

Watching Politics

The Representation of Politics in Primetime Television Drama

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Abstract

What can fictional television drama tell us about politics? Are political events foremost related to the personal crises and victories of the on-screen characters, or can the events reveal some insights about the decision-making process itself? Much of the writing on popular culture sees the representation of politics in film and television as predominately concerned with how political aspects are played out on an individual level. Yet the critical interest in the successful television series *The West Wing* praises how the series gives insights into a wide range of political issues, and its depiction of the daily work of the presidential staff. The present article discusses ways of representing (fictional) political events and political issues in serialized television drama, as found in *The West Wing*, *At the King's Table* and *The Crown Princess*.

Keywords: television drama, serial narrative, popular culture, representing politics, plot and format

Introduction

As is well known, watching drama – whether on TV, in the cinema or on stage – usually involves recognizing the events as they are played out and making some kind of judgment (aesthetically, morally, or otherwise) of the action the characters engage in. As Aristotle observed: Drama is about people performing actions. Actions put the interests and commitments of people into perspective, thus forming the basis for conflicts and choices decisive to the next course of action. This basic principle of drama was formulated in *The Poetics*, where Aristotle also made several observations about the guiding compository principles of a successful drama.

Today, Aristotle's principles are particularly notable in mainstream cinema as well as in popular television drama, where the predominant narrative technique requires action and character as main entry points for the viewers' understanding and experience of the story. As for the aims of the plot, the conflicts evolving, the inter-relation of characters and their place in the story, this emphasis on events and characters favors easily accessible narratives. Accordingly, due to these narrative forms, viewers will find it easy to become engaged in the on-screen events that develop.

However, this emphasis on plot and character means that stories are anchored in personal rather than communal experiences. It is indeed a comparative advantage of television drama as a narrative form that the story will find a place for a whole ensemble

of more or less equally important characters. Yet the tendency to focus on plot and character implies a privatization of experiences and a resulting emphasis on the emotional aspects of conflict. Popular culture, specifically in the shape of mainstream cinema and television drama, is often criticized for not being capable of describing complex processes, structural mechanisms and the operative functions of institutions.

In a now canonized article on melodrama, Thomas Elsaesser notes that "the persistence of melodrama might indicate the ways which popular culture has not only taken note of social crises and the fact that the losers are not always those who deserve it most, but has also resolutely refused to understand social change in other than private contexts and emotional terms."¹ Brian Neve, in an evaluation of a large number of films about the U.S. presidency, echoes Elsaesser in his conclusive statement, arguing that "neither film nor other forms of popular culture seem to have the power to provide effective models of political participation or action."² In Neve's view, films from earlier periods were more frequently aimed at setting a political agenda. In the 1990s, however, Neve notes an increasing degree of disbelief in the political system as such. The critical approaches to popular culture evoked in the above by Elsaesser and Neve, suggest a continuation of the elitist cultural understanding represented by the Frankfurter school, whose approach underlies the still dominant view that popular cultural expressions are generally unfit as vehicles for social analysis.

Melodrama is, no doubt, the dominating mode of popular television shows. In effect, the narrative structures of mainstream film are the *modus operandi* of television series as well, if for no other reason because they are seen as normative. For any drama aimed at a larger audience, the communication of plot and emotion is fundamental. This begs the question, in light of the quotes by Elsaesser and Neve above: Would any conflict portrayed in the traditional drama format inevitably focus on the fate of individuals, or is it possible to place individual experiences within a larger structural frame and still maintain the need for narrative progression and closeness to personal conflict inherent in the traditional drama?

The present article will discuss the representation of political relations and political issues in popular television drama.³ The main question is not whether popular television drama can depict true-to-life political events (although that is an issue as well, albeit of lesser concern), but rather whether the dramatic focus relates to the political sphere or to the private sphere. As noted, popular drama subscribes to a narrative form in which the action informs how we perceive the characters, rather than knowledge about a community or an institution. Communities and institutions can serve as a background to the action or represent limitations to what can be done, but their integral dynamics and working logics are seldom scrutinized. However, this last assertion seems to miss some of the narrative possibilities upon which popular drama in its serialized form can draw. Using extensive courses of events and wide casts of characters, the television drama is well suited, often more so than the feature film, to enhanced plots and in-depth portrayals of relations and backgrounds.

Yet it is still expected of a television drama that it fulfill the popular demand for plot enhancement and for vitality in conflicts. This implies several dilemmas in the presentation of political action in a dramatic context. The nature of politics involves numerous formal procedures, lengthy documents, long meetings, complex discussion, drawn-out bureaucratic processes and undefined deadlines, whereas a television drama demands a clearly defined course of events, strong individuals, clear-cut conflicts and progressive suspense.

As indicated above, it is indeed questionable whether the dramatic format is really a suitable framework for depicting political action. Is it really possible to credibly present political processes and issues in a television series without compromising the need for action and plot in a drama? This is the dilemma discussed in the following analysis of three serial television dramas centered on the world of politics; *Ved kongens bord* ([*At the King's Table*] screened on the Norwegian state channel NRK, 2005), *Kronprinsessan* ([*The Crown Princess*] screened on the Swedish state channel SVT, 2006) and the first two seasons of *The West Wing* (screened on the US network channel NBC, 1999-2006).

