

## Barack Obama and Celebrity Spectacle<sup>1</sup>

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In the contemporary era of media politics, image and media spectacle have played an increasingly important role in presidential politics and other domains of society. With the increasing tabloidization of corporate journalism, lines between news, information and entertainment have blurred, and politics has become a form of entertainment and spectacle. Candidates enlist celebrities in their election campaigns and are increasingly covered in the same way as celebrities, with tabloidized news obsessing about their private lives. In this context, presidential candidates themselves become celebrities and are packaged and sold like the products of the culture industry. In this study, I will suggest some of the ways that the logic of the spectacle promoted the candidacy of Barack Obama and how he has become a master of the spectacle and global celebrity of the top rank. I will discuss how he became a supercelebrity in the presidential primaries and general election of 2008 and utilized media spectacle to help his win the presidency. Finally, I will discuss how Obama has so far in the first 100 Days of his presidency deployed his status as global celebrity and utilized media spectacle to advance his agenda.

In the contemporary era, celebrities are mass idols, venerated and celebrated by the media. The media produces celebrities and so naturally the most popular figures promoted by the media industries become celebrities. Entertainment industry figures and sports stars have long been at the center of celebrity culture, employing public relations and image specialists to put out positive buzz and stories concerning their clients, but business tycoons and politicians have also become celebrities in recent years. Chris Rojek distinguishes between "ascribed celebrity," which concerns lineage, such as belonging to the Royal Family in the United Kingdom, or the Bush or Kennedy families in the United States; "achieved celebrity," which is won by outstanding success in fields like entertainment, sports, or talent in a particular

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier pre-election version of this paper, with links to images and videos discussed in the paper, appeared as "Media Spectacle and the 2008 Presidential Election: Some Pre-election Reflections," *Mediascape* (Fall 2008) at [http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall08\\_Kellner.html](http://www.tft.ucla.edu/mediascape/Fall08_Kellner.html). I have revised this version in the light of the actual election results, post-election analysis and Obama's first months as president.

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field compared to "attributed celebrity," through which fame is achieved through media representations or spectacle, as in scandals or tabloid features (2001, p. 17ff), with Paris Hilton being an obvious example of this category.

Celebrity is dependent on both constant media proliferation and the implosion between entertainment, news and politics. The proliferation of media outlets has created an ever more intense and diffuse celebrity culture with specialized publications, Internet sites, and social networking fanning the flames of celebrity culture and mainstream media further circulating and legitimating it. Celebrities have thus become the most popular figures in their field and publics seem to have insatiable appetites for inside information and gossip about their idols, fueling a media in search of profit in a competitive market to provide increasing amounts of celebrity news, images and spectacle.

Indeed, celebrity culture is such that there is a class of faux celebrities — think Paris Hilton — who are largely famous for being famous and being in the media, supported by a tabloid media that is becoming more prevalent in the era of the Internet, new media and social networking sites that circulate gossip. In this context, it is not surprising that politicians, especially political leaders frequently in the media spotlight, have become celebrities, as publics seek news, information and gossip about their private and public lives, turning some politicians into media superstars and relegating politicians caught in scandal to tabloid hell and damnation.

In addition, politics in the United States and elsewhere in global culture have become propelled in recent years by media spectacle. It is my position that the mainstream corporate media today in the U.S. and elsewhere increasingly process events, news and information in the form of media spectacle.<sup>2</sup> In an arena of heightened competition between 24/7 cable television networks, talk radio, Internet sites and blogs, and ever proliferating new media like Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Twitter, competition for the audience's attention is evermore intense, leading the corporate media to go to sensationalistic tabloidized stories which they construct in the forms of media spectacle, attempting to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible, until the next spectacle emerges.

Spectacles are media constructs that are out of the ordinary and habitual daily routine which become popular media events, capturing the attention of the media and the public. They involve an aesthetic dimension and often are dramatic, bound up with competition like the Olympics or the Oscars and they feature compelling images, montage and stories. In particular, media spectacle refers to technologically mediated events, in which media forms — like broadcasting, print media or the Internet — process events in spectacular ways. Natural disasters are presented as media spectacle as "Breaking News!" Highly dangerous hurricanes, tsunamis, fires, and other natural events dominate the news cycle when they hit, as the Asian Tsunami of 2005 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005 both did, and are processed as media spectacle. Global pandemics can also become major media spectacles as with the SARS spectacle of 2003 and the so-called Swine Flu crisis of 2009 (although the latter soon fizzled out,

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<sup>2</sup> On my concept of media spectacle, see Kellner (2001, 2003, 2005, 2008).

surpassed by the deaths of Michael Jackson, Farrah Fawcett, Walter Cronkite, and other celebrity spectacles).

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 the meltdown of the U.S. and global financial systems concurrent with the 2008 presidential election and new presidency of Barack Obama. Celebrity spectacles include the O.J. Simpson trial which dominated corporate media news in the mid-1990s (Kellner, 2003a), the ongoing Britney Spears saga, or, most striking, the spectacle of the life, death and aftermath of Michael Jackson which is becoming one of the most enduring and far-reaching media spectacles of all time.

In this study, I suggest some of the ways that the logic of the spectacle promoted the candidacy of Barack Obama and indicate how he has become a master of the spectacle and global celebrity of the first rank. I will discuss how he became a "supercelebrity" during the presidential primaries and general election of 2008, and how he utilized media spectacle to help win the presidency. Finally, I will discuss how Obama has, in the first months of his presidency, deployed his status as global supercelebrity and utilized media spectacle to advance his agenda.

### ***Media Spectacle and Politics: The Democratic Party Spectacle***

Looking at the 2008 Democratic Party primaries, we see exhibited the triumph of the spectacle. In this case, the spectacle of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton — the first serious African American candidate versus the first serious woman candidate — generated a compelling spectacle of race and gender as well as a campaign spectacle in the incredibly hard-fought and unpredictable primaries. As a media spectacle, the Democratic Party primary could be seen as a reality TV show. For the media and candidates alike, the Democratic primary was like "Survivor" or "The Apprentice" ("You're fired!"), with losing candidates knocked out week by week. With the two standing candidates Obama and Clinton, it was like "The Amazing Race," "American Gladiator" and "American Idol" all rolled into one, with genuine suspense building over the outcome.

The primary was also a celebrity spectacle because Hillary Clinton was one of the major celebrities in U.S. culture, as well as a former First Lady and New York Senator, while Barack Obama, a community organizer, Illinois state legislator and then Senator was emerging as one of the major celebrity figures in U.S. and even global politics.<sup>3</sup> The spectacle of race and gender in a major U.S. party primary was unprecedented as presidential politics have previously largely been the prerogative of white males. As Jackson Katz (2009) argues in a forthcoming study, masculinity and presidential packaging of the candidate as the strongest leader, a protective father and a true man has been a major determinant of presidential elections in the media age. Having both a woman and an African American as candidates thus

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<sup>3</sup> In this article, I am ignoring Obama's earlier pre-celebrity history: He first came to national attention through his dramatic keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic Party convention where he emerged as a rising star followed by setting his own political trajectory and philosophy in two well-written and best-selling books (Obama, 2004 & 2008).

breaks with the dominant code of Great White Leader; and as we shall see, Barack Obama came to challenge dominant conceptions of presidential masculinity as well as race.

