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Low culture and high politics: presidential passions in France

The template for the presidency of the Fifth Republic was set by Charles de Gaulle and one of the defining characteristics of that office was the preservation of a dignified distance between the incumbent and the fourth estate. With regard to President François Hollande and his predecessor, however, there had never been a greater measure of media intrusion in the life of the president, and often of the most prurient kind. The questions this raises therefore are whether this represents an aberration; whether there has been some kind of osmosis between a media driven low culture and the highest office in the Republic; and more fundamentally whether the digital natives of the celebrity-driven culture of contemporary France remain susceptible to a notion of leadership and its underlying myths that were shaped in the middle of the last century.

La forme que devait prendre la présidence de la République fut forgée par Charles de Gaulle et l'un des traits fondamentaux de cette fonction fut la distance digne d'un président par rapport à la presse. Cependant quand on considère le sort du président François Hollande et de son prédécesseur on est obligé de conclure que la vie du chef d'état n'avait jamais subi autant d'intrusions par les médias, et souvent pour des raisons les plus vulgaires. Il est donc nécessaire d'aborder les questions que cela suscite. Peut-on qualifier ce phénomène d'aberrant ? Y-a-t-il eu une sorte d'osmose entre une vulgarisation de la culture poussée par les médias et la fonction suprême de la République ? Les adeptes de la culture numérisée et starisée de la France contemporaine demeurent-ils susceptibles au leadership et ses mythes sous-jacents formés au milieu du siècle dernier?

Introduction: a new political culture?

The campaign leading up to the French presidential election of 2007 in France was a source of fascination to the media for reasons that had not been encountered in any previous campaigns. The spotlight was focused on two couples who, in their different ways, illustrated the way politics had become a form of celebrity, and increasingly indistinguishable from the personal. On the one hand, there was a political power couple where the female partner, Ségolène Royal, had leap-frogged the male partner, François Hollande, in the race to become the *Parti Socialiste* (PS) candidate in the presidential election. While Royal had held office as a government minister, Hollande had been the doggedly assiduous Socialist party secretary. Whatever frictions there were in him now having to serve her individual ambitions as a presidential candidate were discreetly managed, but nonetheless presented too juicy a personal dynamic to avoid speculation by the media. On the other hand, there was a couple where the wife, Cécilia Sarkozy, was so averse to the constraints imposed by political ambition that it was debatable whether she would follow her husband, Nicolas Sarkozy, into the Elysée palace as the first lady of France were he to be elected as the centre-right candidate of the *Union pour une majorité populaire* (UMP) to the presidency. The inner circle of UMP figures and campaign advisers had known since 2005 that Cécilia had started an affair with Richard Attias, who had also worked for the UMP. The question then became whether she could be persuaded to keep up a tragi-comic charade of unity for a candidate who, throughout his career, had never been reluctant to grab media attention, usually through robust self-expression, to impress his chosen electorate.

With the approach of the first round of voting in the election, the seasoned commentator Catherine Nay relates how strategies worthy of a French farce had to be employed to preserve

the illusion of matrimonial unity. The couple were already living apart but Nicolas Sarkozy would smuggle himself in an unofficial vehicle, into the underground car park of what was believed to be the family apartment, so that he could then exit with his wife through the front entrance for the benefit of the assembled media before setting off to vote (Nay 2012). According to their close friend and UMP politician, Patrick Balkany, sustained pleading was required from his wife, Isabelle, to dissuade Cécilia from leaving Nicolas between the two rounds of voting in order to be reunited with the man she described as the love of her life, Richard Attias (Balkany 2009). Once the first round was over, however, Cécilia adamantly refused to engage in a repeat performance for the crucial second round of voting on 6 May 2007, and the traditional symbolic image of a prospective president visiting the polling station with his partner gave way to something much more unusual, the significance of which Sarkozy knew would not be lost on the media. On this occasion Sarkozy was accompanied by the daughters from Cécilia's previous relationship with Jacques Martin, Judith and Jeanne-Marie.

