

Media Spectacle and Media Events: Some Critical Reflections

Douglas Kellner

The mainstream corporate media today in the United States process events, news, and information in the form of media spectacle.¹ In an arena of intense competition with 24/7 cable TV networks, talk radio, Internet sites and blogs, and ever proliferating new media like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter, competition for attention is ever more intense leading the corporate media to go to sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle that attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible, until the next spectacle emerges.

By spectacle, I mean media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine which become special media spectacles. They involve an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic, bound up with competition like the Olympics or Oscars. They are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society's highest values. Yet while media rituals function to legitimate a society's "sacred center" (Shils) and dominant values and beliefs (Hepp and Couldry 2009), media spectacles are increasingly commercialized, vulgar, glitzy, and, I will argue, important arenas of political contestation.

Media spectacle refers to technologically mediated events, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form. Examples of political events that became media spectacles would include the Clinton sex and impeachment scandal in the late 1990s, the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 terror attacks, and, currently, the meltdown of the U.S. and perhaps global financial system in the context of a U.S. presidential election. I will theorize in this study media spectacle as eclipsing and absorbing media events. I first indicate how my analysis is connected both to Guy Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle and theories of media events and spectacles, and then illustrate my theory with an analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign.

Guy Debord and the Society of the Spectacle

The concept of the "society of the spectacle" developed by French theorist Guy Debord and his comrades in the

Situationist International has had major impact on a variety of contemporary theories of society and culture. My notion of media spectacle builds on Debord's conception of the society of spectacle, but differs significantly. For Debord, "spectacle" constituted the overarching concept to describe the media and consumer society, including the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities and the production and effects of all media. Using the term "media spectacle," I am largely focusing on various forms of technologically-constructed media productions that are produced and disseminated through the so-called mass media, ranging from radio and television to the Internet and latest wireless gadgets.

As we proceed into a new millennium, the media are becoming more technologically dazzling and are playing an ever-escalating role in everyday life with proliferating media and cyberculture generating new sites like FaceBook, MySpace, and YouTube, as well as a propagation of complex computer games, which include role-playing and virtual immersion in alternative worlds. Thus, in addition to the spectacles that celebrate and reproduce the existing society described by Debord, and by Dayan and Katz and others as media events (see below), today there is a new domain of the interactive spectacle, which provides an illusion of interaction and creativity, but may well ensnare one ever-deeper in the tentacles of the existing society and technology (see Best and Kellner 2001).

Thus, while Debord presents a rather generalized and abstract notion of spectacle, I engage specific examples of media spectacle and how they are produced, constructed, circulated, and function in the present era. In addition, I am reading the production, text and effects of various media spectacles from a standpoint within contemporary U.S. society in order to help illuminate and theorize its socio-political dynamics and culture, and more broadly, globalization and global culture. Debord, by contrast, was analyzing a specific stage of capitalist society, that of the media and consumer society organized around spectacle.

Secondly, my approach to these specific spectacles is interpretive and interrogatory. In my studies of media spectacle, I deploy cultural studies as *diagnostic critique*, reading and interpreting various spectacles to see what they tell us about the present age, using media spectacles to illuminate contemporary social developments, trends, and struggles.² Thirdly, I analyze the contradictions and reversals of the spectacle, whereas Debord has an overpowering and hegemonic notion of the

society of the spectacle. Although he and his comrades in the Situationist International sketched out various models of opposition and struggle, and in fact inspired in part the rather spectacular May '68 events in France, whereby students and workers rebelled almost overthrew the existing government, Debord's notion of "the society of the spectacle" tends to be monolithic and all-embracing. By contrast, I see the spectacle as contested and have a notion of the reversal of the spectacle. In my conception, the spectacle as a *contested terrain* in which different forces use the spectacle to push their interests and agenda.

Media Events and Media Spectacle

The notion of media spectacle also builds upon Dayan and Katz's notion of a "media event" (1992), which referred to how political systems exploited televised live, ceremonial, and preplanned events, such as the funeral of President Kennedy, a royal wedding, or Olympic Games to celebrate and reproduce the social system. Interestingly, Katz and Liebes (2007) have recently revised the original Dayan and Katz analysis to distinguish between "media events," "the ceremonial Contests, Conquests and Coronations that punctuated television's first 50 years," contrasted to disruptive events "such as Disaster, Terror and War" (Katz and Liebes 2007). My own view is that the Bush/Cheney administration has orchestrated media spectacle in its "war on terror" to strengthen their regime, but that the spectacle of the Iraq war got out of control and became a highly disruptive terrain of struggle (see Kellner 2005). In fact, war itself has arguably become an orchestrated media spectacle since the 1991 Gulf War (see Kellner 1992 and 2005), with terrorism also using media spectacle for political ends (Kellner 2003b).

