Politics and Popular Culture

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Edited by

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SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

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Introduction

Hollywood Politics:
The Popular Culture Factor
in 21ST Century Politics

Leah A. Murray

In 2008 we saw a continuation and perhaps even acceleration in the trend of popular culture having a discernible effect on politics. From *The Daily Show* to Barack Obama's Blackberry to candidates' use of Facebook and MySpace, politics have opened up to new technologies as we come online for the next generation. Our political world has become popularized, or our popular world has become politicized. Politics has become a part of our daily lives in a new way, facilitated by the entertainment media and new technologies. This next generation will grow up in a politicized popular world where issues like torture are explored on shows like *24* and fictional presidents deal with real policy choices on shows like *The West Wing*. Also, our political news has adjusted as we see the amalgamation of politics and entertainment in society. Politicians appear regularly on *Saturday Night Live* and *The Colbert Report* to entertain the masses while they work to govern off camera.

This volume's authors attempt to make sense of the changing political popular world through a series of interdisciplinary essays that explore the ramifications of popular cultural depictions of politics drawing on literature in a variety of fields: political science, history, literature, fine arts and communications. We examine three major phenomena in a politicized popular culture. First, we explore the role that the entertainment media play in understanding politics. For example, we can understand deeply complicated political thought if we watch characters on *Lost* struggle with a state of nature; we can consider the ideas of a unitary executive divorced from our own partisanship if we engage *Battlestar Galactica*'s Laura Roslyn's decision making calculus; we see our American political soul reflected in movies and television shows and we are able to reflect on it.

What is interesting about our fictional political worlds is we are allowed, as a people, to consider different political ideals without the baggage of our last vote or our ideology. We can step outside ourselves and challenge the way we think on particular issues. We are opposed, for example, to torture but we root for Jack Bauer on *24*, so we can think about how we really feel about the use of torture to gain information. Second, we explore the real world of politics as it has been shaped over the last century of new technology. As powerful a medium television proved to be to politics, the latest technological breakthroughs have proved to be a paradigmatic shift. From Twitter to Facebook, our politicians are able to keep in almost constant contact with their constituencies, which has vast implications for the way political discourse will progress. If a Senator needs to respond within eight minutes to an event, that response will certainly be different from those in a time when he had a day or a week to respond. If the news media need to report in a 24 hour news cycle, competing not only with other news sources but with amateur journalists with digital cameras, the gatekeeping function of our political media is drastically affected as all news is almost instantaneous. Third, we explore what happens when the real world and media collide. Entertainment media change their messages when major political events happen. For example, spymaster tropes had to evolve when 9/11 changed the international dynamic in a fundamental way. Robert Ludlum's Jason Bourne series had to be conceptualized on film in a new way after this event. The influence goes in both directions as politicians and the political world adjust when media coverage changes. When *Saturday Night Live* ran its impersonation of the 2000 presidential debates, the Gore campaign watched to see how to advise its candidate for the next round.

These three phenomena are explored using both theoretical and empirical methods throughout the volume, organized into three major topical sections. First, we examine the use of popular culture as an explanation of political theory. Consumers of these media products are learning political theory, indeed advanced political theory in some cases. The authors in this section each grapple with how political theory and political popular culture intersect. First, Gerry Canavan examines the seeming incongruity of 2008, a year that celebrated the hope and optimism of Obama's presidential campaign message and also delivered box office records to the message of death and negativity found in the character of the Joker in *Dark Knight*. He argues that this culture's drive toward disruption is the common appeal and that 21st century America is looking for change. Second, John Freie takes a historical look at the image of the presidency to demonstrate that the way presidents govern has substantially

changed since Neustadt's seminal work *Presidential Power and the Modern Presidents* laid out a model for understanding the presidency, often known in the literature as the modern presidency. Freie argues that we have shifted from a modern paradigm to a postmodern governing structure and that we need a new understanding of the use of popular culture by politicians, specifically the president. How Obama governs looks very different given this new paradigm and we need to adjust our expectations accordingly. Third, a current popular show, *Lost*, is seemingly designed to teach social contract theory to the masses. Every character is a referent to some major political work. Scott McDermott fleshes out the connections between the plot lines and characters and age old Enlightenment ideas. He enters what is a well traveled conversation about the purpose of the show and adds to our understanding of the phenomenon. McDermott demonstrates that *Lost* deliberately teaches its viewers the basic tenets of social contract theory in its characters and story arcs. Fourth, Hugo Torres examines the intersection of entertainment media and ideology as both are influenced by 9/11. Torres explores how conservatives find a home in a post-9/11 understanding of interacting with enemies in *24* while liberals are more attracted to *Battlestar Galactica*. He argues that each show demonstrates a different value orientation toward terrorism and asks different questions about our war against terrorism while still having a common faith in democracy. Viewers of these shows would find compelling arguments for each ideological perspective. Finally, in this section, I explore the role leadership plays in political judgment as demonstrated in *Battlestar Galactica*. Using Weber's leadership archetypes, I argue that this show implicitly makes a case for the vocational politician, or civil servant, being a hero when all else fails. The idea that a civil servant can make the best decisions in a post-apocalyptic world is depicted throughout the show's characters and storylines. The authors in these chapters demonstrate the power of popular culture in understanding politics, whether it is through entertainment media or through the perception of governing by presidents in a world where popular culture plays a much larger role.

