, dynamism and vigorous force. Girls hurtle down the road to greet him in a fashion that anticipates the adoration expressed towards later pop and rock bands like The Beatles. This impression of Kennedy's 'star' status is emphasised by his signing of autographs for swarms of fans, and his cool detachment when being prepared for a televized address. By marked contrast, Humphrey, en route to a campaign event, talks about the amount of nitrogen and fertilizer in the state's soil, before promptly falling asleep. While Humphrey is content to pander to the farming community, visibly boring his sparse crowd, Kennedy's rhetoric speaks to more profound concerns, namely America as a nation at a time of great instability and conflict. As suggested by Roper (2000: 62), Kennedy's oratory was designed to construct him as a hero, establishing him 'as a president at a time of

acute – almost apocalyptic – challenge'. In this regard, *Primary* presents Kennedy as a grander, more attractive, dynamic and compelling presence than Humphrey could ever hope to be, and the moving image makes the point very persuasively: Kennedy is a star.

Obama exudes a similar confidence in front of the camera. In Rice and Sams's documentary *By the People* we are given a unique insight into Obama's election campaign. The film makes a handful of careful allusions to Obama's relationship with the Kennedy legacy, with one volunteer asserting that he had not participated in an election campaign since Bobby Kennedy ran for president in 1968, simply because there had not been anyone exciting enough until now. Chief speechwriter Jon Favreau suggests that Kennedy provides a great deal of inspiration when composing speeches for Obama. This information is accompanied by a shot of the famous photograph by Jacques Lowe, entitled 'A Small Town in Oregon'.[iii] The photograph shows JFK and wife Jackie sitting in a quintessentially American diner, encompassing the iconography and style of both the man and the era. Kennedy's posture (hands clasped together, raised to his mouth) and dress (suit and tie) reinforce his image of elegance and pensiveness, while the diner setting evokes nostalgia for a simpler past. Interestingly, although Favreau suggests *Bobby* Kennedy has a closer relationship *rhetorically* to Obama, it is the *image* of JFK which lingers in view. As the camera remains transfixed upon the photograph, it reinforces the notion that it is Kennedy's image which remains the symbolic presidential ideal, further highlighting that it is this image to which Obama aspires. It also demonstrates that it is not the *real* Kennedy that is the driving force behind the allusion, but the *image* of him which is considered the symbolic presidential ideal.

This process of aligning Obama the candidate with the Kennedy image-ideal is reinforced in a more abstract way on the level of performance, where Obama talks to voters, to his campaign staff, and to the camera. His calm and collected waiting for the results of the 2006 mid-term elections which opens *By the People* calls to mind Kennedy's own placidity when waiting for the returns in *Primary* – smoking a cigar, reading the newspaper, using the telephone. Obama has his own idiosyncrasies, including the now iconic "fist bump", but the loose, observational visual style, and cool, easy manner in which Obama relates to the camera recalls the smooth allure of Kennedy. As suggested by Bruzzi (2006: 160), it was Kennedy's ability to look entirely unflustered in the presence of a camera which gave his performance power. Rice and Sams's footage of Obama denotes a similar quality, an aspect of stardom which John Ellis describes as an 'underperformance', that is, a naturalness in front of the camera whereby the actor (or politician in these cases) is 'not performing [...] so much as being' (1992: 99). Although Obama does address the camera directly in the opening sequence of *By the People*, saying how much pleasure he takes from elections in which he is not a candidate, for the majority of the time the camera might as well not be there.

The similarities of performance between Kennedy and Obama are rendered more tangible by Obama's appearance on a significant number of magazine covers prior to the 2008 election. In amongst Mailer's effusive praise of Kennedy was the suggestion that he was a Nietzschean *übermensch*, a 'superman' who could drive the nation with a new sense of purpose, placing it back on course after the drift and conformity of the Eisenhower years. In this regard, Obama's image in magazines not only recalls Kennedy's, but the *image construction* of Kennedy as superhero, drawing simultaneously from American politics and Hollywood film. Significantly, the cover

of *Rolling Stone*'s March 2008 edition clearly attempts to frame Obama as Superman - not only is Obama's body language reminiscent of the iconic pose of The Man of Steel preparing himself to take on the villain and rescue the damsel, but the nimbus-like glow which surrounds him renders visual his alleged messianic qualities [Figure 1].