On my account, there are many levels and categories of spectacle (Kellner 2003a and 2008). Some media spectacles, like Dayan and Katz's media events (1992), are recurrent phenomena of media culture that celebrate dominant values and institutions, as well as its modes of conflict resolution. They include media extravaganzas like the Oscars and Emmies, or sports events like the Super Bowl, World Cup, or Olympics, which celebrate basic values of competition and winning.

Politics too is increasingly mediated by media spectacle. Political conflicts, campaigns, and those attention-grabbing occurrences that we call "news" have all been subjected to the logic of spectacle and tabloidization

in the era of media sensationalism, infotainment, political scandal and contestation, seemingly unending cultural war, the on-going phenomenon of Terror War, and now the emergent era of the Obama spectacle.

Media spectacle thus includes those media events and rituals of consumption, entertainment, and competition like political campaigns that embody contemporary society's basic values and serve to enculturate individuals into its way of life. Yet the spectacle, as my allusion to the *political spectacle* attests, may also embody key societal conflicts, and so I see the spectacle as a contested terrain. Since the 1960s culture wars have been raging in the United States between Left and Right, liberals and conservatives, and a diversity of groups over U.S. politics, race, class, gender, sexuality, war, and other key issues. Both sides exploit the spectacle as during the Vietnam War when the war itself was contested by the spectacle of the anti-war movement, or the 1990s Clinton sex and impeachment spectacle, whereby conservatives attempted to use the spectacle of sex scandal to destroy the Clinton presidency, while his defenders used the spectacle of the Right trying to take out an elected president to successfully defend him.

Spectacles of terror, like the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and Pentagon, differ significantly from spectacles that celebrate or reproduce the existing society as in Guy Debord's "society of the spectacle," or the "media events" analysed by Dayan and Katz (1992), which describe how political systems exploited televised live, ceremonial, and preplanned events. Spectacles of terror are highly disruptive events carried out by oppositional groups or individuals who are carrying out politics or war by other means. Like the media and consumer spectacles described by Debord, spectacles of terror reduce individuals to passive objects, manipulated by existing institutions and figures. However, the spectacles of terror produce fear which terrorists hope will demoralize the objects of their attack, but which are often manipulated by conservative groups, like the Bush-Cheney administration, to push through rightwing agendas, cut back on civil liberties, and militarize the society.

Spectacles of terror should also be distinguished from *spectacles of catastrophe* such as natural disasters like the Asian Tsunami or Hurricane Katrina that became major spectacles of the day in 2004 and 2005. Other recent U.S. spectacles of catastrophe include fires, dramatic failures of the system or infrastructure such as the Minnesota

Bridge collapse and Utah mine tragedy, both becoming spectacles of the day in August 2007, and recurrent Hurricanes, such as Gustav in August 2008 which delayed the Republican party presidential convention one day when it was predicted to be twice as powerful as Hurricane Katrina (although, fortunately, it was only half as powerful but totally dominated U.S. corporate media coverage for days). *Megaspectacles* constitute a situation whereby certain spectacles become defining events of their era. These include commodity spectacles such as the McDonald's or Nike spectacle, or Michael Jordan and the NBA basketball spectacle, which define an era of consumption (Kellner 2003a). Entertainment spectacle like Elvis Presley, rock and roll, and hip hop, came to help define a cultural epoch, The Age of Rock that still rocks on. Megaspectacles also include socio-political dramas that characterize a certain period, involving such things as the 1991 Gulf war, the O.J. Simpson trials, the Clinton sex and impeachment scandals, or the Terror War that was the defining of the global nightmare of the Bush-Cheney era, now blessedly over. Megaspectacles are defined both quantitatively and qualitatively. The major media spectacles of the era dominate news, journalism, and Internet buzz, and are highlighted and framed as the key events of the age, as were, for instance, the Princess Diana wedding, death, and funeral, the extremely close 2000 election and 36 Day Battle for the White House, or the September 11 terror attacks and their violent aftermath. From 2003 to the present, the spectacle of Iraq, and the ongoing Terror War, have dominated our era and encapsulate basic conflicts and political dynamics, although these megaspectacles can be overshadowed temporarily by the spectacle of the day, like the interlude of the "Virginia Tech Massacre" (Kellner 2008), or the 2008 U.S. presidential party primaries and then election campaign, that I discuss below.