These three series illuminate a number of issues relating to the representation of politics in a dramatic format. First, they focus on two entirely different political environments, i.e. Scandinavian parliaments and government and the Administration of the U.S. President. Second, the presentation of the mechanisms of politics differs widely between the Scandinavian series and *The West Wing*. Third, the formats of the three series provide different frameworks for their respective plots. Yet there are many similarities, too, most strikingly in that the lion's share of the action takes place in the corridors and offices housing the strategic political operations. While advisers and bureaucratic staff play key roles, a bare minimum of the events relate to the elected chambers (Stortinget in Norway, Riksdagen in Sweden, the Senate in the U.S.) or the population. Accordingly, a major topic in this discussion will be whether these dramas seek to reflect real-life politics and political institutions or whether scandal, emotional conflict and dramatic events tend to dominate their plots.

Politics in the Shape of Drama

Totaling at 155 episodes and screened on the network channel NBC, *The West Wing* featured a rich ensemble cast throughout its seven seasons. Executive producer Aaron Sorkin wrote most of the episodes of the first four seasons. It is relatively well known that Aaron Sorkin, together with producers John Wells and Thomas Schlamme, originally planned for the President to appear in *The West Wing* only occasionally. Sorkin's primary focus was on White House staff. But he changed his mind eventually. The President was going to be at the heart of events after all and star in every episode. However, this change of direction did not affect Sorkin's original idea. Apart from the president himself, *The West Wing* features at least five central staff members at the core of events, a large number of individuals representing different roles at the White House and members of the President's family.

Several characters bear a striking resemblance to persons who in real life made a mark as White House aides in the Clinton Administration, some of whom later became notable political commentators (George Stephanopoulos, Dee Dee Meyers, Paul Begala). Sorkin himself rejects the Clinton association as purely coincidental.⁴ Less coincidental, no doubt, is the frequent use of consultants with ample real-life White House experience, such as Dee Dee Meyers (Clinton's Press Secretary), Patrick Caddell (who arranged polls for Jimmy Carter) and a number of other Washington insiders (Democrats and Republicans). Also, Sorkin communicated regularly with members of staff to find new ideas for his plots and for feedback on his scripts. Meyers and Caddell, both listed as project consultants throughout the first season, even helped write some of the episodes. For the second season, Sorkin also employed Marlin Fitzwater, a former adviser to Ronald Reagan.

The two Scandinavian series share a number of characteristics and have very similar basic ideas as their starting point. Though the influence of *The West Wing* is noticeable, these series are distinctly different. A mini-series spanning six episodes, *Ved kongens bord* centers on Health Minister Tove Steen, with events stretching over approximately one year. *Kronprinsessan* spans four episodes and places Environment Minister Charlotte Ekblad at the core of events. Both series focus on a relatively young woman with a family who unexpectedly is offered a seat in the Norwegian and Swedish governments, respectively.

Ved kongens bord was screened on NRK in the spring of 2005. It was co-written by the experienced director and screenwriter Leidulv Risan and journalist Nina Sandås, with Åse Vikene as dramatic adviser. Roy Jacobsen, well-known author and supporter of the Labor Party, was script consultant together with author Arne Berggren. Reflecting an idea strongly promoted by NRK, their point of departure was to create a Norwegian variety of *The West Wing*. As noted above about the American series, the Norwegians too made use of heavy political experience, most notably by employing as project consultant the previous State Secretary to the Prime Minister, Jonas Gahr Støre (the current Minister of Foreign Affairs).

The creators of this series wished to present a broad picture of political processes and to stimulate public political discussion. In fact, it was a written ambition to "present a truthful depiction of contemporary politics in Norway."⁵ Director Leidulv Risan also expressed a hope that he could contribute to building up increased respect in the public for the choices forced upon politicians by the dilemmas facing them every day in their work.⁶ This view, too, aligns well with the ideals formulated by the creators of *The West Wing*. Yet *Ved kongens bord* also follows another major trend in serialized television, namely celebrating the heroes of everyday life. This was hardly new to NRK Drama. Previous NRK productions attempting this – with various levels of success – include *Brigaden* [The Fire Brigade] 2002) and *Skolen* [The School] 2004). In American television this trend is clearly noticeable in series such as *The Third Watch* (NBC, 1999-2005) and *E.R.* (NBC, 1994-). *Ved kongens bord*, as well as *Skolen*, could also be seen as an attempt at reaffirming NRK's long-standing tradition for popular education, due to its commitments as a public broadcasting channel. In serialized drama, these educational ideals had been virtually absent since *Offshore* (1996), a long-running series aimed at describing Norway's watershed transformation into an oil economy.

Kronprinsessan, a Swedish-Danish co-production, was screened on SVT in the winter of 2006. The director, Kathrine Windfeld, is Danish, and the screenwriters, Sara Heldt and Pia Gradvall, Swedish. Produced by Anna Croneman and based on a novel by Danish author Hanne-Vibeke Holst, *Kronprinsessan* had an all-female team heading the production. Apparently, one of the reasons that the series became a Swedish production was that the story was considered too close to Danish political reality. Hanne-Vibeke Holst is a former journalist whose substantial authorship conveys a clearly feminist profile. The follow-up to *Kronprinsessan* (2002), *Kongemordet* [The King's Murder] 2005), deals largely with the same political circles and according to recent plans, this work, too, is to be filmed as a Swedish TV series directed by Kathrine Windfeld.

