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CAMELOT: THE VIOLENCE AND THE ECSTASY

Abstract. “Camelot” is a term of containment. I discuss how it subsumes the epistemological wound created by the mysteries surrounding JFK’s death, anxiety around cold war tensions, a technological frontier, the embrace of a charismatic figure who in 1960 Norman Mailer called Superman, and the mystique of Jackie Kennedy, particularly stemming from her strategic silences.

Key words: Arthurian legends, Cold War, charisma, nostalgia, Superman, Jacqueline Kennedy

Even though the word wasn’t uttered during Kennedy’s presidency, “Camelot” is invoked seamlessly as the assumption of something that once was, and never will be again. Yet Camelot is a spongy and ill-defined cultural memory, summoned to suggest something imprecise but impossibly good; it is an opaque cultural currency (it has exchange value but no use value) that begs to be explored. In looking at this phenomenon symptomatically I argue that what inaugurated Camelot is what isn’t known and can’t be said about the assassination. The 26-second Zapruder footage shows the side of JFK’s head explode in a livid spray of red blood, yet, so much is still suppressed in this graphic rendition of the assassination. We still don’t know who killed JFK nor why. Camelot is thus a term of containment and ripe for amplification. In this essay I try to open up the term and reveal its many connotations, referents and repressed material. We know the Arthurian legends place great stock on narratives of fidelity, respect, deference and stories and characters which cohere around them. I want to contrast those mythical accounts with the Kennedy narratives whose defining feature is that they will not cohere: they point to a presidential body whose cultural autopsy at once reveals too much and too little. Camelot, a term that won’t go away, harnesses all that isn’t known and remains unspoken yet which spills out in disguised form. It appears to hinge on nostalgia, but in this paper I argue that Camelot is a metonym for cultural anxiety and a utopian space that never was, hence something that cannot be articulated. The truth of the assassination returns to a critical silence (Oswald’s death secured that), as conspiracy theories amply underscore. Camelot is thus dense with tension,

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desire, impossibility, a future nostalgia: above all, what wants to, but can’t be, uttered. No accident that it is associated with Jacqueline Kennedy who notoriously remained silent on the assassination and her life with JFK.

Camelot as a utopian space is characterized by containment in several senses. It contains (and exposes) the epistemological wound created by the mysteries surrounding JFK’s death, anxiety around cold war tensions, a technological frontier, the embrace of a charismatic figure who in 1960 Norman Mailer called Superman, and by the mystique of Jackie Kennedy, particularly stemming from her strategic silences. She still stands for the ineffable in Dallas in 1963. She was beside JFK in the car when he was assassinated but never spoke publically about that after the interview with Theodore White (1963) in which she coined the term. She rarely spoke, but her use of the word “Camelot” has resonated for 50 years. And she didn’t emit tears when JFK died, something for which is praised. This real and metaphoric embodied containment is underwritten by Camelot.

How did it begin? Seven days after the assassination, on November 29th, 1963, Jacqueline Kennedy requested an interview with journalist and author Theodore White. In ‘An Epilogue,’ which accompanied White’s article on the President, Jackie spoke of many things only some of which were published. The thrust of White’s narrative centers on Jackie’s distrust of official historians who she saw as poised to cannibalize the President’s record and others’ personal memories of him. ‘History! ... it’s what those bitter old men write,’ she said. White recounts that her telling of the story was a stream of consciousness, told without tears, a “recitative to herself.” He notes that Jackie had to “rid herself of the blood scene” (White, 1978: 676). She said, “I kept holding the top of his head down, trying to keep the brains in … his blood, his brains … all over me.” But what she also pressed upon White was a view of history that belongs to heroes who must not be forgotten. Claiming to be “ashamed” to say what she summoned White to hear, but also “obsessed,” Jackie continues with the anecdotal comments which have since that time subsumed the Kennedy presidency under one mythical word. She noted that Jack liked to listen to records before falling asleep and “the lines he loved to hear” were these two from the Lerner and Loewe musical: “Don’t let it be forgot/that once there was a spot/for one brief shining moment that was known as Camelot.” She continues in her own words, “There’ll never be another Camelot again” (White, 1963: 158–159). Jackie invokes in a rambling fashion the potent myth of the self-made man, coincident with the idea of the fallen martyr. She describes Jack as “simple” and yet “complex,” a “lonely, sick little boy … scarlet fever … this little boy sick so much of the time, reading in bed, reading history … reading the Knights of the Round Table. 