Media spectacles are thus becoming the form in which news, information, and the events of the era are processed by media corporations, the state and political groups, and institutions and individuals who have the power to construct political and social realities. In an earlier era of broadcasting, media events were the major form in which the media and the state constructed significant social rituals that reproduced the existing society. Media events tended to be temporally regular, discrete, temporary, and relatively predictable. In the early era of television, as Lang and Lang have argued (1992 [1984]), media events became key markers and constituents of the political and

social reality of the day, although as Boorstin warned (1961), they could also be constructed as pseudo-events.

Media spectacles, by contrast, are more defuse, variable, unpredictable, and contestable. Media spectacles emerged as a dominant form of defining and contesting existing social and political realities during the era of cable and satellite television and the metaphysical event of the Internet, that changes everything. Whereas media events tended to be national, media spectacles are often global. In what McLuhan (1964) foresaw as a "global village," a networked and wired world can experience the same events simultaneously and in real time as during September 2008, the entire world suffered through the Chinese milk poisoning and then the meltdown of U.S. financial institutions, which threatened the global economy.

Media spectacles are orchestrated by the state in the case of wars, governing, or political elections, while media corporations on a daily basis constructed media spectacles out of "breaking news" and what are defined as the major events of the day. Media corporations want to hook consumers into big stories so that they will stay tuned, log on, or keep their eyes and attention on the big events of the day that are increasingly orchestrated as media spectacles. This is currently the case in the United States, and to some extent globally, with the 2008 U.S. presidential election whose outcome may well define a new historical era.

Cultural Studies and Political Spectacle: The Case of the 2008 U.S. Presidential Election

Since the establishment of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham England in the 1960s, as well as in subsequent versions of cultural studies throughout the world, there has been a long-standing tradition of taking on the big issues of the era (Kellner 1995). My version uses cultural studies and critical social theory to attempt to illuminate the contemporary moment. Looking at the 2008 Democratic party primaries we see exhibited once again the triumph of the spectacle. In this case, the spectacle of Obama and Hillary, the first serious African American candidate vs. the first serious woman candidate brought on a compelling spectacle of race and gender, as well as a campaign spectacle in incredibly hard-fought and unpredictable primaries. As a media spectacle, the Democratic Party primary could be read as a reality TV show. For the media and candidates alike the Democratic

primary has been *Survivor*, or *The Apprentice* ("You're fired!"), with losing candidates knocked out week by week. With the two standing candidates Obama and Clinton, it has been the *The Amazing Race*, as well as *American Gladiator* and *American Idol* rolled into one, with genuine suspense concerning the outcome.

From the first primary in Iowa where in January he won a startling victory, it has been the Obama spectacle, a spectacle of Hope, of Change, of Color, and of Youth. In addition to his campaign speeches on the stump everyday that have mobilized record crowds, after every primary election, Obama made a spirited speech, even after his loss in New Hampshire and other primaries. He gave a magnificent Super Tuesday victory speech that could have been the most watched event of the primary season and was probably the most circulated speech on the Internet that week, in which Obama pulled slightly ahead in a multi-state primary night. Obama then won 11 primaries in a row, made another magnificent speech after the Wisconsin primary where Obama took over airways for about an hour, providing a vision of the U.S. coming together, mobilizing people for change, carrying out a progressive agenda, getting out of Iraq, using the money spent there to rebuild the infrastructure, schools, health system, and so on. Even when he lost primaries, he gave inspiring and impassioned speeches.

There has also been an impressive Internet spectacle in support of Obama's presidency. Obama has raised unprecedented amount money on the Internet, he achieved

over one million friends on Facebook, and has mobilized youth and others through text-messaging and emails. The YouTube (UT) music video "Obama Girl," which has a young woman singing about why she supports Obama with images of his speeches interspersed, has gotten over 5 million hits and, along with Will,I,Am's Obama music video, is one of the most popular in history, while twelve Obama UT videos have received over one million hits a piece.³

In terms of stagecraft and spectacle, in Obama's daily stump speeches on the campaign trail, his post-victory and even defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots Internet and cultural support have shown that Obama is a master of the spectacle. Hence Obama eventually secured the Democratic presidential nomination setting himself to run against John McCain as the presumptive Republican party candidate. Thus, during the summer months, we have had the Obama vs. McCain spectacle, intensified during the party conventions in late August and early September and on full-blast for the final two months of

campaigning. Since Obama is the master of the spectacle, McCain had to give good spectacle himself, or produce anti-Obama spectacles. From the time Obama cinched the nomination, McCain largely attempted to create an anti-Obama spectacle through TV ads, planting anti-Obama stories in the press and circulating them through the Internet, and eventually savagely attacking Obama everyday on the campaign trail.

