

## Light and Dark in Pakula's *All the President's Men*

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### Abstract

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This paper studies the influence that "Light" and "Dark" have on the thematic structure and meaning in *All the President's Men*, a film directed by Alan Pakula and released in 1972, particularly the political aspects of the film and some other issues like sexuality and feminism. The articulate and special use of lighting in this particular film helps us better understand the new political and historical dimensions of the film. The discussion shows that "light" is an important film technique used to highlight the significant aesthetics and the structure of the film, its connection with politics, and the mainstream events in the seventies that have witnessed the first release of the film. This discussion also reveals that light and dark have skillfully added a lot to the film plot, which enables the audience to understand the intricacies and the complexities of political themes that are explicitly and implicitly embedded throughout the whole movie. It has been shown that light does not just illuminate or darken the screen that it acts the same way actors do, that it creates focus and concentration, and that it creates psychological tension and relaxation. In contrast, dark is connected with danger, mystery, evil and political secrets or conspiracies. In short, it is connected with the suspects and criminals in the film.

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**Keywords:** Light, Dark, Film Techniques, *Mise-en-scène*, politics, Feminism, Film Theory

### Introduction

"Light" and "Dark" that occur in this film title are opposites which reflect reality. Whereas "light" symbolizes knowledge and truth, "dark" stands for ignorance. Pakula's using them in his film gives the audience an idea about his approach. As a realist, Pakula employs them to emphasize the message he tries conveying to viewers that "politics often lurks in the dark," and to highlight the political conspiracy in the nineteen seventies of the previous century. To achieve this objective, Pakula makes much use of montage editing, new styles, and new techniques of which the contrast between light and dark is one.

This technique influences not only the structure but also the meaning of the film both on the historical and political levels. While many films adjust montage editing including lighting modes and techniques in order to meet the dynamics and the events of the age, Pakula's film uses clear and new lighting techniques which make it different from the other ones of the same era. This film is a little bit complex to understand; however, light and dark in it have skillfully added a lot to the main plot of the film which enables the audience to understand the intricacies and the complexities of political themes that are explicitly and implicitly embedded throughout the whole movie.

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*All the President's Men* is a film directed by Alan Pakula, and was released in 1972. What is quite amazing and intriguing about this film is the realistic theme and approach that the director uses to tell a real story of political corruption and conspiracy. First of all, the film revolves around the story of a political scandal in President Nixon's time. Discovered by two Washington Post journalists, Woodward and Bernstein, this political scandal has finally led to Nixon's resignation from the presidency office. It shows how 'Woodward' and 'Bernstein' have investigated the break in, at the Watergate building, and how the president's election has been manipulated. The film sheds light on the role of journalism and media in investigation and criminology, especially the most complicated political conspiracies in the American History. The political conspiracy the film shows has been unraveled by the two reporters who have made exceptional efforts that have finally led to discovering the political game and then to the president's resignation. The main conclusion shown in the last scene is "the involvement of the White House in the Watergate break in".

## 1. Analysis and Discussion

The uniqueness of the film's realistic approach in handling a real political scandal, and also its real detective approach, matches the lighting techniques the director uses throughout the whole movie. From the very opening scene of the movie, lighting seems to catch our attention the same way the action affects us. We actually focus on light as much as we focus on the action and the performance of the actors. Light seems to suit the excellent performance the actors skillfully show in the movie regarding investigations, detective work, and journalism. However, "lighting" in this film seems to vary according to different settings, actions, and performances. It also seems to vary as one sees the amount of distinction and variety the director makes between the external and the internal, the black and white, day and night, home and office settings with natural and outdoor scenes. For example, in the offices or at the Washington Post offices, there is a big focus on the individuals. Each shot is flooded with strong office fluorescent lighting. Each shot can take up more than five minutes. Similarly, bright lights seem to pervade the whole office while the camera's eye narrows focus on the individual and on the very little and minute things that Woodward writes on a little piece of paper. These bright scenes pervade the whole screen, and everything is just clear and easy to be recognized on the screen.

Lighting in this film correlates with the exploration, detection, and investigation themes. Lighting makes us see an actual brighter image of the truth which is being investigated and discovered by the two reporters. Obviously, the *Mise-en-scène* in this film is all carefully made and overlapped with the political themes, but lighting is one of the most influential things here that significantly contributes to what we see before the camera. For example, the powerful use of the fluorescent lighting in the film seems to accentuate minute and tiny details found by Woodward and Bernstein. Then the director seems to bring our attention under the camera scrutiny and the lighting of the place which make things closer to us, and easier to understand.