The highly mediatised psychodrama reached a paroxysm on the night of Sarkozy's election triumph with the subsequently infamous celebration at Fouquet's restaurant on the Champs Elysées, styled like a reality show for a cast later described as 'le *Who's Who* de l'argent' (Giesbert 2011, 72). The problem was that the organiser of the event and the show's leading lady, Cécilia, had decided that she did not want to appear. Between forced smiles for the sake of posterity, Sarkozy was reduced to pleading with Cécilia's daughters to phone their mother and persuade her to come. The strain, however, could not be entirely masked. When Cécilia finally arrived several hours after the start of the party, her pallor and tearfulness told its own story. What was meant to be a presidential triumph had degenerated into soap opera. Centre stage, as Giesbert has observed, was a figure who, although he always plays to the camera, always plays himself, due to his inability to change persona (Giesbert 2011, 38). The convulsions of the Sarkozy marriage continued to be played out in the media until the final one,

in keeping with the times, was conveyed via a text message that was leaked first to the website of *Le Nouvel Observateur* in February 2008 and then went viral. ‘Si tu reviens, j’annule tout’ was the plaintive cry of the most powerful politician in France, promising his wife he would call off the relationship with Carla Bruni if she would come back to him (*Libération* 2008).

The notion of the ‘personnage envahissant’ described by Giesbert, who always thrusts himself forward and who is ultimately a victim of his own personality, reflected a deeper sense of malaise about the direction being given to French culture from the elite stratum of the polity. The vulgar narrative of separation from Cécilia was followed by the ‘people’ magazine courtship by Sarkozy of the erstwhile model, Carla Bruni, and illustrated one of many paradoxes about Sarkozy that in the eyes of some commentators demeaned the standing of the presidential office. Although a man of the centre-right, Sarkozy seemed to embody the relativization of cultural value and the kind of narcissistic self-promotion that some associated with Jack Lang’s attempts to democratise culture under the socialist administration of the early 1980s. The twin ambitions of Lang as Minister of Culture, until his departure from office in 1986, had been to spread far more widely the state’s support for cultural creation, and in so doing bring culture out of its elitist fortresses and into society (Looseley 1995).

The advent of Sarkozy on the political stage seemed to justify the judgement passed on the Lang years, by the performer and commentator Jacques Bertin, as having ushered in a cultural era ‘de la superficialité, du brio, du sonore’ (*Le Nouveau Politis* 1991, 7). The celebration of all things cultural and the apparent attribution of the term ‘cultural’ to all things seemed, to some critics, to have abolished the distinction between culture as a form of intellectual apprenticeship served through the study of high cultural creation, and the notion of culture as the everyday forms of creativity emanating from a society’s habits and rituals. The result of this was therefore a pick and mix cultural orientation where Shakespeare could be served up alongside the products catering to the tastes of mass consumerism (Finkelkraut

1987). Worse, for some, was the idea that the democratisation of culture under Lang had served as an excuse to confuse leisure and art, and call the result ‘culture’. By privileging investment in untutored tastes, the state had reduced cultural consumption to a succession of events and spaces, where spontaneity and immediacy were the most important considerations. The result of a move away from the rigorously intellectual acquisition of culture had paved the way for the domination of an audio-visual aesthetic (Fumaroli 1991). The dominant media image, however inelegant, and the arresting soundbite, however crude, during the course of Sarkozy’s mandate appeared to be the realisation of these cultural anxieties. As Sarkozy’s term of office came to an end and a credible socialist candidate came into view who portrayed himself as the antithesis of the ‘président bling bling’, the question then was whether the injection of low culture into high politics would prove a transient and ad hominem development.

A return to normality?