In the second section, we grapple specifically with the dynamics of popular culture and the presidency. The 2008 election brought many new media to bear as well as much interaction between facets of popular culture and politics, especially as it pertained to Obama. These authors examine the relationship the presidency specifically has with changes in popular culture, be it technology or product placement. First, Jeffrey Crouch and Richard Semiatin argue that changing technologies have affected the nature of presidential discourse, most especially as we

transition from a political theater based on party to must see entertainment based on individual personality. They specifically look at those times in debate history when candidates fail and how those failures are so important to political discourse. As presidential debates are a moment in political time when prime time popular culture and real-time politicians interact, understanding how they have evolved over time is an important piece to the puzzle when gaining knowledge of the mutual influence of popular culture and politics. Second, Lilly Goren and Justin Vaughn examine how the presidential image is marketed and consumed. These authors argue that the presidential image has become a market force in popular culture – that the Obama image has economic value. When the First Lady wears a specific brand of clothing, people across the nation go out to buy the same dress. Thus politics has become about product placement. Third, Gwendelyn Nisbett and Lindsey Harvell look at the 2008 presidential election and the role popular culture played in affecting young people's politics. Using focus groups, these authors found that while the newer non-traditional media play a role in forming political opinions, young people still rely more on interpersonal relationships. They are more likely to cite their family and friends than any technology when discussing where their opinions were formed. Finally, LaChrystal Ricke explores the role of the relatively recent political phenomenon of YouTube. She looks specifically at the 2008 election and finds that the political use of YouTube facilitates collective action and creates knowledge. Thus, political communication has been drastically changed by the introduction of YouTube, much the same way the Nixon-Kennedy debate fundamentally changed politics fifty years ago. We can only guess at the potential possibilities for politics as the use of YouTube is embraced by more campaigns. Presidential politics, the authors in this section demonstrate, has changed in both the nature of our consumption of it and also in our political discourse. These chapters indicate that we have experienced a major paradigm shift in how presidential politics play out. In much the same way people neither anticipated nor predicted how television media would change the way we think of our presidential candidates, we are just beginning to understand how the intersection of politics, popular culture and new media will affect presidential politics in the long term.

Finally, in the third section, we look at the effects when popular culture and politics very specifically interact due to specific catastrophic events. These authors examine the influence of focusing events of politics and popular culture, whether the result is fiction, satire or news coverage. First, Karen K. Burrows examines the effect 9/11 has on politics in popular

culture. In her chapter, Burrows argues that America is searching for its post-9/11 identity and that popular culture plays a role. Looking at two television shows that bookend 9/11 in the United States, *Alias* and *La Femme Nikita*, Burrows argues that these shows grapple with spying as a career demonstrating the way America conceives of itself in a "war on terrorism" world. Thus, this acts as a natural experiment as we see how America thought of itself through the lens of the spy genre prior to 9/11 and then following; the two series depict very different ideals. Also examining the role 9/11 has had on Americans' perception of themselves, Jacobus Verheul argues that *24* informs our conversation about torture as a tool in our war on terrorism as well as our use of preemptive violence. Popular culture has helped us morally justify our use of tools that previous to 9/11 would not have been acceptable. We root for Jack Bauer in a way that we would not have in the 1990s. Third, Betty Kaklamanidou examines the populist politics of the political documentary. She argues that through the use of documentary filmmaking, Michael Moore has become the unofficial regulator of popular politics. In this way, we see popular culture used as a threat in political movements giving quite a bit of power to the media. Thus Moore is no longer reporting on political phenomena, but creating them and manipulating them. In fact, his presence as a reporter at the 2008 Republican National Convention made news itself. Kaklamanidou explores what happens when popular culture becomes politics, which then becomes popular culture. Finally, Chapman Rackaway, Kevin Anderson, Michael A. Smith and Ryan Sisson examine where media coverage of events becomes political by looking at those moments in our political world when candidates die. They demonstrate that there is a "eulogy effect" in a number of relatively recent cases. Thus a major event affects media coverage of politics *writ large* which then affects the political world. The authors in this section demonstrate that popular culture plays a role in our struggle with our conceptions when a catastrophic event changes the playing field. As our world becomes more intimate with everyone being able to know every detail of every event, our popular culture world reflects those struggles. Media coverage is affected by and affects our understanding of ourselves and our politics.

The relationship between popular culture and politics has a long history because politics make the best stories. Some of most well known and sexiest scandals in history happen in political circles. Entertainment media going at least as far back as Greek drama have explored political questions. The authors in this volume not only make interesting arguments about the mutual relationship of politics and popular culture in the modern day, they open up new questions about where we will head in the future.

Given all the new media and technology, the interaction between politics and popular culture will only increase in both intensity and importance.

