

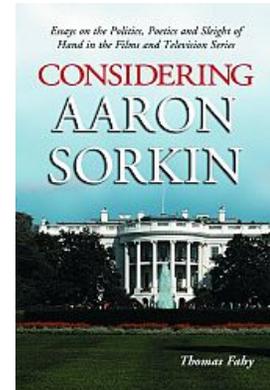
Thomas Fahy (Ed.), **Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Sleight of Hand in the Films and Television Series**, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2005, 223 pp., \$33.90 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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Studying Aaron Sorkin's writings for mass media demands the collected toolkit of the broad liberal arts in a way that makes the endeavor a poor candidate for academic pigeonholing. Political and psychological, classically literary and meta-mediated, cultured and coarse, subversive and regressive—these scripts are complicated communicative artifacts. Originally published in 2005, Thomas Fahy's edited volume *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Sleight of Hand in the Films and Television Series* addresses this fact by bringing together academics from a range of disciplines. Twelve essayists reflect on Sorkin's early career, from *A Few Good Men* (1992) through *The West Wing*, the NBC television series that enjoyed a seven-season run. That show debuted in 1999, though, and with *The Social Network* recently earning Sorkin his first Academy Award® (Best Adapted Screenplay, 2011), a revisit of this volume's critiques seems in order: How can they suggest critical approaches to *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, *Charlie Wilson's War*, and *The Social Network*?



Following an introductory interview between Sorkin and Fahy, Chapter 2 presents Robert Gross' essay, "Mannerist Noir," which takes *Malice* as its subject matter. His main contention is that, in striving to outdo its predecessors and become a new and different kind of noir story, the 1993 film becomes instead an overfreighted amalgamation, a sort of bastard child of "*Double Indemnity* meets *Straw Dogs* meets *Frenzy*" (p. 25). Throughout his critique, Gross places a great deal of confidence in the worthiness of this sort of archetypal comparison. For example, his assessment of Andy, the protagonist, weakly forces a false choice between characterizing him as a "feminized wimp" or a "hardened 'tough guy'" (p. 33). Gross is correct to think in terms of archetype, though I would argue that he is too married to it. His most generous conception of the film demands an acknowledgement that archetype exists, but also a willingness to suppose that it may not dominate the protagonist's worldview. This is when he writes that *Malice* recalls *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, with *The Maltese Falcon* standing in for *Hamlet* (pp. 22–23). Stoppard's play is successful because its title characters are nonarchetypes, aliens by fiat of their ordinariness in a world populated by Shakespeare's most absolute-driven, archest of folks. Andy's magnetism is similar: He is a non-noir character thrown into a noir plot. He is just a guy; sometimes he is not very strong, and sometimes he is surprisingly strong, but never is he either helpless or He-Man.

Such a conception of archetype is certainly useful when approaching *Charlie Wilson* or *Social Network*. Take Charlie and Gust's first moment of mutual appreciation, expressed through anti-archetype as "You ain't James Bond" and Gust's retort "Well, you ain't Thomas Jefferson. Let's call it even." Contrast those two characters' likability and interest with that of the Winkelvoss twins' painful, one-noted

characterization as cookie-cutter, spoiled rich Harvard kids. Future critique would do well to consider archetype with Gross' gusto, if not his tunnel vision.

In Chapter 3, Susan Cokal's "In Plain View and the Dark Unknown: Narratives of the Feminine Body in *Malice*" deals largely with aspects of the finished film that do not fall under the purview of the screenwriter. Choices to do with set lighting almost always belong to the director, cinematographer, or art director in American feature films. She also engages in a sort of feminist criticism that can be regarded as entirely reader-projected and overly inflammatory, such as when she equates the female lead's use of purple fingerprint (in the context of teaching a perfectly happy kindergarten class) to an act of "self-rape" which "pushes her . . . physical body to [its] limits" (p. 40). While it may be tempting to dismiss this kind of commentary as unfair, it offers the reader (and the communications scholar) a chance to reflect on the sheer vastness of things that may be attributed to a work's "author," regardless of any judgment as to the validity of such attribution. Aaron Sorkin, more than perhaps any working Hollywood writer, tends to receive a great deal of public credit for movies that he does not direct, which is to say that messages he, himself, has not sent are consistently attributed to him. I imagine that an interesting study could be conducted examining the aspects of Sorkin's collaborations which are billed in the critical response as his doing.