Although Obama benefited significantly through his supporters' Internet and other cultural productions, he was temporarily put on the defensive in the summer with the YouTube released videos of the inflammatory speeches of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the Chicago pastor of his church. The deluge of Republican and then mainstream media circulating the Rev. Wright speeches and Wright's appearances on television and making inflammatory speeches led Obama to break with his pastor. However, Obama gave what many believed to be a brilliant speech on race in Philadelphia, another spectacle that became a major cultural event on both the Internet and mainstream media.

Underneath the spectacle on the broadcasting media, a Republican campaign circulated through the Internet claimed that Obama was really a Muslim, was like Rev. Wright and anti-American, and even an Iranian agent.⁴ In addition to these underhanded sneak attacks, parallel to the Swift Boat attacks against John Kerry, the McCain campaign released TV ads equating Obama with Paris Hilton and Britney Spears as an empty celebrity, leading Paris Hilton to create an ad attacking "the wrinkly old white dude" (i.e. John McCain) and arguing why she'd be a better president; her YouTube video received over one million hits in a single day.

While the McCain camp engaged in petty anti-Obama ads and attacks in summer 2008, Obama went on a Global Tour that itself became a major media spectacle as he traveled from Afghanistan and Iraq to Europe. Obama gave a rousing speech in Berlin that attracted hundreds and thousands of spectators and a global TV audience, and was shown meeting with leaders in all of these countries, as if he were the presumptive president.

As the campaigns neared their party conventions, traditionally a great TV spectacle, the presidential race seemed to be establishing once again the primacy of TV democracy where the election is battled out on television --although print media, Internet, and new media are also significant, as I have been suggesting. Following the great spectacle of the Democratic convention in late August with memorable speeches by Obama, Al Gore, Bill and Hillary

Clinton, and a moving appearance by Senator Ted Kennedy, McCain desperately needed some spectacle and got it in spades when he announced and presented his Vice-President candidate, who generated the Sarah Palin spectacle, one of the more astounding media spectacles in U.S. political history. Palin, a short-term Governor of Alaska and former small town mayor who few knew anything about when McCain introduced her. It turns out, however, that Palin gives good spectacle: she's a gun owner and NRA activist and footage all day showed her shooting guns. She was also a high school basketball star so there were good spectacle of her playing basketball (although Obama could probably beat her one on one). Palin's husband was a snowmobile champion so you got more good sports spectacle and Sarah's a beauty contest winner, winning local contests and coming runner up as Miss Alaska, so there were a lot of images of her as pin-up girl that first day which introduced her to the American public. Gov. Palin's a mother with five children, so you had great family pictures, including a newborn baby with down's syndrome. After her initial speech with McCain introducing her, her family and the McCains went shopping and she was shown as an enthusiastic shopper marking her as a typical American.

Then on Labor Day, September 1 the public learned that Palin's 17 year old daughter was pregnant and unmarried so we had sex scandal spectacle all day and debates whether a mother with all these problems should run for Vice President and submit her family to media scrutiny; many other scandals about Palin herself came out: she had fired state employees who would not do her bidding and had appointed unqualified high school friends and cronies to state jobs; she had supported corrupt politicians, had lied about her record, and had consistently taken positions to the right of Dick Cheney, so Sarah Palin suddenly became a spectacle of scandal, as well as adulation by the Christian and Republican Right.

The Republicans were forced to postpone their convention because of another spectacle, the Hurricane Gustav spectacle that was said to be twice as dangerous as Katrina, but turned out to be only half as bad. Once the Republicans got their convention started, it turned out that Sarah Palin gave an electrifying speech that mobilized the rightwing Republican base and a new star was born. For a couple of weeks after the Republican convention Sarah Palin was the spectacle of the day and the media buzzed around the clock about her past and her record, her

qualifications or lack of them, and her effect on the election.

The Stupid Season in the campaign was over, however, on Monday September 15, 2008 when the collapse of the Lehman Brothers investment company helped trigger what appeared to be one of the great U.S. and global financial crises in history. Suddenly, the election was caught up in the spectacle of the possible collapse of the U.S. and global economy so economics took front and center. In two wild weeks of campaigning, McCain first insisted that the "fundamentals" of the U.S. economy were sound, and when everyone ridiculed him, he recognized the significance of the crisis and said that as president he would fire the head of the SEC (Security Exchange Commission), although this official does not serve directly under the president, and everyone from the *Wall Street Journal* to the television networks admonished McCain for trying to scapegoat someone who experts knew was not responsible for the crisis.