POPULAR CULTURE AS POLITICAL THEORETICAL EXPLANATION

PERSON OF THE YEAR:
OBAMA, JOKER, CAPITALISM, SCHIZOPHRENIA

GERRY CANAVAN

> How then does one explain the fact that capitalist production is constantly arresting the schizophrenic process and transforming the subject of the process into a confined clinical entity, as though it saw in this process the image of its own death coming from within? Why does it make the schizophrenic into a sick person not only nominally but in reality? Why does it confine its madmen and madwomen instead of seeing in them its own heroes and heroines, its own fulfillment?
> —Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

If 2008 had a person of the year, it had two: Barack Obama on the one hand and Heath Ledger's Joker on the other. Each in his own way was a spectacular image made flesh—the spectacle of hope, change, and progress against that of disaster, dread, and death—and each in his own way embodied his moment. *The Dark Knight*, a cultural sensation, shattered records, including $67.2 million in a single day, the biggest single-day opening ever; the largest opening weekend, $150 million; $100 million in two days, $200 million in five days, $300 million in ten days, and $400 million in 43 days—all records, the last achieved with twice the speed of the previous record holder.[1] The film's total gross has now crossed a billion dollars worldwide after its release on DVD and a subsequent re-release in theaters in January 2009.[2] For its part, the Obama campaign, aided by an acute awareness of mimetic branding and viral marketing, and fueled by unprecedented use of online fundraising and social networking tools, set its own monetary records throughout the primary and general election season, including $133 million dollars in the first quarter of 2008 and $150 million dollars in a single, record-smashing September[3] that included $10 million dollars in one night after Sarah Palin's speech at the Republican National Convention.[4] In all Obama had millions of donors, with approximately half that number giving less than $200. Obama's stump speeches regularly drew crowds of 50,000 people or more, with 33.6 million people tuning in to watch a campaign-paid *infomercial* a week before Election Night.[5] By the end of the election the

Obama campaign had collected 13 million email addresses, a million cell-phone numbers and half a billion dollars from three million people over the Internet, the vast majority in increments of $100 or less.[6] All this, and he won too.

At first glance the sheer fact of this paradox appears ludicrous, but we cannot escape it. It was the power of this juxtaposition that gave Australian artist James Lillis instant fame when he chose to parody Shepard Fairey's iconic HOPE campaign posters (vaguely reminiscent of the iconic "Che" print) with JOKE, a image of the-Joker-as-Obama that circulated quickly on the Internet and is still (as of this writing) available as a T-shirt.[7] How can the country that elected Obama on a rhetoric of "hope" and "change" *at the same time* revel so completely in the Joker's pure negativity and aura of death? What can explain the appeal of *The Dark Knight* to countless numbers of Obama supporters, donors, and volunteers, many of whom must have gone from working for the campaign during the day to seeing the film that night? How could any cultural moment be attracted to such polar opposites simultaneously? This chapter will argue, through reference Deleuze and Guattari's category of the schizophrenic, that despite their surface differences the Obama campaign and *The Dark Knight*'s Joker in fact drew their tremendous popular appeal from a common source: a projected desire for a revolutionary reconfiguration of the conditions of life in twenty-first century American capitalism.

Secret Identities and Missing Birth Certificates

Almost two decades ago, in *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology,* Richard Reynolds noted the essential passivity of all superheroes, who take on the role of foil or antagonist against the active engine of plot in their stories, the figure who formally speaking is the protagonist: the villain.[8] This has never been truer than in *The Dark Knight*. Naturally, Batman is the nominal hero of this film, but in this, more than any other film in the franchise—befitting the first movie in the series to forgo his name in its title—he is neither the film's star nor its object of primary interest. Indeed at times he is something of an afterthought to a war of wills between the Joker and Harvey Dent, able to be returned to a place of honor in his own franchise at the end of the film only because Dent has the bad luck to be half-doused in gasoline.

This is the Joker's film, and had been ever since its predecessor (*Batman Begins* [2005]) ended with its tease of the Joker's "calling card." The Joker is whom we have come to see, the Joker what we have been

waiting for, the Joker who generates nearly all of the pleasure of the film. So we must be careful to resist readings of *The Dark Knight* as an uncomplicated, one-to-one mapping of the major players in the War on Terror into comic-book terms. That is to say that the Joker is not best understood as "a terrorist," though characters in the film call him such repeatedly. The wishful thinking of some right-wing commentators aside,[9] the film is not a grand apologia for the Bush presidency, despite the presence of torture and fanciful domestic spying subplots and its apparent Jack Bauer ethos of legal exceptionalism. It is, instead, a kind of macabre pageant, a celebration of the violent revolutionary excess of the Joker himself that is legitimized by the disciplining presence of Batman—delight in destruction made ideologically safe because it is (a) not "real" and (b) eventually (if nominally) "punished."

More so than even Jack Nicholson's turn in the iconic 1989 Tim Burton film, this is a film that lives and dies by Heath Ledger's performance. The film's advertisers were surely aware of this when they crafted the "Why So Serious?" viral advertising campaign dedicated to his performance, as well as the various Alternate Reality Games and online promotions crafted towards uncovering images that tease the Joker. This is why the frenzy of media speculation that greeted Ledger's death immediately translated into free advertising for the film.