From the first primary in Iowa, where in January he won a startling victory, the Obama spectacle emerged as a spectacle of hope, of change, of color, and of youth. In addition to his everyday campaign stump speeches that mobilized record crowds, on every primary election night, Obama made a spirited speech, even after his unexpected loss to Hillary Clinton in New Hampshire, proclaiming: "Yes We Can" was the call of workers who organized, women who reached for the ballot . . . and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the promised land."

On Super Tuesday, in one of the most watched events of the primary season's first weeks, Obama gave a compelling victory speech, which became the most circulated speech on the Internet that week. With that multi-state primary victory, Obama pulled slightly ahead in delegate count. Obama then won 11 primaries in a row,<sup>4</sup> made another striking speech after the Wisconsin primary in which he took over the airways for about an hour, offering a vision of the U.S. coming together, mobilizing people for change, carrying out a progressive agenda, getting out of Iraq, and using the money spent there to rebuild the infrastructure, schools, health care system, and so on. Even when Obama lost primaries, he gave inspiring and impassioned speeches.

There was also an impressive Internet spectacle in support of Obama's presidency. Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money on the Internet, generated more than two million friends on Facebook and 866,887 friends on MySpace, and reportedly had a campaign listserv of over 10 million e-mail addresses, enabling his campaign to mobilize youth and others through text-messaging and e-mails.<sup>5</sup> Videos compiled on Obama's official campaign YouTube site were accessed over 11.5 million times (Gulati,

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<sup>4</sup> For an insider look at the daily events of the primaries and general election by a savvy reporter who closely followed the Obama campaign, see Wolffe (2009). The book, however, provides no analysis of Obama's mastery of the spectacle, little on how the campaign enthused and organized youth, and almost nothing on how the campaign deployed the Internet to raise money and organize supporters, and thus misses completely the Obama spectacle that I am depicting. I will periodically use Wolff, however, to confirm my version of the campaign events. Likewise, the studies in Larry Sabato's edited book *The Year of Obama. How Barack Obama Won the White House* fail entirely to engage the role of media spectacle in the election.

<sup>5</sup> On Obama's mobilization of the Internet, see Rezayazdi (2009), Gulati (2010) and Cornfield (2010). Although the latter two articles by political scientists provide detailed analysis of Obama's use of new media and social networking sites, neither engages the Obama spectacle that was the content of the Obama campaign. Diana Owen asserts that the majority of people polled claimed that they depended on conventional media, especially television, for their news and information on the election, although significant age-related differences in media appeared "leading to speculation that a dual media system may be developing in response to the preferences of older and younger audiences." See Owen (2010). In her study of the role of the media in the 2008 election, Owen also neglects the role of media spectacle.

2010, p. 195), while the YouTube (UT) music video "Obama Girl," featuring a young woman singing about why she supports Obama interspersed with images of his speeches, received well over 5 million hits and is one of the most popular in the site's history.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, grassroots campaigns for Obama illustrate the impact of YouTube and Internet spectacle for participatory democracy. Among the enormous numbers of Internet-distributed artifacts for the Obama campaign, Will.i.am's "Yes We Can" music video manifests how grassroots-initiated media artifacts can inspire and mobilize individuals to support Obama. This MTV-style UT music video breaks with conventional ways of producing music video, as Will.i.am assembled a variety of artists' grassroots participation in its production. In his words:

I wasn't afraid to stand for "change" . . . it was pure inspiration . . . so I called my friends . . . and they called their friends . . . We made the song and video . . . Usually this process would take months . . . but we did it together in 48 hours . . . and instead of putting it in the hands of profit we put it in the hands of inspiration . . .<sup>7</sup>

In addition to this video made by professional musicians, there emerged grassroots-based videos made by ordinary people who produced their own videos and narratives to support Obama, collected on a YouTube (UT) Web site.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally underrepresented youth and people of color enthusiastically created UT-style self-made videos, containing their personal narratives and reasons why they support Obama for President, and used these videos as an innovative platform for grassroots political mobilization with which to inspire and consolidate potential Obama supporters online and off-line.

Throughout major cities like Los Angeles, hundreds of Obama art posters and stickers appeared on stop signs, underpasses, buildings and billboards, with Obama's face and the word "HOPE" emblazoned across them. Even street artists began creating Obama graffiti and urban art in public places with Obama's image competing with those of Hollywood stars, sports figures, and other celebrities as icons of the time (Linthkicum, 2008).

So in terms of stagecraft and spectacle, Obama's daily stump speeches on the campaign trail, his post-victory and even post-defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots Internet and cultural support have shown that Obama is a master of the spectacle. As for Hillary Clinton, she simply was not as good as Obama in creating spectacles, although she became proficient as the primaries went along, and near the end of the presidential primaries, the new spectacle of "Hillary the Fighter" emerged as she relentlessly campaigned day and night and was just barely beaten by Obama.

Refusing to give up, Clinton campaigned tirelessly and gave rousing speeches to her hyped-up forces, so that in the two weeks before the Ohio and Texas primary, the Hillary the Fighter spectacle

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<sup>6</sup> See the video at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKsoXHYICqU> (accessed December 14, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.hopeactchange.com/creators/song> (accessed January 30, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> See <http://www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc/> (videos 2 to 30, accessed January 30, 2009). For detailed analysis of the YouTube videos assembled here, see Kellner & Kim (2009).

competed fiercely with the Obama spectacle and helped win her these primaries. Clinton had mobilized an army of highly motivated, largely female, supporters, aided by politicians associated with Bill Clinton and Democratic Party professional operatives. Hillary the Fighter was becoming quite a spectacle herself, going on the attack in the Texas debate, criticizing Obama on the stump and in ads, going on popular TV shows like "Saturday Night Live" (SNL) and "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart," the two most popular comedy and news satire shows, to promote her policies and increase her "likeability." During this time, Clinton was a fireball of energy, campaigning daily to impressive crowds, appearing on every imaginable TV show, and getting on the cover of *TIME* magazine on May 17, 2008 with a dramatic cover picture of "The Fighter."

With momentum going her way, Clinton won three party primaries in early March; then the media started to become more critical of Obama after a satirical SNL skit spoofed how the media was hyping Obama relentlessly and promoting him as "The One." Clinton referenced the SNL coverage and even made a complaint in a debate that the media was totally uncritical of her opponent, as *Saturday Night Live* had pointed out. Media pundits and Clinton accelerated their daily attacks on Obama, putting him on the defensive, and Obama appeared to be losing his momentum in the two weeks before the Texas and Ohio primaries, both of which Clinton won, making it a tight and exciting race.

