

## **America's Dream... or Nightmare?**

Four years after the Watergate Scandal shook a nation, Alan J Pakula would direct one of America's most politically relevant films; as evidenced through the on-going tension in the country's political state all these years later. Narrating the controversy yet realism of the governmental crisis, 'All the President's Men' depicts how the Watergate Scandal broke the potential of the American Dream. Furthermore, how the film signifies the relationship between press' need for information and the government's need for secrecy. An honest element which only intensified the conflict between democracy and republicanism at the time. Through the film's mise-en-scene and diegesis, it will be argued how Pakula's direction considers contemporary, but above all, political fear.

Pakula establishes that his narrative will unfold through the concept of a 70s' progression into the American Dream. As a medium, political cinema demonstrates the ability to raise awareness and inspire social change. "The truly political film (the thoroughly politicized film) isn't a film about politics. It is a film that problematizes the privilege of the speaking subject by revealing his social and class ties". Dmitry Vilensky. (2007) 'What does it mean to make films politically today?'. Political cinema, then, questions the audience's understanding of power structures that would, otherwise, go unnoticed. We can use this theory to argue exactly how Pakula creates a sense of political anxiety within 'All the President's Men'.

Discussing this visually, Pakula's imagery explores his characters' fears on a deeper, filmic, level. For example, despite his wide range of cinematography, Pakula often revisits the split focus shot [\(Figure 1\)](#) when filming inside the Washington Post, a location bombarded with new technology and an overwhelming sea of documents. Blurring the screen between protagonist, Woodward, and the setting around him, Pakula visually suggests his disillusionment towards this innovation that surrounds him. Therefore, through the split focus shot, we further understand Woodward's relationship with the American Dream. In addition to this, how his increasing concern has been impacted by the 1970s; a decade inundated by an advance in technology. But why does Pakula choose this shot type? "When filmmakers implement a split diopter shot, it creates a sense of uneasiness. It's not natural to see objects in this way". Mike Bedard. (2019). 'Eye-Popping Examples of Split Diopter Shots'. Overall, Pakula's split focus shot implies Bob Woodward's foreignment with the world around him; the impact of the American Dream. Further, blurring his background during an increase of technology to show the country's demand. A contemporary, but more importantly, cultural fear which the audience may have shared due to the film's release in 1976.



(Figure 1)

Furthermore, Pakula uses wide shots, often complemented by negative spaces, creating a sense of bewilderment between both screen and audience. In one scene, protagonists, Woodward and Bernstein, visit the Library of Congress in search of records from the White House. A pivotal moment in the film which highlights their race against time to deliver the story and expose the scandal. Capturing this scene via a crane shot [\(Figure 2\)](#), the camera is lifted above our, initially looking, devoted protagonists until they appear almost transparently small due to the, now, elevated look of the scene. This gradual but effective crane shot quite literally heightens the feeling on screen; making sense of the overwhelmingly vast library that our protagonists must search through. “The camera slowly backs straight up to the very top of the library’s grand dome, with a view down on the now puny protagonists”. Seifrit-Griffin. S. (2023). ‘From Book to Film with ‘All the President’s Men’. Now See Hear! The Library of Congress’. Visualising the sheer size of their responsibilities, Woodward and Bernstein’s political anxieties are seen through Pakula’s wide shots.



(Figure 2)

However, this is not the only time that Pakula's wider visuals are able to belittle the protagonists on screen. During multiple scenes back in the Washington Post, extreme wide shots manage to merge an absent-minded Woodward with his surroundings. Quickly walling-in Robert Reford's character with the many set pieces such as books, articles, typewriters, newspapers and so forth; all symbols of the American Dream's demands and expectations. [\(Figure 3\)](#). Visualising that he's not only lost in thought, but also lost in the neighbouring set, Pakula's failure to distinguish Woodward's foreground from the background implies that Woodward is visually drowning in a sea of expectations from the American Dream. Therefore, Pakula's wider shots visualise being shut off from the outside world. A semiotic which, through central framing, shows Woodward's fear of inferiority where the political world is represented by wide camera angles supressing him.



**(Figure 3)**

Following on the idea of contrast seen in *All the President's Men*, Pakula also uses juxtaposition to create parallel tension. This idea that two characters, although nonlinear from each other, can interact simultaneously is seen with Woodward in the Washington Post. Reporting on his newly founded research, a nervous Woodward's writing is disrupted by a television in close proximity, displaying news footage of a

meanwhile, care-free Nixon at Congress ([Figure 4](#)). Showing both the republican movement and yet the man who prevailed democracy in one frame, this split-screen-like imagery is Pakula's way of daring the narrative, but further, juxtaposing the relationship between press and government. With Nixon seen as easy-going, we are shown how his abuse of power keeps him from being scared like Woodward. Instead, he can rely on his corruption to hide the Watergate Scandal from the public. But by showing this with Woodward's anxiety, we can see that *he* holds the true weight of responsibility. "A character often represents not just that specific individual but a type-politician, not a politician" Gianos, P.L. (1998). 'Politics and Politicians in American Film'. Bloomsbury Publishing USA. So, whilst Robert Redford brings charisma to the role, Woodward's depiction in the film also represents a broader stereotype of journalists rather than a singular character. Overall, contrast is used to symbolise that fear is the cost of power, begging the question of who really has control between Nixon and Woodward.