However, the lingering aura of Ledger's death has a consequence: it significantly deforms the audience's ability to read this film correctly. That Ledger died just after filming—that initial reports blamed *the role itself* for his (as it turned out, incorrectly assumed) "suicide"—in some ways threatens to transform *The Dark Knight* into a kind of snuff film. As an unnamed "studio insider" told Variety after news of the actor's death broke:

> "The Joker character is dealing with chaos and life and death and a lot of dark themes," one insider with knowledge of the campaign said. "Everyone is going to interpret every line out of his mouth in a different way now."[10]

It was in this context that early media reports in the wake of Ledger's death inevitably turned to a cryptic statement from Jack Nicholson, the Joker in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman*: "I warned him."[11] Or, as David Denby put this point in his review of the film in *The New Yorker:*

> When Ledger wields a knife, he is thoroughly terrifying (do not, despite the PG-13 rating, bring the children), and, as you're watching him, you can't help wondering—in a response that admittedly lies outside film criticism—how badly he messed himself up in order to play the role this

way. His performance is a heroic, unsettling final act: this young actor looked into the abyss.[12]

This question—which Denby "can't help wondering," which dominated both public and critical reception of the film—is precisely the question that *we are not supposed to be able to ask of the Joker*. The film is quite clear that the Joker has no history, and can have no history. This is why he tells multiple versions of the story of how he got his scars depending on whom he hopes to terrify, and if the point isn't clear Jim Gordon is sure to drive it home: "Nothing. No matches on prints, DNA, dental. Clothing is custom, no labels. Nothing in his pockets but knives and lint. No name, no other alias..." The Joker's violence cannot be located in an identity or a personal subjectivity. It must originate from and out of nothing, *out of the shadows of Gotham itself*; that is the entire point.

Precisely the opposite could be said of Bruce Wayne, who is *all* history—who builds his own assemblage of gadgets, disguise, gravelly voice, and affectless persona precisely because his father and mother were murdered in Crime Alley, whose entire life grows out of and *is* a (frankly insane) response to that singular event. But it is true of Batman; like the Joker himself, Batman appears suddenly as an irruptive force of no apparent origin, without history or explanation, which disrupts the ordinary flows of mafia capital in Gotham City. Batman, too, must necessarily have no history: to locate even a shred of history in Batman, as the Joker does regarding his relationship with Rachel Dawes, is to cripple him almost beyond repair.

To link the Joker to Heath Ledger's death, therefore, does devastating interpretive violence to the figure of the Joker as such; it is an attempt to inject with history something that has no history, that is frightening and terrifying but also liberatory and powerful—"out-of-control" in both its senses—precisely because it has no past, no desires, no agenda, and no future. It is an attempt to make sense out of what is insensible, what is multiple, what is (in Deleuzean terms) purely schizophrenic:

> The schizo has his own system of co-ordinates for situating himself at his disposal, because, first of all, he has at his disposal his very own recording code, which does not coincide with the social code, or coincides with it only in order to parody it. The code of delirium or of desire proves to have an extraordinary fluidity. It might be said that the schizophrenic passes from one code to the other, that he deliberately scrambles all the codes, by quickly shifting from one to another, according to the questions asked him, never giving the same explanation from one day to the next, never invoking the same genealogy, never recording the same event in the same way. When he is more or less forced into it and is not in a touchy mood, he

> may even accept the banal Oedipal code, so long as he can stuff it full of all the disjunctions that this code was designed to eliminate.[13]

This question of history is similarly inescapable with regard to Barack Obama, who has managed to draw such a superfluity of history to himself that one hardly knows where to begin. He has positioned himself variously as a kind of self-conscious Oedipus seeking a lost father—*Dreams of My Father*—and as the voice of a "new generation" he predates by ten to twenty years, as a reformer/revolutionary, a reconciler, and also as the fulfillment-through-return of a particular sort of American greatness. He even possesses in his own way a kind of doubled identity—the Barry he grew up as becomes "Barack" in adulthood, who in turn becomes the hidden truth behind a opaque public image ["Barack Obama"] which has no history, which is widely perceived to have come out of nowhere, almost to have sprung suddenly into existence on the second night of the Democratic National Convention in 2004. Obama, too, came from nowhere, irrupting on the scene to impossibly defeat the best-known establishment figures in both political parties, first the Clintons, then the Bush and McCain—winning both the primary and the election despite his youth, his race, his relative lack of name recognition, his comparative inexperience, and his surface similarities to the "latte-sipping, arugula-eating" Northeastern liberals who had lost in 1980 (Kennedy to Carter), 1988 (Dukakis to Bush), and 2004 (Kerry to Bush II).

Accordingly, the greatest threats to Obama's political viability came in attempts to linking the meteoric Candidate Obama to some real, flawed person, for instance the man who had attended Rev. Jeremiah Wright's church, or the man who once lived in the same neighborhood as former Weather Underground leader Bill Ayers. Even now, a significant portion of the right wing has invested itself in the so-called "birther" movement, which denies the reality of Obama's citizenship and insists instead that he was actually born in Kenya. These are all hyperbolic, if futile, efforts to locate Obama's "true" past, his "real" history—his secret identity—and thereby depower him. That there exist no photographs of Candidate Obama smoking cigarettes during the long 2008 campaign, despite his quiet admission that he did so, is proof enough of the power of his carefully honed public mask, beneath which we can never see.

Like Batman, like the Joker, Barack the man has been overwritten completely, overcoded by Barack the Utopian fantasy of a break with history. Here, it was break from both eight long years of Bushism and from the troubled racial history of the nation itself, in particular as the sudden and unexpected fulfillment of Martin Luther King's longed-for dream—which, we were soberly assured by media figures on both

Election Night and Inauguration Day, turns out to have been specifically and exclusively about the presidency all along.

