



Pere Antoni Pons

The everydayness of power

The West Wing

If the effect is the same as what happens with me, after seeing any average-quality chapter of *The West Wing* (1999-2006) the reader-spectator will think he or she is witnessing an incontrovertible landmark in the latest phase of audiovisual narrative. After viewing one of the more dazzling, memorable episodes, he or she will not hesitate to believe that this is to behold one of the major, most perfect intellectual and artistic events of the early twenty-first century, comparable – not only in creative virtuosity but also in meaning, magnitude and scope– with Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel, Shakespeare’s tragedies, Balzac’s *The Human Comedy*, or the complete recordings of Bob Dylan. Over the top? Even with more rotund words, it would be no exaggeration.

Nowadays, nobody can ignore the fact that a colossal explosion in quality has happened over the last decade in the universe of American TV series. The old idea according to which the hapless professionals —scriptwriters, actors and directors— the ones who lack the luck or talent to carve out a niche in Hollywood or to triumph in the world of cinema, have to work in television has now been so thoroughly debunked that it even seems to have been turned on its head. Thanks to titles like *The Sopranos*,

Lost, and *The Wire*, no one doubts any more that TV series can be as well filmed, as well written and as well acted as any masterpiece of the big screen. Or even more so. The “idiot box” is no longer that. If television used to be (with honourable exceptions) the synonym for facile, trite entertainment churned out in soulless, industrial quantities, it is now an inexhaustible quarry of what we might call author genius, which continues to satisfy viewers’ craving for entertainment while also feeding them Pantagruelian banquets of visual audacity, narrative imagination, moral complexity, emotional exaltation and dense intellectual substance. In this small-screen explosion of (monumental and genuine) talent *The West Wing* is, perhaps, the prime example.

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD... OF AARON SORKIN

It is evident that films and, still more, TV series are collective works: their final quality depends on the professional talents and skills of a very populous team of skilled workers. Nonetheless, all heroic artistic achievements, including the most multitudinous, have their hero, and that of *The West Wing* is called Aaron Sorkin (1961). Sorkin, a New York Jew, of turbulent, voluble and excitable personality, according to people who have dealt with him, is not only the person who had the original idea but who also wrote almost all the chapters —quite a feat— of the first four seasons, after which he left the project for reasons that are still obscure: some point to irreconcilable differences with the producers, others to his wanting to take some time off after four years of frenetic slog, years that were blotched, moreover, with an outlandish detention at Los Angeles airport for drug possession (marihuana, magic mushrooms and cocaine, quite a cocktail). Paradoxically (or not), Sorkin began his career as a playwright. His first success was a work titled *A Few Good Men*, which he himself adapted for the big screen in a version directed by Rob Reiner and starring Tom Cruise and Jack Nicholson. The twofold success of the play and the film led, a few years later, to Sorkin’s writing another screenplay for Reiner, *The American President* (1995), about the political-sentimental trials and tribulations of a widower-president (Michael Douglas) who falls in love with an environmental lobbyist (Annette Bening). The first version of the story ran to almost three hundred pages, almost twice the length of any usual plot, which meant that a good part of the material couldn’t be used in the end. This discarded work was precisely what Sorkin took up again in 1999, at the request of a producer, to put together the pilot project of *The West Wing*.

A NOBLE (OR IDEALISED) VISION OF POLITICS

The portrayals of the world of politics constructed over time in literature and films have tended, in general, to probe and accentuate the darkest aspects of the innermost workings of power: corruption, conspiracy, moral degeneracy, spiritual frazzle, populism, incendiary demagoguery, barefaced Machiavellianism, self-seeking, manipulative megalomania, the despotic nature of rulers, the uncouth pushiness of men and women who would do anything to suck at the pap of power or merely to get a walk-on part, the perversity of ideologies that have lost their soul out of obtuseness or blind ambition... The portrait of power offered by *The West Wing*, in contrast, boldly breaks with this hypocritical, pessimistic brew and, furthermore, reveals an unwavering zeal to highlight

a more luminous, noble, and exemplary face of political management in the people who, motivated more than anything else by a desire to be of public service, are engaged in it.