In one of the scenes, when Woodward is making calls in his office and writing names of persons and suspects on a piece of paper, in this scene--particularly, lighting seems to flood the place while Woodward's hand is on the paper; we feel that the paper is just before our eyes as lighting becomes more powerful, and the things are so close to the camera. Everything that we see clearly on the surface in that scene tells us something about the mystery of the story and the complexity of the political situation. The scene starts with Woodward circling names on a piece of paper. He also uses a red color pen to circle these names, so that we see them more clearly. The bright red color matches the strong fluorescent lighting and creates a tense psychological pressure due to our feeling at that moment that Woodward is under extreme job pressures and that he is now facing a new critical situation. In *Film: an Introduction*, John Fell suggests that colors have significant emotional overtones which can be linked to the theme the film deals with. He says: "there is some tradition for signaling out one color for a simple color combination in order that a film audience may be cued to story and theme." (100)

## 2. Film techniques: Light and Dark

Lighting seems also to match the external and the internal dimensions and the settings in which major as well as insignificant actions take place. One of the major things here is that lighting is very much powerful and bright in most of the shots we see inside the Washington Post. This is actually significant because it triggers the wider sphere of the problem which is within the political institution. In another shot, when Woodward meets with important men and suspects, the lighting is at the lowest, and we actually see only dark shadows. However, this is also suggestive and much related to the secrecy of the job that Bob undertakes as an investigator. Dark shadows are seen in the dark, and we can barely see the actors on the screen when he meets some suspects.

The fact that actors can be hardly seen on the screen triggers the idea that there is something behind the scenario. It provides the audience with the sense that there is a real political game played in the dark by people of authority.

Additionally, one of the important things regarding "lighting" in this film is the use of light and dark in different situations related to the climax of the plot. The variety of lighting techniques is actually seen as important in understanding each scene in the movie. Referring to the dark scenes in *All the President's Men as a Woman's Film*, Kraft explains that the whole plot of the movie is catalyzed by the quite dark scenes of the break in and its connection with the political conspiracy. She says:

Alan J. Pakula's 1976 film *All the President's Men* fits loosely into several generic categories, firmly into none. It is most often referred to as a detective film or a conspiracy thriller, and certainly the whodunit narrative pattern is catalyzed by the quiet, dark scene of the break-in and developed throughout the film by scenes revealing periodic discoveries adding up to a revelation of guilt in the end. The narrative tension of the film is driven by our willingness to forget what we know and participate in the mystery, the accumulation of evidence, and the unmasking of villainy. We wanted to know in 1972 and 1973 whether or not President Richard Nixon would be held accountable for the Watergate break in; we were fascinated then and have remained fascinated to this day by the way the reporters, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, pieced together a case, episodically and daily. The film partakes of other genres as well. The "buddy film," for example, provides another structuring device. Woodward and Bernstein develop from rivals into collaborators in a challenge over power on two levels—the hierarchy of influence in national politics and the hierarchy of influence at the *Washington Post*. We think of them as buddies, a mismatched pair but a workable team—such as Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid or Joe Buck and Ratso Rizzo. These associations would have occurred to audiences in 1976, as Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman were linked in the imaginations of moviegoers of that time. (30)

The film's new innovative lighting techniques and styles cannot be separated from its political role in the world of cinema because it brings up new changes on the picture and content levels. The film seems to remind us of *Midnight Cowboy*, in which we see the two persons, Joe, and Ratso build up a strong friendship because they share the same dream. The same could be applied here to this film because we see both "Woodward", and "Bernstein" develop the same vision and sequence, and then ultimately share the same dream. Although their dream seems to be officially driven, yet they have a strong political vision. And the lights we have in the film can definitely reinforce this issue. As Elizabeth Kraft explains:

Each had enjoyed individual success as a half of another buddy team, but, perhaps more significantly, the two films in which they earned buddy renown were produced in the same year, 1969, and both were nominated for Best Picture. *Midnight Cowboy* won the award, but *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* won a place in the hearts of the American movie going public. Robert Redford was the closest thing the 1970s had to a matinee idol, and Dustin Hoffman was the decade's artiste. Between them, they defined American male stardom, and their "buddiness" was inherent in their opposite looks, roles, and performance styles. (32)

As a matter of fact, dark and light are variant and different throughout the whole movie. They keep varying according to the settings, the climax of the plot, and the performance of the actors. They create sustained and effective effects on the climactic atmosphere of the plot where we see everything calculated in an unprecedented way, like the efficiency of the investigation undertaken to discover a real political crime. Light adds more to the precision of the images and the clarity of the actions we see in the movie. We actually see maximum accuracy and efficiency made throughout the whole movie both in terms of actions and in terms of characters. The efficacy of this performance also meets the dynamic and constantly changing lighting atmosphere that varies accordingly.

One of the most important things here is that the tactics of politics and the secrets made in the dark are actually consistent with the scenes including the shadows and the lights given in each shot. Politics seems to play on different forms, aspects, and dimensions exactly as the light plays different modes on different settings and atmospheres. For example, politics seems to enter every aspect throughout the film. While feminism is represented clearly in many other films in the seventies, like *Days of Heaven*, which also has special lighting techniques, this film deals with the issue of feminism and patriarchy, but from a political rather than a social perspective.

For example, seduction and sexuality are very much politicized here because they match the wider sphere of political corruption. Sexuality here seems to be represented as a way of discovering secrets and revealing certain truths behind the scenario. While the movie's title suggests "the power of authority and masculinity", still the film tells us something about feminism through highlighting patriarchy and the authority it associates through politics and its manipulation.