'Change'

The Joker's parodic self-representation of his own history—"Wanna know how I got these scars?"—is only the most salient example of his schizophrenic powers of complication and recombination. What the Joker seeks to do—all he seeks to do—is break down codes:

> TWO-FACE
> It was your men, your plan!
> THE JOKER
> Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I'm a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it. You know, I just... do things. The mob has plans, the cops have plans, Gordon's got plans. You know, they're schemers. Schemers trying to control their little worlds. I'm not a schemer. I try to show the schemers how pathetic their attempts to control things really are.

This is as political as the Joker gets, and as expected it is an apolitics of pure negation, an insistent rejection of all status quos. The Joker decenters, he decodes, he disrupts flows. He queers all hierarchies and subverts all norms. He swaps hostages for hostage-takers, school buses for getaway cars, recodes scotch as poison and police protection as death, scrambles the map of the city, turns a DA into a killer, creates a network of Joker acolytes to rob a bank and then murders them, gathers all the capital of Gotham's mafia-corruption complex to himself and then burns it. Consider his various remappings of the dead man's switch—to kill him kills you, *or* to do nothing kills, *or* saves some *and* kills others, except when he decides to blow the switch anyway, *or* when the locations have been switched, *or, or, or.* There is nothing to hold onto with the Joker—he deterritorializes everything, even the terms of his own murderous games. His violence is deeply and inescapably recombinative—it is never the same thing twice, and we are never the same afterwards.

What does it mean, then, for us to *like* the Joker, to indeed *prefer* the Joker to either Batman or Dent or anybody else in the film? What does it say that we do not *care* that he kills Rachel, Bruce Wayne's barely-there love interest, that he corrupts the already-doomed-by-sixty-years-of-comics-canon Harvey Dent for our amusement? What are we to make of the Joker's undeniable appeal? This is a film that draws its power not from the repetitive narrative staging of hero vs. villain—a manifest staging that

the audience, on the level of the latent, rejects—but from the audience's delight in pure, anarchistic violence. This is divine violence, to borrow Walter Benjamin's term from his "Critique of Violence" (1920): messianic violence that does not found or preserve the law but overturns it.[14]

So, to rephrase the question, what does it mean to (in this sense) *approve* of the Joker? To root for him? To see his "point," such as it is? Because, I think, we do. When we retheorize the film around the Joker we recognize that he is in every sense its creative engine, its vital force. Thinking in Deleuzean terms, the Joker is the film's embodiment of the unstoppable creative force of the nomadic war machine of *A Thousand Plateaus*—even, as one of his henchmen describes, wearing not makeup but "war paint." And it was this drive towards disruption that was the barely sublimated subtext of Campaign 2008, not just in Obama's slogan of CHANGE but in McCain's counter-meme of MAVERICK—the gambling anti-hero, the hotshot fighter pilot who doesn't play by the rules. Even the planned title for the autobiography of ex-Governor Sarah Palin, McCain's vice-presidential candidate, suggests the continued appeal of the Joker's vital force: *Going Rogue.*

The Joker seeks to disrupt a system of overlapping codes, flows, and conventions that is often unjust, inequitable, stultifying and suspect—and while naturally we must disapprove of his *methods* we must admit there is something of a revolutionary Utopian impulse in him that we can surely *recognize*, if not exactly admire. The Joker, when all is said and done, wants CHANGE too. And does that not suggest the possibility that we too might be Jokerized, that there is something essential about the Joker we dare not see lost?

Near the end of the film, dangling upside down the Joker says to Batman: "I think you and I are destined to do this forever." (Note how the camera slowly adjusts itself to his positionality in this moment, against "absolute gravity", suggesting both the Joker's thematic centrality and his essential weightlessness.) And of course they are. We see that in this film, unlike 1989's, the Joker cannot be killed: this time Batman—that is to say, Bruce Wayne, über-capitalist, master of the reterritorializing power of capitalism who has remade himself so entirely—must *save* the Joker in his fall off the skyscraper. Without the Joker Batman is obsolete, as he is already obsolete when the film begins. This time, we find, he (and we) need the Joker to live. Batman's productive powers as the defender of the Gotham City status quo stand in the same relation to the Joker as capitalism does to schizophrenia; the Joker can never be killed because he provokes, and embodies, Batman's own creative excess.[15] In this way the Joker is the truth of the Batman; he is Batman's exterior limit, that line

towards which he is continually drawn towards and perpetually—structurally—unable to resist. The Joker is the force that gives Batman life. Without the Joker Batman is essentially self-negating; he defeats the mobsters, ends corruption, and then hangs up his cowl and gadgets, totally supplanted. Without the Joker, that is to say, Batman exhausts himself. It is only through the schizo-flows generated by the Joker and the other supervillains who will infest Gotham in sequel after sequel (and comic after comic) that Batman's creativity and heroism can be continually reborn and revitalized—that Batman himself can continue to exist. Batman is indeed only as good as his villain, and they do, in fact, need each other—the Joker to push the limit and the Batman to recoil/chase/follow.

There is a lesson here for Barack Obama, or really for the supporters who have created an image of him in their minds as a kind of redeemer superhero. The disruptive drive for CHANGE—the Joker's drive—was the recombinative schizo-fuel both for Obama's campaign and his immense popularity. It is what allowed him to build that unprecedented, multifaceted network of dedicated and industrious volunteers, allowed him to channel new media technologies to handily beat better-known establishment figures in both parties. CHANGE was the fuel that drove those six million donations, that launched a thousand blogs, and that made 2008's historic election and 2009's equally historic inauguration possible.