Obama seemed to gain the initiative during the economic crisis as he made measured and intelligent statements on the economy, and so the Republicans desperately began a strategy of the Big Lie, endlessly distorting his tax proposals, accusing him of crony relations with disgraced federal officials who he hardly knew, and making ridiculous claims about Obama's responsibility for the economic mess. It was becoming apparently that the Republicans were pursuing the Karl Rove/George W. Bush strategy of simply lying about their opponents, trying to create an alternative reality. It was becoming clear that Sarah Palin's candidacy was based on Big Lies, as McCain introduced her as the woman who had stopped the Bridge to Nowhere in Alaska and was a champion of cutting "earmarks," pork barrel legislation to benefit special interests in one's district. Palin repeated these claims day after day, but research revealed that she had supported the Bridge to Nowhere from the beginning, had hired a public relations firm to get earmarks for her district and her state, and had in fact received more earmarks per capita than almost any politician in the country.

With the September 22, 2008 economic meltdown, however, when it looked like the U.S. economy was in a freefall collapse and the Bush-Cheney administration proposed a multibillion dollar bailout package, John McCain embarked on one of the truly incredible political spectacles in U.S. history, trying to position himself as the savior of the economic system and then making an utter

fool of himself as day after day he engaged in increasingly bizarre and erratic behavior. Just before the first presidential debate on September 26, McCain announced he was suspending his campaign, was going to Washington to resolve the financial crisis and would stay until it was resolved, threatening to miss the presidential debate. After a lot of negative publicity, he showed up for the debate, viciously attacked Barack Obama in probably the most thuggish debate performance in U.S. political history, with his website declaring him the winner before the debate even took place (subsequent polls showed that Obama got a bounce from the debate and the candidate's performances in response to the financial crisis).

Over the weekend, McCain came to Washington, claiming he was bringing together Congressmen to resolve the financial crisis and attacked Obama for staying on the campaign trail. The morning of the Congressional vote on the debate, McCain and his surrogates claimed it was John McCain alone who had brought Democrats and Republicans together to resolve the financial crisis and continued vicious attacks on Obama. When, hours later, it was revealed that the bailout package pushed by the Bush-Cheney administration and supported by McCain, Obama and the Democratic and Republican party house leaders, failed because two-thirds of the Republicans, who McCain was supposed to be leading, voted against it, McCain had more than a little egg on his face as the stock market plunged in the biggest one-day drop in history.

Trying in the face of his buffoonish spectacle to keep the initiative, McCain said that this was not the time to engage in partisan behavior, but to pull the country together, and blamed the failure of the bailout bill on Obama and the Democrats -- surely a partisan claim! The Sarah Palin spectacle momentarily took focus off of McCain's erratic efforts to take advantage of the booming economic crisis and the unpopular trillion dollar plus bailout, when the Vice Presidential candidate debated the Democrats Joe Biden. The lead-up to the debate featured daily sound-bites of Sarah Palin's interview with CBS's Katie Couric in which she was unable to mention one specific newspaper or journal that she read, could not think of a Supreme Court decision she opposed beyond Roe vs. Wade, and generally could not complete a coherent sentence, let alone provide a clear answer. During the debate she proved herself to be a good script performer as she acted out the predigested sound-bites to each question, winked and talked folksy if she wanted to distract the

audience, and generally played cutesy rather than actually debate the questions with Biden, who provided coherent answers to questions and criticism of John McCain which Palin ignored.

Palin's conservative base loved her down-home hockey-mom performance and so Palin was unleashed as the attack dog on the campaign trail, as a desperate McCain, with polls indicating that votes were going Obama's way in key states, decided to attack Obama's personal character as a last-ditch way to try to win votes. After the *New York Times* published an article on Obama and former Weather-underground member Bill Ayers, Palin started referring daily to "Obama's pallin' around with terrorists," and John McCain began personally attacking Obama, raising the question "who is the real Barack Obama," with the audience screaming "terrorist!"