[Figure 1]

What the adoption of this glow also recalls are the iconic photographs of Stanley Tretick, which deliberately placed a halo of light squarely on Kennedy's head as he spoke to an adoring crowd.[iv] The positioning of a halo on a president's head is not unusual; angelic or messianic iconography has been adopted to fit the purposes of virtually all presidents. However, *Rolling Stone*'s use of the headline 'A New Hope' reinforces the notion that Obama is somehow the fulfilment of a legacy handed down

to him by presidents past, and the glow which surrounds him and so obviously recalls Superman, might also be indicative of the desire to summon Kennedy. Indeed, 'A New Hope' further recalls Hollywood cinema, explicitly referencing the subtitle of George Lucas's *Star Wars: A New Hope* (1977). One cannot help then map that film's narrative of rebellious warriors fighting and taking down an Evil Empire onto Obama's and Kennedy's own positions as underdogs going into their respective election campaigns, and their attempts to position themselves as challengers to the *status quo*. I would suggest that the image of Obama on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, which channels simultaneously the heroic glamour of Hollywood cinema and the innocent belief in the image of the American president as triumphant superhero, corroborates Theodore Sorensen's observation that there is indeed 'a craving for superheroes and father figures as strong among many Americans as it is among the citizens of any monarchy' (quoted in Roper 2000: 2).

There are a variety of instances in which Obama has sought to construct himself as the inheritor of the Kennedy legacy, as well as a father in the Kennedy mould. Annie Leibovitz's photographs of Obama with his family may make *obvious* references to historical figures such as Abraham Lincoln and Muhammad Ali, but their overall impression, the texture, quality and, fundamentally, the *sentimentality* behind the photos elicit comparison with Kennedy. For example, the style and colour palette of Leibovitz's photographs – a nostalgic monochrome – which feature Barack and Michelle with their daughters Sasha and Malia[v], evoke Richard Avedon's famous images of Kennedy with his young children.[vi] As Hellmann has argued of Kennedy, there appears to be a doubling process occurring here: not only does the essence of the Leibovitz's monochrome images of the Obamas quite clearly evoke the spirit of Kennedy but, when one combines such images with the superlatives expressed

towards Obama as the inheritor of the Kennedy legacy, there appears to be a manifest desire to believe in the comparison. While Obama may look to the *political* ideals of Lincoln, Roosevelt and Martin Luther King, it is to the *image* ideals of Kennedy to which he turns in the presentation of himself, as it is these ideals which are of such continued significance to the cultural understanding of a vigorous, potent and successful American presidency.

Following Kennedy's death, his widow Jackie suggested that she would forever remember their time in the White House as 'Camelot.' The construction was indicative of how the New Frontiersmen viewed their mission: as a cultured and cosmopolitan elite, it was their task to turn the United States away from its provincial and agrarian past to prepare it for an imperial future. As Brown contends, 'Camelot suggested that the Kennedy presidency was a special time, exempt from the boredom and routine of "mere" politics, glittering with glamour, full of benevolence, and presided over by a handsome king with his beautiful queen.' However, the myth promised 'fantasy rather than fulfilment' (1988: 42-3). I would contend that it is the pursuit of this fantasy which has preoccupied the minds of later presidential candidates and their supporters. It is therefore telling that Obama's own publicity sought to recreate this myth when he took office in January 2009, with a series of photographs which were clearly intended to invoke Obama's position as the inheritor of Kennedy's legacy. These attempts to emphasize the continuities with the Kennedy era, as well as the potential for a new political dynasty constructed with the Camelot image in mind, were seized upon by the press. Both *The Times* and the BBC suggested that they showed Obama seeking to reconstruct the image of Kennedy's Camelot: a youthful president hard at work, with his young family always nearby (Reid 2009). Two images in particular most explicitly position Obama as the progeny

of Kennedy. A photograph that shows Obama searching underneath his desk when Kennedy's daughter, Caroline, comes to visit [Figure 2] demonstrates Obama's attempt to recreate the famous Tretick photograph of Kennedy's young son, John Jr., peering out from underneath the table as his father works.[vii]