That CHANGE is a highly adaptive buzzword meaning nothing and everything briefly fed the fantasy that 52% of the country now agreed on some soon-to-be-enacted radical program of change—but now we know better. This is to say that Obama achieved the presidency through a largely content-free, Joker-like demand that the applecart be overturned and the flows of our own military-industrial-mafia-corruption complex be disrupted, and that this demand has, paradoxically, catapulted him to a Batman-like office where his job is to *preserve*, not disrupt, capital's flows.

'Socialism'

In summer 2009, only a few months after Barack Obama's inauguration, a digitally altered image of Obama began to appear as graffiti on overpass walls, first in Los Angeles and then in other major American cities, including Boston and Atlanta. The striking image, drawn from an October 23, 2008, *Time* magazine cover, depicts a snarling Obama made up as Ledger's Joker, with heavily made-up white skin, green hair, heavy eye shadow, and scarred cheeks highlighted by wildly excessive red lipstick. The image was created with Photoshop in January 2009 by a twenty-year

old Chicago art student, Firas Alkhateeb, and had sat in digital obscurity on the storage site Flickr[16] until borrowed by an unknown party and repurposed for protest against Obama administration policies. The artifacts of the original *Time* magazine context were digitally stripped away, leaving only the doctored image of Obama, and below the portrait was added a one-word caption suggesting the field of this supposed Obama-Joker equivalence: SOCIALISM.

The reaction to the Obama-as-Joker image was immediate, with wide discussion on political blogs in both the left and right corners of the blogosphere trickling upwards into discussion on talk radio and television. The image was adopted by members of the Tea Party movement and appeared at related protests throughout the summer, appearing on protest signs at health-care-reform "town halls" and the "9/12 Movement" protest on the Mall in Washington, D.C., which had been spearheaded by prominent conservative talking-head Glenn Beck and heavily promoted by the Fox News Channel. At the same time the image was pilloried by liberals and the left, which found itself perplexed by the hyperbolic caption—isn't Obama clearly governing as a centrist? Isn't the Joker more of a radical Libertarian?—and disturbed by the racial connotations of the whiteface makeup. In a *Washington Post* editorial, Philip Kennicott argued that the image's evocation of Ledger's Joker was calculated to suggest an ideological stereotype of violent, black urbanity that (the artist's apparent argument goes) is quite literally coded in Obama's genes. These racial and perhaps racist connotations were likewise noted by a blogger who helped catapult the image to national prominence, Steven Mikulan at LAWeekly.com, who drew attention to the whiteface makeup's photo-negative reflection of blackface minstrelsy and concluded "The only thing missing is a noose."[17]

But the provenance of the image suggests something besides race is also at work. In an interview with the *Los Angeles Times*—the news outlet that finally tracked him down—Alkhateeb describes himself as neither a Democrat nor a Republican, and admits that while he didn't vote in November, if he *had* voted it would have been for Ohio's Dennis Kucinich, widely understood as the Democratic primary candidate furthest to the left.[18] In one interview, Alkhateeb expressed ambivalence about the SOCIALISM caption not readily admitted by partisans on the left: "It really doesn't make any sense to me at all," he said. "To accuse him of being a socialist is really ... immature. First of all, who said being a socialist is evil?" For Alkhateeb, it seems, Obama's bait-and-switch was not SOCIALISM at all, but rather the short-lived paucity of CHANGE.

But such attempts to engage the anonymous poster as if it were making some earnest political claim only draw us deeper into its trap. No matter what you throw at it, the poster has but one reply: "Why So Serious?" Like the spectacle of the "tea parties," like the chaotic disruptions at health-care town halls, like Rep. Joe Wilson's unprecedented heckling of the president during a televised address to Congress, like any prank, the poster has no real argumentative content. A prank doesn't *mean* anything; it just disrupts.

The right, it seems, may have learned the lessons of Campaign 2008 better than the left.

There was always something of the Joker's revolutionary mania lurking just beneath Obama's campaign appeals, a schizophrenic drive to scramble the system as it currently exists. And it is only this Utopian impulse towards the ecstasy of disruption that can fuel a successful Obama presidency—whether you call it CHANGE, SOCIALISM, JOKE, or whatever else you like. It is not surprising that Obama's sky-high approval numbers have sharply dipped since his inauguration; it is Obama himself who has returned to Earth as his ambition, his taste for CHANGE, has been tempered by the duties of the office he now holds. There is only one way for Obama to retain his vitality and his creative energy as a political actor—to remain in his own way, if you'll forgive me, Batmanesque. He must let himself dance with the Joker, pushing on and being pushed by the limits of CHANGE. He cannot grow complacent; he will have to, in the Joker's words, let a little chaos in. And to the extent that he cannot, to the extent that *any* person in his position will necessarily become the champion not of change but of continuity, it will be up to those who supported him—those who are psychologically invested in Obama's success but who at the same time want to see the flows at last disrupted and the old codes finally overturned, who want in the end CHANGE (whatever that means)—to reassert their impossible demand for a Utopian break from history, to push the limits, to resist the schemers, to Jokerize themselves in opposition.

Notes

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[11] Joe Neumaier, "Jack Nicholson warned Heath Ledger on 'Joker' role." NewYorkDailyNews.com. 24 January 2008. Last accessed 26 January 2009.
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http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/cinema/2008/07/21/080721crci_cinema_de nby, Accessed 12 August 2009.