Throughout the second week of October, Palin and McCain continued to make the Ayers connection in their campaign rallies, media interviews, and TV ads, personally attacking Obama, and the frenzied Republican mob would scream "Kill him!," "Traitor!," "Bomb Obama!" When one confused woman in the Republican mob told McCain that she "didn't trust Obama" because of things she'd been hearing about him, stammering "he's an Arab!," it was clear that the Republicans lies and demagoguery had led their rabid rightwing base to believe that Obama was an Arab, a Muslim, a terrorist, and not an American. It was also clear that Palin and McCain had stirred up significant levels of mob fear, ignorance, and violence that were becoming extremely volatile and dangerous.

Investigative reporters indicated that Obama had only a casual relation with Ayers, whereas Palin and her husband were involved in an Alaskan secessionist party whose rightwing and anti-semitic founder had a long history of outrageous anti-American ranting, racist ramblings, and ultra-right politics: Palin's husband had belonged to that party and just this year Sarah Palin addressed their party convention wishing them "good luck." Another investigative report linked Palin to a number of extreme rightwing groups and individuals who had promoted her career (McCain, too, it was revealed, had been associated with an unsavory lot). But Palin's week of infamy came to a proper conclusion when the Alaskan Supreme Court ruled on October 10 that a report into the "Troopergate" scandal could be released and the report itself pointed out that Palin had "abused her authority as governor" and violated Alaska's ethics regulations. Thrown off her moralistic high horse, Palin

nonetheless continued to be McCain's attack dog and raise controversy on the campaign trail

It was clear that Republicans were playing a politics of association to feed their media spectacles, just as the Bush-Cheney administration had associated Iraq with 9/11, Al Qaeda, and "weapons of mass destruction," connections that were obviously false, but the associations worked to sell the war to their base, gullible Democrats, and the media. Republicans had long sold their rightwing corporate class politics to voters by associating the Democrats with gay marriage, abortion, and secularism. Would the public and media wake up to the Republicans' politics of lying and manipulation or would they continue to get away with their decades of misrule and mendaciousness?

The major theme of the final debate pushed by McCain that remained a touchstone of his campaign was how Obama's answer to Joe the Plumber proved that he was going to raise taxes on small business. In an Obama campaign event the previous weekend, the man who McCain referred to as Joe the Plumber told Obama that he had been a plumber for fifteen years and was trying to buy the business he worked for -- and since it cost over \$250,000, he would be forced to pay higher taxes since Obama's tax reform proposal would increase taxes on those making over \$250,000 and lower those making less. It turned out Joe wasn't the dude's first name, whose real name was Samuel J. Wurzelbacher; that he was not a licensed plumber; that his income the previous year was around \$40,000; and that he owed over \$1,000 in back unpaid taxes.⁵ These paltry facts did not stop McCain and Palin who continued to raise Joe the Plumber in every campaign stop and were making it the major theme of their campaign to generate an opposition between Obama the tax-and-spend liberal who would raise your taxes and McCain and Palin who took the side of Joe the Plumber, Ted the Carpenter, and a daily array of allegedly working class people who opposed Obama.

As the two campaigns entered their last week of campaigning before the November 4 election, Obama made speeches with his "closing arguments" hoping to "seal the deal." During September, Obama raised an unprecedented \$150 million, much of it from small Internet and personal donations, and also was getting soaring poll numbers, showing him pulling ahead nationally and in the significant battleground states. As he entered the last week of the campaign, Obama presented the spectacle of a young, energetic, articulate candidate who had run what many considered an almost flawless campaign and attempted during

the election's final days to project images of hope, change, and bringing the country together to address its growing problems and divisions -- exactly the message that Obama started off his campaign with.

The McCain-Palin camp seemed to close with the same basic argument with which most Republican candidates end their campaign: the Democrats want to raise taxes and spread around the wealth, an accusation increasingly hyped by the rightwing base and McCain and Palin themselves that Obama was really a "socialist." McCain continued to raise questions about Obama's experience and the risk that the country would undergo with an untried president, while Obama retorted that the real risk was continuing with more of the last eight years of catastrophic economic policies and a failed foreign policy.

As the campaign came to a close, Obama tried to seal the deal with a multi-million dollar infomercial played on major networks during prime-time just before the World Series game on October 29. In a Hollywoodesque production, the Obama spectacle came together with "American stories" about hard times and struggles and how Obama would deal with these problems and help people. The Obama TV spectacle also contained a rare acknowledgment of the seriousness of problems with the economy and what Obama would do to deal with the crisis; a reprise of his story, highlighting his biracial heritage and close relations to his white mother and grandparents; testimonies from a variety of individuals concerning Obama's experience in community, state politics, and the national level; and highlights from some of Obama's greatest moments of his speeches.