The gallery of main characters (who, naturally, underwent modifications over the 155 chapters of the series) is what establishes from the outset the lofty moral and cultural conception of politics that the series conveys. To begin with, the president, Josiah Bartlet (Martin Sheen), former Democratic

governor of New Hampshire and direct descendent of one of the founding fathers, is of an intellectual brilliance that is only comparable with his honour and decency. A Nobel laureate in Economics, of encyclopaedic culture and scintillating sense of humour, Bartlet embodies all the virtues that any great political leader should have: the resolute conviction of the idealist who believes in the

possibility of (and need for) progress, the ethical mettle of the humanist who bases his behaviour on an open and positively evangelical sense of religion, the cunning and perspicacity of the leader forged in a thousand battles, the transcendent consciousness of the statesman who knows that his reckoning with History will come some day, the sentimental permeability of someone who has been forced not to forget that being president means serving the freedom, happiness and well-being of the citizens, the porosity or gymnast's agility of the man who flees sectarianism and prefers to work together with a dissenting but solvent, qualified and generous adversary than with a doltish, ill-intentioned, doctrinaire... or servile fellow party member.

The archetypically larger-than-life personality of President Bartlet is the focal point of the series, the axis around which all the other characters move: the Chief of Staff, Director of Communications, Press Secretary, the speech writers, the military top brass, the legal and political advisers, the Vice-President, the First Lady, and so on. In any case, such a wide-ranging television series would not be humanly bearable or even possible in narrative terms if it were based on the grandeur of only one character. Hence, the supporting characters do no injustice to the president's virtuosity or to his highly-honed perceptiveness. All the men and women who make up his team of co-workers are as upright, brilliant and idealist as he is. They have all gone into politics altruistically and out of conviction, they are all willing to work single-mindedly for the common good and to make the country more just, more powerful and more prosperous, they have all taken on the commitment of having to do things as best they can and know how (and even more than that) and, finally, all of them have sacrificed professional careers in the private sector that would be bringing in much higher salaries than what they earn working in the White House.

Represented in President Bartlet's team are not only the different sensibilities of the Democratic Party (ranging from those of more liberal ideology and stance, through to the moderate members, or those with a much more deal-making sense of reality), but also the different identities —religious, ethnic or racial and

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geographical— of US society. There are Catholics, Jews and Protestants, Blacks, Whites and, to a lesser extent, Spanish-Americans and Asians. Again, some are from the West Coast, some from the East Coast and others from heartland America.

The team members, well aware of their enormous worth, sure of themselves and at times a touch arrogant, always oscillating between sarcasm and tenderness, are united by an indestructible alliance, by a camaraderie not exempt from tugs-of-war and conflict, yet also honest and always indomitably loyal. Together they form —to use Shakespeare’s words— “We few, we happy few, we band of brothers”. The most outstanding characters in the group of co-workers are Leo McGarry (Jon Spencer), an old lion of politics who knows all the hidden snags of the upper echelons of power, Chief of Staff and the

President’s closest friend; C. J. Cregg (Allison Janney), the tormented, elegant and ingenious Press Secretary who, in the closing seasons, replaces McGarry as Bartlet’s main adviser; Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), candid, good-hearted and seductive and one of the people in charge of writing the presidential speeches; Abigail Bartlet (Stockard Channing), the spiky, temperamental First Lady...

Especially remarkable, to my mind, is

the duo consisting of the two Jewish staffers, Joshua Lyman (Bradley Whitford), Deputy Chief of Staff, and Toby Ziegler (Richard Schiff), Communications Director. Together they represent the two faces —opposing, yet of shared ideological characterology— of Jewish-American identity. Both are awesomely intelligent, and both have a firm, almost intransigent relationship with their own principles, but the former is histrionic, mocking, wild and hyperactive so that he resembles a sophisticated bastard child of Philip Roth’s Portnoy, while the latter is reflective and withdrawn, of tortuous lucidity, rabbinic gravity and lugubrious mordacity and, depending on the person he is up against, lethal. Since the series covers the two legislatures of the Bartlet Administration, the contenders in the presidential succession race are much more in the limelight in the last two seasons. On the one hand, is a young Democratic Hispanic congressman, Matt Santos by name (Jimmy Smits), whose career and ideas present more than one parallel (serendipity?) with Barack Obama’s and, on the other, is the veteran, tremendously cunning Republican senator, Arnold Vinick (Alan Alda). Significantly, despite all their clashing ideological differences and their raw confrontations, both aspirants are able to refrain from undercutting the high standards set by the president —the man— they hope to replace.