[13] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus,* Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977, 15.

[14] See Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," Trans. Peter Demetz and Edmund Jephcott, republished in *On Violence: A Reader,* Ed. Bruce B. Lawrence and Aisha Karim, Durham: Duke University Press, 2007: 282-285. "If mythical violence is law-making, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the

latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood."

[15] See Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 34: "What we are really trying to say is that capitalism, through its process of production, produces an awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy or charge, against which it brings all its vast powers of repression to bear, but which nonetheless continues to act as capitalism's limit."

[16] The original image is still available at http://www.flickr.com/photos/khateeb88/.

[17] Steven Mikulan, "New Anti-Obama 'Joker' Poster," LAWeekly.com, 3 Aug. 2009, http://blogs.laweekly.com/ladaily/politics/new-anti-obama-joker-poster/index.php. A followup post on Aug. 13

(http://blogs.laweekly.com/ladaily/community/obama-poster-all-about-race/) contextualizes his claim of racial appeal alongside the various racist email forwards and talk-radio parodies popularized by opponents of Obama since the election. Another early commenter on the image was Jonathan Jerald of BedlamMagazine.com, who notes the image's "malicious, racist, Jim Crow quality." Jonathan Jerald, "Mystery Obama/Joker Poster Appears in L.A.," BedlamMagazine.com, 25 April 2009,
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THE POSTMODERN PRESIDENCY

JOHN FREIE

News reporters, political pundits, and even academics have been puzzled by presidential behavior over the last 30 years. Frustrated by Ronald Reagan's ability to maintain his popularity while pursuing policies a majority of Americans disapproved of, many reluctantly concluded that image has become more important than substance. Puzzled by how Reagan could say one thing and then pursue policies that contradicted what he said, academics have referred to his presidency as a "the Reagan paradox"[1]. Unable to explain how a president who seemed to possess the kind of personality well-suited to the presidency, but who vacillated between effective leadership and uninhibited adolescent behavior, one academic has characterized Bill Clinton as possessing a Zelig-like personality with "a constellation of traits that vary in their ascendancy depending upon the circumstances in which he finds himself".[2] Those less sympathetic attacked Clinton as immoral and corrupt and only became increasingly angry and frustrated when his popularity increased even in the midst of his impeachment trial. Recognizing that this anomaly runs counter to our previous understanding of how citizens evaluate presidents, political scientists have attempted to revise their model of presidential popularity and have cynically concluded that the public has adopted a Machiavellian view of presidential behavior where "morality is irrelevant to the achievement of political results".[3]

Yet, all this pales in comparison to the chorus of criticism that was heaped upon George W. Bush. Tracing the expansion of presidential power throughout history, one recent book claims that the Bush administration has so expanded presidential power that the presidency now threatens democracy.[4] Even less sympathetic, one presidential scholar concluded that Bush's claim of executive authority "is an honest reading of the Constitution only if the reader is standing on his or her head at the time".[5] In their study of unilateral presidential actions, Mayer and Price, while not suggesting that the modern presidency model should be discarded, nonetheless conclude that "students of the American presidency should revise the prevailing view of presidential power".[6]

In a satirical attempt to summarize the foibles of recent presidencies, the *Washington Monthly* gathered a group of political pundits into a pseudo-nominating committee to identify the most serious "fibs, deceptions, and untruths" spoken by the last four presidents. The list was then submitted to another panel of judges composed of other pundits who rated each president to create a "mendacity index" (George W. Bush won, but barely).

Throughout American history politicians have always been accused of being liars, of deceiving others for political gain, or of simply being corrupt. It is, to some extent, a facet of our political culture. Yet, the intensity and depth of hostility from not just the partisan press, but from political opinion leaders and academics seems unprecedented. It is the argument of this article that something more fundamental is occurring other than the personal mendacity or political failures of a series of presidents.

The paradigm that has been used to assess presidential behavior—the modern presidential model (sometimes referred to as the strong presidency)—has failed to adequately explain recent presidencies. Nonetheless, those who watch the presidency continue to employ that outdated model to assess behaviors that, in fact, can best be explained using an alternative model—the postmodern presidency.

The Modern Presidency Paradigm

The dominant paradigm used to explain and evaluate presidential behavior is referred to as the modern presidency. Although its roots can be traced to the presidencies of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, it is commonly accepted that it came of age during the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and was most clearly articulated in Richard Neustadt's book *Presidential Power* which was written as a primer for president-elect John F. Kennedy. Over the years, modest changes in the model have been made, but the general framework for explaining presidential behavior remains much as it was outlined by Neustadt.

Following are the key elements of the modern presidency model:

The president activates the system. The modern presidency perspective begins with the belief that the constitutional structure and the nature of the political party system have produced a politics prone to inaction and gridlock. Every place a president turns, his power is checked by competing powers. The danger is not, as some would claim, that government will become too powerful and too oppressive, rather, it is that government will

be unable to act decisively to address problems. Government inaction is a greater challenge to democracy than government oppression.