The theme of masculinity and feminism is also highlighted through cinematographically projected elements, colors and lighting which all seem to show the effects of temptation and resistance to sex and sexuality which is all politically driven, as Elizabeth Kraft states:

Seduction in *All the President's Men* is focused on the gaining of secret knowledge rather than sexual favors. Of course, the big secrets in *All the President's Men* are those kept by the president and his men, but unearthing these secrets means delving into spaces inhabited by women and women-like men—secretarial spaces, librarian spaces, and bookkeeping spaces. Two specific shots in the film visually establish the analogy between secret knowledge and femininity. First is the crane shot focused on the reporters in the Library of Congress. The shot moves upward until the point of view mimics an overseeing deity looking down from the rotunda into the womb of the building in which men labor to bring knowledge forth. (33)

Lighting also varies as the film continues to move on. For example, when Woodward and his friend question the lady, we notice the brightness of the picture which harmonizes with the natural scene that adds a brighter green background. That scene in particular, is flooded with both bright colors and illumination which attract the attention of the viewers to keep up with Bernstein's questions for that Lady. It is quite important to note here that techniques and styles in this scene trigger the innovative theme "lighting" framework highlights. More importantly, the camera's focus on Bernstein and the lady's face also gives a strong luminous scene. We follow Bernstein's eyes, the lady's eyes as the light seems to give a powerful effect on the whole scene. After this scene, we see Woodward and Bernstein watching a political interview on TV. As we see in this scene, we are as audience in the dark as the scene puts us in the same situation in which we find its influence on us. The light directed to their faces gives us the sense of being in the world represented. We start following his questions as the camera focuses and concentrates on their faces.

### 3. Conclusion

In fact, light in this movie is part of acting and performance without which we will not understand what is going on. Light seems to act, not just illuminate or darken the screen, but it talks and acts in the same way the actors do; lighting creates intense focus and concentration, and dark also accentuates the plot as Woodward and Bernstein get gradually close to the truth. More importantly, lighting seems to create that psychological effects on the audience as we tend to feel the danger Woodward and Bernstein feel while risking their lives for unraveling a political mystery. Lighting also creates both psychological tension and relaxation. While in scenes outside the building especially when Woodward and Bernstein sit and talk with ladies, the actors seem relaxed and cool as we see a luminous bright lighting often mixed with a natural bright scene. However, in dark and shadowy scenes, we often feel the psychological tension and danger that both journalists are exposed to.

The initial scene begins with the president coming to the stage where people begin to applaud his coming. The scene makes a sharp contrast between the reality which is in the dark and the prestigious appearance of the president on the stage in the House of Representatives. In fact, the film brings new innovative styles and lighting techniques which totally juxtapose truth and its absence with the light and dark. What is behind the scenario is always depicted as a shadow in the film, and all of these luminous scenes we see like the fluorescent lighting in the offices represent a clear image of the truth that is being investigated.

The initial scene is in stark contrast with the scene at the end of the movie when the audience discovers what is in the dark. The president's scene as well as many other scenes of important political figures is shadowy and a little bit dark, which makes it opposed to the bright light scenes we see of Woodward and Bernstein while investigating or making calls in their offices. What is also strange here is that all shadows are related to political secrets or conspiracies which nobody knows in the film except Woodward and Bernstein. While everything seems to be in doubt in terms of political secrets, Woodward and Bernstein keep searching for these secrets. Whenever they discover new things, we see a bright light and keep doing so until we finally get to the conclusion of the film when the writer types few sentences. At this point, the light almost fades away, and we don't see anything on the screen except the few words where the background turns completely black.

The depiction of the environment as being flooded with light or shadows is certainly an important part of the scenario simply because every action we see in the movie is always deeply immersed in the whole environment. This is really an interesting method which is used to draw the attention of the audience. The separate shots follow one another at the end, with dark environment, where the details seen on the screen emphasize the political scandal. In this scene the only light seen is directed at the words we read as the eye of the camera seems to follow and shed much light on them; the viewer's eyes, similarly, follow that little light which brings about a very big question on the truth emerges out of the consequent scenes.

The opening scene of the movie seems to exactly match the final scene because both of them are flooded with a dark environment that limits and directs the view to few words seen on the screen. For example, in the first scene, the camera's eye shows the letters printed on the screen with a completely dark and white background. These two scenes with the lighting they provide narrow the viewer's focus and attention and direct the viewer to read realistic, historical, and political facts related to the political history of the United States. The date imprinted on the screen " June, 1, 1972", which is the date of discovering a real political scandal, states what the whole film is about. This date is projected on a flashing white and black background, with strong white light and complete dark background. Towards the end of the scene we see similar lighting techniques in which the camera directs light only at the words the typing machine shows on the screen, narrowing the viewer's view to factual events and results of that scandal, the resignation of the president.

Finally, we think that the director has skillfully used light and dark to create a realistic juxtaposition to politics. This masterly use contributes to viewers' understanding the political theme of the film. However, a more profound reading of the film will definitely show us the significance of the new light techniques and shadows as essential elements in understanding its complete message.

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