(Figure 4)

In addition to this, Juxtaposition is also used to create a sense of reconciliation within the workspace. As seen in the Washington Post, many of Woodward's colleagues are populated by both republicans and democrats, yet all work together despite their

political differences to report on President Nixon, showing unity between left- and right-wing groups [\(Figure 5\)](#). Although this mixture of political views avoids prejudice, for example, disagreements that only confuses the tension further; the irony that republicans and democrats must work together creates a sense of vulnerability and certainty, but more importantly, a civil war. This also reflects Nixon's tactic of Southern Strategy. The idea of inflicting political fear onto society, you can gain votes entirely based on trust. "I think the president's strategy was fear and division and to scare people to the polls, and it worked in my case, and I think that's what they're doing now". Donnelly, J. (2018). 'The Politics of Racial Division: Trump Borrows Nixon's Southern Strategy'. Therefore, Pakula introduces Nixon's Southern Strategy through his juxtaposition between tension and unity to show the relevance of trust in politics.



(Figure 5)

But it isn't only cinematography which is relevant to portraying emotion. Pakula's lighting, too, creates a sense of unease. During the many scenes where Bob Woodward must confront the politically mysterious character, 'Deep Throat', lighting conveys fear to secure his ominous appearance. Using low-key lighting [\(Figure 6\)](#), as opposed to Woodward's high-key lighting [\(Figure 7\)](#), Pakula's reveal for Deep Throat visually challenges the genre. "When controlled differently, each point of light can

create different kinds of moods to both the look and story". Tech, J. (2020). *How lighting affects the mood of films*. Changing the mise-en-scene to subvert dramatic conventions, lighting affects the film to suddenly reveal horror tropes in looks. Through Pakula's simple shift in the scene's lighting, this character's appearance secures Deep Throat's sinister and ominous look. A reveal which the audience had, before, too long anticipated.



(Figure 6)



(Figure 7)

Through the style and mise-en-scene of his film, Alan J. Pakula visually explores the political fear surrounding a corrupt 70s government. As well as this, the mixed responses that Americans may have had towards the demands of the United States' 'dream', or, in this case, what would become a nightmare. However, this is not the only

time where the film's aesthetics meets politics. Sound is also used to express political fear through the form of diegesis, auditorily conveying political messages.

Pakula's visuals are complemented by his use of sound, capturing a sense of uneasiness within the soundscape. In one scene inside the Washington Post, multiple noises which imitates that of a clock's ticking begin to play at once. Type-writers, keyboards and more suddenly surround the room in a patterned dissonance. Through this usage of diegetic audio, we are placed in Woodward's shoes as this sensory overload gradually becomes a natural atmosphere for the Washington Post. Auditorily mimicking a clock, these haunting sounds become a constant reminder for the journalist's race against time to deliver the story. Effectively showing Pakula's use for the auditory of filmmaking.

However, diegetic audio can also work effectively on its own, delivering tension with a solely auditorial use to further imply political fear. One scene sees Bernstein, played by Dustin Hoffman, having lunch with a source-teller on a rooftop looking over Washington. As the two talk, the gradual disturbance of an on-going airplane threatens their conversation being heard from audiences, causing Bernstein to raise his voice. This subtle but irritating diegetic symbolises the government's attempt to silence journalists. But, as seen through Bernstein's refusal to wait, raising his voice in determination suggests an auditory battle between the press' need to inform and the government's need for privacy.

On this topic of diegesis, because Pakula focuses his audio on the practice of diegetic rather than music, we are given a sense of realism within the film's sound design. As mentioned, the atmosphere becomes dependent on those of workplace items such as computers; almost like creating a score from America's increasing technology. Through this lack of non-diegesis, Pakula offers us a heightened sense of authenticity when considering the sounds around us. "This was during an age of 'naturalistic' sound, when movies tried to capture voices and ambient noise in a way that sounded like real conversations and places, rather than performed dialogue recorded on sound stages." Khoi Vinh, (2003) 'The Sound of Washington' Subtraction. In short, Pakula draws the audience's attention towards the practice of diegetic; clearly establishing the environment and atmosphere through the exploration of sound design. Auditorily capturing that of the American dream, not through contemporary music, but rather the country's concern of technological progress. A style of filmmaking which allows Pakula to explore audio within a nonfiction thriller, embracing naturalistic storytelling.

In conclusion, Alan J. Pakula explores societal fear in 'All the President's Men' by reflecting political aesthetics within his mise-en-scene. Representing these anxieties through both cinematography and sound design, Pakula appropriately balances informative and creative filmmaking. Using Bernstein and Woodward to spread light on the Watergate scandal, expose the power of corruption and ultimately prevail democracy. In doing so, Alan J. Pakula creates a sense of nationality during both America's governmental crisis and decade inundated by a 'dream' that would eventually become a nightmare.

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