The president should be the initiator of action because he is the only public official who has been elected by the entire nation. The president "creates the issues for each new departure in American politics by his actions and by his perceptions of what is right and wrong".[7] Representing a national constituency, the president uses his power on behalf of everyone. Early formulations of the modern presidential model even went so far as to fuse presidential power with protection of the national interest. As Neustadt somewhat naively put it: "what is good for the country is good for the President, and *vice versa*" [emphasis in original].[8]

Legislative leadership. Legislating is a slow and methodical process, frustrating those who want change and often leads to gridlock. Consequently, the modern president must take an active role in legislative policy formation and set the congressional agenda. "The president has become a driving force within the legislative system….this force works to produce policy output, which is why Congress looks to the president for new initiatives and why it tolerates his influence".[9]

The formal powers of the president assure only that a president will be a clerk. To be successful a president must be a skilled politician who can persuade others to support his initiatives: "A president's job is to get congressmen and other influential members of the government to think his requests are in their own best interests".[10] A modern president must be willing and able to bargain and negotiate with legislators. Whether it is leading through partisan appeals, bipartisanship pleas, twisting arms, making personal appeals, offering pork to obtain votes, or even going over the heads of legislators to appeal to the public to pressure their legislators, a modern president should be an active participant in the legislative process.

Presidential character. Character is associated with a group of traits that have significant social, ethical, and moral qualities. It involves both a mastery and development of the self as well as the extension of the self into society to shape culture. A person with good character is a person who is oriented toward hard work and productivity, is flexible and pragmatic, is adaptive, rational, courageous, and possesses high self-esteem; above all, he or she is a person of integrity. Confident in knowing who he is a president seeks power not to satisfy deeply hidden needs to compensate for his own insecurities, but because the exercise of power makes it possible for him to improve the nation and the world.

The presidency, probably more than any other national political office, is affected by the character of its occupant. White House staffers,

politicians themselves, quickly assess the best ways of approaching a president by observing his likes and dislikes, his work habits, and the manner in which he approaches his job, whether he seeks out problems or avoids them, whether a president is active or passive—are all orientations that stem from character and affect the operation of an administration.

The electoral process as a winnowing process. Although the nomination and election processes appear haphazard, messy, and lacking an internal logic, they actually emphasize and reward the skills and talents needed to be a good president. As presidential candidates proceed to collect delegate votes in the caucuses and primaries, the lesser qualified candidates and the ones who fail to create a vision for the country fall by the wayside until only two, one Democrat and one Republican, remain standing. The contest between the Democratic and Republican nominees is the final struggle between two visions of what America should be like at that particular time in history. The campaigns involve significant portions of the electorate resulting in a legitimization of the person who is eventually chosen while providing citizens with a means to express their interests.[11]

Presidential reputation. One of the critical resources a president has is his reputation. Politicians in the "Washington community" keep a keen eye on the president to examine his judgment as he goes about making decisions, looking for patterns of behavior. A president does not have to be concerned his day-to-day performance, but he has every reason for concern about the residual impressions that accumulate in the minds of those who watch him. His political advantages lie in what others think of him; his professional reputation alone will not persuade, but it makes persuasion easier.[12]

The plebiscite president. Early formulations of the modern presidency emphasized the relative stability of public support for the president as presidential decision-making was seen as remote from the lives of Americans. Only when events touched upon the everyday lives of people would opinion shift: "The moving factor in prestige is what men outside Washington see happening to *themselves*" [emphasis in original].[13]

Revisions of the modern presidency have added a plebiscitary character to the model. Kernell documents how presidents have developed strategies of "going public" whereby "a president promotes himself and his policies in Washington by appealing directly to the American public for support",[14] thus putting pressure on members of Congress to cooperate with presidential initiatives. Constrained by weak political parties and structural barriers which create checks on presidential actions, presidents

have used the modern mass media to forge direct links with the public and, by doing so, build legitimacy and political capital.[15]

This model has been used to explain, predict, and even justify presidential behavior. Presidents themselves often believe that their actions can be justified because they are linked to the assumptions of the model. Yet, its ability to adequately account for behavior is increasingly falling short of providing satisfying explanations of presidential behavior.

An Emerging Postmodern Critique

Over the last three decades scholars from a wide range of disciplines have articulated a postmodern vision and at least one has claimed that present-day America is the ideal of postmodernity.[16] Indeed, the scope of postmodern analysis has extended to art, architecture, literature, economics, philosophy, religion, technology, social criticism, psychology, but ever so reluctantly to political science, particularly to analyses of contemporary politics.

While it seems obvious to even the most casual observer that politics today is much different from politics in the past, postmodern analyses of the American presidency have been rare.[17] Presidential scholars in particular have made only very modest forays into using postmodernism to explain presidential behavior. Of the few, only two have argued that recent changes are so fundamental as to constitute paradigmatic change.[18] Neither have been well-received and presidential scholars remain unconvinced that postmodern structural changes have occurred.

An equally modest, but more accepted, body of literature analyzes presidential personality and rhetoric from a postmodern perspective. As might be expected, this research has focused on President Bill Clinton. In what is perhaps the most influential research yet on the postmodern presidency, Bruce Miroff describes Bill Clinton as a man with a shape-shifting personality who possessed no core moral values and governed through the use of symbols, gestures, and rhetoric rather than substance. Following the advice of his political advisor Dick Morris, "Clinton became increasingly adept at dominating the terms of political debate, demonizing his political enemies, and reinventing his own political personae. He was increasingly expert at pleasing the public with his shifting stances on issues large and small and at impressing the public with the skill of his performance on the job".[19]

The work of Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles also focuses on Bill Clinton. Recognizing a new era of postmodern American politics they refer to as