[Figure 2]

This raises interesting notions in relation to Freud's conception of the ideal father: whereas *By the People* demonstrated Obama's admiration of Kennedy, and his valorization of Kennedy as the image-ideal, here Obama is more explicit in positioning himself within the Camelot legacy. Obama is literally looking to take the place of Kennedy's son, further indicating that, in terms of presidential antecedents, it is Kennedy who remains the image of the ideal father. Much as Kennedy had established his greatness through a carefully managed series of images, so here

Obama attempts to confirm his position within Kennedy's legacy via the same process.

The significance of the desk image is reinforced by another (one would think soon to be iconic) photograph of Obama gazing up at Aaron Shikler's posthumous portrait of Kennedy, which serves the official White House rendering of the assassinated president. [Figure 3].

[Figure 3]

There is little doubt that, as a keen student of history, Obama would have looked up at the portraits of *all* his predecessors at one point or another. However, as the credits sequence of Rob Reiner's Hollywood romantic comedy *The American President*

(1995) demonstrates, when presidents look to associate themselves with their predecessors, there are certain choices and critical elisions which have to be made to retain the impression of the image-ideal: Kennedy, the traditional presidential hero in Hollywood cinema, features prominently; Richard Nixon, conventionally conceived of as the villain of American presidential history, does not. Obama might have been photographed examining the portraits of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, even Ronald Reagan, but the image which was captured and publicized was him looking up at Kennedy, emphasizing that, in the collective consciousness, Kennedy remains the image-ideal of a president. Indeed, the photograph reminds one of an oft-quoted scene in *Nixon* (1995), Oliver Stone's biopic of the disgraced former president. Stumbling drunkenly around the White House in the final days of his presidency, Nixon looks up to this very portrait of Kennedy and says, rather forlornly:'When they [the people] look at you, they see what they want to be. When they look at me, they see what they are.' Stone is here acknowledging Nixon's frail humanity as the 'ego' to Kennedy's 'ego-ideal'; where Nixon is deficient and ordinary, Kennedy's image retains the illusion of perfection in the collective memory. I would argue that the photograph of Obama looking up at Kennedy's portrait, when taken in conjunction with the other texts and images which circulated around him prior to his election and soon after taking office, implies the opposite. Obama, unlike Nixon, will not remain inevitably in Kennedy's shadow, but may have the energy, charisma and dynamism to live up to Kennedy's promise; there is a clear sense that Obama could render the image-ideal a reality. Not only is there an intention to cultivate this impression by Obama's image-makers, but an overwhelming desire to believe in it as well. Moreover, there is a raw, incomplete quality to Shikler's Kennedy portrait which is absent in the crisp, comprehensive renderings of his fellow presidential counterparts. The impression of

Kennedy here is one of melancholy and quiet contemplation, with its distinctive, unfinished look mirroring Kennedy's incomplete presidency. The photograph constructs the impression that perhaps Obama's reverence for the past will allow him to follow in Kennedy's footsteps and *complete* the picture in a way that Kennedy himself was never given a chance to.

These two photographs, in which Obama explicitly places himself as the heir of Kennedy, brings us back to the idea established at the beginning of this essay. Perhaps an appropriate method for understanding the processes of image construction in the modern presidency might be to examine Freudian conceptions of the primal father, a figure whose faults are erased by his death, and whose idealized image those who come after look to emulate. In Freud's model, the ineffectual, hapless, 'real' father ceases to exist following his death, and is replaced by the romanticized version. This is certainly true of our continued reverence for Kennedy: we do not revere *him* as someone who once was a flesh-and-blood human being, but we valorize his image, what he represents, what the period of which he was a part has come to hold in our collective consciousness. As I outlined at the beginning, Kennedy has come to symbolize a period of hope, idealism, prosperity and, crucially, of stability. According to Bruzzi (2006: 157), Kennedy's death 'represents the moment at which the myth of national unity took hold rather than the moment at which it was destroyed.' It is this notion which renders any attempt to recreate or return to this idealized past something of an impossibility, simply because it never actually existed in the first place.