François Hollande’s campaign in the presidential election of 2012 was one of studied normality, based on an identification with the pursuits, preferences and experiences of ordinary voters. As Jacques Chirac portrayed through his famous appetite for provincial cooking and François Mitterrand conveyed in his love of long walks in the countryside of his native region, so too in his family and working life, Hollande styled himself as what his fellow-citizens would recognise as ‘un homme simple’. The fact that, like typical metropolitan ‘bobos’ or bourgeois bohemians, Hollande and Ségolène Royal had four children while eschewing the conventions of marriage, had met at the supremely elitist *Ecole Nationale d’Administration*, and spent their working lives in the rarefied circles of the governing elite, was discreetly passed over. Yet, as Valérie Trierweiler, the successor to Royal in Hollande’s affections asserts, the key components of soap opera for that couple were also present in 2007, in parallel with Nicolas Sarkozy and Cécilia. Notwithstanding the inevitable degree of self-justification, Trierweiler was not the only one to imply at the time that Royal’s candidature for the presidency in 2007

was the source of resentment and friction (Trierweiler 2014). While the choice of Royal as presidential candidate could be justified by her ministerial experience, he on the other hand had been the party secretary who might have expected some recognition for maintaining the viability of the *Parti socialiste*. Instead, he found himself in the subordinate role of oiling the wheels of her campaign.

The unraveling of the relationship between Hollande and Royal provided the opening for Trierweiler, the press courtesan from the magazine *Paris Match*, who caught the public eye in the presidential campaign of 2012 as an aspiring first lady. But according to her memoir, already by October 2012 Trierweiler was hearing recurrent rumours about Hollande and the actress Julie Gayet. Ultimately, it was the low cultural focus of the gossip magazine, *Closer*, that broke the story of Hollande's liaison with Gayet on its cover in 2014 when it published pictures of the President on a scooter attempting to visit her apartment unnoticed (*Closer* 2014). The subsequent mirth in the media at Hollande's expense was not significantly more charitable than that endured by Sarkozy. But the idea that they had both flirted with celebrity culture and therefore paid the price is too simple an explanation. Forty years beforehand, when Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing ascended the steps of the Elysée palace as the youngest president of the Fifth Republic, he did so after having graced the covers of France's glossy magazines with his beautiful young wife, Ann-Aymone, in a conscious attempt to project himself as a modernising antidote to the previously gray and elderly leadership of the Republic. Yet the image of the perfect young family began unraveling within months of Giscard d'Estaing taking office.

On 2 October 1974 the headline 'Valéry Folamour' appeared on the front page of the satirical publication *Le Canard Enchaîné*, and spread the story around Paris that in the early hours of the morning, while at the wheel of a Maserati, VGE had hit a milk delivery van and had an altercation with the driver. The other passengers were said to be the famous director Roger Vadim and a former lover of Giscard's, the heiress Catherine Schneider, while other

sources rumoured that the female passenger was the actress Marlène Jobert (Clerc 2014). In any case, VGE's reputation as a playboy was established. However, far from prompting a return to presidential reserve, Giscard d'Estaing seemed to relish his reputation as a heartless seducer or 'sentimental sans coeur' and was rumored to have sprinkled his presidency with the stardust of courtly dalliances with the actress Cathy Rosier, the singer Marie Laforêt and the dancer Lisette Malidor. It has even been suggested that the rumor concerning an illicit gift of diamonds to Giscard d'Estaing originated from Jean-Bedel Bokassa himself, the then Emperor of the Central African Republic, in a fit of pique provoked by the French president's seduction of his strikingly handsome empress wife, Catherine (Valence 2011). Yet Giscard-d'Estaing was able to benefit from a largely benign press after leaving office, ultimately portrayed as a kind of sage of the Fifth Republic and the defender of its European vocation.