The Clinton forces mobilized a celebrity spectacle for the campaign, getting Jack Nicholson to make ads for her and sending younger stars on the campaign trail in Ohio and Texas. After these big primary losses, *The New York Times* featured an article, "Lesson of Defeat: Obama Comes out Punching" on March 6, 2008, and a new theme — Obama the Fighter — emerged, supplementing Obama the Visionary, the Charismatic, the Redeemer, and JFK Reborn. Obviously, Obama had to become more aggressive and become a fighter in response to Hillary's fierce attack-dog mode.

As noted, usually the spectacle of masculinity is decisive in U.S. presidential elections (Katz, forthcoming). George W. Bush bought a Texas ranch so that he could wear cowboy boots and cut brush, images mocked by Michael Moore in "Fahrenheit 9/11." In 2004, John Kerry went hunting and smeared rabbit blood on himself to project the spectacle of Kerry the Hunter, but the Bush-Cheney campaign played images of John Kerry windsurfing on a boat, an aristocratic sport, and used the images of him windsurfing from one side of the boat to another to illustrate the "flip-flop" motif used against Kerry.

Against Obama, Hillary had become increasingly masculine, positioning herself as the Fighter, the Commander-in-Chief, the aggressive campaigner, assuring white working class voters that "I'll fight for you." One of Hillary's surrogates said only she had "testicular fortitude" to do the job, while another praised her, saying that, "She makes Rocky Balboa look like a pansy" (Leibovich & Zernike, 2008). In Pennsylvania, Clinton even played the gun card, recalling how her grandfather had taught her respect for guns and how to shoot them, leading Obama to joke that Hillary Clinton "thinks she's Annie Oakley."

In March, as the campaign rhetoric heated up with each team trading insults, Clinton played the fear card with her ad proclaiming that "It's 3 a.m." suggesting that the American public needed an experienced Commander-in-Chief to deal with a crisis. In mid-March, Obama was subjected to especially nasty attacks concerning his Chicago associates, particularly his pastor Jeremiah Wright, whose inflammatory speeches were circulating on YouTube and through the media and the Internet. In response, Obama's remarkable March 18

race speech became one of the major spectacles of the primary season. TV network commentators were immediately comparing it to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech and calling it was the most important political speech on race since King's. Pundits, including conservative ones, gushed praises of the speech that dominated TV news throughout the day and the Internet and print media in the days following.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps Obama's low point came when he told a group of supporters at a fundraiser in Marin County, Calif., that he was having trouble getting white working class support in Pennsylvania because small town residents were "bitter" and "clinging to guns and religion." The Clinton and Republican response teams attacked Obama as an elitist, out of touch and contemptuous of guns and religion, but he continued to hang on to his lead in the delegate count and won primaries on May 5 in Indiana and North Carolina. Eventually Obama eked out a close win in the Democratic Party primary after a close and momentous battle of the spectacle.

### ***Celebrity and Election Spectacle***

Hence, Barack Obama secured the Democratic presidential nomination, setting himself to run against John McCain, the Republican Party candidate. Following Obama's impressive performance on the stump in the Democratic Party primaries, coverage of both the party conventions and general election were dominated by the form of media spectacle. 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 of 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. This established him as a global celebrity.

Since Obama had become an extremely effective creator of political spectacle, McCain presumably had to produce good media spectacle himself. From the time Obama clinched 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 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 when the inflammatory speeches of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the Chicago pastor of his church, were released on YouTube.<sup>10</sup> The deluge of Republican and then mainstream media circulating the Wright speeches combined with the reverend's appearances on television, making highly controversial 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 both on the Internet and in the mainstream media.

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<sup>9</sup> For an overview of commentary on the King speech, see Kurtz (2008).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of Rev. Wright's "God damn America" speech, see Wolfe (2009, p. 167); for the inflammatory videos circulated by the Republican Party and endlessly played in the media and circulated on the Internet, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nH5ixmT83JE> (accessed on July 6, 2009).

Underneath the spectacle on the broadcasting media, a Republican campaign circulated through the Internet claiming that Obama was really a Muslim, anti-American like Wright, and even an Iranian agent.<sup>11</sup> In addition to these underhanded sneak attacks, which paralleled the Swift Boat attacks made against John Kerry in 2004, the McCain campaign released TV ads equating Obama with to such empty celebrities as Paris Hilton and Britney Spears; this led 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, and that YouTube video received over one million hits in a single day.<sup>12</sup> Quite obviously, the Republicans did not understand that Obama's rising celebrity status was helping him become more popular, getting him more attention, support and, eventually, votes from a population that is generally attracted by celebrity status and culture.

In another ad, McCain attacked Obama for policies that would lead to high energy prices and ridiculed Obama's proposal to "inflate your tires," as if this were the entirety of Obama's energy program. Obama was able to counter that he had a much more sophisticated energy program and that John McCain had voted against many of the alternative energy sources that Obama supported. Desperate for attention and needing a little spectacle of his own, John McCain appeared with his wife, Cindy, at the Sturgis Biker Festival with the pop musician, Kid Rock. As the bikers roared their engines in approval, McCain engaged in blustering, if often incoherent, demagoguery, shouting that Washington was broken; that while the country was in crisis, its Congress was on vacation and insisting he would make them come back to work during the summer. He received his loudest cheers and shouts of approval as he offered up his wealthy trophy wife, Cindy, to enter the beauty contest the next day, perhaps not knowing, as the TV images of past contests made clear, that this involved nudity and he was essentially offering his wife as a sex object before a drunken crowd.

As the campaigns neared their party conventions, traditionally a great TV spectacle of the campaign, the presidential race seemed to be establishing once again the primacy of network television as the major site upon which election battles play out, although print media, Internet and new media were also significant, as I have suggested. 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 a compelling spectacle and got it in spades when he announced and presented his vice presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, who generated one of the more astounding media spectacles in U.S. political history.

### ***The Curious Sarah Palin Spectacle***

Sarah Palin, the first-term Governor of Alaska and former small-town mayor, who few knew much about when McCain selected her, was a genuinely surprising pick. It turned out, however, that Palin certainly provided good spectacle. She was a gun owner and NRA activist, and television networks aired

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<sup>11</sup> See *National Enquirer* (2008) and *The Washington Post* (2008).

<sup>12</sup> For the Paris Hilton for President Video, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4WDjuiOmxA&feature=Playlist&p=D2B5F8D06FBBD2B7&playnext=1&playnext\\_from=PL&index=25](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k4WDjuiOmxA&feature=Playlist&p=D2B5F8D06FBBD2B7&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=25) (accessed July 6, 2009).



footage all day of her shooting guns. She was also a high school basketball star, so TV showed repeated footage of her playing basketball (although Obama could undoubtedly beat her one-on-one). Palin's husband, Todd, was a snowmobile champion, providing even more good sports spectacle throughout the media barrage that was the Palins' introduction. Moreover, Palin was a former beauty pageant winner, triumphing in local contests and coming in runner-up as Miss Alaska, with various images of her as a pin-up girl circulating that first day as well. A mother of five children, including a newborn baby with Down syndrome provided the media with a great deal of picturesque family photos. After her initial speech with McCain introducing her to the American public, her family and the McCains went shopping where she was shown as an enthusiastic shopper, marking her as a typical American.

