David Frost vs. Goliath

HISTORY AND ENTERTAINMENT IN *FROST/NIXON*

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In the climate of fear, violence and paranoia that marks the contemporary political sphere post September 11, it may be difficult for young audiences to comprehend the magnitude of the Watergate scandal that rocked American politics in the mid 1970s. However, these events led to calls for then-president Richard Nixon's impeachment and culminated in his resignation. While the Watergate scandal has been brought to the screen before – most notably in Alan J. Pakula's 1976 Oscar-winning adaptation of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's *All the President's Men*, and later in Oliver Stone's 1995 biopic *Nixon* – the recent film *Frost/Nixon* (Ron Howard, 2008) shifts its attention to Nixon's life after his resignation, presenting a harrowing and emotional showdown between the one-time president and British television identity David Frost. Based on a 2006 play by Peter Morgan, *Frost/Nixon* configures the series of interviews at its core in a generic framework to attain optimum entertainment value. Despite the fact that the film is not always historically accurate, it is a powerful reminder of the tenuous line that only barely separates the personal from the political.

FROST, NIXON AND THE WATERGATE SCANDAL

On the evening of 17 June 1972, five men broke in to the Democratic National Committee headquarters, which was housed in the Watergate building in Washington, DC. The investigation surrounding their arrests revealed that they were involved with the committee seeking Nixon's re-election in 1973, and a series of subsequent investigations (including the now-infamous investigation by *Washington Post* journalists Bernstein and Woodward) led to the establishment of the Senate Watergate Committee. The committee's findings not only confirmed the involvement of several key government officials in the break-in, but also ultimately led to a movement to impeach Nixon. Crucial to this

investigation was the discovery of the infamous 'presidential tapes' – Nixon had recorded his conversations with major players in the events that followed the break-in. The tapes contained valuable evidence for the committee, but despite being subpoenaed, Nixon refused to hand them over. Even after the notorious 'Saturday night massacre', in which the Justice Department official who had sought the tapes was fired and replaced with a more Nixon-friendly figure, the president refused to submit the tapes, instead offering a written transcription. The tapes were finally supplied after a Supreme Court decision in July 1974, but to the horror of the American public, important sections had been deleted. What remained, however, was enough to undermine Nixon's version of events, and he announced his resignation on the evening of 8 August 1974, before a vote to impeach him could be taken.

Although formally exonerated by president Gerald Ford, the stain of the Watergate scandal haunted Nixon until his death in 1994, and his public image was always associated with corruption and abuse of power. In 1977, Nixon agreed to a series of four interviews with British television personality David Frost. Subsequently known as 'The Nixon Interviews', their premiere screening attained what is still the highest ratings for a political interview on television. These interviews form the basis of *Frost/Nixon*, which explicitly frames the project as a mission to extract an admission of guilt from Nixon. It was the impact of these interviews and other similar work that earned Sir David Frost his now international reputation as a key media figure, despite initially being regarded as a television personality rather than a professional journalist. Since 2006 he has hosted the program *Frost Over the World* on the Al Jazeera English television channel, and he continues to interview other controversial political figures including George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Mikhail Gorbachev and even Wikileaks founder Julian Assange.

FROST/NIXON AS ENTERTAINMENT

The biopic has long held an interest in important political figures, going back to John Ford's *Young Mr Lincoln* (1939) through to Oliver Stone's films on Nixon, John F. Kennedy (*JFK*, 1991) and George W. Bush (*W.*, 2008). While movies such as these are renowned for bringing the stories of these famous political leaders to life and making them relevant to new audiences, they are also designed to entertain. As such, certain elements can be played up, toned down, embellished or sometimes even outright fabricated for dramatic effect. After all, these are not historical documentaries but films designed for mainstream cinema-going audiences.

Frost/Nixon's director Ron Howard is much better known for his commercial blockbusters – *The Da Vinci Code* (2006), *Apollo 13* (1995), *Backdraft* (1991), *Willow* (1988) – than he is for hard-hitting docudrama. Howard confirmed his reputation as a serious director with his Oscar-winning film *A Beautiful Mind* in 2001, but it is his 2005 film *Cinderella Man* that can be most immediately associated with *Frost/Nixon*. While this story about heavyweight boxing champion James J. Braddock may at first seem to have little in common with *Frost/Nixon*, the latter actually adopts the narrative structure of the boxing film as it tells the story of Frost's David-and-Goliath-like 'battle' with the one-time president.

The film begins with a montage of television news stories summarising the Watergate break-in and the events leading up to Nixon's resignation. This then cuts to footage of Nixon (played by Frank Langella) delivering his infamous resignation speech and then flying away from the White House one last time. In addition to scenes of both Nixon and Frost (Michael Sheen), the film goes on to present interviews with the men involved in

bringing about The Nixon Interviews – Nixon's chief of staff Jack Brennan (Kevin Bacon), Frost's producer John Birt (Matthew Macfadyen), and Frost's researchers Bob Zelnick (Oliver Platt) and James Reston, Jr. (Sam Rockwell) – essentially outlining the events that led to the climactic final interview.