Judged by current expectations of political leaders, the personal choices made by François Mitterrand might be viewed even more severely by public opinion. With the kind of moral relativism worthy of a Third Republic politician, by the 1950s Mitterrand had effectively reached a pact with his wife Danielle that gave him free rein in affairs of the heart as long as the stability of family life with their two sons was preserved (Schneider 2009). He started a relationship in the 1960s with a shy young woman almost 30 years his junior, Anne Pingeot, and set her up as his chief concubine, leading a double life with his wife and future first lady of the Republic for decades to come. When the existence of his daughter with Anne, Mazarine, became public knowledge, through the pages of *Paris Match* on 3 November 1994, it was like the tacit acknowledgement by a monarch of a child to whom, as his inner circle knew, he was greatly attached, not least because she shared his love of literature. It was evidence once more of the skill and charisma which had enabled Mitterrand to choreograph the orbit of individuals and interests around him in what his diplomatic adviser, Hubert Védrine, observed as a kind of courtly tableau (Védrine 1996). From *Libération* on the left to *Le Figaro* on the right, there

was a refusal to treat the existence of Mazarine with the prurience of the ‘moralisateurs’ who set the tone in the Anglo-Saxon press. The disappointment that there was in Mitterrand at the end of his second mandate, was due to the realisation that his socialism had been principally a vehicle for personal ambition rather than a matter of conviction. But even that disenchantment was significantly attenuated by the empathy for a great figure laid low, when his fight against terminal cancer became known.

Perception of, and in, ‘l’espace public’

It was Jürgen Habermas who popularised the notion that the revolution of 1789 gave a dynamic impetus to the emergence of ‘l’espace public’, that sphere which began to define itself with the advent of the Enlightenment and became a site of mediation between civil society and the state (Habermas 1988). A nascent bourgeois democracy was encouraged to grow due to the idea that this space was open to all citizens who could engage in discursive exchanges and debate matters of general interest, thus enhancing the progress of individual freedom of expression as well as the value of ‘publicité’. The operation of these exchanges in an open forum was also a way of forming public opinion and provided a means for citizens to exercise a counter-vailing pressure when faced by the power of the state. But the ‘publicité’ characterising the exchange of ideas could also generate a widespread interest in those figures who had become prominent in articulating them, thus becoming a vector for ‘célébrité’.

As Antoine Lilti underlines, even at its inception, ‘l’espace public’ was never quite the forum for intellectual debate that some idealised conceptions of it suggest (2014). Those whose ideas were supposed to irrigate it were just as likely to be grist to the mill of a public opinion transfixed by celebrity, and become simply famous for being famous. When Voltaire returned to Paris at the age of 85 in 1778, after a thirty-year absence, he had long been the most famous

cultural figure in Europe. Such was the fervor to acclaim him that when he attended a performance of his tragedy *Irène*, at the *Comédie Française*, a bust of him was ceremonially crowned on stage. Perhaps sensing the potential for ridicule in this kind of veneration, Voltaire removed the crown of laurel leaves, but it was too late to prevent the theatre critic Sébastien Mercier characterising the whole episode as one of ‘farce’ and ‘facétie’ (Lilti 2014, 26). In the case of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one could argue that the force of ideas is even more clearly relegated to secondary significance when weighed against a persona that is catapulted to international stardom. After years of struggling for recognition, in 1751 Rousseau’s *Discours sur les sciences et les arts* seemed almost instantly to provide him with a profile that was wholly disproportionate in relation to the kind of awareness usually generated by academic prizes (Caradonna 2012). However, the success of *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in 1761 propelled him to an altogether new level of notoriety and Rousseau’s decision to flee France after the condemnation of *Emile* and *du Contrat social* by the Paris *parlement* in 1762, merely sharpened the public’s appetite for journalistic accounts of his travails. Even before he set foot in England, at the invitation of the philosopher David Hume, publications such as the *London Chronicle* and the *Public Advertiser* had kept their readers up to date with the most picaresque aspects of Rousseau’s personal and political troubles. When he arrived in London in January 1766, Rousseau was greeted like a modern celebrity, by a press that avidly recorded the details of his outfit and the expressions on his face when he appeared at the theatre to watch a performance by Garrick. As Hume observed, somewhat perplexed; ‘Every circumstance, the most minute, that concerns him, is put in the newspapers’ (Lilti 156).

