The Pink Suit

On the morning of 22 November 1963 Jacqueline Kennedy, First Lady to the 35th President of the United States, was prevaricating over what to wear for their visit to Dallas, Texas while her husband quipped in front of a breakfast crowd at the Chamber of Commerce, Fort Worth:

"Two years ago I introduced myself in Paris by saying that I was the man who accompanied Mrs Kennedy to Paris. I am getting somewhat that same sensation as I travel around Texas. Why is it that nobody wonders what Lyndon and I will be wearing?" (Kelly, 1978: 200).

Minutes later, the President’s wife emerged in the wool Chez Ninon pink wool suit she would then wear for the fatal open-topped motorcade ride through Dallas. The image on the cover of the November 1963 commemorative issue of Life Magazine carries a close-up photograph in ‘vibrant colour’ (Lubin, 2003: 115) of Jack and Jackie Kennedy prior to the president’s assassination, arriving at Dallas’ Love Field airfield. For all the wrong reasons, Jackie’s elegant pink wool suit rapidly became universally recognisable, the quintessential, blood-spattered relic of the assassination, hidden from public view in the National Archives, Maryland until, at Caroline Kennedy’s behest, 2103. This paper will examine questions of authenticity, re-enactment and the afterlife of an object that, while it has been endlessly copied and reproduced, exists more as a fantasy object, a nostalgic trigger to memories of trauma and collective loss’. Taking examples from various screen renditions of the assassination - from the film art piece The Eternal Frame (Ant Farm and T.R. Uthco, 1975), to the two mini-series Kennedy (1985) and The Kennedys (2013), to Jackie (Pablo Larrain, 2016) - this paper will look at the pink suit as an evocative site of both rupture and nostalgic recollection.

After a first degree in English and Drama, Stella Bruzzi began academic research with a study of ‘The Political Use of Trials in Film, Theatre and Television’. She worked as a Researcher at the BBC before taking academic posts at Manchester and Royal Holloway, University of London, where she was a founding members of the Department of Media Arts. She joined the Department of Film & Television Studies at Warwick in 2006 as Head of Department and is currently Director of Research for Film and Television Studies. In April, she takes up the post of Dean of Arts and Humanities at University College London.


Prof Bruzzi is currently at work on the book for which she was awarded a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship in 2011: Approximation: Documentary, History and Staging Reality. Her talk to
us this is drawn from this project. The concept of ‘approximation’ identifies ‘research of contemporary fact-based images that best illustrate the idea that history, like documentary, has never had a finite identity or set of meanings but is rather always in flux, always being recontextualised and redefined’:

Approximations are inherently dialectical; new meanings are arrived at through the drawing together of conflicting, colliding elements. Unlike in a jigsaw, where individual bits are essentially meaningless abstractions until interlocked successfully with adjacent segments, the elements or strata of complex approximations are intelligible on their own, they don’t need each other to become logical. Approximations [...] resemble meandering journeys; their purpose or endpoint is not necessarily the one I set out to find. For example, working on Mad Men and specifically the penultimate episode of Season Three when the news of President Kennedy’s assassination breaks, led me to consider the many absent or invisible artefacts from the news coverage of that day, such as Abraham Zapruder’s 8mm home movie of the shooting and the pink suit Jackie Kennedy was wearing to accompany her husband to Dallas.

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