Thomas Fahy reappears in Chapter 4 with "Athletes, Grammar Geeks, and Porn Stars: The Liberal Education of *Sports Night*." He asserts, rightly, that Sorkin's characters display the knowledge one would gain from a traditional liberal arts education, and that such a display comes with all the risk and reward of any educational posturing. As Cokal does in the preceding chapter, however, Fahy ascribes some suspect agency to certain aspects of Sorkin's work. For example, while searching for evidence that Sorkin has carried some perceived didacticism from his training in the theatre into network television, Fahy notes that the writer "even structures his scripts (teleplays) for *The West Wing* as four-act plays" (p. 62). But this is standard industry practice; every American TV show has "act breaks" structured and timed for airing commercials. Fahy is able to overcome this and similar missteps with an amiable and engaging tone, as well as with the fact that what he argues for is usually right, despite his shaky evidence. He is strongest in his claim that, despite Sorkin's stated aim to "not tell anyone to eat their vegetables, not make TV that is good for you" (p. 69), the writer pushes a lot of vegetables, with mixed results. Of the scenes with which Fahy illustrates this point, there is a clear divide between the successful, artful integration of displayed intelligence within established characters and the less well-received, somewhat pedantic asides which do not further any charm on behalf of the speaking character.

Of Sorkin's latter work, the most obvious instance which engages this divide is the opening monologue delivered by Wes Mendel at the start of *Studio 60's* pilot episode, although Matt Albie also flirts with it pretty consistently. The Mendel monologue is such an intriguing case because it could well be entirely unlikeable: Wes' character is never heard from again; his sole function is to chastise the country for 53 seconds about the terrible TV they watch and make. But it is a tour de force, akin to Jed's "I am God" in *Malice*, or to Mark's "Did I adequately answer your condescending question?" in *Social Network*, and it matters little how well-integrated into the character the speech is.

The volume changes direction in Chapter 5 with Douglas Keesey's "A Phantom Fly and Frightening Fish: The Unconscious Speaks in *Sports Night*," which focuses on psychological analysis of that show's characters and their love triangles. It is a fine piece of psychological criticism, and its reception will largely depend on the reader's degree of comfort with that particular scholastic approach. Keesey is mainly concerned with mining the characters' speech for inconsistencies that belie emotional undercurrents contrary to the words' lexical or situational meanings. He also focuses to a fair amount on the encoding of sensuality in language, a topic of undeniable critical use when it comes to addressing Sorkin's work. Beyond language, what much else is there in his scripts? There aren't a ton of overt action or sex scenes, certainly, but there is a degree of sensuality and sexual tension, and Keesey offers a roadmap to begin exploring where, exactly, those senses find their genesis. It is a question that could be rather fruitfully applied to Mark's character in *Social Network*. Think of the psychological weight clearly present in the film's final scene, where the only thing he has to reach out and touch is a keyboard.

The collection's second decidedly feminist essay comes in Chapter 6, where Kirstin Ringelberg's "His Girl Friday (and Every Day): Brilliant Women Put to Poor Use" examines the characterization and narrative use of women across the whole span of Sorkin's early career. She is spot-on in noting that Sorkin's women are quite often both particularly bright and perpetually secondary. Think of Jo (*A Few Good Men*), Sydney Ellen (*American President*), Dana, Sally (*Sports Night*), Donna, Margaret, and Abby, or of C. J.'s early seasons (*West Wing*). To a one, these are all exceptionally intelligent, quick-witted women whose narrative function is to support a male character—and often one who is cruder or of lower rank.