One might think this is all pretty ridiculous, but American elections are often won on image and spectacle, and obviously Sarah Palin provided good spectacle. Republicans initially hoped that she would draw in Hillary Clinton supporters and other female voters because she was herself a woman, but that did not happen for a number of reasons. Palin opposed abortion rights, was militantly anti-abortionist, had a poor record on environmental protection, and believed environmental crisis was not man-made. Furthermore, Palin supported drilling oil everywhere without environmental regulation, preached the teaching of creationism and religion in the schools and taking offending books out of libraries; and was militantly anti-gay, so it was quite unlikely that any true Clinton supporters would vote for this right-wing ideologue.

Then on Labor Day, September 1, a tabloid-besotted media revealed that Palin's 17-year-old daughter was pregnant and unmarried, creating an all-day sex scandal spectacle and leading to debates on whether a mother with all these problems should run for vice president and submit her family to the media scrutiny. More seriously, many political scandals involving 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, lied about her record, and consistently taken positions to the right of Dick Cheney. This all made Sarah Palin suddenly a spectacle of scandal as well as the object of adulation by the Christian and Republican Right.

The Republicans were forced to postpone their convention because of another spectacle: Hurricane Gustav, which was initially projected to be twice as dangerous as Katrina but turned out to be relatively minor. Once the Republicans got their convention started, Sarah Palin gave an electrifying speech that mobilized the right-wing Republican base and a new star was born. For a couple of weeks after the Republican convention, Sarah Palin was the spectacle of the moment 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 Spectacle of Economic Crisis and the 2008 Presidential Campaign***

After the "Stupid Season" of presidential party conventions and the orchestrating of party spectacle was over, however, on September 15, 2008, the collapse of the investment company Lehman Brothers 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, and so economics took a front-and-center place in the campaign. 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 Security Exchange Commission, even though 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 whom experts knew was not responsible for the crisis. Zigzagging wildly, McCain thundered one day that he was against federal bailouts and when the Bush administration announced the biggest bailout in history that was allegedly necessary to save the whole economy, McCain flip-flopped into support of bailouts. By the end of the week, he resorted to blaming Obama for the crisis, since Obama was part of a corrupt Washington establishment. This baseless allegation overlooked that McCain's top economic advisor Phil Gramm had been instrumental in pushing deregulation of the economy through Congress. Further, top lobbyists were running McCain's campaign, including his campaign manager who was instrumental in lobbying for the failed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac financial institutions that some in the McCain-Palin campaign were trying to blame for the economic meltdown and present as a Democrat party debacle.

Obama seemed to gain the initiative during the economic crisis as he made measured and intelligent statements about 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 whom he hardly knew, and making ridiculous claims about Obama's responsibility for the economic mess. It was becoming apparent that the Republicans were pursuing the Karl Rove-George W. Bush strategy of simply lying about their opponents, and trying to create an alternative reality.<sup>13</sup>

For instance, from the beginning, Sarah Palin's candidacy was arguably 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," or 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's construction from the onset of its plans, had hired a public relations firm to secure earmarks for her district and her state, and that Alaska had received more earmarks per capita than anywhere 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 to go to Washington to resolve the financial crisis and would stay there until it was resolved, thereby threatening to miss the presidential debate. After a lot of negative publicity, he showed up for the debate, where he viciously attacked Barack Obama in one of the most thuggish debate performances in U.S. political history, with his Web site declaring him the winner before the debate even took place (subsequent polls showed that

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<sup>13</sup> See Kellner (2007) on "The Politics of Lying" during the Bush/Cheney era.

Obama got a bounce from the debate and his performances in response to the financial crisis).

Over the weekend, McCain went to Washington, claiming he was bringing together Congressmen to resolve the financial crisis while attacking Obama for staying on the campaign trail. The morning of the Congressional vote on the stimulus package McCain and his surrogates claimed it was John McCain alone who had brought Democrats and Republicans together to resolve the financial crisis and continued their 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 both 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 ended up with more than a little egg on his face as the stock market plunged in the biggest one-day drop in its 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 rather to pull the country together; then he 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 worsening economic crisis and the unpopular more than trillion-dollar bailout, when the Republican vice presidential candidate debated the Democrat's choice, Senator Joe Biden. The lead-up to the debate featured daily sound bites of Sarah Palin's interview with CBS's Katie Couric in which Palin was unable to mention one specific newspaper or journal that she read regularly, 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 scripted 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; Biden, on the other hand, provided coherent answers to questions and offered criticism of John McCain which Palin ignored.

Palin's conservative base, however, loved her down-home hockey-mom performance, and so Palin was unleashed as the attack dog on the campaign trail. McCain had become desperate, with polls indicating that votes were going Obama's way in key states, and he 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 saying daily that "Obama's pallin' around with terrorists," and John McCain began personally attacking Obama, raising the question "Who is the real Barack Obama?" to which the audience replied, 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 at these rallies, the frenzied Republican mob would scream things like "Kill him," "Traitor" and "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 influenced their rabid right-wing 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 right-wing 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 in 2008, Sarah Palin had addressed their party convention, wishing them "good luck." Another investigative report linked Palin to a number of extreme right-wing groups and individuals who had promoted her career (McCain, too, it was later revealed, had been associated with an unsavory lot).<sup>14</sup> 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, even claiming that the Court had claimed that she had not abused her authority or violated ethical regulations, when clearly the court ruled otherwise.<sup>15</sup>

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 later proven false, but those associations worked to sell the war to their Republican base, gullible Democrats, and the media. Republicans had long marketed their right-wing 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 the GOP continue to get away with their decades of misrule and mendaciousness?

### ***The Joe the Plumber Spectacle***

Economic news got worse by the day as the stock market continued to plunge and the global economy appeared to be collapsing. In this atmosphere of crisis, the McCain-Palin spectacle of distraction appeared increasingly appalling. With a backlash against Palin's rabble-rousing and McCain's negative campaigning, the Republican candidates toned down their attacks on "The One," although their direct mailings and robocalls continued to associate Obama with Bill Ayers and terrorism and to raise doubts about his character. In the final presidential debate on October 15, McCain had a chance to bring up Obama's associations to his face which he did in a generally aggressive debate in which Obama coolly and calmly answered claims concerning his alleged radical associations and easily dismissed them.

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<sup>14</sup> On Palin's unsavory connections, see Blumentahl & Neiwert (2008). On John McCain's radical right associations and involvement with the corrupt Savings and Loan tycoon Charles Keating that won him ethical rebuke in the Senate, see Kooperman (2008, October 10).

<sup>15</sup> In her first unscripted and uncontrolled appearance after the release of the Troopergate report, Palin was roundly booed at a Philadelphia Flyer NHL hockey game where she threw out the first puck; see Kooperman (2008, October 12).

