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Hollywood's White House, the American Presidency in Film and History, and: The West Wing, the American Presidency as Television Drama (review)

Ken Dvorak

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why and how certain films were censored or banned from distribution, the reviewer would have wished to have been able to read more about spectatorship, particularly the popular response to the political content of specific wartime films. Nevertheless, it cannot be overemphasized that High's *The Imperial Screen* is a paragon of current historical film scholarship.

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**Peter C. Rollins and  
John E. O'Connor, editors.**  
***Hollywood's White House,  
the American Presidency in  
Film and History.***

University Press Kentucky, 2003  
441 pages; \$32.00 hardcover

**Peter C. Rollins and  
John E. O'Connor, editors.**  
***The West Wing,  
the American Presidency  
as Television Drama.***

Syracuse University Press, 2003  
272 pages; \$45.00 hardcover;  
\$19.95 paperback

**Timely Works**

Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor's newest collaborative works are an excellent addition to film and television studies. In *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* and *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama* the editors have painstakingly assembled the work of scholars and journalists who examine Hollywood and television's portrayals of the American Presidency.

Over the years, the editors have worked on numerous projects including *Hollywood's*



*World War I: Motion Picture Images* (1999); *Hollywood's Indian: The Portrayal of the Native American in Film* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed, 2003) and the thirty-three-year-old journal *Film & History, An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film & Television Studies*. Rollins' interest in historical film analysis began with a presentation at the first Popular Culture Association meeting in 1971 analyzing the television series *Victory at Sea*. (Later published as chapter 5 of *Television Histories*, Eds. Peter C. Rollins and Gary Edgerton, 2001.) Within a year of the popular culture gathering, Rollins met John E. O'Connor, editor of the fledgling *Film & History* journal, forging a lifetime of collaboration and friendship. (See "About Us" on the journal's web site, [www.filmandhistory.org](http://www.filmandhistory.org)).

*Hollywood's White House*, declares the editors, "is dedicated to the American Presidents and the glorious office of the presidency." Their contributors begin by examining the film presidencies of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, "Rough Rider" Theodore Roosevelt, and Woodrow Wilson. Part two examines fictional presidential heroes, presidential imagery found in the films of Frank Capra, and Hollywood's creation of an "action" hero president in *Air Force One* (1997). Concluding chapters discuss presidential character, a "hot button" political issue emerging with Oliver Stone's film *Nixon* (1995), and reaching a crescendo during the presidency of Bill Clinton (1992-2000). More recently the issue of character consumes 24/7 cable news media outlets which daily dissect every action and word of George W. Bush. The supporting bibliographic essay written by Myron A. Levine examines the literature surrounding the changing functions of the presidency as the office has evolved over time. John Shelton Lawrence's "A Filmography for Images of American Presidents in Film" provides a comprehensive start for future studies of the presidency in media.

Many of the essays are compelling, especially Deborah Carmichael's "*Gabriel Over the White House* (1933): William Randolph Hearst's Fascist Solution for the Great Depression" and Loren P. Quiring's "A Man of His Word: Aaron Sorkin's American Presidents." Carmichael examines the dark themes generated by *Gabriel*...and how a mild-mannered, even-tempered president became "transformed after a car accident and subsequent coma" into a human dynamo of governmental (often unconstitutional) activism, vanquishing America's foreign enemies and restoring economic and social justice to a country ravaged by the Great Depression. In relation to more recent productions, Quiring describes the art of "passionate" presidential vocabulary used by writer Aaron Sorkin as a metaphor for presidential values/action. Quiring writes that Sorkin "wants a president who can embody the rational discourse governing our society, faithful not to the random seductions of image but to oaths that the Constitution represents." Sorkin's presidents, Andrew Shepherd (Michael Douglas, *The American President*) and



President Josiah “Jed” Bartlet (Martin Sheen, *The West Wing*) embody patriotic/messianic language becoming of virtuous leaders versus the shallowness of other presidential characters often seduced by political expediency and defended by spin experts working with smoke and mirrors.