Sorkin neither was nor is a stranger to this charge. Recently, *Studio 60* posed the same problem, and *Charlie Wilson* flouted it oddly with Charlie's congressional staff of brilliant, but uniformly young and buxom, "jail bait." *Social Network*, however, seems to skirt it completely. It is missing this dynamic, not because Sorkin has finally written a triumphal woman, but because that film's women aren't treated as important enough to even assist the male characters. There simply are no strong female characters, with the possible exceptions of the various female lawyers, or of Erica, who is really more dignified in her averageness than she is powerful. In all of Harvard, however, there is not a smart, powerful girl to be found. In particular, Christy's bimboism is as unbelievable as it is offensive. The typical defense of Sorkin on this issue has been that, well, he can't be good at everything, and he's not great at writing women. We'll just have to live with it. But *Social Network* goes beyond annoyingly consistent depictions of women as useful underlings; the open contempt for women's intrusion into this boys' club story ought not to be lived with. Perhaps it is time to listen harder to the scathing criticism the film has received from the likes of Jezebel.com and other contemporary feminist culture watchers.

Chapter 7 offers Fiona Mills' "Depictions of the U.S. Military: Only 'A Few Good Men' Need Apply," which is based on similar observations about gender. Unfortunately, it is the least persuasive essay in the collection. Her main point is that *A Few Good Men* depicts (and thus furthers) a culture in which men exclude all things feminine from the military on the presumption of the female gender's inherent weakness.

While it is hard to quarrel with her larger aim, the consistently poor argumentation of Mills' ideas is distracting. Over and over, she wants to have her cake and eat it, too. For example, Mills applauds that Jo's conservative dress-uniform clothes work to contravene the use of women in military narratives as "typical eye candy" (p. 102) and allow her to assert her intelligence, but then she turns around and insists that the non-sexualized military attire must also be "Sorkin's attempt to obscure" Jo's femininity (p. 109).

The worse crime, though, is engaging in the kind of belittling half-recognition of women's contributions that she is decrying as a means to further her point. At one point, Mills recalls the story-changing scene in which Danny, having stepped into his closet to retrieve the baseball bat that Jo put away there, makes a breakthrough in remembering the state of the victim's closet as evidence for the case. Mills attempts to credit Jo for this realization on the grounds that she put Danny's bat away for him. What a mockery of giving credit where it is due! Jo, brilliant and under-recognized, has finally proven her worth—by tidying up and serving as *deus ex machina*. Or later, Mills seeks to forward a reading that the murder victim, Santiago, can be understood as an "ostensibly queer character" (p. 110) because he is too weak to live up to the (presumably masculine) standards of the Marine Corps. Setting aside the problematic nature of equating the feminine and the queer for a moment, we should note that Mills is again using the logic that her whole essay is meant to call out—that weakness and femininity are to be equated. There is no suggestion about Santiago's sexuality either way in the film; no one but Mills is making this point. Even Col. Jessep, who seems like a fellow who wouldn't be shy about such things when he declares that Danny's naval dress whites are a "faggotty white uniform," does not have as honed a sense of gaydar as Mills. The argument is a straw man designed only to pile the unspoken emotional heft of *homophobe* onto *misogynist*, and its quick collapse should serve as a reminder to scholars of the damage that overreaching can cause to one's work.

The book changes course and adopts a much more favorable tone toward Sorkin in Chapter 8 with Ann C. Hall's "Giving Propaganda a Good Name: *The West Wing*." She begins by giving readers a brief historical lesson on the sorts and uses of communication that have been termed "propaganda," tracing the word back to its roots in Pope Gregory XV's counterreformation efforts. Her perspective is that propaganda is a neutral communicative medium that builds up as often as it tears down. She also cites historian Oliver Thomson's opinion that "nearly all of the great creative talents in every era have devoted at least some of their output to political, religious, or moral propaganda," arriving at the conclusion that "[p]ropaganda, then, is not a lower art form" (pp. 117–118). While she acknowledges the show's liberal bent, Hall's point is that the propaganda it puts forth is less about advancing the American Left's agenda than it is about depicting government in general as a positive entity, a place where people with disagreements and rivalries can act together in good faith to better their country and world. She treats it as a singularly good thing, which stands in contrast to most of the other essayists' responses. A perfect example is her reaction to the baldly sexist, elitist, regionalist, and religiously offensive tête-à-tête between Josh and C. J. which is reprinted here:

JOSH: You're overreacting.  
C. J.: Am I?  
JOSH: Yes.  
C. J.: As women are prone to do?