... and he just liked that last song.” The President here is every little American boy, who by force of will and emulation, crafts himself in the image of one who overcomes adversity to become a hero. Much attention had been paid to JFK’s back injury, surgery, his navy experiences which included his being shipwrecked for a few days, his survival unknown, and his chronic back pain until his death (Hamilton, 1992). This is an Oedipal narrative in which the youthful boy sets out to slay what is in his path, whether a real or imagined father figure, or something else in the way of his rightful destiny. This was the first reference to Camelot, made by any Kennedy, or anybody, and yet it retroactively stands for a presumed and yet indiscernible era and mood.

Norman Mailer (1960/2001: 10) captures that mood in his 1960 report on the Democratic National Convention by situating Kennedy’s elusive yet ineluctable appeal within the tensions generated by America’s “double life.” For much of the twentieth century, he wrote, that life has

... moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground: There has been the history of politics, which is concrete, factual, practical, and unbelievably dull... and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely, and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.

Untapped and ferocious desires: these are what seep into the cool veneer of the imagined Camelot. Camelot needs its subterranean infrastructure, the dungeons which imperfectly contain its smouldering undercurrents. It wouldn’t be Camelot without these. The reverence for metaphoric containment is at its heart and it settles on, among others, the fetishization of the boundary – call it a frontier – and thus what seeps through. When Mailer (1960/2001: 4) refers to the “madnesses of the country” in 1960 he is channelling the enduring mythical ethos of the Arthurian legends. Mailer’s perception of madness points to the tensions between the apparent real and the imperceptible and which attach to abstract cold war boundaries and a charismatic leader whose presence will syphon those tensions. Mailer’s prescience is in foreseeing the explosive centre that negotiates present, past and future. Note the emphasis on the necessary contradictions – ecstasy and violence – that sustain the Kennedy aura. The strange affinity between modern America and the narratives of Camelot centres on the frisson created when the surface calm spars with the clandestine movement beneath it and results in an inevitable rupture. The Arthurian legends and “Camelot,” though in their hackneyed form in a Broadway musical, provide the grammar for that explosion. Let us turn to them first.
Legendary “Camelot” pre-Camelot

The Arthurian legends are narratives of tradition, the formal elements of style and appearance, and a fixed dominion of rank, responsibility and privilege: “the highest model for emulation” (Bulfinch, 1934: 304). A model perhaps, but Bulfinch is quick to point out that in practice the force of instrumentality prevails so that “justice administered” can as easily reveal its dialectical darker side, i.e., that

dungeons were full of oppressed knights and ladies, waiting for some champion to appear to set them free, or to be ransomed with money; that hosts of idle retainers were ever at hand to enforce their lord’s behests, regardless of law and justice...

There is also courtly love: honour, obedience and faithfulness, “service is its own reward and no joy is necessarily implied” (McCarthy, 1988: 56). Love, within this formal code, is characterized by impossibility and suffering: the exceptionally beautiful women are unavailable to their suitors. Lancelot, for example, is in love with Arthur’s wife Guenevere. Love, in any case, is virtuous, a test, a trial existing outside the feudal union of marriage, a romance at odds with knightly endeavour. Love is a “fellowship at heart,” the quest for a grail, an ideal.

We can say that the Kennedys’ Camelot opens onto the triad, and the trials, of Arthur, Guenevere and Lancelot. Arthur of course was killed. Or was he? It is rather fitting that “Camelot” figures in the legend Morte d’Arthur where Arthur is born to be king and, as the title suggests, narrative climax occurs with his death. Yet, readings of Mallory’s Morte d’Arthur indicate that Arthur, though struck by Modred’s sword, is carried away still alive. Bulfinch notes that some say King Arthur is not dead but hidden, and that he shall return one day to reign over England. Still many say the inscription on his tombstone reads: “Here Arthur lies, King once and King to be” (Bulfinch, 1934: 432). This investment in the physically wounded (or even dead) yet symbolically renewable figure fits well with the legendary destiny that runs through the discursive construction of the death, life and after-life of President Kennedy. Jacqueline Kennedy is a crucial part of this construction.