This work is timely as America enters the presidential race of 2004 and begins to debate over presidential character; furthermore, the country may revisit disputes over a contested presidency. *Hollywood’s White House: the American Presidency in Film and History* is highly recommended as a guide for its insights into the dynamics of the most important office on the globe and how that symbol of power has been presented to popular audiences.

Not satisfied with one volume dealing with the presidency in film and history, the editors have provided a more narrowly focused companion work, *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*, dedicated exclusively to the award-winning television series created by Aaron Sorkin. Following the formula established in *Hollywood’s White House*, Rollins and O’Connor have assembled a cast of experts whose devotion to, and criticism of, *The West Wing* provide insights into television’s most popular weekly presidential drama.

*The West Wing* is not a glorification of the television series; instead the editors have skillfully chosen to examine the “politics of visual language.” They explain that Americans share a hope that our country will produce people willing to serve—often out of a spirit of noblesse oblige. The visual language used by Aaron Sorkin and the characters of *The West Wing* convey an “inspiration and hope while it entertains a loyal audience that desperately wants to believe in the nobility of the American dream.” Whether embedded in American cultural beliefs or displayed in visual language, the spirit of America found in *The West Wing* remains not a set of tired ideals but a vibrant drama of possibilities and service—offering hope for the nation’s future.

The book is divided into four parts. The first set of essays examines public and private issues including episodes detailing how the fifth estate can be manipulated; race and gender issues; myth and reality surrounding the behavior and impact of White House staffers; and separation of presidential and personal responsibilities in what Heather Heaton refers to as “the Kings, two bodies.” Succeeding essays discuss the language and dramatic structure of the series, including the wide-spread perception of *The West Wing* as morally driven and that it ignores the realities of internal politics which often includes backstabbing, and compromising accommodations. *The West Wing* concludes by offering journalistic views which assert that the television series is a metaphor for a mythical Clinton White House. *The West Wing* has been described as little more than “political pornography” aimed at liberals; on this latter point, correspondents Chris Lehmann and John Podhoretz are extremely emphatic.

*The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama* is a colorful book about a remarkable television series. As

a companion to *Hollywood’s White House*, it enhances the study of the American presidency while quietly illuminating a lifetime collaboration of two remarkable film/history scholars. The two books should be acquired by every public and university library for they will be of interest both to the expert and to the general reader.

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**David Ludvigsson.  
The Historian-Filmmaker’s  
Dilemma. Historical  
Documentaries in Sweden in  
the Era of Häger and Villius.**

**Uppsala University Press, 2003.  
411 p.**

**Swedish Insights on  
Historical Documentary**

The Swedish historian David Ludvigsson (Uppsala University) has recently published an impressive study on historical documentary under the title *The Historian-Filmmaker’s Dilemma. Historical Documentaries in Sweden in the Era of Häger and Villius*. The book does not try to be a complete account of Swedish audiovisual history but, rather, concentrates on two of its major figures after the 1960s. Olle Häger and Hans Villius both held a PhD in history when they were hired by the Swedish Broadcasting Company in 1967 to make historical documentaries for television. Häger and Villius formed a productive couple who, without doubt, would have been world famous if they had worked in an English-speaking country and emphasized more international themes. They collaborated thirty-five years and produced over two hundred programs together. Ludvigsson writes about “the era of Häger and Villius” and, indeed, the two historians really made an institution and represented history for decades. Hans Villius was the one who became known by the public. He appeared sometimes as an on-screen presenter but was more often recognized for his distinctive voice-over narration. His south-Swedish accent became the voice of history in Sweden.

David Ludvigsson’s study can be set into a larger context. During the past decades, there has been a vivid interest in what Germans have called *Geschichtskultur*, an interest in how history exists in the present day, how history is continuously produced