But the major theme of the debate, as pushed by McCain and one that would become a touchstone of his campaign, was how Obama's answer to "Joe the Plumber" on the campaign trail proved that Obama would raise taxes on small business if elected. 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 15 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 a year and lower the taxes of those making less. It turned out Joe was not even the man's first name, and his 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 unpaid back taxes.<sup>16</sup> These paltry facts did not stop McCain and Palin, who continued to extol Joe the Plumber in every campaign stop. This became a major theme of their campaign: generating opposition for Obama, the tax-and-spend liberal who would raise your taxes, and building support for 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, leaving out only Rosie the Riveter.<sup>17</sup>

The McCain-Palin "Joe the Plumber" tour narrative, however, was interrupted daily by the scandals and juicy news stories that tend to dominate news cycles in the era of media spectacle. It was revealed that the Republicans had spent more than \$150,000 on the Palin family wardrobe and that Palin's stylist was paid twice as much in early October as McCain's major campaign consultants. In her first policy address — on the need for spending on special needs children — Palin denigrated research spent on studying fruit flies, a basic tool of genetic research which has helped produce understanding of autism, among many other genetic disorders. That same day, Palin's campaigning was interrupted by the need for her and her husband Todd to do another deposition in the Troopergate scandal. All this led to Palin's negative ratings continuing to rise, as did numbers that claimed she was a drag on the McCain campaign.<sup>18</sup>

That same week went badly for the rest of the McCain campaign. A young woman who worked for the McCain campaign made accusations that a big black man had raped her and carved a "B" for Barack on her face; these allegations led to a bevy of right-wing attacks on the Obama people, but the police quickly questioned her and by the next day the young woman admitted she had made it all up, a rather scandalous incident of race-baiting that the McCain campaign encouraged and did not disavow or apologize for. And to top the week of October 20 off, John McCain's brother, Joe McCain, called a 911

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<sup>16</sup> 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](http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/timestopics/people/w/joe_wurzelbacher/index.html?inline=nyt-per) (accessed November 14, 2008) For a video in which he exposes his right-wing views, see <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/joe-in-the-spotlight/> (accessed November 14, 2008).

<sup>17</sup> See Bumiller & Zeleny (2008) for reporting showing that McCain was on a "Joe the Plumber" tour. As it turns out, Obama's grandmother, who he visited near the end of the campaign and who died the night before the election, was a "Rosie the Riveter," working on factories during World War II, when the men were overseas fighting.

<sup>18</sup> *Salon's* "War Room" blog tracks the daily campaign trail of both camps at [http://www.salon.com/politics/war\\_room/](http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/) (accessed October 24, 2008).

number to report a traffic jam he was stuck in, and when the operator retorted that it was not proper to use the number for this purpose, Joe said, "Fuck you," and hung up.

### ***Sealing the Deal***

As the two campaigns entered their last week of campaigning before the November 4 election, Obama made speeches with his "closing arguments" to the American people, hoping to "seal the deal." During that September, Obama had raised an unprecedented \$150 million, much of it from small Internet and personal donations, and was soaring in the polls, which showed him pulling ahead of McCain 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 right-wing base and, by 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 be taking with such an untested president, while Obama retorted that the real risk was continuing with more of the last eight years of catastrophic economic policies and failed foreign policy.

There were also signs of disarray and defeat in the Republican camp. McCain insiders were presenting Palin as a "diva" who had gone "rogue," failing to reproduce the campaign lines that they wanted, suggesting she was out for herself and positioning herself for a 2012 presidential race. One McCain operative even dismissed her as a "whack job." Meanwhile, Palin complained about the McCain campaign giving her the \$150,000 worth of clothes that had become a media obsession, insisting she usually got her own clothes from thrift shops, and often ignored the McCain handlers who were trying to keep her from the press and script her speeches and comments.

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 Hollywood-like 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; an acknowledgment of the seriousness of problems with the economy and what Obama would do to deal with the crisis; a reprise of his personal 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 speeches.

This event was followed by a live appearance with Bill Clinton in a midnight campaign rally in Florida, Obama's 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 for reaching out for experts on the issue, suggesting that the Clintons and Obama had made up, at least for the present. Obama returned the compliments with praise of Clinton's presidency and compared the good times experienced under Clinton and the Democrats to the messes of the past eight years under the Republican Bush-Cheney regime, which Clinton and Obama both claimed John McCain would basically continue.

As the presidential campaign entered its final days, it was clear that these contemporary U.S. presidential campaigns were organized around the production of daily media spectacles that embodied narrative themes of the campaign. In a hard fought Democratic Party primary, the Obama spectacle of youth, change, hope, and a new multicultural America narrowly bested the spectacle of Hillary the Fighter, with the prospect of the first president of color defeating the prospect of the first female president. This spectacle gripped the nation and the global media, and set up intense interest in the spectacle of young Obama going up against war hero and veteran Senator John McCain in the general election.

Obama continued to draw large and adoring crowds throughout his fall campaign, but also consistently tried to present the image of being 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 moniker "No drama, Obama."

The spectacle of masculinity also played out in the election in novel ways. Barack Obama represented a cool, hip, black urban masculinity, in tune with popular culture, breaking with the tough father and defender masculinity typical of most previous presidential candidates, especially Republicans (Katz, forthcoming). Obama was a devotee of basketball but not working class sports like bowling or hunting, and was highly sophisticated and multicultural. Hillary Clinton played the gender card against Obama unsuccessfully in the primary, claiming she was the true man and fighter, while in the general election both Sarah Palin and John McCain tried to unman Obama, presenting themselves as tougher, more masculine and better able to protect the country in a mean world. Palin constantly talked about hunting and sports, was a highly aggressive campaigner and mocked Obama relentlessly. McCain in turn represented a military macho masculinity, constantly playing up his military background and toughness in foreign affairs. But for the first time, an electorate was not significantly swayed by the gender or race card, as we discovered on election night.

### ***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 in with maps flashing red and blue colors on the states, with the exciting swoosh of breaking news, followed by results and trends of the election, all in the inevitable countdown for a candidate getting the magic number of electoral votes to gain the presidency.

All day long, the television networks provided exciting spectacles 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 vote tallies and determine the winner.

The November 4, 2008 election night started slowly with Obama getting the predictably Democratic states in the Northeast and McCain getting predictably 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 p.m., 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.

But on the television networks, spectacle trumped analysis as McCain took the stage in Phoenix with his wife Cindy and Sarah and Todd Palin by his side to make an extremely gracious concession speech, laced with appeals to his followers to support Obama and the country in this time of trouble. Some of the Republican base in the Phoenix ballroom did not like this message and McCain had to repeatedly silence their booing and screaming.

Meanwhile, in Grant Park in Chicago — the site 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 Chicago hosted a peaceful assembly of a couple of hundred thousand spectators, mostly young and of many colors, that had assembled to celebrate Obama's historical victory. In the crowd, television networks showed close-ups of celebrities like Jesse Jackson, tears streaming down his face, a jubilant Spike Lee, a solemn and smiling Oprah Winfrey, and others who joined the young crowd to hear Obama's victory speech. The park hushed into silence as 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 crowd 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, and even throughout the world. There were special celebrations in countries like Kenya and Indonesia where Obama had relatives or had lived and his connections to these countries were producing national shrines that would be tourist destinations. Obama had become a global spectacle and his stunning victory would make him a world celebrity superstar of global media and politics.