Sarah Bradford’s 2000 biography of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is titled America’s Queen. The references to an oblique kind of royal destiny are many and they go back to her time as First Lady. A journalist in 1961 referred to the “new U. S. Royal Family” with a new baby, “Prince Jack” (Bergquist, 1961: 62). During a trip to New York a member of the crowd gushed about Jacqueline, “She’s like a princess ... She’s the closest thing to royalty an American girl can be” (“First Lady,” 1961: 26). On her goodwill visit to India
and Pakistan in 1962 some locals referred to her as “Queen of America” ("The Administration," 1962: 13). To speak of “royalty” in this way is to put into motion a few manoeuvres. One is that of elusiveness itself. America has never had a royal family but it does have Hollywood. But the separation between Royals and celebrities and ordinary citizens puts the former beyond reach and ripe for iconic configuration. Yet when the Kennedys are referred to in this way it is with the wish to preserve a metaphoric court – for a select few, there by dominion – with us as loyal subjects. A desire for courtliness is the desire for symbol above all else, and the way symbols tap and structure cultural meanings. But the subversions of that structure – the affairs, the scandals, the eavesdropped telephone calls – are deviations which underscore the code and these are also desired.

As noted above, the Arthurian kingdom is structured by role, station and responsibility; what matters is one’s rank, not personal motivation or private conscience. Arthur is served by his knights but Lancelot’s duty was also to answer to Guenevere. Both Arthur and Lancelot had relationships, even children, with several women. In contrast to mundane amorous pursuits, courtly love is faithful love, an alliance, and the only “proper motivating force for a knight… one facet of that loyal service” (McCarthy, 1988: 58). Lancelot is chivalrous; his actions are virtuous, morally chaste. In the age of courtesy, it is knightly privilege to love, but in the courtly service of a mistress. This service is the “glory and occupation of a knight,” his mistress’s “smiles, bestowed at once by affection and gratitude” and “held out as the recompense of his well-directed valor” (Bulfinch, 1934: 305). In modern parlance, the knight/Lancelot is disciplined by, among others, the gaze of his mistress, the return of the smile, or the longing for it even in its elusiveness. And what if the gaze isn’t returned, if she won’t look back? Dominick Dunne (1994: 61) wrote, Jackie would have “her eyes raised just high enough to avoid eye contact, in the celebrity manner of seeing but not seeing called blindsight.” I want to argue that we are Lancelot, desirous of what may lie behind Jackie’s reflecting but not revealing sunglasses, and thus “faithful, obedient and long-suffering” (McCarthy, 1988: 56). Her refusal to speak, “the stylishness of her privacy” (Morrow, 1994: 66), makes us obedient ventriloquists who hopelessly implore her to speak by speaking for her. When she died she had more listings in the Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature than any other living American woman (Thomas, 1994: 40).

**Camelot as (future) nostalgia**

Much of what is connoted in “Camelot” is nostalgia, a gaze longingly projected backwards. But Susan Stewart (1993: 23) writes that nostalgia is “sadness without an object”, a yearning that doesn’t call on lived experiences but
rather the past as reimagined in narrative form. Stewart (1993: 23) argues nostalgia

_like any form of narrative, is always ideological: the past it seeks has never existed except as narrative, and hence, always absent, that past continually threatens to reproduce itself as felt lack. Hostile to history and its invisible origins, and yet longing for an impossibly pure context of lived experience at a place of origin, nostalgia wears a distinctly utopian face, a face that turns toward a future-past, a past which has only ideological reality._

This “utopian face” of nostalgia is reflected in the way JFK’s presidency is perceived after the fact. He died while still in office thus assuring his future promise could be repeatedly imagined. Camelot is this utopian future-past, a reunion predicated on an impossible foreclosure. Camelot is the wistful and imprecise imagining of things that cannot be (and thus unattainable desires are kept in place, desire itself is kept open and alive). Mike Reynolds (2001: 84) calls this the “dream-like fecundity” of the Kennedy assassination.

