

***Frost/Nixon*, a Ron Howard film**

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The film *Frost/Nixon* was released in France on April 1st, 2009 under the title *Frost/Nixon : l'heure de vérité*. But since it was released in the USA on December 5th, 2008, the shooting took place in 2007, at a time when the American people were very tired of the lies of President W. Bush. This dramatic political film has a strong purpose : to go again through the great satisfaction of seeing Richard Nixon admitting "I let down the country", as he probably would have done if he had gone to court. The whole film is focused on the famous interviews of a talk show host, David Frost¹. In 1977, he did four interviews of ninety minutes each with Richard Nixon and all of them were shown on television. Shootings started on March 23rd, 1977, and lasted altogether twelve days. These interviews are still the topic of discussions, films and plays. *Frost/Nixon* is a play by the British screenwriter and dramatist Peter Morgan. The play premiered at the Donmar Warehouse theatre in London in August 2006. Directed by Michael Grandage, and starring Michael Sheen as the talk-show host and Frank Langella as the former president, *Frost/Nixon* received enthusiastic reviews in the British press². From March 31, 2007, the play began previews on Broadway and from there throughout America. It officially opened as a limited engagement at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theatre on April 22, 2007 and closed on August 19, 2007, after 137 performances³.

Film director Ron Howard asked dramatist Peter Morgan to write a scenario for his film adapted from the play and kept the same actors.

Viewing extracts of the original interviews⁴, one realises that film director Ron Howard has also kept the very same words in the ones we see in his film. The film suggests that David Frost's main purpose was to give Richard Nixon the trial he never had because of Gerald Ford, his republican successor. As a matter of fact, the American people could not be satisfied with a situation that left unpunished a President who had lied to them. This is mainly understood at a stage of the interviews when David Frost, after many attempts at trying hard to get a confession, comes out with a piece of evidence, just like a prosecutor would : the recording of a whole conversation Nixon had with Charles Colson. In 1969, Colson was appointed to the White House staff as Counsel to President Nixon. Colson also began to get involved in the activities of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP). On 20th March, 1971, at a meeting of CREEP it was agreed to spend \$ 250 000 "intelligence gathering" operation against the Democratic Party.

¹ David Frost was knighted on December 31, 1992, becoming Sir David Frost.

² It then played at the Gielgud Theatre in London's West End, also starring Langella and Sheen as Nixon and Frost.

³ "Interview with the Interviewer" "Frost/Nixon puts David Frost back in the public eye", David Segal, *Washington Post*, Monday, April 30, 2007. <http://www.washingtonpost.com> [lien consulté le 12 mai 2009].

⁴ The original interviews were released on DVD in 2008/12/2.

Beyond the confession, one does not learn a great deal about the political and cultural context of the USA at the time. History is barely mentioned since the film is more about the making of the interviews and the importance of revealing the truth than about what was actually happening in those days. As a matter of fact the film starts with the President's dismissal without retracing the process which put the Senate in a position where the Impeachment procedure should be used. Now this is the real dramatic episode of American political history since although this procedure was used against other Presidents it never went all the way to the end that is the dismissal of the President of the United States of America.

It all started during re-election campaign in 1972 and what Nixon did was way beyond what the constitution of America allowed him to do as President, and was a lot more than American public opinion could endorse.

However one needs to have the context to understand the enormous success of these interviews and maybe to understand why Ron Howard wanted to make a movie out of it after all.

Richard Nixon was first elected President of the United-States of America in 1968. The inner political context was quite intense : the impact of the Vietnam war and protest against Lyndon Johnson's « Great Society » effects on American society, the Afro-American movement and the Movement for Civil Rights⁵ had lead a majority to vote Republican, and the « Anger of forgotten Americans » who had low incomes and did not benefit from State measures, and felt ruled out of the Great Society all caused unrest. Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon capitalised on that anger : « At a time when the whole country is helping its unemployed poor people, working Americans have been forgotten⁶. » This was the political background of the 1972 presidential campaign when the Watergate happened.

The first interview which was on television on May 4, 1977 is mainly about the Watergate scandal⁷. In this talk, David Frost cannot help asking the question that is on every one's mind : « Why didn't you burn the tapes? »

On June 17, 1972, a burglary took place at the Democrat Party in what was later described as an attempt to destabilise the presidential campaign of November 1972. Five persons were arrested in the possession of a large amount of money.

The White House denied any implication in the burglary. President Nixon was re-elected on November 7, 1972. He obtained 61% of the votes. Two *Washington Post* journalists, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, lead an inquiry which lead to the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CREEP) and more precisely to the White House Plumbers, a Special Investigation Unit. At the beginning of 1973, the trial started. The head of the Democrat majority asked senator Erwin to conduct a full investigation known as the Erwin commission. The White House tried to hush up the scandal but

⁵ Civil Rights Act (1964) et Voting Rights act (1965) : A hundred years after the Secession War, these Laws were adopted to put an end to racial discriminations in civil and voting rights. Civil Rights Movement brings together women and men fighting against all sorts of discriminations (Gay movement, women rights movement and others).

⁶ Richard Nixon, presidential speech at Miami Beach, 1968, in Pierre Melandri, *Histoire des Etats-Unis contemporains*, Paris, André Versailles éditeur, 2008, p. 515

⁷ Institut National de l'Audiotvisuel. <http://www.ina.fr/> [lien consulté le 12 mai 2009].

close collaborators of the President's attempts failed and two of them had to resign. The press revealed corruption attempts and recordings of Nixon's conversations which he had planned himself were brought to public knowledge.

The film also shows that David Frost is convinced of having a fabulous idea : the interview with President Nixon should win a huge audience and would allow him to recover the top rank he had on American television as a talk show Host.

