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Book Review

Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images

Kristen Hoerl


Forty years after his assassination, the memory of President Kennedy continues to grip the popular imagination. Recently, media and scholarly attention to the memory of John F. Kennedy has been evidenced in television documentaries and books that have recalled his presidency, his personal life, and his assassination. In Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images, David M. Lubin explores photographs of Kennedy to understand Kennedy’s popularity with the American public. Lubin, a professor of art, argues that Kennedy was significant not only for his political role as president but because he became an icon of twentieth-century postwar America. By describing the symbolic significance of photographs of President Kennedy, Lubin provides a new avenue for understanding why memories of Kennedy have not dissipated in popular culture.

But Lubin’s book is not exactly focused on either Kennedy or images of him. As the author notes in his introduction, John F. Kennedy is really a pretext for a book about the relationship between popular culture and U.S. history after World War II (x). Throughout his book, Lubin describes a range of cultural texts including films, television programs, and novels that Lubin believes guided the ways that audiences might have ascribed cultural significance to John and Jacqueline Kennedy when they viewed photographs of them. According to Lubin, photographs of the Kennedys tap into the images that resonate broadly within Western culture. Jacqueline Kennedy, Lubin argues, became an icon of feminine beauty because Hollywood beauties including Doris Day, Elizabeth Taylor, and Marilyn Monroe formed part of the context for the public’s perception of the first lady (14).
Likewise, Lubin explains that stills of Kennedy’s assassination from the Zapruder film became aesthetic objects and consumer commodities because they resonated with modern art, theatre, and film that attested to the uncertainty and precariousness of human existence after World War II (181–88). For Lubin, parallels in imagery and ideas between texts are not merely coincidental; instead, he argues, they signify the “political consciousness at work within a modern image culture” (170).

Chapters in Shooting Kennedy are arranged according to the photographs that mark the trajectory of John F. Kennedy’s political career and relationship with Jacqueline. Individual chapters provide detailed descriptions of one or two photographs that signify a particular moment when Kennedy captured national attention, including his courtship with Jacqueline, his inauguration, and his funeral procession. Lubin then describes how these photographs resonate with images and ideas in the art world and in contemporary commercial media, including films, television programs, and advertisements. This book’s focus on the intersections between the Kennedys’ lives and the social context of mid-century America would compel audiences interested in President Kennedy’s personal life, the cultural legacy that informed his leadership, and what he symbolized for America during the 1960s. For example, Lubin argues that books about heroic adventurers such as fictional character James Bond and historic figure Lord Byron, both of whom Kennedy was fond of, shaped Kennedy’s political ambitions and attitudes toward his sexuality with women (108–13). Likewise, Lubin argues that the Kinsey report and popular books written by feminists at the end of the 1950s must have some bearing on Jacqueline’s attitude toward her marriage to John Kennedy (60–65). By focusing on texts that influenced or were likely to have influenced the presidential couple, Lubin suggests that John and Jacqueline Kennedy were themselves products of high art and popular culture in twentieth-century America.

This book would also be of interest to readers of Rhetoric & Public Affairs who study the rhetorical and political functions of visual images. By drawing connections between photographs of Kennedy and seemingly unrelated texts, Lubin suggests that individual images achieve their iconic status because of the legacy of images and popular texts that have come before them. For instance, he asserts that to understand photographs of Kennedy’s inauguration, we must also attend to films such as Citizen Kane and marble statues of Caesar Augustus (ca. 20 B.C.), which also evoke Western culture’s most deeply ingrained notions about leadership and nobility (97). The myriad of cultural texts that Lubin describes as salient to understanding photographs of Kennedy demonstrates that the meaning of any individual text is constructed not only within the social context in which it appears, but intertextually, through its similarities to other texts that resonate broadly within a culture.

Lubin’s attention to this wide variety of cultural texts distinguishes his book from a host of books about Kennedy; however, it is not always easy to distinguish Lubin’s central argument from the many details he provides to describe the interconnections among these texts. Although Lubin suggests that each chapter is about the cultural images and ideas that contribute to the meaning of photographs of Kennedy, Lubin is more successful at demonstrating that all popular texts constructed in the United States after World War II may somehow be connected with each other. In chapter 5, Lubin argues that images of John and Jacqueline Kennedy riding in a motorcade on the day of the shooting reminded audiences of the Clampets, who rode into Beverly Hills in an old jalopy during the opening
to the popular television program *The Beverly Hillbillies*. Chapter 5 then describes Kennedy’s awareness of rural poverty in the United States, and other mass media entertainment set in Appalachia. Indeed, *The Beverly Hillbillies* and John Kennedy’s domestic policy initiatives both recognized problems of poverty in rural America, but the image of hoodless automobiles does not directly relate to images of poverty. By linking texts through their loose associations with one another, Lubin unwittingly articulates a variation on the game Six Degrees of Separation, where players tie two seemingly unconnected celebrities together through their associations with other celebrities. The ingenuity of this game, at least in theory, is that everyone on earth can be affiliated with someone else through their relationships with other people. Likewise, Lubin demonstrates that every text in popular culture may also be connected to another text, including a photograph of Kennedy, by association or resemblance to other texts in popular culture. These associations don’t always prove that texts preceding photographs of Kennedy shaped how audiences understood Kennedy.

Despite these limitations, *Shooting Kennedy* is a fascinating book and well worth reading. Lubin writes beautifully about the connections between these texts. His analysis of the resemblances between art in the history of Western culture and photographs of President Kennedy demonstrates that visual images have legacies that they draw from when they become salient to contemporary popular culture. Likewise, his elucidation of the ways that texts in politics and popular culture intersect in unexpected ways suggests that works of art and politics are inevitably entangled, for they are both part of a broader narrative about a common cultural heritage.

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