Charisma

Garry Wills (1983: 285) writes that the Kennedys

..._rightly dazzled America. We thought it was our own light being reflected back on us. The charismatic claims looked natural to a charismatic country. America, we like to think, has been specially ‘graced’. Set apart ...If we kept ourself isolated from others, it was to avoid contamination._

Charisma: _charis – grace, favour or gift, the perception of extraordinary power. Its essence can’t be put into words. The charismatic individual, according to Max Weber (1947/2005: 217), appears to be extraordinary himself “regardless of whether this quality is actual, alleged or presumed.” Charismatic authority is not given, or tied to tradition, faith, job or career. It is attached to the person, not the office, and seems adrift from all forms of rational organization. Those with charismatic authority appear to have a mission, stand outside normal rules and routines and they need and garner followers. As early as 1953, JFK was described as having an “elusive quality,” “blithe and buoyant” with “exterior nonchalance” making “people want to do something for him” (Healy, 1953: 27, 126, 123). During the 1960 campaign _Time_ magazine (“Candidate,” 1960) noted he was “endowed” with charisma. He could reach “with no apparent effort into a first-class mind ...” (“Candidate,” 1960). My point is to suggest that these words partake of the..._
rhetorical construction of a charismatic persona, one defined by the indefinable.

Conditions have to be ripe for the willing reception of the charismatic. His special powers grow from special dangers, thus, instability is necessary so the charismatic figure can prove himself. Weber (1947/1968: 22) writes: “If he wants to be a prophet he must perform miracles; if he wants to be a war lord, he must perform heroic deeds.” Indeed, JFK (1960a: 70B) in an essay in *Life* magazine, written a few months before his election in 1960, writes of the “arrival at a potential crisis point” whose resolution will be found in the underscoring of the “national purpose” (a phrase used 10 times), a purpose committed to “constant, restless, confident questing ... struggling, striving, searching. Quest has always been the dominant note of our history.” Kennedy (1960a: 73) asks the rhetorical question, “What does it mean to be an American?” in these “harsh times” in which “our enemies will not weaken.” The question and the context invoke an American “destiny,” momentum and inevitability that attach to the charismatic figure. And thus Kennedy (1960a: 73) writes, “Upon us, destiny has lavished special favors of liberty and opportunity...” Shortly after the 1960 election (in an Olympic year) Kennedy (1960b) penned “The Soft American,” for *Sports Illustrated* magazine in which he outlines government-sponsored plans to devise and implement programs to encourage the fitness, health and “vigor” of American citizens. Kennedy’s rhetoric takes up the idiom of national defence and aligns the physical body with the “vitality of a nation.” He notes the relevance of “physical soundness” for “victory on the battlefields” but also sharpens this view as he directs it toward the Communist “enemy,” that “implacable adversary.” Too many Americans, he warns, are “getting soft” and “sound bodies” are necessary for “hardy spirits and tough minds,” the mental acuity and determination to take on a relentless foe (Kennedy, 1960b: 15–17). Kennedy is on the cover of the magazine; Jackie is standing beside him.

Kennedy’s charisma coexists with, and flourished in, a time of barely-suppressed anxiety: he was a figure who absorbed and exposed the tensions of the early 60s. The New Frontier was a response to the 50s characterized by the “boredom one senses on all sides, the torpor, the anxiety, the listlessness” (Podhoretz in Dallek, 2003: 274). Boredom and anxiety: at once, they bear all the signs of local ennui and an edgy need to re-direct that anxiety (toward Russia, Cuba, Germany). Kennedy will refer in his acceptance speech at the convention to the upcoming election choice between “the fresh air of progress and the stale, dank atmosphere of ‘normalcy’” (in Sorensen, 1965: 167). The courtliness of the Kennedy White House was an indictment of the mass production, conformity and homogenization of the 50s. The restoration of the interior of the presidential home – Jackie’s project – was designed to recapture the “authentic reminders” of those Americans.
who had lived there (Sidey, 1961: 62). The Kennedy White House was fashioned around authenticity; its conceit was that of the court, complete with invited guests representing the worlds of history, letters, entertainment, the power of language and narrative. This is ordered courtliness at a time of generalized though subterranean anxiety. No wonder that Robert Frost referred to the incumbent Kennedy presidency as the embodiment of the “glory of a next Augustan age,” an age of duty, respect, fortitude, and self-sacrifice for the larger good: these all have their own mythical force. Frost wrote “Dedication” for Kennedy’s inauguration and whose last lines are “a golden age of poetry and power.”