There is therefore a development that straddles what is sometimes perceived as too fixed a demarcation between the old and the new. The familiar suggestion that ‘the world as we know it today...is the composite of reflexes bred by the French Revolution’ (Steiner 1988, 151), underestimates the degree of modernisation that was already underway before then. In

particular, the massive impetus given to the printed word, especially the growth of journals and periodicals which serve as vehicles for the commercialisation of culture, impacted on 'l'espace public' and the nature and purpose of public opinion. While emerging as a force for democratisation in the political sense through the operation of public opinion, in socio-cultural terms 'l'espace public' engenders a significant degree of social imitation. It is what Tarde describes, at the beginning of the twentieth century, as the gratification that comes from sharing in an event, facilitated by modern communication, focused by the fashion of the moment, literary or otherwise (1989). Though isolated physically, individuals can influence each other through the consciousness that they constitute a public, sharing an interest in the same thing at the same time.

The paradoxes of publicness or publicity operate at a number of levels. Whether it was in reaction to the social rebelliousness implicit in Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse* or the adolescent sensibilities of Françoise Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* some two centuries later, these cultural outputs allowed their individual consumers to entertain the idea that they had a unique relationship with the works and their creators. But the obverse of this form of individuation was that these consumers were absorbed into an expression of mass culture. In political terms, while the light of publicity appears democratic by nature, and the enemy of secrecy and closed networks of power, at the same time it can be the trigger for those manifestations of a kind of collective autosuggestion, sudden shifts and irrational enthusiasms that can be manipulated in ways that disenfranchise the individual. Hence the nexus between publicity, mass culture and the evolution of capitalism increasingly identified in the second half of the twentieth century. The take-off of modern capitalism and its concomitants of rapid urbanisation, consumerism, and secularism, has led to the definition of values and identities that operate to the detriment of the public space (Sennett 2002). The idealisation of the personal, in terms of material consumption and cultural preferences, has come to shape that public space supposed to

privilege a collective project, and led to a personalisation of public life where effectiveness in pursuit of a mandate takes second place to the personal characteristics of the individual. Publicity and celebrity, the economic and the political have meshed, making the manufacture of fame something specific to advanced capitalism (Morin 1972).

Personalisation and the exploitation of loss

Exceptional beauty and artistic originality, or political vision and judgement, are no longer sufficient conditions for success in an age when the possibilities for the dissemination of words and images are in constant progression. The confluence of celebrity in the cultural realm and the deployment of notoriety in the public space is expressed by the common resort to the dramatization of one's personal life. For his most seasoned observer, what really launched Nicolas Sarkozy's presidential ambitions into orbit was the way he melded a very personal life story with the lofty aspirations of the Republic for all its citizens. At a rally in Paris on 14 January 2007, shortly after his selection as his party's presidential candidate, he wove his own narrative of self-realisation into that of the Republic's which offers a path to the summit, even to an outsider, raised in a single-parent family, and who had started life as 'un petit Français de sang mêlé' (Giesbert 2011, 64).

Notwithstanding his frequent dismissals of the intellectual legacy of May '68, Sarkozy seemed to possess an instinctive appreciation of the notion that the modern mediatised spectacle is the site of power. But he was not only an actor in the spectacle, he also assumed the mission as an outsider to trouble the wider context in which it operates. This, it can be argued, is because the 'société du spectacle' is a modern replication of the separation of the haves and have-nots that was once characterised by the old divisions according to socio-economic class. The majority are reduced to the role of passive observers of the privileged, rich and famous doing things that they themselves cannot. The irony of the communication

platforms that support the ‘société du spectacle’ is that they operate against communication in a reciprocal sense. As Guy Debord put it: ‘Le spectacle est le discours ininterrompue que l’ordre présent tient sur lui-même, son monologue élogieux [...] cette « communication » est essentiellement *unilatérale* ; de sorte que sa concentration revient à accumuler dans les mains de l’administration du système existant les moyens qui lui permettent de poursuivre cette administration déterminée’ (1992, 26).