The story begins when Frost sees the broadcast of the Nixon resignation speech while shooting *Frost Over Australia* in 1974. Impressed with the ratings it received, he asks Birt about the possibility of an interview with the controversial figure. Eager to return to the US market after an earlier project had failed, the ambitious Frost is driven less by ideological interest in Nixon's plight as he is by the desire to restore his own career to its former glory. Believing the interview with Frost will be non-threatening and an easy way to finally defend his reputation in front of the American public, Nixon agrees to take part for a large sum of money. Frost is unable to convince any major US network to pick up the interview, however, and spends much of his preparation time seeking private funding (and bankrolling much of the project himself). Worried about their reputation, as Frost's planned interview is mocked by supposed 'real' journalists, both Zelnick and Reston become increasingly nervous and suspicious of Frost's motivations; Reston in particular is driven by an ideological motivation to see Nixon take responsibility for his betrayal of the American people and for his corruption of the system.

The film's climactic action surrounds the interviews themselves, and while Nixon takes command of the first three (seeming to confirm Reston and Zelnick's discomfort), after a late-night phone call from a drunk and passionate Nixon, Frost mobilises both himself and his researchers. Frost is aggressive in the final interview, presenting Nixon with newly discovered information that undermines his version of events. The shocked Nixon becomes increasingly nervous and angry, stating at one point that 'when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal', and finally admitting that he 'let the American people down'. The camera freezes on his broken, defeated face, and Reston tells us that this picture spoke a thousand words and was the real victory of Frost's interview.

THE GRAINY TELEVISION NEWS FOOTAGE FROM THE EARLY 1970S ACTS AS DOCUMENTARY 'EVIDENCE', AN ARTEFACT FROM THE ERA ITSELF DEPLOYED TO CREATE A SENSE OF AUTHENTICITY.

Structurally, the four separate interviews are presented as distinct 'rounds' of an ongoing confrontation or 'match', preceded by what mirrors the traditional 'training' period of boxing films such as *Rocky* (John G. Avildsen, 1976). These references to boxing films are clearly deliberate; on numerous occasions the film even uses boxing terms such as 'throwing in the towel'. While this storytelling device is interesting in and of itself, *Frost/Nixon*'s examination of how the media works to tell such stories – and its reflexive awareness of itself as a vehicle for precisely such a tale – represents the more complex elements of Howard's film.

FROST/NIXON AND THE MEDIA; *FROST/NIXON* AS THE MEDIA

Reston's description of seeing Nixon's humiliated face in the film's climactic fourth interview highlights the film's central belief in the media's ability to manipulate stories and present them in a specific way. 'The first and greatest sin or deception of television is that it simplifies,' Reston remarks, noting that it was only in this one moment that he was able to 'really understand the reductive power of the close-up'. Although Nixon never apologised in words, for Reston – the 'American everyman' of the film who gives the most personalised account of the anger and disappointment felt towards Nixon – the apology was clearly visible in 'Richard Nixon's face, swollen and ravaged by loneliness, self-loathing and defeat'.

By privileging this one image, both Reston and the film itself acknowledge the power of media-constructed images from within the world of *Frost/Nixon*. Superficially, the film is clearly concerned with the power of media imagery simply because that is the story it follows – the creation of a historically significant media moment. However, the film acknowledges the depth and complexity of this process through its own formal construction, even in the film's opening moments. The grainy television news footage from the early 1970s acts as documentary 'evidence', an artefact from the era itself deployed to create a sense of authenticity to the story, even though that story is played out by actors in a fictional feature film. The decision to include documentary-style interviews with characters based on real-life people (Reston, Birt, Brennan and Zelnick) also underscores the filmmaker's desire to seem 'real': 'Nixon was real, Frost was real, the interviews happened,' it seems to say, 'so all of these other things must be real too.'

A brief look at the actual Nixon Interviews (which were issued on DVD at the time of *Frost/Nixon*'s release) shows just how far the reality of those interviews is from their cinematic counterpart. The need for dramatic action in a fictional film may demand that certain elements are played up for effect, but *Frost/Nixon* cleverly permits itself these embellishments as they themselves are part of its story – the media image is what matters the most. Just as 'the power of the close-up' diminished everything that was said leading up to that moment, so too does *Frost/Nixon* justify its own dramatisation of a real-life historical event in the search for its own moment of reductive 'truth'.

Frost/Nixon may not be a wholly accurate version of the events surrounding the interviews, but it captures the inherent power of the moment with all of its hubris and bittersweet tragedy. For a country still recovering from the horrors of the Vietnam War, the government's willingness to absolve Nixon from any wrongdoing typified the growing disillusionment with a moral universe out of control, where good things can happen to bad people and villains can escape not only unscathed, but victorious. *Frost/Nixon* not only captures the country's psychological need to see Nixon suffer for his betrayal, it also paints a powerful emotional (albeit not wholly factual) portrait of that moment in 1977 when David Frost conquered Goliath.

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