**Kennedy the “cybernetic president”:**

Both the “New Frontier” – the self-titled Kennedy administration – and Camelot are a dream, specifically of a technological future. International responses to the assassination of Kennedy reveal that the time was seen as the American Century, the United States as “the metropolis of their civilization” (Costigliola, 1986: 115). In his study of European reactions to the assassination, Frank C. Costigliola (1986: 119) notes that Kennedy was the “personification of the future,” with “the promise of a technological future firmly in human control.” Costigliola (1986: 119) documents responses from as early as Nov. 23rd, 1963 and notes that Europeans saw Kennedy as “Christ of the computer age” with a “dry, rational, computer-oriented approach to problems.” Britain’s *The Spectator* mourned the loss of the message “that politics could still be significant in a technological age” (Costigliola, 1986: 120). A Polish writer nominated Kennedy a “cybernetic president” (Costigliola, 1986: 120). The future was ‘a brief and shining moment’ not yet achieved but based on the promise of scientific mastery. This is nostalgia as longing without an object.

The New Frontier emerges not from Kennedy’s own New England roots but from the West, specifically Los Angeles California, pointedly Hollywood. In 1960 Norman Mailer wrote that both Los Angeles and Kennedy captured the aura of the time, but an aura is ungraspable and so Mailer uses metaphor. Los Angeles,

> this land of the pretty-pretty... its milky pinks, its washed-out oranges, its tainted lime-yellows of pastel on one pretty little architectural monstrosity after another ... it is all open, promiscuous, borrowed, half-bought, a city without iron, eschewing wood, a kingdom of stucco, the playground for mass men – one has the feeling it was built by television sets giving orders to men (Mailer, 1960/2001: 5).
This palate of vibrating pastels is the “town the Democrats came to” (and inaugurated the blue glow of televised politics thereafter) (Mailer, 1960/2001: 5). Mailer captures that Hollywood light-saturated imaginary, the lustre, veneer, the plastified inauthenticity. But he calls it a town, suggesting a still-small town built on indescribable pursuit, restlessness and movement itself. The New Frontier was indeed that – no history but a frontier, and in America that means, along with real and metaphoric space and real and metaphoric technology (Kennedy said the US would put a man on the moon before the end of the decade), movement Westward. Invoking how the West was established, Mailer (1960/2001: 5) writes the contemporary Democratic party is a “crazy half-rich family, loaded with poor cousins, travelling always in caravans with Cadillacs and Okie Fords, Lincolns and quarter-horse mules, putting up every night in tents …” This is a frontier which harkens a ruggedly individualistic past and which harnesses an elusive and iridescent future. The frontier is about expansion, possibility, and hope. JFK’s acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention invokes the West as more than geographic space:

... I stand tonight facing west on what was once the last frontier. From the lands that stretch three thousand miles behind me, the pioneers of old gave up their safety, their comfort and sometimes their lives to build a new world here in the West. They were not captives of their own doubts, the prisoners of their own price tags. Their motto was not ‘every man for himself’ – but ‘all for the common cause’ ... We stand today on the edge of a New Frontier – the frontier of the 1960s – a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils – a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats (in Dallek, 2003: 275–76).

Perils, hopes in formation and threats: the town is re-assembled around new boundaries, geographic, demographic, and ideological. The New Frontier was an apt mythic foil for Kennedy, himself who came from away: Catholic, Irish, his father’s wealth self-made (those *nouveau riche* “poor cousins”). He emerged as a super-man, poised on the edge of a new decade.