Sarkozy’s resort to a vocabulary and a tone of a lower order was not inculcated by life on the mean streets of the Paris suburbs, given the gentility of his upbringing in Neuilly. Nor was it the unguarded slip of a political novice, since the most famous incidents occurred as a government minister and as President of the Republic. It was the starring role he had given himself as the outsider challenging the system in the dramatic pursuit of the most coveted prize in French politics. In his highly mediatised visit to the troubled north-west Parisian suburb of Argenteuil in 2005, Interior Minister Sarkozy pitched his language to those ordinary working people who felt themselves voiceless when it came to the familiar narrative deployed by the media in the reporting of the ‘quartiers sensibles’. In response to one of the exasperated residents of a tower block faced with the daily lawlessness she had to live with, Sarkozy famously said: ‘Vous en avez assez de cette bande de racailles? On va vous en débarrasser’ (*Ouest France* 2015). Having made himself the voice of the suffering and silent majority, once installed as President, Sarkozy took on the voice of the ordinary man in the street when faced with an affront to his dignity. Hence the infamous rejoinder in 2008, captured by numerous cameras and smart phones, when a member of the public proclaimed his refusal to soil his hand by shaking Sarkozy’s: ‘casse-toi, pauvre con’ (Laurent 2008).

In contrast to the conscious exploitation by Sarkozy of non-conformity to media expectation and his challenge to the self-censorship of political correctness, François Hollande attempted to respond to another aspect of the alienation engendered by the society of spectacle.

His presidential campaign in 2012 was remarkable for the studied endeavor to be unremarkable, to de-dramatize his existence and be the foil of commendable ordinariness to the c-list star vehicle that Sarkozy's soap opera presidency had become. Tapping into the frustration of people who had been reduced to the role of mute observers of a presidential pageant organised around an adversary who seemed seduced by the prospect of elevation to the ranks of the rich and famous, Hollande offered the restoration of a lost relation to the social. The sense of separation experienced in the society of spectacle is exacerbated by one of isolation. Viewers are connected to what they witness but only in a virtual sense and are deprived of a sense of community in a social sense, leaving them with a feeling of disempowerment when faced with the forces that govern their material, and especially economic life chances (Virilio 2000). The frustration at 'la pensée unique' or unilateral perspective offered by the media and political elite was a key factor in the rejection in France of a draft constitution for Europe in the referendum of 2005, and by putting himself in the spotlight as 'Monsieur Normal', Hollande capitalised on the underlying fear of capitalist globalisation and the destruction of secure employment associated with it.

In their different ways, Sarkozy and Hollande harvested the low-hanging fruit of a politics of affect, the instant recognisability of images that do not need to be explained, and the reduction of events in terms of an immediate, unconsidered emotional reaction. But at the same time, they have paid the price exacted by the disadvantages of this. As Bourdieu observes, the universe of modern media is subject to the twin constraints of time and space, and in television news programmes particularly, issues have to be pared back, decontextualized and reduced to simple binaries (Bourdieu 1998). For leaders and aspiring leaders therefore, visibility becomes the over-riding consideration. But as advanced societies have evolved into media-dominated regimes, recognition that no longer depends on distinction, merit or talent, rests on a very fragile foundation (Heinich 2012). Sarkozy was impressively presidential in 2008, when France

had the rotating presidency of the European Council. His predisposition to urgent action had found a context in which swift decision-making was desperately needed (Raymond 2013). French viewers saw many images of him energetically coordinating the response that prevented the Eurozone from succumbing to the global financial crash, to such an extent that the former socialist Prime Minister Michel Rocard described his leadership in that situation as worthy of a great man (Rocard and Juppé 2011). For his part, Hollande, so often derided for a lack of firmness in the media, stepped faultlessly into the shoes of a strong and sober defender of republican values when he led the march of millions of citizens and 50 heads of state and government on 11 January 2015 through the street of Paris, in the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. (*Le Parisien* 2015). But neither of the performances by Sarkozy and Hollande became anchored in the minds of the viewers in such a way as to repair the lack of esteem for them in an enduring way. What was visible and immediately impactful, appeared also to be instantly forgettable. Had the appeal to low culture on the one hand, and the gamble on normality (even banality), on the other, overlooked the desire on the part of the viewers to invest in the myth of leadership?