***The West Wing* – Making Meaning by Means of Melodrama**

There is little doubt that *The West Wing* helped re-shape American television viewers' perceptions about politics. During the 2000 election campaign, you could see "Bartlet for President" stickers on cars. One poll actually asked respondents how they would

have voted had Bartlet run for president. It is tempting, perhaps, to attribute such phenomena to mere nonsense or to lacking competence in distinguishing reality from fiction. However, many Americans may sense that the real presidents and White House staff do not possess the kind of respect for their office and commitment to ideals expressed by President Bartlet and his staff in the fictional *West Wing*. President Bartlet, by the way, has frequently been described as a Clinton without vices. One common criticism, unsurprisingly, has been that the series is too much of a wishful Democrat dream, and inevitably some prefer to call it "The Left Wing."

In the first season of *The West Wing*, there is a great deal of emphasis on the President's outsider background. Bartlet, a winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, is a true intellectual who makes frequent references to Roman history in his discussions with military leaders, lectures his staff in Latin phrases and has a firm grip on the text of the Bible. The President is portrayed as a Washington outsider, in the sense that Washington is often seen as dominated by professional politicians out of touch with the public. The President's staff comes forward as forming a harmonious, almost idyllic, work environment.⁷ They are depicted as hard-working, dedicated people who, in combination with the immense human and intellectual capacity of the president, aim to restore public confidence in Washington by demonstrating how politics can be consistently idealistic, yet also pragmatic.⁸

The West Wing is a hybrid form of the episodic structure of the series format and the continuous dramatic involvement of the serial format. In a series there is a beginning and end to a main course of events in every episode; in a serial events continue to develop from episode to episode. Basically, *The West Wing* follows the pattern of the series – a majority of the political issues are solved in every episode, but some issues may resurface later. At the same time, a number of parallel events relating to the individual regular characters continue to develop throughout the season. The hybrid format is even more distinct in the second season, which begins with a double episode about an attempted assassination, and the last four episodes deal with how the staff members relate to the news that the President has MS.

All in all, the series presents a wide range of issues to be handled by the White House. Each episode features at least one main event, and two or three additional events that may or may not be connected with the main event. In most cases at least one event is unrelated. There are also several story lines that deal primarily with the private life of a staff member, but that might also have political implications. An example would be Sam's acquaintance with a call girl or Leo's history of alcohol and drug abuse, which are subsequently exploited by political opponents as weak points of the Administration.

The continuous personal stories relating to most of the staff members add depth and development to the characters; Sam's vainglorious showing off of his brilliance, C.J.'s frequent flirts with the journalist Danny Concannon, President Bartlet's worsened health condition and its effects on his wife. These stories force us to perceive the characters not as mere figures, but as persons with real qualities and histories. This is also why it becomes so important to us, the viewers, that the characters succeed in their political processes – this is not about the issues as such, but about our sympathy for the position of the character dealing with them.

The political issues in an episode are somehow nearly always connected with a personal relationship. A point in case is "Six Meetings Before Lunch" (season 1, episode 18), where Mallory, a teacher, cancels her date with Sam because he wrote a memo containing criticism of the public school system. In the following discussion about school politics,

the big question building up is whether Sam will manage to argue his case well enough to get a new date with Mallory or if he will have to change his opinions to win her over. Following events reveal that Sam had been instructed to write a memo reflecting the views of the opposition, but refrained from telling Mallory in order to let her have the pleasure of arguing her own views, even if that implied putting the proposed date at risk. The complexity of it all lends political *and* dramatic potency to the scenes involving Sam and Mallory, while viewers are rewarded with a happy romance after all.

The most profound inter-relations between personal relations and political conflict, however, involve the President himself. In "Take This Sabbath Day" (1.14), the President has 48 hours to pardon a prisoner on death row. Sam and Toby are devoting their time to the cause of the convicted prisoner. President Bartlet is opposed to capital punishment, but unsure whether the right thing to do is to follow his own conviction rather than acting in line with public opinion. The president appears increasingly paralyzed by indecision as the deadline approaches. At last, he decides to call his childhood priest to the White House. The final scene sees the president kneeling before his priest in The Oval Room to ask forgiveness as time runs out for reprieve.

The tableau-like scene at the end, with the kneeling, bowing President, contrasts sharply with many other episode endings. Quite frequently at the end of an episode, central staff members are seen gathered in some sort of formation. In "In Excelsis Deo" (1.10), they are seen finding their place in a row, one by one, while watching joyously a child choir singing a Christmas psalm. This scene is crosscut with a volley of shots from the military funeral of a homeless veteran. In "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet" (1.19), Leo, the chief of staff, has called the troops to his office for a pep talk. Josh, C.J., Sam and Toby form a semi-circle as they take turns repeating the oath they made upon entering their White House posts: "I serve at the pleasure of the president." "Mandatory Minimums" (1.20) sees the staff one by one visiting the presidential bedroom, where Bartlet has withdrawn to nurse his flu, in order to seek his advice and support.

These tableau-like endings belong to a long-standing melodramatic tradition, but serve a number of functions in *The West Wing*. They demonstrate the joint strength of the main characters, whose trials and tribulations help build a mutually reinforcing community. At the same time, the president, whose support and belief in their shared efforts is indispensable, becomes a father figure to his staff, thus reflecting the national position of the White House office as a place for leadership and security.⁹

Melodramatic narrative structures are applied not only occasionally; they are dominant throughout the series. According to some writers, *The West Wing* fits neatly in the traditional romantic mythical structure, as defined by Northrop Frye and later applied by Hayden White and others.¹⁰ *The West Wing* narratives subject the president and his staff to numerous and difficult trials, which only helps to reaffirm, however, the image of the United States as a military and moral superpower led by a fundamentally patriarchal office.