**Superman**

Norman Mailer referred to the Kennedy promise as “superman comes to the supermarket.” *Superman*: a pop-culture superhero icon. And like many superheroes, he is a masked avenger: accessible – he shows up when you need him – but not fully knowable. An immigrant, he needs a dual identity (Fingeroth, 2004: 53; Reynolds, 1992). No accident that Superman’s narrative is christened by his orphan status: as an orphan he is obligated to craft
his own provenance yet is still an outsider. Kennedy was the first Catholic president of the United States, and this was considered its own kind of foreignness. But it is the metaphoric features of the alien which resonated then and still do in the resurrection of Camelot. The figure of the superhero – like the charismatic – is without origins and arrives out of nowhere. He makes a flash appearance but must disappear just as quickly. His alien masked-ness adds to his allure. We (need to) invent him as he invents himself; yet, aloof from us, he is unattainable. Both Superman and Arthur are symbolically renewable. The King is Dead, Long Live the King: Superman always returns. And he re-makes himself in relative anonymity – recall Clark Kent is the invented identity, not the other way around. Although Superman is always reinvented as the same, his story points to an unspecified future but a future nonetheless. He must live up to his acclaim, his narrative is forward-driven: once and always an orphan, he is a youth whose adult unravels from within. He can only associate with those who are perceived to hold the same mythical values of truth and justice. There is a “strictly delineated moral code … limited by the type of man that Superman must inevitably become. Specifically, Clark cannot remain good friends with any person who could negatively influence the moral integrity of the future Superman” (McManus and Waitman, 2007: 183, emphasis mine).

Bunkers

The streamlining of fears into a manageable object/enemy is one essence of both the cold war and the Kennedy mystique. Cold war tensions are revealed in the starkest prose in the early 1960s and thus anchor the immateriality of “Camelot” in the specifics of place and time. In September 1961 Life magazine carried an editorial from President Kennedy to accompany an article and photo spread on fallout shelters. The letter, article and illustrations are rife with viral fear (“these dangerous days”), inflammatory predictions (“you could be among the 97% to survive if you follow advice on these pages”), and sweeping but unspecific pronouncements (“we must prepare for all eventualities”) (1961: 95). The piece is about real and metaphoric containment, shelters as the responsibility of the “solid, sensible man – and a responsible citizen (“Fallout Shelters,” 1961: 96). The solid and responsible citizen is in control of his fears and aware of his adversaries. This is the unseen Camelot with its dungeons, secrets, machinations and blueprints for the shelters. JFK (1961: 95) writes that “nuclear weapons and the possibility of nuclear war are facts of life we cannot ignore today.” He notes the government will develop “improved warning systems which will make it possible to sound attack warnings on buzzers right in your homes and places of business.” Action is needed, he goes on, “to protect yourself – and in doing
so strengthen your nation... The ability to survive coupled with the will to do so therefore are essential to our country.” The editorial’s language points to the cultural preoccupation with urgency, civic identity, threats, the hope for nothing short of survival. The images of safe and happy children in the bunkers rub up against the accompanying text with its fearful insistence on a possibly immanent crisis. Readers are warned with pungency:

*It is likely that any attack will come at night while you are at home – so the enemy will have daylight to prepare for the retaliation. (When it is midnight in New York, it is 8 a.m. in Moscow.) ... There is no guarantee that any of your defenses – or even the nation’s defenses – will be adequate if the enemy attacks all-out with complete surprise. But they will increase your odds. And every family shelter will contribute to the nation’s total deterrent. For if the U.S. is so well prepared that it cannot be knocked out, the enemy may never attack (“Fallout Shelters,” 1961: 97).*

References to Jacqueline Kennedy as a “propaganda weapon” who has “created unrest behind the iron curtain” (Bergquist, 1961: 61, 62) are part of this rhetorical construction of national security, vigour and vigilance. Jackie’s fit with the atomic age is underscored by the description of her hat and coat as “radioactive pink” (Bowles, 2001: 140; Dherbier and Verlhac, 2004: 100).