Old and new myths

The anonymous operation of bourgeois values that allows ‘significations mythiques’ to structure our perceptions, as described by Barthes (1957, 246), assumes a passivity on the part of the viewer that has been challenged by other perspectives of the viewer’s role in a celebrity-driven culture. For Morin (1972), there is a dynamic relationship between the real and the imaginary in the mind of the viewer or fan. He or she may not be simply deceived into believing in the mythical qualities of a figure, they may choose to invest in the image because that process is the way the human imagination is lived in the real world. In terms of political culture, to pursue a high visibility strategy of leadership without deferring to the template fashioned by the most mythical leader of modern France, is a risky option. As repeated polls and surveys

illustrate (even as his legacy in party terms continues to fracture), there is an ever greater ‘pénétration dans l’imaginaire quotidien des Français’ of the Gaullist myth (Hazareesingh 2010, 179). By force of character and the catastrophe that had befallen France in 1940, and in the face of possible civil war in 1958, Charles de Gaulle had come to incarnate the character of the Republic (Gaffney 2012), and anybody wanting to occupy the stage successfully once he had vacated it would have to adopt the key elements of his performance. De Gaulle might have been criticised for foisting an undemocratic constitution on the Fifth Republic and creating a republican monarch of a president (Duverger 1967), but this is what the public chose to invest in, as opposed to the ineffectual ‘présidents potiche’ of the previous republics.

Ironically, it was the socialist who had opposed the constitution of the Fifth Republic who was the most adept at exploiting the myth of leadership created by de Gaulle and the symbolic expressions of it, allowing him to ‘out-king’ all of de Gaulle’s successors (Gaffney 2012, 139). Like de Gaulle, Mitterrand kept an Olympian distance from the vulgarity of petty party politics, especially during the periods of cohabitation with a right-wing government. Like de Gaulle, he was admired for his intellect and talent as a man of letters, and his monarchical largesse was indulged by his public, to the point where he felt able to offer the legion of honor to Anne Pingeot’s father, though what he had done to earn it was unclear. As for Anne herself, he moved her into an apartment in the Elysée, where she brought up their child, at the French tax-payer’s expense. Conversely, Sarkozy’s attempts at court politics were fatally undermined by a lack of monarchical distance and cultural capital. His decision in 2006 to describe the selection of a literary classic, *La Princesse de Clèves*, for use in civil service exams as something worthy of ‘un sadique ou un imbécile’, cheapened his brand recognition (Fabre 2011). Once in office, Sarkozy very rapidly became the subject of satires on a bargain basement republican monarch, and a diminutive one at that, as in Patrick Rambaud’s series of chronicles that first appeared in the year following Sarkozy’s election (Rambaud 2008). As for François Hollande’s

attempt to downplay the distinction that is synonymous with being an 'énarque', in pursuit of the 'Monsieur Normal' strategy, this left him more vulnerable than a fellow 'énarque' and predecessor like Valéry Giscard-d'Estaing. Even when, at the end of his mandate, Giscard d'Estaing's own monarchical pretensions had become the object of satire, his unabashed self-projection as the supreme product of a uniquely rigorous system of academic selection was something to which French viewers still deferred. Almost twenty-five years after leaving office, Giscard d'Estaing retained his intellectual standing as one of the guiding lights of the European project, who, together with German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, laid the foundations for the future of European Monetary Union by linking Europe's leading currencies together within the European Monetary System. This esteem was underlined when the European parliament tasked Giscard d'Estaing with oversight of the drafting of a constitution for Europe. The fact that the draft constitution was rejected by the French electorate in the referendum of 2005 was seen principally as the failure of the elites then in place, rather than Giscard d'Estaing's.