Information and Dilemmas

The events in *The West Wing* are purely fictional. The show seemed to mirror current real political issues in several of the episodes, and in many cases the show became a point of reference for political commentators and other insiders.¹¹ Several episodes had stories based on real events or hinted at how White House staff would have acted in a given situation. The political subject matter can be roughly divided into four sub-

categories: response to particular events in the public, like hate-triggered crime ("Take Out the Trash Day", 1.13) or an appeal for pardon ("Take This Sabbath Day"), is one. A second category, the relationship between the White House and Congress, is covered extensively, specifically on the many occasions where the staff have to maneuver between special interest groups and elected representatives to secure a majority vote ("Five Votes Down," 1.4). Military operations on foreign soil constitute a third category ("A Proportional Response," 1.3); a fourth would include federal issues ("Six Meetings Before Lunch"). Departures from these topical categories include fund collection ("20 Hours in LA," 1.16) and, in "Let Bartlet Be Bartlet," the role of presidency weighing Bartlet down. Moreover, as most episodes include a handful of interconnecting issues, every episode covers a variety of topics.

However, if the wide scope of political issues and topics helps paint the big picture of White House operations, the focus remains primarily on the preparation and handling of political issues rather than on their outcome. For instance, in questions regarding military intervention ("A Proportional Response"), we learn how the commander-in-chief and his military leaders evaluate various forms of retaliation after a minor attack on US troops. All events in the episode take place in the White House. There are no confrontations with next-of-kin or witnesses to the military action in question. The suspense in this case lies with the President's own doubts: Will the generals respect his position as commander-in-chief? After all, he has no military background. Moreover, should the President let himself be led by his growing rage on behalf of the nation and accordingly mount a military response that is out of proportion? President Bartlet's frustrations and doubts evolve into a debate on the United States' role as military superpower. Bartlet's war rhetoric brings to mind White House policies in the wake of the 9/11 attacks – but in this fictional case, the military leaders win the president over with sensible counter-arguments.

In "Five Votes Down", the Administration needs five more votes to ratify new legislation that will regulate public access to automatic weapons. Strikingly, there is little information in the series about the intended effects of such legislation, lobbyists are notably absent and there is no footage of street gun sales. Instead, the focus is purely political, with heavy emphasis on the use of the party whip to establish a majority, a process that also provides a glimpse of the delicate balance of power between the President and the Vice President. The thin lines between the abstract and the specific are also apparent in "Six Meetings Before Lunch." The issue at stake here is a potential compensation to be paid out to slave descendants, estimated at a stunning 1.7 trillion dollars. One might assume that such an amount would render all discussion irrelevant, but not here. Indeed, it is the discussion itself that provides the lifeblood of this story, despite or maybe because of the lacking prospect of a solution. The sharpening of minds through endless discussion is what keeps the Democrat discourse going.¹²

For what it's worth, *The West Wing* could be defined as politically educational television, and given the topic, its overwhelming success amongst American viewers may be perceived as an unexpected phenomenon. Yet, in combining dramatic narrative techniques with the presentation of political issues, the creators of *The West Wing* may have found an effective new recipe for popular television. The quite equally distributed attention awarded the various characters enables frequent scene changes and parallel events, typically two to four story lines in each episode. In most cases, each story line involves several staff members. But in most discussions, staff members appear in a variety of pairs, in short, intense scenes (called *snippets*).¹³ For example, Donna, walking

hurriedly through the corridors, will be talking to Josh about a pressing issue. In the next scene, C.J. will join in and continue the conversation with Josh; Donna steps aside and Josh ends up in Leo's office to hear his opinion. All this walking and speedy talking in corridors might appear slightly frantic, but it does provide the conversations with a pictorial dynamic, and the frequent change of interlocutors prevents deadlock in the dialogues.

While some critics have commended *The West Wing* for a realistic (as in close to reality) representation of the corridors of politics, others argue that its depiction of the White House work environment is quite unrealistic. To support the latter argument, critics point to an all too harmonious presentation of the staff; there is no internal rivalry or conflict, no favoring of any one in particular, no staff member with controversial career ambitions. They are all allowed to speak openly – even to the President – with no risk of being left in the cold. The only exception to this administrative ideal is the Vice President, but he has a political agenda of his own. Indeed, the tackling of several issues is no doubt rather unrealistically presented, such as when the President appoints new members of the federal election committee without going through the House of Senates ("Let Bartlet be Bartlet"). In real life this would be preposterous. In the episode in question, Bartlet's course of action implies that he, the President, has regained the political initiative – in his opinion he doesn't need to follow consensus in all matters at hand.

Critics praising the series tend to emphasize its brilliant portrayal of White House operations. The discussions and issues are rich in perspective. For example, Josh and Donna's many dialogues cover a wide range of topics: should the budget surplus be distributed to the population or used to finance public spending ("Mr. Willis of Ohio," 1.6)? Is it legitimate to use taxpayers' money to save Mexico from a financial disaster ("Bad Moon Rising", 2.19)? In season two, Sam and Ainsley Hayes have numerous conversations about the dividing lines between the ideologies of the Democrats and the Republicans.