JOSH: That's not what I meant.  
C. J.: Yes, it is.  
JOSH: No, it isn't.  
C. J.: It's always what you mean.  
JOSH: You know what, C. J., I really think I'm the best judge of what I mean, you paranoid Berkeley shiksa feminist.  
(beat)  
Whoa. That was *way* too far.  
C. J.: No, no.  
(beat)  
Well, I've got a staff meeting to go to and so do you, you elitist Harvard fascist missed-the-dean's-list-two-semesters-in-a-row Yankee jackass.  
JOSH: Feel better getting that off your chest there, C. J.?  
C. J.: I'm a whole new woman.

Hall writes, "Both characters are able to take it and dish it out. Sorkin seems to be saying to all—lighten up; we can get more done that way" (p. 125).

My curiosity is whether the propaganda continues to be as good when the subject matter is less positive. Take the end of *Charlie Wilson*, for instance: Is the propaganda equally good when it tells us bad news, implying that we are currently at war in Afghanistan because we "fucked up the endgame" in the 1980s? Or *Social Network*, which goes beyond bad news to put forth a history that is, by most accounts, false and overnegative. What about *Studio 60*, which most critics and audiences agreed was not as good as *West Wing*, despite its similar story of people overcoming their differences to make a good thing for the good of the country? Identifying when the propaganda is good, and what makes it that way, could be a particularly rewarding line of inquiry.

In Chapter 9, Spencer Downing steps in with "Handling the Truth: Sorkin's Liberal Vision," to more directly address the political content of Sorkin's early work. This is by far the most engaging, nuanced contribution in the volume. Downing's thesis is that "Sorkin strives to reinscribe liberalism into the political mainstream by encouraging audiences to see liberal values as plausible, pragmatic, and patriotic" (p. 127). While there is certainly no shortage of instances to cite that support this idea, Downing is most interesting when he examines scenes that do not necessarily advocate political or cultural liberalism. In *A Few Good Men*, after Col. Jessep has insisted that he was right to order the illegal code red and is being led away in handcuffs, he shouts out, "All you did here was weaken the country." Downing reads that as Sorkin letting down his guard, admitting that Jessep "is right. The world is not all sweetness and light, and someone must deal with unpleasant truths" (p. 132). What he doesn't consider here, though, is that Sorkin might be putting the vanquished (conservative) rhetoric—at its clearest and most seductive—on display to show what it is that the audience ought to remain on guard against. After all, Jessep is raving in this scene, and he is under arrest; the only thing investing him with authority is his bellicosity. Similarly compelling articulations of cross-purposed rhetoric occur in the storyline of Tom Jeter's captured brother in *Studio 60*, throughout the "Zen master" trope in *Charlie Wilson*, and in almost

all of Mark's dialogue with Eduardo in *Social Network*. Further scholarship into the effects wrought by such passages would certainly be worthwhile.

Chapter 10 offers Nathan A. Paxton's "Virtue from Vice: Duty, Power, and *The West Wing*," which discusses the impetus for many of the characters' dedication to the liberalism that Downing describes in the previous chapter. Paxton contends that the staff of the Bartlet White House are motivated almost entirely by duty, and that, when they do experience internal conflict, it is between duty to work (in this case, country) and duty to self that they must choose. Paxton finds this hang-up on duty to be unconvincing and ultimately damning to the show: "For the viewer, such a commitment to duty can provoke admiration, but, in its inaccessibility, it is ignorable and finally ineffective" (p. 157).

While the crowds and critics mostly disagree with Paxton on that point, or perhaps just don't care, he has touched on something that recurs in Sorkin's later work. Certainly, duty to one's work as it opposes duty to one's personal life is a dominant theme in *Studio 60*, and it is *the* theme in *Social Network*. While that script doesn't use the term "duty," Mark's ambition is always couched in the imperative: "I've got to do something to get the attention of the clubs." "We've got to expand!" "Our servers can never go down!" Mark is always trying to assume some heavier mantle. In the climactic scene, when the site has just registered its millionth user and his closest lieutenant has been exposed as a cocaine-triggered loose cannon, he cracks open a new box of business cards that read: "Mark Zuckerberg – I'm CEO, Bitch!" If Mark's motivation is not just ambition, but duty, what impact does it have on the story? On the moral of the story? On the morality of the story? Folding the concept of duty into critical consideration absolutely complicates and enriches any other conclusions one might gather from the film.