However, my analysis of the image relationships between Kennedy and Obama appears to suggest that reality is an irrelevance. Symbols, ideals, and images are the currency of cultural memory. This is how, despite the persistent undermining of his image, the revelations of his many extra-marital affairs, and the devious tactics

he adopted to win elections, the time over which Kennedy presided has never been allowed to appear as anything other than perfect. The continued adoration of Kennedy might be irrational, but the star remains undimmed: he remains the ego-ideal in our understanding of presidential images. I would argue that this mystique is kept intact by the continued return to Kennedy's image through documentaries like Drew's *Primary*, the adoption of his ethereal presence in Hollywood representations of the president such as Reiner's *The American President* and Aaron Sorkin's TV series *The West Wing* (1999-2006), and in the photographs of Richard Avedon and Stanley Tretick. In these texts, Kennedy can return to us as a kind of benign ghost whenever we choose to recall him. Idealized in life and in death, we return to Kennedy's image as a site of nostalgia, looking to it simultaneously for comfort and inspiration. For us, Kennedy never existed as a flesh-and-blood human being, only as an image. Even his gruesome death, which might have jolted us into acknowledging his frail humanity, was mediated through a camera's lens. It is also why every president who has followed him has had to deal with his legacy. It is unsurprising, therefore, that when Obama emerges, with so many semiotic similarities to Kennedy, the qualities of the earlier president are projected onto the younger man. Not only is this an attempt to return to an idealized past, but also to realize a future that was not allowed to happen, enabling Obama (the son) to fulfil the legacy of Kennedy (the father).

The importance of Kennedy's image, then, is not that it is accurate, that it corroborates an historical record, but that it allows us to dream; it seduces through its glamour and embodies the spirit of idealism upon which the United States was founded. Obama, or perhaps more accurately, Obama's image-makers, have cannily refashioned this image to infuse Obama's own message of hope and change with an historical antecedent. One is reminded of that famous line from John Ford's *The Man*

Who Shot Liberty Valance (1962), made the year before Kennedy died: 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.' What is perhaps most telling is that, as demonstrated by the adoration of Obama, our desire to believe in the Kennedy legend persists.

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[i] *Men's Vogue* (September/October 2006) cover – 'Barack Obama: The Path To Power', image available at [http://www.reobama.com/Magazine_MensVogue_June_08.jpg].
Men's Vogue (October 2008) cover – 'Barack's Thrill Ride: Stowing Away on Air Force One', image available at [http://mrsgrapevine.com/2008/09/barack-obama-covers-mens-vogue].

[ii] Image of a young Bill Clinton meeting President Kennedy at the White House in 1962 is available to view at [http://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/2717010/Archive-Photos].

[iii] Jacques Lowe's photograph 'A Small Town in Oregon' is available to view at [http://www.jacqueslowe.com/gallery.php?id=jfk&num=2].

[iv] Stanley Tretick's photograph of President Kennedy speaking to a crowd in Dallas, Texas while campaigning for the presidency in 1960 is available to view at [http://www.stanleytretick.com/10.jpg].

[v] Annie Leibovitz's photograph of the Obamas sitting on the lawn is available to view at [http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2009/10/barack-obama-annie-leibovitz].

[vi] Richard Avedon's photograph of President Kennedy with his young daughter Caroline available to view at [http://kennedys.tumblr.com/post/361608010].

[vii] Stanley Tretick's photograph of John Jr. playing underneath President Kennedy's Oval Office desk is available to view at [http://www.stanleytretick.com/44_op_471x600.jpg].