

Jackie (2016)

Stefanie Schäfer

dir. Pablo Larraín; prod. Darren Aronofsky, Juan de Dios Larraín, Mickey Liddell, Scott Franklin, Ari Handel; screenplay Noah Oppenheim; photography Stéphane Fontaine; music Mica Levi. 35mm, color, 96 mins. Fox Searchlight Pictures, distrib. Fox Searchlight Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox.

Pablo Larraín's *Jackie* is a historical biopic about first lady Jacqueline Kennedy. It covers the time after her husband's 1963 assassination and the making of the Kennedy myth as an embodiment of national mourning. *Jackie* represents Larraín's turn to U.S. national iconography and its global media impact in an oeuvre in which he has previously interrogated Chilean life, politics, and trauma, and more generally themes of motherhood, family, and celebrity, most recently in a biopic about Lady Di, *Spencer* (2021). Like Larraín's other films, *Jackie* problematizes the audience's investment in the central characters' feelings and gender role stereotypes (Wells). This is achieved with Stéphane Fontaine's cinematography of extreme closeups, which creates a proximity between viewer and protagonist on the big screen, reminiscent of the media scrutiny Jacqueline Kennedy was subjected to, the mystery surrounding the Kennedy assassination, and her transition from glamorous first lady to publicly grieving widow. In *Jackie* we see the protagonist looking back in a post-assassination interview through flashbacks to the Kennedy White House, the Dallas assassination, and the arduously orchestrated JFK state funeral. From Jackie's moments of trauma and excessive feeling to a final nostalgic ballroom reverie, the storyline portrays her struggle to create the Kennedy myth as montage. Hence, the film's narrative structure and aesthetics entangle three different constructions of »Jackie«: the public first lady persona, the politically active wife, and the legacy-building widow.

Jackie reiterates the historical events of 1963, when Jacqueline Kennedy launched the »American Camelot« myth in a *Life* interview, published on December 6, 1963, (White), where she linked her late husband's favorite Broadway musical, *Camelot*, to



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

his boyish penchant for heroism. Here Kennedy asserted her role as admiring wife and caring mother when she described her husband's heroic fantasy through the chorus line: »Don't let it be forgot that once there was a spot, for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot« (White). Kennedy thus latched onto the musical's staging of postwar U.S. imperialist fantasies (Finke and Shichtman) and the melodramatic love triangle between King Arthur, Queen Guinevere, and Launcelot (suggested in *Jackie* through Jackie's proximity with Bobby Kennedy). The Camelot myth offered a fantastic escape from the era's political struggles around civil rights, the Cold War, and the Vietnam War, and ushered in the era of the »Imperial Presidency« (Konstantinou 158). It cast the Kennedys as legendary, Arthurian royal couple in a Broadway-style origin narrative tethered to transatlantic kinship and Anglo-Saxon whiteness, complete with cheerful musical tunes and sentimental tensions.

Larraín's direction and Noah Oppenheim's screenplay assert the first lady's »underestimated power« (Dunak 305) and present Jackie as white sentimental heroine struggling to shape her husband's legacy while acting as focal point of national mourning. The interplay of Jackie's different personas is also emphasized in the film's *mise-en-scène* and soundscape. The interview situation, lit in cold natural light, contrasts with the stark colors of JFK's blood and brain tissue on Jackie's dress and face, the black-and-white restaging of original documentary footage, and the dazzling glow of her best White House memories. The score combines extradiegetic fragmented strings resounding in Jackie's mind with the full-blown title song of *Camelot*. It forms the soundtrack to her final night in the White House, when she drinks and plays dress-up, and moves through the bedrooms and down to the Oval Office, where she even climbs into the President's desk chair.