This event was followed by a live appearance with president Bill Clinton in a midnight campaign rally in Florida, his first campaign event with the former president and husband of his primary campaign rival Hillary Clinton. Bill enthusiastically endorsed Obama, indicating that Obama was regularly calling him for advice concerning the economic crisis and praising Obama's reaching out for experts on the issue and that the Clintons and Obama had made up, at least for the present. Obama returned the compliments with praise of Clinton's presidency and a comparison between good times under Clinton and the Democrats contrasted with the messes of the past years under the Republican Bush-Cheney regime, which Clinton and Obama both claimed John McCain would basically continue.

Barack Obama continued to draw large and adoring crowds throughout his fall campaign, but consistently tried to present an image of himself as cool, calm, competent,

and presidential on the campaign trail and during media interviews and the presidential debates. Unlike the McCain-Palin campaign, he avoided dramatic daily shifts and attention-grabbing stunts to try to present an image of a mature and intelligent leader who is able to rationally deal with crises and respond to attacks in a measured and cool manner, giving him the current moniker "No drama, Obama."

The Election Night Spectacle

Election night is always a major political spectacle when the country, and parts of the world, watch the election results come with maps flashing new red and blue colors on the states, with the exciting swoosh of Breaking News!, followed by results and trends of the election in the inevitable countdown for a candidate getting the magic number of votes to gain the presidency.

All day long the television networks gave us the exciting spectacle of record turnouts all over the country, with images of people patiently waiting in line to vote, the candidates making their last electoral stops and pitches and then voting, followed by the period of waiting for polls to close so that the networks could release votes.

The November 4, 2008 started slowly with Obama getting the predictable Democratic Party states in the Northeast and McCain getting predictable Republican Southern states. Excitement mounted when Obama was awarded the plum of Pennsylvania, which McCain and Palin had campaigned hard for, and when an hour or so later Obama was given Ohio it was clear that he was on the way to victory. At 11:00 pm, the networks opened the hour with the banner heading "Barack Obama Elected 44th President of the United States," or just "Obama Elected President." His sweep of the west coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington, plus the bonus of Hawaii and the hard-fought southern state of Virginia sealed it for Obama who was on his way to a big win.

Meanwhile, in Grant Park in Chicago, the scene of the spectacle "The Whole World is Watching" during the Democratic convention in 1968, when the police tear-gassed antiwar spectators, and the site a year later of the Weather Underground abortive "Days of Rage" spectacle, -- this time a peaceful assembly of a couple of hundred thousand spectators, mostly young and of many colors had assembled to celebrate Obama's historical victory. In the crowd, close-ups appeared of celebrities like Jessie

Jackson, tears streaming down his face, a jubilant Spike Lee, a solemn and smiling Oprah Winfrey, and other celebrities who joined the mostly young crowd to hear Barack Obama's victory speech. The park hushed into silence as John McCain gave his concession speech and the audience nodded and applauded respectfully, suggesting that the country could come together.

When Obama, his wife Michelle, and his two beautiful girls took stage the place went wild and the eyes of the world were watching the spectacle of Barack Obama becoming president of the United States. Television networks showed the spectacle of people celebrating throughout the United States, from Times Square to Atlanta, Georgia, and even throughout the world. There were special celebrations in countries like Kenya and Indonesia where Obama had lived and his former residencies in these countries were becoming national shrines that would be tourist destinations. Obama was indeed a **global spectacle** and his stunning victory would make him a world superstar of global politics.

Deconstructing the Spectacle

In this article, I have focused on the dimension of presidential campaign as media spectacle and have described the spectacles of the 2008 presidential election, surely one of the most exciting and fascinating political spectacles in U.S. history. While I have argued that presidential campaigns in the U.S. and elsewhere are primarily orchestrated as media spectacles, I do not want to suggest that this is the most important aspect of determining who wins an election, or the master key to victory. Obviously, money plays a major part in presidential elections and often whoever raises the most money wins. In a media age, money allows candidates to produce their own spectacles in the form of TV ads and they need millions to raise money to orchestrate campaign events and produce an organization. Obama had raised an unprecedented amount of money, including record donations from small contributions and a record amount of money raised through the Internet.

People also vote because of political affiliations and ideology, their economic interests, and sometimes even because of issues and substance, no matter what the spectacle of the day has to offer. Yet while I write this shortly after the election and serious scholars have not yet fully explained Obama's victory, I would suggest that certain resonant images and media spectacles contributed to Obama's victory. People obviously wanted change and hope

and Obama offered a spectacle of both since he was the first candidate of color and also represented generational change. The Obama campaign pushed daily the spectacle of the connections of John McCain with the Bush administration, in TV ads, daily rallies, the debates, and other forums with TV news playing endlessly pictures of Bush and McCain embracing and graphics showing that McCain had voted with the most unpopular and failed present of recent history 90% of the time.