### ***Politics of the Spectacle in the Contemporary Era***

In this article, I have focused on the dimension of U.S. presidential campaigns as media spectacles 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 candidates need to raise millions to orchestrate campaign events and produce an organization capable of winning the presidency. Obama raised an unprecedented amount of money, with record donations from small contributors 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. While serious political analysts have not yet fully explained Obama's victory and no doubt there will be debate over this for years, I would suggest that certain resonant images and media spectacles contributed significantly 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 represented a generational change in leadership. The Obama campaign pushed daily the spectacle of the connection between John McCain and the Bush administration in TV ads, daily rallies, debates, and other forums. This was complemented by TV news playing endlessly pictures of Bush and McCain embracing and graphics showing that McCain had voted with the most unpopular and failed president in 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 obviously turned voters off; meanwhile, 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 appeared to react 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, producing an extremely negative spectacle of a Republican mob, stirred up by McCain and Palin. All this seemed to help inspire rational voters to line up, for hours if necessary, and to vote for Obama and a new brand of politics.

Thus campaign spectacles can backfire. While the Sarah Palin spectacle alone did not destroy the Republican campaign, it certainly did not help recruit many independent voters, even if it made Palin a darling of the Republican extreme right and a media superstar.<sup>19</sup> I might note that in the last weeks of the election, Bill and Hillary Clinton invested their star and spectacle power into the Obama campaign. The midnight rally in Florida in the last days of the election provided a memorable spectacle, one that might have unified the Democratic Party and brought Clinton supporters to into the Obama camp in swing states like Florida and Ohio, where the Clintons had campaigned heavily.

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<sup>19</sup> Palin's startling resignation as Governor of Alaska on July 3, 2009, on the eve of traditional Fourth of July celebrations, created a media spectacle that temporarily put aside the ongoing media spectacle of the death of Michael Jackson and its aftermath, generating intense speculation as to what was behind Palin's surprise resignation and what her future would hold.

During the last weeks of the presidential campaign, there was intense speculation concerning how the race factor would influence the outcome of the election and whether the so-called "Bradley effect" would kick in, referring to African-American candidate Tom Bradley who ran for governor of California in 1982 and appeared to be ahead in the polls, but narrowly lost the election. Commentators suggested that although white voters might tell pollsters that they would vote for popular African-American candidates, racism kicked in while in the voting booth and they would then vote for white candidates instead.

Preliminary surveys indicated that there was no Bradley effect in the 2008 presidential election. While there was much discussion of whether the Bradley effect would kick in against Obama, who was leading in the polls going into the election, there was no evidence of white voters saying they would vote for Obama and then voting against him in the polls. These results put in question the applicability of the Bradley effect, and suggested that there was a post-racial dimension to the Obama phenomenon.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Media Culture and Presidential Spectacle***

Thus, the possibility emerges that Obama was helped by his ethnicity which became a positive rather than negative factor. In *Camera Politica*, Michael Ryan and I (1988) claimed that popular Hollywood film of the late 1970s anticipated the election of Ronald Reagan, with a plethora of conservative hero films that featured a yearning for deliverance from the evil forces of the world like communism, statism and liberal malaise. In the 2000s, there were many anticipations of the yearning and acceptance of a figure like Barack Obama in television and Hollywood films, and one could argue that media culture helped prepare the conditions to elect a black president.<sup>21</sup> The country was arguably made ready to think about a president of color and became familiar with black presidents from Hollywood film and television. As early as 1972, James Earl Jones played a black president in *The Man*, although posters for the film read: "The first black president of the United States. First they swore him in. Then they swore to get him" (Harlow, 2008). More recently, Morgan Freeman played a calm and competent president in the 1998 disaster movie "Deep Impact" and Tommy Lister played president in "The Fifth Element" (1997), while Chris Rock took on a role of hip-hop president in the comedy "Head of State" (2003).

Perhaps, however, it is Dennis Haysbert's David Palmer on the TV thriller "24" who is the best-known black president in media culture. Playing a competent and charismatic leader for over five seasons, Haysbert himself believes that

Frankly and honestly, what my role did and the way I was able to play it and the way the writers wrote it opened the eyes of the American public that a black president was

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<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Drew (2008) notes that no evidence appeared concerning a "Bradley effect" in the 2008 presidential election and claimed that: "Some of the smartest political analysts I know had already dismissed the Bradley effect as a myth. And there was no evidence of such a phenomenon in this election. In fact, a considerable number of whites said that they voted for Obama because he is black."

<sup>21</sup> I base this analysis of how representations of African-Americans in U.S. media culture help prepare the country for a black president on research for a forthcoming Blackwell book titled *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush/Cheney Era*.

viable and could happen . . . It always made perfect sense to me. I never played it like it was fake.<sup>22</sup>

To Haysbert's dismay, his character was assassinated and his younger, more inexperienced brother Wayne Palmer, played by D.B. Woodside, ascended to the presidency, whose reign was marked by insecurity — not surprising on "24" — and uncertainty.<sup>23</sup>

The most astonishing anticipation of Obama's election can be found in the popular TV series, "The West Wing" (1999-2006), featuring Martin Sheen as president and dramatizing the adventures of his White House staff. A *New York Times* article indicated that one of the West Wing screenwriters, Eli Attie, called David Axelrod, one of Obama's key advisors in 2004, and asked him to tell him about Barack Obama. After Obama's stunning address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Axelrod and Attie had discussions about Obama's refusal to be defined by his race and his desire to bridge partisan and racial divides. As "The West Wing" unfolded during its final 2004-2006 seasons, there were anticipations of Obama in a Latino Democratic Party presidential candidate Matthew Santos (Jimmy Smits). As Santos pursued the presidency, the parallels between the fictional TV candidate and Obama were startling: both were coalition-building newcomers who had not served long in Congress; both were liberal but sought a new brand of politics; both were very attractive and had very photogenic families; both were fans of Bob Dylan and, of course, both were candidates of color.

Even more striking, the Republican candidate in the fictional "West Wing" election campaign during the 2005-2006 season was modeled on John McCain, circa 2000. The fictional Republican Arnold Vinick (Alan Alda) played a maverick California Senator who broke with his party on the environment, had strong foreign policy credentials but was more liberal than his party on social issues, and he chose a conservative governor as his running mate to shore up his conservative base. Like Obama, Santos talked of hope and change in his election campaign and declared that, "I don't want to just be the brown candidate. I want to be the American candidate."<sup>24</sup>

Morgan Freeman's film trajectory in the 2000s shows how the American public is both able to perceive individuals in a multiracial mode and accept powerful black men in positions of authority. After playing president in "Deep Impact," Freeman has played God in "Bruce Almighty" (2003) and "Evan Almighty" (2007), as well as playing the omniscient narrator in various films this decade, including "War of

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<sup>22</sup> See Braxton (2008). In another interview, Haysbert noted: "My role helped prepare the way for Obama, opening the eyes of the American people [so] that they felt they could vote for a black president without triggering the apocalypse." See Harlow, op. cit.