Significant political statements are explained through engaging dialogue, never preachy but with ample room for the pros and cons. Also, the characters display a genuine devotion to their causes. The episodes deal with a number of topics relating to form of government and democracy. Viewers learn about the impact of polls on the preparation of issues, the basic principles of census, the meanings of "lame duck sessions" and "filibusters". Bartlet's MS announcement to his staff in season two entails discussions on several constitutional questions: Has Bartlet misled the American people, and, if so, what are the legal implications? In this, and similar situations, *The West Wing* provides valuable insight into what goes on behind closed doors, where the media are never let in.¹⁴

Never Just a Politician

The protagonist of *Ved kongens bord (At the King's Table)* is a former elected representative for Conservative Youth (Unge Høyre). Unexpectedly, Tove Steen is appointed Minister of Health in a fictional right-center coalition government, not unlike the Norwegian Bondevik government in the years 2001-2005, which was headed by a pragmatic prime minister from the Christian Democrats (Kristelig folkeparti) and had the Conservatives' party leader as Minister of Foreign Affairs. A real life model for Tove Steen could be the former Minister for Local Government and current leader of the Conservatives, Erna Solberg. Like Solberg, Steen is relatively young and went directly from public anonymity

to national fame as an outspoken member of the government. Both are unafraid to front unpopular issues or budget cuts in the media and eager to argue that political decisions should follow ideological guidelines to a larger degree. Less importantly, they are both connected with Bergen, Norway's second largest city. But whereas Solberg was a seasoned politician when she became a minister, Tove Steen was called into office owing to her background as a health economist.

In *Kronprinsessan* [The Crown Princess] the leading character is Charlotte Ekblad, who quite out of the blue is short-listed for the post as Minister of Environment, as the Social Democrats prepare internal changes in the government. Although this series was based on a Danish novel, the story is smoothly adapted to Swedish politics. Charlotte Ekblad (Charlotte Damgaard in the novel) has been associated with the Dane Anita Bay Bundegaard, Development Minister in the government of Poul Nyrup Rasmusen, and the Swede Mona Sahlin, the former Minister for Sustainable Development in Göran Persson's government.¹⁵ As with Tove Steen, Charlotte Ekblad's main force is professional expertise, owing to her background as leader of an influential environment group. Expertise is an important, if not singular argument for offering Steen and Ekblad a government seat. Norway's and Sweden's (fictional) governments both need fresh blood to tackle the major challenges ahead.

The two Nordic drama series have even more in common. At the beginning of the drama series, both Tove Steen and Charlotte Ekblad are preparing to move abroad. Their husbands have been offered vacancies as guest lecturer at Harvard and leader of a development project in Uganda, respectively. Modern, equal women with a career of their own, both see their husband's new job as an opportunity to realize an old dream previously rendered impossible due to family obligations. In both cases, when the call from the Prime Minister comes at the very moment suitcases are packed and everyone is set to go, the husbands convince their wives to say yes to the chance of a lifetime. But as events evolve, their initial enthusiasm wears off. On several occasions, both Tove Steen and Charlotte Ekblad sense that their husband feels ignored and let down by his wife's massive workload. Simultaneously, Tove Steen and Charlotte Ekblad suddenly find themselves caught in a political crossfire involving an aggressive press, backfiring from fellow members of party and government and urgent decision-making. Despite mounting pressures, however, the political power play has an intoxicating effect. Both ministers jump at the chance when offered a secure seat in the next election by their constituencies. The following election becomes a success just as predicted, but the controversial ministers both end up withdrawing from the government following devastating political intrigues.

There are multiple pressures on the two female ministers, in the shape of political operations, domestic demands and an acute media interest owing both to their lack of political experience and to their position as inspiring and attractive women. This brings to mind Liesbeth van Zoonen's analysis of the relationship between politics and popular culture. In *Entertaining the Citizen* (2005), van Zoonen demonstrates how leading female politicians are consistently faced with a discourse relating to their role as mother and wife.¹⁶ According to van Zoonen, this habitual association corresponds closely with the portrayal of women in film and television as "the glue" of the family and chief provider of welfare for husband and children. In van Zoonen's view, this pop-cultural frame of reference continues to inform media and public expectations about female politicians. Public interest in female politicians still tends to focus on domestic sacrifice, rather than political issues and achievements. But how would van Zoonen's analysis apply

in the Scandinavian countries? According to Gunhild Agger, who conducted numerous interviews for an article on *Kronprinsessan*, indeed it does: Female politicians are still asked frequently to comment on how they tackle the double role of mother and minister; male colleagues who are also fathers rarely face the same question.¹⁷

Although both Scandinavian productions take this perspective into account, the presentations differ. In the Swedish series, emphasis is on the media hunt for delicate details in Charlotte Ekblad's family relations. The break-up of her marriage in the wake of her husband's affair hits the tabloid front pages immediately. Media attention is also paid to her personal finances and the use of a government car to pick up her child from kindergarten. There is no such pressure on Tove Steen. Although her private life, too, hits the front pages eventually, the reason is more connected with hard politics. Steen enters into a love affair with the leader of the parliamentary health committee, who moreover is from the Labor Party. Tove Steen's insistence that this affair belongs to the private sphere is naïve at best, and a clear indication of a lack of regard for the ethical guidelines of politics.