Whatever the case, for all this idealised portrayal of the inner workings of the politics and management of power (some have said that the Bartlet Administration is an ennobled version of Clinton’s, which is to say with more intellectual substance, more ideological courage and without the sex scandals and media intrigues that rocked its last stages), *The West Wing* is always realistic, convincing and true-ringing, never giving the impression that this is some implausible fairytale or pure (very well disguised)

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propaganda to nudge citizens-spectators towards recovering their trust in the goodness and well-meaning purpose of the powers-that-be. The numerous virtues and evident good intentions of the main players does not mean that, like everyone else in the real world, they don't sometimes make mistakes, indulge in self-deception, suffer, feel vulnerable or tormented by inner gnawings when things get too much for them, or because of a sense of failure or frustration.

Again, all of them come with the baggage of their own personal traumas, some biographical or intimate millstone that weighs them down, some weakness against which

they have to struggle: the president is afflicted with multiple sclerosis but did not make it public in the campaign; McGarry is a rehabilitated alcoholic and drug addict; C. J. Cregg's father has Alzheimer's and she feels she is neglecting him because her job is so demanding; Lyman feels guilty over the accidental death of his sister when they were children; Ziegler is divorced from a woman he still loves... This is, doubtless,

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one of the most masterly triumphs of Sorkin's plot: the ability to construct ethically irreproachable, intellectually superior, yet extremely human characters that inspire tenderness, who may be extraordinary but are not perfect. Rather, they have accepted their own imperfections and valiantly persevere in trying to correct them.

Similarly, the series is not about drawing attention to the chiaroscuro of nobility, or the turbulence in which one is inevitably trapped when one is among the group of leaders of the world's most powerful country. The world of politics is very tough, at times cruel and ferocious and almost always contaminating. Furthermore, if one has a lot of responsibility and must make speedy decisions in which the future of one's country and the present of one's own prestige are at stake, it is necessary to mark out priorities, sometimes brutally, and to act expeditiously and consistently. Hence, circumstances sometimes oblige one to do things one does not want to do: renunciations, betrayals, concessions, lying, and making sacrifices, et cetera. In brief, despite its devotion to the exemplariness, the most worthy, educational and beneficial aspects of power, *The West Wing* doesn't stint on any of its more lamentable, obscure features. The series also shows how the behind-the-scenes spaces where the best and brightest circulate also have their murky corners, and that they, too, are tumultuous. And, naturally, there are also the imponderables of the human condition—secrets, pain and sordidness—which have been swept under the rug of good faith.

THE EVERYDAYNESS OF POWER: ONE COMES TO WORK HERE!

If somebody had prophesised only twenty or fifteen years ago that a TV series basically concerned with the ideological dilemmas and the action-packed professional ups-and-downs of a US president and his team would become a fabulous commercial success (with audiences exceeding twenty-five million viewers and a plethora of Emmy

Awards, the TV Oscar), he or she would probably been written off as mad or as having no sense of reality. Nonetheless, this is precisely what has happened with *The West Wing*.

Unlike so many other TV series relating the adventures and misadventures of the members of a particular in-group (doctors, journalists, lawyers or police) in which the stars are tirelessly working at their personal relationships —to paraphrase E. M. Forster writing ironically about the main characters of his novels— *The West Wing* is a painstaking portrait of the day-to-day and especially the working life of the president and the trusted men and women of his inner circle. The daily frenzy of managing the highest realms of world political power is the raw material —storylines, plots, themes of dialogue...— the very stuff of the series. This is management, let us be clear about it, in the most palpable and everyday sense that anyone could possibly imagine. Like what really happens in the non-fictional White House, the stars of the series spend almost every minute of each episode obsessed by the job: holding meetings, reading or commenting on reports, doing the electoral sums, running surveys on voters' intentions, preparing dossiers on all sorts of matters, designing new positions, pushing for laws, calming down international conflicts (or becoming embroiled in them), talking about the problems that are continually arising out of whatever eventuality, declaration or incident, squabbling or negotiating with adversaries in their own party or in the opposition, tongue-lashing or being tongue-lashed, and trying to reach agreement with members of Congress, of the Senate or the different pressure groups always hovering around the president. If one goes to the White House to work, one sees in *The West Wing* how one works there.