<sup>23</sup> As an aside, I might note that the sinister and treacherous president on "24" who succeeded Palmer, Charles Logan (Gregory Itzin) can be read an amalgam of George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, Don Rumsfeld and other sinister figures in the Bush-Cheney administration, although he also appears to be modeled after Richard Nixon.

<sup>24</sup> See Selter (2008). Another article claims that Obama's new chief of staff, Rahm Emmanuel, was anticipated by the West Wing fictional deputy of staff, Josh Lyman (Bradley Whitford); see Strange (2008).

the Worlds" (2005), "March of the Penguins" (2005) and "Feast of Love" (2007). In Rob Reiner's "The Bucket List" (2007), the Freeman character finds himself in a hospital cancer ward with an irascible billionaire played by Jack Nicholson. When they discover that they have six months to live, Freeman proposes that they make a "bucket list" of what they would like to do before they die (i.e., kick the bucket), and since the Nicholson character is superrich, there is no limit to their possibilities. The Freeman character is once again the moral center of the film, and calmly, intelligently and with good humor allows the unlikely pair to achieve their goals, in the end helping the Nicholson character unite with his long-estranged daughter.

All of these films tend to present the Freeman character bonding with people of different races, ages and classes, showing a propensity in contemporary U.S. culture to accept African-Americans in a variety of roles, and to respect and accept people of color in terms of their personalities and admirable qualities. Furthermore, according to the Internet Movie Database, Freeman has acted in at least 36 films in the years 2000 to 2008, often playing roles where he occupies the moral center of wisdom, as in some of the films mentioned and in Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby" (2004). But Freeman has also played detectives, criminals, assassins, and assorted characters in a wide variety of films and genres, as well as serving as a popular narrator for a large number of films.

Denzel Washington has emerged as well as a major player in Hollywood, acting and directing films and playing starring roles on Broadway. In the 2004 remake of "The Manchurian Candidate," the Washington character rescues the polity from corporate and political conspiracies, as he did earlier in Alan J. Pakula's "The Pelican Brief" (1993) and Edward Zwick's "The Siege" (1998). Receiving three Golden Globe awards and two Academy Awards for his work, Washington is recognized as one of the most acclaimed and popular actors of our time.

The recent trajectory of Will Smith also shows how a man of color can play roles previously reserved for white actors. As Jan Stuart points out, in recent films Smith has erected "a gallery of Olympian everymen." He played an offbeat superhero in "Hancock" and a homeless overachiever in "The Pursuit of Happyness," two roles that stand as, in Stuart's words, "canny exemplars of the divinity next door with warts and all." The film "Seven Pounds" (2008) "rounds out with those two films a kind of trilogy of self-deification," with Smith playing a character who, like the star of the 1950s TV series "The Millionaire," randomly chooses individuals to "dramatically change [their] circumstances," exactly as Obama advertised he would try to do in his televised infomercial on "American Lives" in the run-up to the election and something which many people fantasize that Obama will do (Stuart, 2008).

Furthermore, in the annual survey of theater owners run by Quigley Publishing, Smith was named the "number one" box office attraction of 2008 and, as of January 2009, had grossed an astonishing \$2,511,011,862 globally in his 19 films.<sup>25</sup> I am not arguing that Hollywood film or any TV series directly helped elect Barack Obama; rather it was his highly effective campaign and candidacy that was decisive, as well as the major economic crisis which drove people to question Republican laissez-faire market

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<sup>25</sup> See *Los Angeles Times* (2009). For Smith's cumulative box-office, see <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/chart/?id=willsmith.htm> (accessed January 5, 2009).

economics. I am arguing, however, that film and television anticipated having a person of color as president and may have helped make the possibility thinkable.

In addition to these black superstars, there are many other representations of people of color in contemporary U.S. film and television that are presented in a post-racial register, in which their race does not play a significant narrative role and is often unacknowledged. This is not to say that racial oppression and racism has disappeared in U.S. film, culture and society, and one can easily cite many examples of continued racial stereotypes and blatant racism in media culture and public life. It does suggest, however, that the culture at large is ready to accept and even affirm people of color in starring movie roles and real-life executive positions, even that of the president of the United States.

### ***The Obama Era***

Following Obama's election, there was no question of his unique celebrity status. Obama's face appeared on the cover of every news magazine and his post-election vacation to Hawaii and return home to Chicago was covered by a paparazzi horde perhaps never before equaled. Pictures of Obama shirtless on the beach in Hawaii and walking hand-in-hand with his daughters in Chicago became iconic, the picture of the handsome man who had ascended to the pinnacle of political power.

The pre-inaugural spectacle in January was memorable and perhaps unparalleled in recent U.S. history. Following a precedent of Abraham Lincoln, Obama took a train ride to Washington, starting in Philadelphia where he made a speech and then picked up Vice President Joe Biden and his family in Wilmington, Del., for a few more photo opportunities. Along the way, large crowds assembled in train stations to greet Obama and there were even cheering crowds along the track en route to the capital city.

January 19, 2009 happened to be Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday and a national holiday, and that Monday fittingly became a day of memorials with a major concert at the Washington Mall featuring Bruce Springsteen, Stevie Wonder and other A-list musical performers entertaining the large crowds. A record one million or more people were already in the nation's capital and the festive mood was palatable as the television networks covered the day's festivities and the joyous crowd, which itself became a spectacle of celebration and happiness.

The Obama inaugural spectacle was as well-planned and performed as the primary and presidential campaign. An unprecedented two million people braved the cold and the crowds to come to Washington for the transformative event of inaugurating Obama as president of the United States. Never before has the country seen such a massive number of happy, celebrating people from all walks of life and parts of the country take part in the traditional inaugural ceremony, an event marred only by the bumbling conservative Supreme Court Justice John Roberts, who bungled the oath of office, throwing Obama off stride momentarily. The spectacle included the last four presidents and their families, plus Dick Cheney in a wheelchair after allegedly throwing out his back from lifting boxes in his new home. While Obama's traditionally short inaugural speech did not have the lofty and soaring rhetoric and crowd-pleasing chants of his most memorable discourses, its recognition of the severity of the crisis confronting

the country, the need for fundamental change in politics and values from the Bush-Cheney administration, and determination to confront these problems satisfied the crowds and most serious observers.

Seeing the Bushes leave the White House by helicopter after the ceremony and Cheney being lifted from his wheelchair into his getaway car was an aesthetic delight and a real spectacle for members of the TV audience at home, as they watched the least popular president and vice president in U.S. history leave town in disgrace, signaling that a new era had truly begun.