Kronprinsessan and *Ved kongens bord* both deal extensively with the demands on family life faced by people in a leading political position. Both series provide a critical stance on media interest in infidelity and other private topics. However, the communication of this criticism is double, in that so much attention is paid to conflicts arising from such issues. Hence, these series also validate exactly the sort of stereotypes outlined by van Zoonen. Charlotte Ekblad and Tove Steen are the only political office holders shown in family settings.¹⁸ Only the female politicians have to relate to expectations of a harmonious family life. A similar topic, by the way, is dealt with in ABC's series on the first female president of the USA, *Commander in Chief*, where Macenzie Allen needs to tackle not only politics, but also her capricious teenage daughter and grumpy husband.

In many respects, this is a striking contrast to *The West Wing*, but even the President has interest in his roles as father and husband. This is the case particularly in "Ellie" (2.14), where Bartlet is seen struggling with his relationship with his second-oldest daughter. In the first as well as the second season, there are also several husband-and-wife rows. Yet these family conflicts are never completely removed from or uninfluenced by the political business of the President. Bartlet is never observed being just husband or father, he is always also the president.¹⁹

Love and Murder as Dramatic Engines of Politics

Ved kongens bord, a mini-series that follows events from episode to episode, is different from *The West Wing* with regard to format, but there are aspects of the hybrid format even in *Ved kongens bord*. For instance, each episode features conflicts that are left behind in the following episodes. In the first episode, Tove Steen, not yet toughened up by her advisers and bureaucrats, is seen making a stumbling performance in a parliamentary speech. Following Steen's announcement of a political departure from her predecessor, her parliamentary adviser decides to go behind her back. In the second episode, Steen needs to handle an internal leakage to the press and at the same time defend a controversial government policy in dealings with a mortally ill boy. In the third episode, Steen is looking for a solution to a temporary crisis in the cooperation with Russia whilst dealing with a refugee who has kidnapped his children. The fourth episode includes negotiations with the parliamentary opposition in a case that threatens to split the Government, and in the fifth episode, Steen is on the campaign trail for the

coming election. The final episode has a parallel climax of dramatic events in the Russia cooperation *and* in Steen's love affair with Harald Dahl.

Unlike *The West Wing*, *Ved kongens bord* is not based on events that are imitations of real-life events, at least not as regards the main story about cooperation between health institutions initiated at the government level in Norway and Russia. This is definitely a future scenario moved to the present. The series speculates in what might happen if a Norwegian hospital were to establish a joint venture with research labs in Russia. As the story unfolds, good intentions inadvertently lead to a number of serious ethical dilemmas. *Ved kongens bord* thus presents a fictional case of real Norwegian politics.

The dramatic line of conflict, however, centers not on the political issues as such but on the intrigues of power and influence. The political process as such, involving alliances across party lines and bilateral negotiations, is concluded. The cooperation with Russia, then, primarily involves sorting out the difficulties that arise and relating to a critical press. Whether the depictions of ministerial bureaucracy are true to form is hard to determine. The focus here is on the pressures experienced by the minister, and the presentation of those pressures seems real enough.

The cooperation with Russia eventually unveils a major political scandal, including illegal activities, possible financial corruption and the murder of a Russian journalist who asked one question too many. This course of events is quite far removed from real-life Norwegian politics. A Norwegian journalist who is familiar with Russian conditions – and happens to be a close friend of Tove Steen – uncovers the circumstances of his Russian colleague's murder, which is related to delicate information about the Norwegian hospital in Russia. This part of *Ved kongens bord* is reminiscent of a number of American films about political journalists exposing uncomfortable truths with serious political implications.

The other major dramatic conflict in *Ved kongens bord* concerns personal relations. There is considerable quality in the descriptions of the private costs of a political position, in the form of long workdays, frequent traveling and removal from the family. Only the depictions of private and personal situations bring viewers really close to the characters. Typically, the political implications of Steen's affair with Harald Dahl never really surface, and the ethical dilemmas of their relationship are hardly discussed at all. Public knowledge of a secret affair between a member of government and an influential member of the largest opposition party would have wide-ranging ramifications, politically *and* private, but the main concern of these two lovers is keeping the relationship secret to protect their families. In real life, the stepping down of at least one of the lovers involved would be inevitable, as would a noisy public mess in the media and the parliament. In *Ved kongens bord* the political implications are somehow removed from the events to enable sharper focus on the circumstances of the relationship.

As a dramatic format, the mini-series implies a dualism in its dramaturgic development. It requires a solution to be found in the last episode for the plots triggered by events introduced in the first episode, often within a short time frame. The traditional means to this end is to tighten up events in the two final episodes, often with a soft ending following the final climax. However, as events develop through several episodes, new dramatic threads are spun off, some of which serve only to keep up the intensity throughout the rest of one episode. In *Ved kongens bord*, the scandal with criminal aspects and the love story both serve as dramatic engines through several episodes. In reality, there is a large degree of consensus and remarkably few saucy scandals in Norwegian politics, which may be a good excuse for taking such dramatic liberties as

in *Ved kongens bord*. But in consequence, attempts at providing political insight are largely overshadowed by the dramatic course of events.

In *Kronprinsessan*, there are no events at this scale and the progression is more episodic. Yet, here too there are dramatic elements that tend to overshadow the political issues at hand for Charlotte Ekblad. At the core of the story, there is an ever-growing sense of conspiracy, and eventually it will lead to her downfall. The Prime Minister and most of his ministers are uncooperative, there are unfaithful servants in Ekblad's staff and a ruthless press is at her. And, to make the mess complete, her husband has an affair. With personal pressures mounting at the core of events, there is barely a glimpse of Charlotte Ekblad's political agenda.