With regard to comparisons between Hollande and his socialist predecessor, François Mitterrand, Hollande could only ever appear as a minor character compared to the star, given the continued fascination exercised by Mitterrand as a kind of 'personnage de roman' (Winock 2015, 229), who combined a sphinx-like political inscrutability with the intellectualism that has been perceived as part of the fabric of stardom in post-war France (Gaffney and Holmes 2007). A wistful element of 'Mitterrandolâtrie' marked the reaction to the publication of Mitterrand's letters to Anne Pingeot and then a journal destined for her (2016), in the closing months of Hollande's presidency, as if the ordinary citizen had been given a chance to invest vicariously in the emotional intimacies of a charismatic leader whose performance as a republican monarch granted him an untouchable and almost mythical status. By contrast, François Hollande's attempt at a confessional form of intimacy with his fellow-citizens was unsupported by any charismatic or mythical appeal, and condemned by the very ordinariness

that he had sought to exploit. Over the course of 61 encounters during his term of office, Hollande gave two reporters from *Le Monde* unprecedented access to his thoughts, and although he had no editorial control over the ensuing book, the idea that this was not an attempt to appeal to a disenchanted electorate on a human level would appear disingenuous. The contradiction in portraying himself to hand-picked journalists as ‘un homme en pleine détresse’ over the media revelation of his affair with Julie Gayet, while being at the same time ‘obsédé par la préservation de son intimité’ (Davet and Lhomme 2016, 145), was just one of many contradictions in the publication that could not be overlooked. The storm of adverse reaction was summed up by an exasperated PS official: ‘Mais quand est-ce qu’il bosse?...Il devrait faire une psychanalyse...Il n’est pas fait pour ce job’ (Djamshidi and Martinat, 2016). As for Sarkozy, his inability to resist the ‘scénarisation’ of his personal life was witheringly put down in the memoir of his erstwhile advisor, Patrick Buisson. Like the presidential remake of a daytime soap where the geekiest boy in the class gets the prettiest girl, Sarkozy could not prevent himself from extracting the maximum media coverage from his courtship of Carla Bruni. But rather than being an exercise in bringing the presidency closer to the people it was, as Buisson cruelly observes, an attempt to compensate for the recent experience ‘du cocufiage et du lâchage’ inflicted by Cécilia Sarkozy (Buisson 2016, 85).

Conclusion

The underlying question is, however, whether viewers would have invested in the images portrayed by Sarkozy and Hollande, even if the old myths had been mobilised more competently. Can such appeals be effective, when increasing numbers of citizens are the subjects of their own spectacle? While it can be argued that the mainstream purveyors of televisual fare in France remain sensitive to the need to blend the pursuit of the popular with the defense of a unifying national culture (Mazdon 2013), this cannot be said of newer audio-visual formats and their fragmented audiences. On 15 September 2016 *You Tube* invited the

young French blogger, Laetitia Nadji, to interview the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (Vincendon 2016). Nadji, like a growing number of young people, already had a profile on *You Tube*, having created her own channel with 60,000 followers. Unfortunately for *You Tube*, Nadji chose to pose the kind of questions her followers wanted. Most notably, Nadji asked Juncker whether his ultimate overview of financial regulation was not like appointing a bank robber to the post of chief of police, given the way he had turned Luxemburg into a tax haven during his time in charge of the Duchy's finances. Worse still for *You Tube*, Nadji had secretly filmed an encounter with a *You Tube* representative who had asked her to conduct a soft interview with the Commission President, and subsequently shared that recording with over two million people on *Facebook*.

What Barthes, Debord and Morin could not have envisaged was the technology that would allow individuals to become the stars in their own mythic existence and create a virtual fan base that appears to follow their every word, move and gesture. The consequence for presidents in France and leaders elsewhere may be that their passions are reduced to soap-operas that are just as short-lived as innumerable others, equally deprived of stardust, and ultimately relegated to the lower shelves of cut-price ephemera, together with their political reputations.

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