Obama's first 100 days were highly ambitious, starting by pushing through emergency measures to try to get the economy back on track, specifically a \$787 billion stimulus — described as a "recovery and reinvestment" — plan, a controversial bank bailout package that constituted a government takeover of "toxic" bank assets, a housing recovery program, an expansion of the Federal Reserve, and a budget geared to stimulate the economy, rebuild the infrastructure and create jobs. Obama made good on his middle class tax cut and promised a radical overhaul of the health system, Congressional spending and even military spending. Furthermore, President Obama transformed policy on stem cell research, women's reproductive and labor rights, the environment, and national security through executive orders. To be sure, Obama's hopes for bipartisan politics were dashed when Republicans voted unanimously against some of his economic programs and budget proposals, and now partisan division seems as heated as ever.

President Obama also launched a highly ambitious reversal of Bush-Cheney foreign policy and took multiple new foreign policy initiatives. He promised to close down the prison at Guantanamo Bay and to bring the prisoners there and elsewhere to justice, who had been held without trials; he also promised to put an end to illegal torture, rendition and wiretapping policies. After wavering and declaring that CIA and other agency operatives who carried out torture policies during the Bush-Cheney era would not be prosecuted, Obama later opened the door to prosecute previous administration officials who set the policies and ordered their implementation.

During his first 100 days, Obama's world tours — in which he met with European, global and Latin America leaders — have shown how he has become a major global celebrity and how celebrity politics and spectacle is normalized as an important, perhaps key, segment of global and regional politics. On his visits to England, France and the G-20 summit, Obama received a rock star reception from people in all the countries he visited, with people lining the streets for a glimpse of him, and Obama's image dominated the media in the coverage of his meetings with foreign leaders.

Thus, on the terrain of foreign policy, Obama has used his super-celebrity status to engage in public diplomacy for his agenda and to promote U.S. interests. In part, after the bitter anger generated throughout the world by the Bush-Cheney administration, Obama's phenomenal popularity is a positive antidote to rising and dangerous anti-Americanism and also provides him with leverage as a global diplomat to promote his agendas. After Obama's recent trips to Europe, the U.K., France, Trinidad and Tobago, and other places, it may be the case the Obama is the world's major super global celebrity bar none.

It remains to be seen if Obama's celebrity status can help him solve the overwhelming economic problems, reboot the U.S. economy and make progress on difficult global issues, or if old Washington partisan politics and the overwhelming challenges the Obama administration faces on multiple fronts will undermine Obama's popularity and efficiency as leader. Spectacle and celebrity are certainly important tools of governing in a media age, but it remains to be seen if Obama and his administration can effectively deal with the multiple crises of the contemporary moment.<sup>26</sup>

In conclusion, I want to offer some remarks on the importance of learning to read, understand, and deconstruct the spectacle in order to become an informed and intelligent citizen and participant in a democratic society.

### ***Deconstructing the Spectacle***

I have argued that presidential campaigns have been constructed as media spectacles, in particular since the rise of cable television with its 24/7 news cycles and partisan networks — like Fox News, which can be seen as a campaign adjunct of the Republican party, and MSNBC, which in 2008 had several shows that were blatantly partisan for Obama. A PEW journalism report released about two weeks before the 2008 presidential election that studied positive and negative representations of the two major parties' presidential and vice presidential candidates revealed that McCain received strongly negative coverage, with more than half of the stories about him casting the Republican in a negative light. Stories about Obama, on the other hand, were less than one-third negative, about one-third positive and one-third neutral.<sup>27</sup> About two in five of the stories about Palin were negative, whereas about one-third were positive and the rest neutral; Joe Biden was the invisible man of the group, receiving only 6% of the coverage with more negatives than Palin and almost as many as McCain. Commentators noted that this did not necessarily denote media bias, as conservatives incessantly claim, but rather reflect that many stories were devoted to polls, meaning that the leading candidate, frequently Obama, received more positive representations from these stories. Analysts also noted that McCain's negative stories were largely concerning his response to the dire financial crisis, which was often blamed on Republican policies and market fundamentalism.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, Obama has been sharply criticized by the Left before and after the election; for a collection of sharp critiques of Obama and his administration from the Left, see <http://www.zmag.org/znet/places/2008+Election> (accessed July 20, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> See the PEW Research Center report at <http://www.journalism.org/> (accessed January 5, 2009).

<sup>28</sup> See Rainey (2008). An earlier survey by FAIR, however, "Top Troubling Tropes of Campaign '08," October 10, 2008, suggested that major tropes such as "Straight-Talking Maverick" for John McCain, and "Barack Obama, Elitist Snob" created a positive narrative for McCain and negative representations of Obama; the study's examples, however, were from earlier in the year and were arguably overtaken in the final few weeks of the campaign, as were what the article suggested were largely positive tropes for Sarah Palin, who had overwhelmingly critical media coverage in the last weeks of the campaign; for the FAIR survey, see <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=3629> (accessed October 26, 2008).

As Robert Draper (2008) noted in a *New York Times* article on "The Making (and Remaking) of McCain," the McCain campaign ran five sequential narratives, all bolstered, I would add, with media spectacle: 1) The Heroic Fighter vs. the Quitter (think Iraq); 2) Country-First Deal Maker vs. Nonpartisan Pretender; 3) Leader vs. Celebrity; 4) Team of Mavericks (i.e., McCain and Palin) vs. Old-Style Washington (i.e., Obama and Biden); and 5) John McCain vs. John McCain (i.e., the honorable McCain who said he did not want to engage in gutter-snipe politics vs. the last weeks of the campaign with the nasty attacks on Obama). *The Times* article left out McCain-Palin's last narrative, which pitted Joe the Plumber, whom the Republicans invoked to oppose tax-and-spend liberals, the standard Republican line used when they run out of ideas and attack strategies.

As the election results came in, predictably following major polls, it appeared that a long presidential campaign orchestrated by competing media spectacles and presidential narratives had already shaped people's opinions and determined their voter behavior. It was a momentous election, one marked by stunning media spectacle, but both sides appeared to have firmed up during the economic crisis, which David Axelrod, Obama's chief strategist, said during election night was the turning point of the campaign. It was when people decided Obama would be the better president and was better able to confront the serious problems that the country faced.

Hence, 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 and learn how to critically decode how the media presents political events and candidates. 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 vying to win the support of the public. Obama's narrative from the beginning was bound up with the Obama spectacle, representing himself as a new kind of politician that embodied change and could bring together people of different colors, ethnicities, ages, regions, and political views. Obama effectively used media spectacle and new media to promote his candidacy and generally been consistent in his major themes and storylines, although the Republicans tried to subvert his story with allegations of close connections with radicals like Wright and 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 being used to sell candidates. This article limited itself to describing the media spectacle dimension of the 2008 presidential campaign and Obama's first 100 days in office. I do not want to claim that media spectacle alone is the key to or essence of presidential campaigns, which also depend on traditional organizing, campaign literature, debate, proliferating new media, get-out-the-vote efforts, and 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 U.S. today, as well as mediating the political battles of the present age, and that the Obama spectacle has emerged as a defining moment in contemporary culture and politics.



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