Idealism, Reality and the Ugly Face of Power in Scandinavian Politics

Halfway through the third episode of *Ved kongens bord*, Health Minister Tove Steen calls a meeting with her most senior staff, the State Secretary, the Political Adviser, the Press Spokesman and the Secretary General. In a short span of time following her appointment, the Minister's standing has taken substantial beatings: Polls are unfavorable and media pressures are high. The collaboration with Russia, inherited from her predecessor, appears to involve an illegal market for donor organs. With party leaders and fellow ministers failing to support her and members of parliament looking to table a vote of no confidence, misery seems complete for the outspoken, reform-zealous Health Minister. She desperately needs a victory, personally *and* politically, to regain momentum and reset the political agenda.

In the hectic but efficient meeting, Tove Steen demands space for creative thinking. The minister and her staff develop a number of new ideas around the table. Analyses and proposals are discussed, concerns with public opinion and government partners evaluated, and a forgotten but valuable report is put on the table. At the end of the meeting a whole new set of measures is ready. New legislation relating to donors is to be presented together with a new fund for families involved, so as to take into account both ethical considerations and political gains. In the process, the Health Minister displays ample capability for renewal, pragmatism and competence and is yet again well positioned on a winning track.

The scene described above is decisive to the dramatic course of events to follow. Such core scenes tend to direct events toward a turning point, introducing new aspects and actions that may change the direction of subsequent events. At this point in the story, Tove Steen has faced skepticism and misfortune at every turn. The time has now come for her bad luck to change – at least temporarily. But from a viewer's perspective there is credibility at stake: Is staking out new policies through brainstorming, in the course of an hour just after breakfast, a truthful presentation of policy-making? Do health policies really undergo major changes of direction without any involvement from lobbyists or workgroups, outside the parliamentary committees and with no internal discussion in the party?

Of course not. Despite questionable credibility, however, what this scene, and the series as a whole, does communicate successfully is that policy-making results from decisions made by individuals, or workgroups, not from processes or systems. In other words, policies need be linked with a person or they cannot be implemented. It is hardly a completely true assertion; political decisions require a whole set of systems and processes, including legislation, party groups, lobbyists and bureaucratic bodies. But strong

will and intelligence will certainly help push an issue through the system. What *Ved kongens bord* does is to skip the first part of the process and focus exclusively on the personal concerns of political decisions. The few attempts at showing the consequences of the decisions made are carried out in a purely fictional fashion.

To a large degree, it is the individual issues discussed in every episode that best illustrate the political work of a minister and the issues surfacing in the process. The political content and related dilemmas are particularly pronounced in the second episode. Shouldn't "the world's wealthiest country" open its funds wide for the treatment of patients, as the populist view would have it? Health Minister Tove Steen argues that "you can't buy yourself out of human suffering," a difficult yet more realistic and politically unpopular stand based on balanced principles. Steen sticks to principles even in her election campaign. The underlying intention, it appears, is to evaluate the nature of politics and the room for decision-making allowed politicians in a modern, media-focused society. If confidence in politics and, consequently, in democratic processes, is to be restored, politicians need to be more honest about their prioritizations and the press should avoid distorting the issues discussed.

In line with this view, the portrayal of Tove Steen in *Ved kongens bord* is of a model idealist politician. However, the series does question whether such a politician would actually survive the current political system with her idealism intact. The political activities and party-political relations depicted in *Ved kongens bord* are drenched in intrigue and double sets of morals. Power will corrupt any one who gets close to it. Hence, the game of politics overshadows its execution and personal interests are stronger than public interests.

The scandal uncovered by Tove Steen leads to her resignation as a minister. She also withdraws from the party, but decides to keep her seat in Stortinget as an independent representative. Interestingly, Norway's Constitution (from 1814) defines the parliament as a collection of individual representatives. It was written 60 years prior to the first formation of a political party in Norway. Tove Steen's decision to continue as an independent representative appears to imply also that you will truly serve your electorate only as an independent and act in line with your convictions only if you stand alone.

Charlotte Ekblad in *Kronprinsessan* is also a politician who emphasizes ideals. Her most prominent idea is to construct a system for keeping accounts of politicians' performance. This implies that all elected politicians should provide a review of their deliverance on all campaign promises. The intention, of course, is to re-establish confidence and fight the growing apathy of the electorate. As a result, Charlotte Ekblad becomes more of an ombudsman for the principles of democracy than a devoted Minister of Environment. Her lack of a background in the political establishment enables her to express the sentiments of the people. Avoiding diffuse statements and pragmatic positions and helped, no doubt, by her visual appeal, Ekblad soon enjoys immense popularity.

The political process in *Kronprinsessan* is consistently obscured by fractionalist activity in the government and the disloyalty of certain staff members. The shaping and making of policies and decisions are notably absent. Negotiations are scarce. Instead, the core issue, again, is the power game as such, with Charlotte Ekblad unwillingly at center stage. Political content is replaced by a cynical game in which positioning is everything – the building up and breaking down by the press and intolerable costs to family life are inevitable side effects. In this rather gloomy perspective, losing one of the most talented politicians becomes a calculated though necessary risk.

But despite this bleak depiction of political life in Sweden, *Kronprinsessan* ends well. Charlotte Ekblad celebrates her election to Riksdagen with her electorate. Unsubdued by the destructive elements of politics, Charlotte Ekblad promises to continue her fight for public interests. Thus, there is hope for change if people choose to give their support to those who deserve it. It is this basic democratic principle, rather than real politics, that is the major concern of *Kronprinsessan*.