The global collapse of the financial markets and crisis of the U.S. and global economy produced one of the major media spectacles of the campaign and the McCain spectacle of erratic pronouncements and daily stunts to exploit the crisis appeared to have turned voters off, while Obama remained cool and rational during this spectacle and time of danger, showing he was more presidential and better able to deal with crises.

During this difficult period in U.S. and global history, voters obviously reacted against the politics of distraction with the Republican spectacles of daily attacks on Obama backfiring and the negative spectacle of Republican crowds screaming "terrorist," "traitor," "kill him!" and the like produced an extremely negative spectacle of a Republican mob, stirred up by McCain and Palin and seeming to inspire rational voters to line up, for hours if necessary, to vote for Obama and a new politics. Thus campaign spectacles can backfire and while the Sarah Palin spectacle did not alone destroy the Republican campaign it certainly did not help recruit voters, although it made Palin a darling of the Republican extreme right and a media superstar.

No doubt other factors will become part of the story of how Barack Obama emerged from relative obscurity to beat Hillary Clinton in a hard fought Democratic Party primary, and then whipped John McCain in one of the wildest and most spectaclesque elections in U.S. history, one that is transformative and will be pondered for years to come.

Finally, to be a literate reader of U.S. presidential campaigns, one needs to see how the opposing parties construct narratives, media spectacle, and spin to try to produce a positive image of their candidate to sell to the American public. In presidential campaigns, there are daily photo opportunities and media events, themes and points of the day that candidates want to highlight, and narratives about the candidates that will win support for the public. Obama's narrative from the beginning was bound up with the Obama spectacle, a new kind of politician representing

change and bringing together people of different colors and ethnicities, ages, parts of the nation, and political views. He has effectively used media spectacle and Internet spectacle to promote his candidacy and generally been consistent in his major themes and story-lines, although the Republicans tried to subvert his story with allegations of close connections with radicals like the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Bill Ayers.

An informed and intelligent public thus needs to learn to deconstruct the spectacle to see what are the real issues behind the election, what interests and ideology do the candidates represent, and what sort of spin, narrative, and media spectacles are they using to sell their candidates. This article limited itself to describing the media spectacle dimension of the campaign so far. I do not want to claim that this is the key to or essence of presidential campaigns also depend on traditional organizing, campaign literature, debate, and getting out the vote, the so-called "ground game." But I would argue that media spectacle is becoming an increasingly salient feature of presidential and other elections in the United States and many other countries today.

References

Boorstin, Daniel (1961) *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*. New York: Harper and Row.

Debord, Guy (1967) *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black and Red.

Hepp, Andreas and Couldry, Nick (2009) "Media Events in Globalized Media Cultures,"

Katz, Elihu and Dayan, Daniel (1992) *Media Events: The Live broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard university Press.

Katz, Elihu and Liebes, Tamar (2007) "'No More Peace!': How Disaster, Terror and War have Upstaged m\Media Events" in the first volume of the *International Journal of Communication* at <http://ijoc.org/ojs/index.php/ijoc/article/view/44/23>.

Kellner, Douglas (1995) *Media Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.

_____ (2001) *Grand Theft 2000*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

_____ Kellner, D. (2003a) *Media Spectacle*. London and New York: Routledge.

_____ (2003b) *From September 11 to Terror War: The Dangers of the Bush Legacy*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield.

_____ (2005) *Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy*. Boulder: Paradigm.

_____ (2008) *Guys and Guns Amok: Domestic Terrorism and School Shootings from the Oklahoma City Bombings to the Virginia Tech Massacre*. Boulder, Col.: Paradigm Press.

Lang, Gladys and Lang, Kurt (1992 [1984]) *Politics and Television*. Edison, N.J.: Transaction Publishers.

Notes

¹ This work draws on my studies of media spectacle in Kellner 2001; 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2008.

² On diagnostic critique, see Kellner, 1995, pp. 116-117.

³ See the videos at

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU>. and David Carno, "MyBo brigade awaits orders," *Los Angeles Times*, November 19, 2008:E1.

⁴ See "An Attack That Came out of the Ether," *Washington Post*, June 28.

⁵ For a dossier of articles on Joe the Plumber, see http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/joe_wurzelbacher/index.html?inline=nyt-per.