Chapter 11 offers another forum for feminist critique, this time with Laura K. Garrett's "Women of *The West Wing*: Gender Stereotypes in the Political Fiction." Her argument is that, on the surface, the show's women are equally competent and interpersonally powerful as the men, but that the power structures of the jobs they are assigned ultimately relegate the women to servile status. It is quite similar to Ringelberg's argument (Chapter 6), with the added lens of real-life analogues for the fictional women: Garrett joins the chorus of critics who have pegged Abby Bartlet and C. J. Cregg as thinly veiled renditions of Hillary Clinton and Dee Dee Myers.

I have trouble accepting the premise that fictional characters whose origins lie in real-life people are bound by stereotype. While Abby and C. J. each experience their share of stereotypical storylines (Off the top of my head, I'm thinking of Abby's turn as the sedative-needing hysterical parent while Jed handles Zoe's kidnapping more calmly, or of C. J.'s need to deal with rumors that she is a lesbian because she played high school basketball), these are more the function of less-than-imaginative storytelling than of any purposeful campaign to box either the characters or their real-life counterparts into oversimplified frames of perception. As any fictionalist must, Sorkin begins with something recognizable, and then grows a new thing from there. The simple recognition of his beginning material ought not to be a jumping-off point for negative criticism.

The reason this point matters is that, as Sorkin's career has begun to focus on biographical films (of which *Charlie Wilson*, *Social Network*, and his upcoming *Moneyball* are all examples), the amount of

that recognizable material has increased; there isn't that much else to go on. It would be a shame to hamstring the critical response to these films by employing a reductive hermeneutic.

John Nein closes the collection in Chapter 12 with "The Republic of Sorkin: A View from the Cheap Seats." In it, he considers the gap between the idealism woven into Sorkin's work and the complexities of the topics it addresses. Nein focuses primarily on Sorkin's political stories (*A Few Good Men*, *American President*, *West Wing*), coming away with a generally positive view of the way Sorkin balances these two poles.

In one example, Nein discusses complexity in light of one of Sorkin's worst scenes. He references the Equatorial Kundo storyline from Season 4 of *The West Wing*, which features Bartlet weighing, over the course of several episodes, a decision over whether to risk American troops to stop a burgeoning genocide in a small (fictional) African nation. The particular scene features the White House staff reflecting on their own bravery in choosing to act, weightily quoting from Margaret Mead's now too-trodden line that one should "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; it's the only thing that ever has." Nein's contention is that a lapse into hackery like that is excusable because Sorkin has "walked the long route," as he has depicted for episodes the staff's personal and patriotic agonizing that has gone into making the decision.

I agree that any writer, and certainly one cranking out a television script every week, deserves to have grace that has been earned through prior brilliance applied to excuse his weaker moments. Still, it would be worthwhile to examine how much Sorkin's recent writing has relied on grace earned earlier. *Charlie Wilson* certainly doesn't "walk the long route" when stock Soviet footage replaces original character work in battle scenes; nor does *Social Network* whenever the Winklevosses' static, goonish helplessness takes the air out of the tense conversations that have typically been Sorkin's wheelhouse. A critical recovery of complexity in Sorkin's recent scripts is necessary, because the complexity is the most prized element of Sorkin's writing in terms of how it guides our mass culture's notion of how communicating ought to work. As Nein so worthily articulates:

At a time when American popular entertainment has (like American politics) consciously avoided moral complexity, Sorkin has embraced it. His films as well as *The West Wing* are about America the Difficult. This distinction between complex and simple storytelling is hardly trivial. These are the stories we use to think through our society. It's no wonder we expect easy answers from politics. Why would we expect the world to be complicated when most of the stories we tell and the news we see are not? (p. 202)

All told, the array of critiques and critical frames in this collection help to uncover some of that complexity, and in so doing, they make *Considering Aaron Sorkin: Essays on the Politics, Poetics and Sleight of Hand in the Films and Television Series* an important guidebook for applying the lessons of fiction to the broader study of communications.