Political Lessons

The West Wing, *Kronprinsessan* and *Ved kongens bord* share a desire for idealistic political action. *The West Wing* depicts a devoted staff and a paternal president united in their fight against external forces. Though they sometimes struggle to defend their pragmatic liberalism, they never lose sight of it. In *Kronprinsessan*, the government says no to Ekblad's radical proposal that politicians should be held accountable for their deliv-erance on promises. Charlotte Ekblad's honesty inevitably leads to her resignation. But the idea of the politician as the people's ombudsman lives on through Ekblad's convincing election to Riksdagen. *Ved kongens bord* is far more pessimistic. Here, political ideals are about to disappear all together. It remains possible to maintain idealist approaches, but only outside the confinements of the system.

In light of the perspectives on popular culture outlined initially, one may ask to what degree *The West Wing*, *Kronprinsessan* and *Ved kongens bord* connect dramatic conflict with personal interests or whether these series also manage to provide a presentation depicting processes and systems. In this respect, *The West Wing* is close to perfect. Indeed, there is ample use of pathos-heavy melodrama, with emotionally engaging scenes crucial to every episode. But the dramatic aspects never overshadow the presentation of political subject matter. On the contrary, the emphasis on the personal only serves as the engine needed for the presentation of political content.

Neither *Kronprinsessan* nor *Ved kongens bord* manage to achieve this. Here, the personal stories of the leading characters are completely intertwined with their political roles and in *Kronprinsessan* to such a degree that the two roles become nearly inseparable. Both Scandinavian series describe the internal mechanisms of politics from the point of view of one person. *Kronprinsessan* may seek to provide a presentation of women's conditions in top league politics in general. But its intense focus on a single person leaves little room for debating the condition of the system itself. Instead, any change that might occur would have to involve a change in attitude amongst the other characters involved.

The event-rich drama depicted in *Ved kongens bord*, too, concerns person rather than issue. The given conclusion, where the protagonist withdraws from her party to be able to pursue her political goals, hardly reflects a general analysis of the system. Up to the final episode, *Ved kongens bord* has personal and political events drawn up in parallel lines. However, in total, the extensive drama format, with Tove Steen facing multiple challenges involving staff, the press, fellow politicians and her own political field, enables a broad depiction of everyday politics. In this view, *Ved kongens bord* could be said to provide a reasonably well-made presentation of political activities and their preconditions.

Translation from Norwegian: *Morten Solli*

Notes

1. 'Tales of Sound and Fury', in Gledhill, Christine (ed.) (2002) *Home is Where the Heart is*, Bfi publishing, p. 47. Elsaesser's article was first published in 1972.
2. 'Frames of Presidential and Candidate Politics in American Films of the 1990s', *The Public*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2000), p. 29.
3. 'Representation' can be a slippery term, but is here used much in line with the various articles in *Representation*, edited by Stuart Hall, where it signifies the meaning-making process. See Hall, Stuart (ed.) (1997) *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage.
4. Waxman, Sharon (2003) 'Inside *West Wing*'s New World', in Rollins, Peter C. & O'Connor, John E. (eds.) *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
5. Quoted from 'Dramabrosjyren 2005', NRK Drama's presentation of its own productions.
6. For example, this link.: <http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/2340100.html>
7. Levine, Myron A.: 'The West Wing (NBC) and The West Wing (D.C.)', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*.
8. Lehmann, Chris 'The Feel-Good Presidency: The Pseudo-Politics of *The West Wing*', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*.
9. Parry-Giles, Trevor & Parry-Giles, Shawn J. (2006) *The Prime Time Presidency. The West Wing and U.S Nationalism*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
10. *The Prime Time Presidency*.
11. Clark, Elizabeth J. (2005) 'The Bartlet Administration and Contemporary Populism in NBC's *The West Wing*', in Hammond, Michael & Mazdon, Lucy (eds.) *The Contemporary Television Series*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
12. Chambers, Samuel A. 'Dialog, Deliberation, and Discourse: The Far Reaching Politics of *The West Wing*', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*.
13. Smith, Greg M.: 'The Left Takes Back the Flag: The Steadycam, the Snippet, and the Song in *The West Wing*'s 'In Excelsis Deo'.', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*.
14. Pompper, Donnalyn 'The West Wing: White House Narratives That Journalists Cannot Tell', in *The West Wing: The American Presidency as Television Drama*.
15. See Agger, Gunhild (2007) 'Den dobbelte referanceramme – *Kronprinsessan* på dansk og svensk', in *Mediekultur*, 42/43.
16. van Zoonen, Liesbeth (2005) *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
17. In Norway the situation is less one-sided. Though the dailies have shown great interest in the private lives of politicians such as Karita Bekkemellem (the Labor Party) and Kristin Krohn Devold (The Conservative Party), there are numerous examples of male politicians interviewed about their families, including Lars Sponheim (The Liberal Party), Bjarne Håkon Hansen (Labor) and Erik Solheim (The Socialist Party). It is now legitimate in Norway even for a male politician to explain withdrawal from prominent positions with family considerations.
18. In *Ved kongens bord* we also see Harald Dahl, leader of the Health committee, occasionally with his wife who suffers from a serious case of multiple sclerosis.
19. In season five, however, when his daughter is kidnapped, Bartlet temporarily hands the presidential office over to the Republican majority leader.

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