In one chapter from the first season, President Bartlet, recovering from flu, is watching a TV series and in a tone somewhere between dumbfounded and scathing, he asks if these characters have no professional responsibilities to meet, since they are always caught up in some or other kind of amorous or sentimental affair. At first glance, it might look like a simple amusing scene. In reality it is a whole declaration of principles, a commitment to what we might call an adult form of art and entertainment. The leading lights of *The West Wing* not only spend almost the whole time at work but the issues that exclusively affect their private lives are only occasionally raised and, when they are, significantly tend to be resolved in swift, delicate ellipses. Hence, there are quite a lot of dialogues in which, after some character has

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been telling another about some eminently personal matter, the latter comes back saying that this isn't remotely interesting, or that all this talk is a waste of precious time. Totally absorbed by duty, the main characters sacrifice their holidays because they prefer to finish off some job that's pending. In one of the very first episodes, the Chief of Staff tries to make his wife understand that, in the next few years, his most important task is not going to be his marriage (but his wife doesn't accept or understand this and divorces him). Sorkin's thesis or creative point of departure could not, therefore, be more emphatic or clear. Occupying the Oval Office, working side-by-side with the leader of the free

world, requires total, single-minded devotion (so, please, no hassles from brats and work-shy or childish adults). As the president himself proclaims at the end of his campaign speeches, “This is a time for American heroes and we reach for the stars!”.

A MASTERPIECE OF AUDIOVISUAL NARRATIVE

Someone might think that this penchant for showing what is basically the professional facet of the main characters must inevitably result in a dense, complicated TV series apt for only the most unhinged fanatics of politics. Nothing is further from the truth. Without ever diluting the substance of the themes dealt with, and without ever lowering the adult, hard-working tone, Sorkin —along with the troupe of screenplay writers working with him or succeeding him— has managed to offer an extremely dense, but also intense and gripping show in each episode. Pure entertainment.

This is so for three reasons. First, since the doggedness with which all the characters throw themselves into their work is motivated not by some kind of machine-like or bureaucratic momentum, but by a vitalistic, temperament-based sense of duty (they risk their necks in everything they do), the series conveys a permanent sensation of authenticity and adventure on a daily basis, in which the influx of national or planetary messes, the palace plots and professional passions set the limits of a microcosm that is a metaphor for the world and coexisting within it, hypersensitive or magnified, are all the feelings, emotions, thoughts, conflicts and forces that shape our existence.

All the characters throw themselves into their work motivated by a vitalistic sense of duty

Second, the arguments are conceived from a place that is beyond genre, which is to say, in every chapter one sees elements of the intimate, personal drama, of the political thriller, of screwball comedy, of the documentary of manners and mores, of the heroic epic and even sublime poetry. Furthermore, the dialogues —and this is unquestionably the

Sorkin trademark— are dazzling, of an almost unbelievable agility and limpidity, especially if one bears in mind the complexity of the ideas being presented, the constant flow of literary, philosophical or biblical quotes the characters come out with, the swiftness with which the most tense or dramatic scenes follow upon lighter, more humorous ones, or vice-versa. Another of the indisputable virtues of Sorkin’s style is his ability to mix, without any forced artifice, the moments in which it appears that nothing is happening (except for the small details of life) and sudden twists in the plot or the most unexpected *coup de théâtre*: an attack, a kidnapping, controversy and staggering resignations...

Third and finally, as happens with all artistic masterpieces in which form and content fit so well together that they end up being inextricable, thus jointly reinforcing a single sense, the style in which *The West Wing* is filmed —the camera always in motion with sequence shots or uninterrupted travelling shots that can last several minutes— marries perfectly with the atmosphere of high-pressure duty or the unstoppable frenzy of the

world being portrayed. The decision to film many of the scenes barring static situations, with characters simultaneously walking and talking in the corridors of the White House offices with the camera always at their heels, was taken on the first day of shooting by Thomas Schlamme, one of the

series' producers, who was also one of the people who directed most episodes. If he had not opted for this kind of filming, there would have been a lag between the images seen by the viewer and the gritty nerve of the storylines and stunning energy of the dialogues. As it is, the viewer cannot help getting embroiled and being dragged into the whirlwind of politics at the top. Which is, of course, the whirlwind of life as well.

It is evident that this start of the twenty-first century —and who would have said it?— is the time of television heroes. It is also evident that *The West Wing* reached for the stars and won them

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