David Frost needed to gather enough money in order to be able to convince Nixon to do the interview. The contract they had amounted to \$ 600 000. It gave Frost the right to broadcast the story of the Watergate.

Frost recruited two experts James Reston Jr and producer Bob Zelnick with whom he prepared the interview. Their work was not exempt of tensions such as « the experts » *versus* « the talk show man » : inspired by their knowledge and their will to uncover the crimes, the experts did not see television the way Frost did. Frost wanted a trial on television. The film suggests that American managers of broadcasting networks did not give him the money Frost needed saying this was check book journalism (because of the contract) and mentioning the fact that he was a foreigner. In the end, all four interviews were broadcast and they obtained a huge audience. The audience reached 45 million people⁸. Frost had achieved his goal : to claim that the President was not above the Laws.

It is during the third interview (on May 19, 1977) that we understand how Richard Nixon overreached the limits of his power as President of the United-States of America. Under the pretext of obtaining information about political opposition to the Vietnam war, Nixon agreed to the Huston Plan which allowed phone-tapping, burglaries, to infiltrate pacifists groups, all sorts of practices that were illegal in the USA.

David Frost asked President Nixon what he thought about this. Nixon answered that under certain circumstances, the President might decide to do things in the interest of the Nation, regardless of whether it was legal or not. Frost could not believe his ears and had Nixon repeat what he just said. Nixon said clearly « When the president does it, that means that it is not illegal. » That was a terrible statement to make which Frost could not ignore. He made a point to underline the fact that a President cannot be above the Law.

At that stage Frost had won on several points. Since the beginning of the film, it was obvious that forces were uneven in the ring⁹, a sort of David against Goliath combat. Nixon's interpret is huge¹⁰ whereas Frost looks really thin. Nixon thinks David Frost wears feminine shoes. In the course of the conversation with his main councillor, the idea that a man should wear lace-up shoes is maintained. In fact, Frost wears Italian shoes; this may reveal a more open attitude towards other cultures, contrasting with Nixon who is convinced of the supremacy of the white man and who appears to be racist and homophobic. One gets a glimpse of his racism in the scene showing Nixon and his team watching television. Frost appears at an official showbiz party and a member of Nixon's staff says : « Did you know he almost married X? » And Nixon

⁸ In the press, Ron Howard mentioned 45 million viewers.

⁹ The comparison with a boxing game and a ring comes to Frost's mind during the first interview.

¹⁰ Frank Langella won a Tony Award for his role as Nixon en 2007.

asks : « Wasn't she black? »

The two fellows are extremely different : one is very elegant, charming and never loses his temper. Frost resists Nixon's attempts to intimidate him ; the other is a big man, he looks like a huge dog, but has a weak character (the interviews reveal his abuse of power and lies).

At the end of the interviews, Nixon gets out of the house and walks towards a woman holding a small dog in her arms. He says : « Is this what they call a teckel ? »

During a telephone call which is obviously made to impress Frost, Nixon tells him that the real reason why they both want to make this interview is to get back to the front stage. Is it the same reason that led Ron Howard to make this film? If not, why did he choose to make a film about the greatest political scandal ever in the USA¹¹ ? It is a very spectacular story indeed. The process of revealing the truth, from the White House Plumbers trial till the President's confession, the work of David Frost was spectacular and it certainly deserved to be the subject of a film, even if it is more rewriting, it is still entertaining.

Nixon himself proved to be entertaining : after all his lies, he decided to make a show on television in 1973, on April 30, he announced the resignation of his closest councillors, making him appear to be innocent. Another time, Nixon had to give the tapes to the Erwin commission and managed to erase part of them, which was later discovered.

The stage setting of the confession is the ending American people expected. Only television in those days could give the American people that show, for nearly everyone had a television in the seventies¹². The Erwin commission had allowed television to broadcast all the auditions they organised. Hence the strong interest for the whole story which public opinion condemned and which the American people could watch step by step. It can also be said that the people were under the impression that they were joining in the elaboration of Justice and democracy, the publicity of debates allowing every one to feel that way. Today, the cinema industry and the very large audience of certain films, thanks to distribution, allow such a process of identification to characters with universal values such as democracy. The making of history is also a process in which one likes to be involved since it allows us to understand why and how things are the way they are and what the motivations of the people at a particular moment were.

This is a question David Frost asked Richard Nixon in the last and fourth interview (May 25,1977) : “How did you get there ?”

Frost asked Nixon to explain what his motivations were with words that the American

11 Serge Diebolt, « L'affaire du Watergate ou la procédure de mise en jeu de la responsabilité du Président des Etats-Unis », juin 1993, <http://www.reds.msh-paris.fr/communication/textes/watergat.htm> [lien consulté le 12 mai 2009].

12 From 1947 television entered American homes ; in 1951, 10% of inhabitants had television. The development of television networks (BNC, ABC et CBS) allows the spectacular development of television in the United-States. Between 1970 and 1990, television equipment rate went over 55%. It is today close to 100%.

people could understand at last since it did not seem to have been the case until then. Was it because of the very high idea American people had of their President ?

Nixon chose to throw back the question : « What words should I use ? »

Frost nearly choked on that question but pulling himself together, he managed to say in a distinct voice : « First you would need to acknowledge it was a crime rather than simple mistakes; second you should admit you abused the power of Presidency and third you could apologise to the American people for your lies and what they have been through for the past two years. » Frost added that if Nixon did not confess all of that he would be tormented for the rest of his life.

President Nixon confessed his crimes in public and the power of television was great, showing his face, masks off. At the end of the film, David Frost pays a visit to Richard Nixon in his house in California. From the conversation it appears that not only Nixon is relieved but that he might even make a fresh start ! What else could the pair of Italian shoes Frost gives him signify ? Does he suggest he should 'step into his shoes' ?