### The containment of Jacqueline Kennedy: a body without orifices

Elaine Tyler May (1988: 92–113) writes of the connection between atomic age anxiety and fears of communism, that is, fears of seduction by an ‘other’, often translated into the fear of unbound female sexuality. Jackie, as an icon of self-restraint, could contain those fears. She wasn’t written about or perceived as sexual at all, much less a siren. The Onassis interlude – and the name that sticks, Jackie O – is assumed to be her one lapse into embodied desire. That is: the unwavering body of Jacqueline Kennedy – steadfast, still, unbowed and courageous – is itself a symbol of a frontier. What she comprises isn’t overtly specified and that is the point. She is an enigma: she told nothing beyond benign comments to the Warren Commission and those to Theodore White. Jackie took secrets to her grave – real or imagined; she wouldn’t speak of her feelings about the assassination, wouldn’t reveal her suspicions or opinions on it or any aspect of her personal life. Her silence has turned out a culture of ventriloquists to speak on her behalf: dozens of biographies have appeared since her death.

As a metaphor of feminine containment Jackie Kennedy embodies the
contradictions of Camelot. At her own funeral in May of 1994 President Clinton said that during the service and ceremonies for JFK she gave the nation a model of how to grieve. In fact, she is famous for not crying there. She kept inside whatever she may have felt and for this she was lauded. Her demeanour is noted as “still,” “unbowed” and brave; she walked with a “sure stride,” her “head held high” “with matchless courage ... silent strength ...She never faltered...” (McCordle, 1963: C16). She was “erect” (Lewis, 1963: 5; Wicker, 1963: 2). From the Washington Post (McCordle, 1963: C16): “she never wept.” The live footage of the funeral, and any of the still photos that are in wide circulation, reveal that Jackie Kennedy never openly wept; she doesn’t even touch her eyes. Her demeanour is never unscripted; it is rather an act of will, moreover a performance. An obituary of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis in the Toronto Globe and Mail observes, “... she delivered for the Kennedy image-makers by being silent … Jacqueline Kennedy didn’t betray a thing in public” (Smith, 1994: D1). What is of interest is not whether she did or did not cry, but rather the unswerving focus on her metaphoric austerity. No accident that in discussing the funeral David Lubin (2003: 255) invokes the ancient story of Agrippina, “the noble widow who restrains her emotions at a time of communal grief.” If Jackie’s nobility and “majesty” (Campbell, 1963: 1) are remarked upon it is because we need her that way. The London Evening Standard noted that although Jackie “had suffered horrors enough to send most women to the limbo land of Ophelia” she “never swerved since the second bullet hit Kennedy. At that moment she came into her own ... a Grecian heroine” (Campbell, 1963: 32).

Jackie’s withholding of tears is tantamount to silence and her enduring silence fed that fascination. She is a model of composure – an emotional bunker – an icon of security and a symbol of order. Her contained body – a body without orifices – is firm, respectful of boundaries, a body that doesn’t leak. It is an opaque body.

Jackie’s opaque body is primed for interrogation, its subterranean river begging to be heard. Consider another anecdote, a foil for a repressed investment in her body (that body which wouldn’t speak). Jackie wore a pink pillbox hat in Dallas but in the photograph of Johnson’s swearing-in as President (a couple of hours after JFK’s death) she isn’t wearing it. William Manchester wonders about the missing hat in a way that returns to Jackie’s revered and impenetrable body. Manchester (1967: 186) understands the missing hat, almost always included in descriptions of what she wore in Dallas, this way:

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2 Though she is criticized for not crying at Aristotle Onassis’s funeral 15 years later; Kelley, 1979:359; Davis, 1986: 8; Evans, 1988: 313–314; Andersen, 1998: 294; Tracy, 2008: 216).
... The Lincoln flew down the boulevard's central lane; her pillbox hat, caught in an eddy of whipping wind, slid down over her forehead, and with a violent movement she yanked it off and flung it down. The hatpin tore out a hank of her own hair. She didn’t even feel the pain.