Through its playacting of the melodramatic mode, *Jackie* meditates on the relationship between politics and the arts. Kennedy coyly dodged this question in the 1961 CBS documentary *A Visit to the White House* (»that's so complicated«), but her husband was actively invested in charisma and »rule-by-celebrity« (Konstantinou 166). Larraín's biopic stages the everlasting search for the »real« Jackie amidst a palimpsest of celebrity images, replacing the meaning-making of historiography with emotionality as an »alternative language« (Pribram 237) wielded by Jackie the mythmaker herself. The cinematography's key motif, the extreme closeup, reappears in variations: when we see Jackie looking at herself in the mirror—watching herself as mannequin, her face layered with reflections of mourners through a limousine window—or when she seeks recognition in conversation with a priest. *Jackie* thus blurs the boundaries between media images, individual memories, and historiographies. In the finale, the inquiring public (symbolized by the journalist), the first lady widow, and the deceased President, all fuse in one ecstatic moment of public feeling: »Jack/ie« will dance on forever in the nation's memory of a Camelot past that never was.

Jackie shows U.S. politics as a melodramatic spectacle, directed by and starring Jacqueline Kennedy herself, to generate a maximum of media coverage. She uses the White House as stage and archive for the national drama of the short-lived Kennedy Presidency. In the CBS documentary, she emphasizes her role as homemaker-turned-curator in a historical building. For the JFK funeral, she researches the precedent of Abraham Lincoln's state funeral, decides to include an anachronistic, empty-saddle war horse, and orchestrates her family's exit from the White House through the front door. It is also Jackie who selects the Kennedy burial plot in Arlington National Cemetery,

thus creating a Kennedy monument among the nation's war heroes. The protagonist's behind-the-scenes memory work is complemented by her public first lady persona: In her televised appearances, she enacts the soft-spoken care work and affective labors expected from a first lady. Her performance creates the gendered and racialized »dignity discourse« as part of the controlling image of white womanhood that build the first lady »cult« (Eaton 2018, 2020; Handau and Simien).

With its blended media and short scenes of emotional excess, *Jackie* interrogates Jackie Kennedy's first lady afterlives. Released at the end of the Obama presidency, the film also pinpoints queries about the Obama years as a postracial »New Camelot,« spearheaded by Caroline Kennedy's 2008 endorsement of Obama as a »President like my father« (Kennedy). Michelle Obama's trailblazing first ladyship inspired comparisons with Kennedy (Schäfer), and the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act in the Obama White House built 1960s nostalgia at a time of racist police brutality and the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement. *Jackie* thus looks back at the making of Kennedy's first lady persona while also imagining the future of U.S. democratic cultures. By employing the melodramatic modalities of the big screen, Larraín's biopic negotiates the affective economies of celebrity politics and the political benefits of a global cinema of melodrama.

References

- Eaton, Oline. 2018. »The Past is Present: Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in American Chaos, Pre/Post 9/11.« *Celebrity Studies* 9 (3): 291-306.
- . 2020. »Onassis, Elders, Obama: Dignity, Arrogance and Anger in Discourses of Modern (White) American Femininity.« *Gender, Place & Culture* 27 (6): 788-808.
- Finke, Laurie B., and Robert Shichtman. 2009. »Remediating Arthur.« In *A Companion to Arthurian Literature*, edited by Helen Fulton, 481-95. Malden: Blackwell.
- Handau, Megan, and Evelyn M. Simien. 2019. »The Cult of First Ladyhood: Controlling Images of White Womanhood in the Role of the First Lady.« *Politics & Gender* 15 (3): 484-513.
- Kennedy, Caroline. 2008. »A President Like My Father.« *The New York Times*, January 27, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/01/27/opinion/27kennedy.html>.
- Konstantinou, Lee. 2015. »The Camelot Presidency: Kennedy and Post-war Style.« In *The Cambridge Companion to John F. Kennedy*, edited by Andrew Hoberek, 149-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pribram, E. Deidre. 2018. »Melodrama and the Aesthetics of Emotion.« In *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, 237-52. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Schäfer, Stefanie. 2015. »Phenomenal Woman: Michelle Obama's Embodied Rhetoric and the Cultural Work of Fashion Biographies.« *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 62 (3): 235-54.
- Wells, Robert. 2017. »Trauma, Male Fantasies, and Cultural Capital in the Films of Pablo Larraín.« *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 26 (4): 503-22.
- White, Theodore F. 1963. »For President Kennedy: An Epilogue.« *Life*, December 6, 1963. John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, Theodore H. White Personal Papers. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/asset-viewer/archives/THWPP/059/THWPP-059-009>.