Jackie’s secretary (Gallagher, 1969: 322) writes she “was handed Jackie’s pillbox hat and couldn’t help noticing the strands of her hair beneath the hatpin. I could almost visualize her yanking it from her head.” The scene is repeated elsewhere (Fowler, 1996: 257; Andersen, 1998: 4) reflecting the need for the replication of certain details. That is, Jacqueline Kennedy’s body, already usurped by Camelot by the time these lines were written, is the classical body of opaque surfaces: nothing is let in and nothing is emitted. Writing about Ethel Rosenberg and her execution in 1953 for being a communist spy (a cold warrior of another kind), Carol Hurd Green (1995: 188) argues “the physical body that can feel pain is denied in order to rationalize its expendability.” Ethel Rosenberg and her husband Julius were sentenced to die in the electric chair; the story goes that Ethel required more injections to die than did Julius, the assumption being that Ethel had an “unseemly” and “ferocious” will, i.e., not that he gave in but that she wouldn’t. Will versus flesh, mind over body: Ethel’s mind won, defeating the lesser side of the binary. “The veneer never cracked,” she “radiated strength and restraint,” “She was white-faced but dry-eyed” (Bartlett in Andersen, 1998: 24; Duffy, 1994: 16; Smith, 1963: 33). This is how Jacqueline Kennedy is described after JFK is shot and at his funeral.

Jackie Kennedy’s body is plumbed for the assumption of its secrets, prised open for discursive appropriation. Hence, the curious interest in what she ate. A “witness” for the Warren Commission (1964: 79) is asked, for no apparent reason, what Jackie Kennedy ate and drank on the plane back to Washington. This interest – what she let in – accompanies interest in what she (didn’t) let out. Fascination turns to imagining what her appetites were and what they could withstand (how much metaphoric hair-yanking was possible). One biographer (Klein, 1998: 364–365) notes Jackie “plowed through every single dessert” on the restaurant table. Or, in her obituary (Duffy, 1994: 25): “…she lunched at her desk on carrot and celery sticks.” Attention to what Jackie ate, a feature of almost every biography of her, is an attempt to mine Jackie’s interiors for her cravings, her uncontrollable – and controlled – desires, below the surface of her calm exterior. These are Jackie’s two rivers. And interest in them stems from her location within the cold war bunkers of the early 60s, bunkers which literalize and fetishize containment.
Camelot performed: Broadway 1963

Of course the Camelot directly invoked in Jackie’s comments is the Broadway production of 1960. By all accounts this “ambitiously rich musical melange” (Kerr, 1960) offered up “fresh dimensions of illusion” (Taubman, 1960). The utterly fabulous visual effect is one of “ornamentation” (Aston, 1960), “pageantry and spectacle” (Coleman, 1960), of “uninhibited splendor” (Aston, 1960). However, while the overall effect is “magnificent and lovely” (Chapman, 1960), “beautiful to behold” (McClain, 1960), it is still an “expensive disappointment” (Coleman, 1960), taken as rather hokey: “it shore is purty!” (McClain, 1960). It has sprites darting about, the “accent on the stupendous is so much in evidence that when Julie Andrews works on some needlepoint her thread seems eight feet long and strong enough to restrain a tuna” (Aston, 1960). Enchantment maybe, but the effect was “dry rot” (Pryce-Jones, 1961: 9). The production is lavish and over-the-top, sentimental, favouring the “spurious intimacy of Broadway” (Taubman, 1960:42) and fidelity to ambitious exaggeration. This is Camelot: unreal, arch, scripted, performed, and remembered for its attempts at pageantry. Not the “history” that Jackie Kennedy decried but its populist rendition. A cliché: Camelot is a readable cliché.

Conclusion: what can’t be said

What can’t be said behind the cliché of the martyred charismatic leader is that, as a syphon for the tensions of the time, only he can provide (the desired) release for those tensions. What can’t be said is the violent unconscious undercurrent thus desires the assassination, compulsively repeated in scores of books, documentaries and cultural dreamscapes. Jackie Kennedy, with her silence, her “stoic dignity” (Hampson and Schwarz, 1994: C9) is the foil for those dreams. Peter Knight (2000: 116) suggests the assassination of Kennedy serves as a “primal scene of postmodernism ...not so much an originating cause as an effect of future effects, an event that would have had to be invented had it not actually happened.” In that sense, JFK got the death we deserved.
REFERENCES
Green, Carol Hurd (1995): “The Suffering Body: Ethel Rosenberg in the Hands of