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8

The Shadow Campaign in Popular Culture

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On August 5 of the 2004 presidential campaign, Democratic challenger John Kerry made news when he criticized President George W. Bush's lack of swift action on the morning of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks by employing references (about Bush continuing to read *The Pet Goat* to schoolchildren after learning of the attacks) that seemed distinctly similar to the charges made in Michael Moore's documentary film *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Meek 2004, p. 21). The next day, Kerry's rhetoric again echoed Moore's criticisms when he explicitly argued that America's security should not depend on the Saudi royal family (Banerjee 2004, p. A12). And largely unnoticed by the press a month earlier, Kerry included additional criticisms similar to those in Moore's film—from the amount of vacation time Bush took in the first quarter of his term in office to Kerry's directly employing a phrase from the climactic scenes of the documentary, that is, the decision to "send young Americans into harm's way" ("Remarks by Senator John Kerry" 2004). Such rhetorical borrowing on Kerry's part is not surprising. Kerry continued to run an ineffectual campaign that exhibited great difficulty in establishing a meaningful message that resonated with voters. Needing to tap into the popular discontent that was keeping Bush's poll numbers so low—especially for an incumbent president during wartime—what better way to do so than by appropriating the specific arguments, language, and points of attack that had already proven successful with the mass audience, as Moore's movie went on to gross more than \$120 million at the box office domestically?

The 2004 presidential campaign, as many observers in the popular press

have remarked, was notable for both the unprecedented amount of direct political action and activity occurring within popular culture *during* the campaign and the interactions that took place *between* the formal campaign and these various cultural venues and actors. At times, the tenor and tone of the campaign were consumed by the actions and agendas circulating outside the formal political arena (such as Moore's movie and the best-selling book, *Unfit for Command*, which attacked Kerry's Vietnam service record). From documentary and feature films to nonfiction books and novels, television talk and comedy programming, radio shows, Internet humor and blogs, and music videos, concert tours, and CDs, popular culture was saturated with and consumed by popularly mediated political expression. Artists, activists, political insiders, and media corporations alike took advantage of the plethora of media outlets to explicitly participate in political discourse or voter-mobilization efforts in what many citizens considered a high-stakes election.

As scholars, we need to not only account for this enhanced role of popular culture as a newly important avenue for the conduct and playing out of political campaigns—what occurred in 2004 and why—but more importantly, determine what to make of it. That is to say, are we to make the judgment that the 2004 presidential election was the most thorough realization to date of the supposed blurring of lines between entertainment and politics, and if so, is that significant in any way? Or are we to focus on the potential effects of such interactions, making an assessment as to whether cultural forums for civic engagement and campaign communication actually make a difference in affecting electoral outcomes? If John Kerry had won the election, we would no doubt be tempted to declare Michael Moore (or a bevy of other cultural artists who supported his efforts to dethrone Bush) a kingmaker, just as the 104th Congress did a decade earlier for the supposed role that radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh played in the electoral success of Republicans in the 1994 congressional elections. With Kerry's electoral loss, though, is it simply too easy to say that the role of popular culture (with the majority of cultural activity supporting him) in the election was meaningless or minimal? Is electoral success the ultimate means for such evaluations, or should this phenomenon be examined from a different perspective?

I contend that both of these approaches are misguided means for understanding the increasingly significant relationship between popular culture and political communication, not just in this election but also in the everyday interactions between media and politics. To decry the supposed blurring of lines between popular culture and the political realm is to misunderstand both. As John Street (1997) argues, "There is more to the link between politics and popular culture than their occasional borrowings and battles. There is an underlying logic which ropes them together. This logic springs from the way in which notions of representation, the people, popularity and identity are shared between them" (p. 21). Stated another way, both popular cul-

ture and politicians are involved in what is, in many respects, the same rhetorical enterprise. Both must create or constitute their audiences and, in turn, organize feelings by packaging a performance that captures audiences' imagination. They both use techniques of persuasion designed to "evoke trust and claim representativeness" in that process (Street 1997, pp. 51–60). And, as politics is now conducted in late-modern society, they both employ the same technologies of mediation to achieve these goals, including the same techniques that have proven most effective within those media. Thus, what may now seem to be a situation in which the values of celebrity, spectacle, and entertainment from one realm are coming to dominate or even constitute the other, in actuality those values have (to some degree) always been present in both.¹

The other alternative, to look toward popular culture for its measurable effects, is ill advised as well, because such an endeavor misunderstands the place and role of *culture* as a form of communication. In James Carey's (1989) now familiar formulation of the differences between a "transmission" and "ritual" view of communication, any desire to pinpoint the ways popular culture could sway an election is based on the conception of communication as "a process whereby messages are transmitted and distributed in space for the control of distance and people" (p. 18). Certainly many of the actors who utilized popular cultural vehicles in the 2004 race desired control in some fashion, that is, affecting how people vote and, in turn, affecting the outcome of the election. Had Bush lost the election (because much of the cultural activity was directed toward defeating him), they would most likely celebrate their communicative actions as significant for just such reasons. Yet this view of communicative acts does not account for the myriad *other* reasons that drove such actions and appearances, or the myriad reasons why voter-audiences consume or attend to these messages in the first place.

The significance of the communicative actions occurring within popular culture is better understood by attending to their ritualistic and participatory qualities, for the ways they enact a means of representing shared beliefs and a common culture. Carey (1989) asserts that the ritual view of communication is "linked to terms such as 'sharing,' 'participation,' 'association,' 'fellowship,' and 'the possession of a common faith'" (p. 18). He sees this communal and communing function as derivative of the thinking of Durkheim, who argues that such diverse acts of communicative representation are central to the formation of society's negotiation of reality and meaning:

Society substitutes for the world revealed to our senses a different world that is a projection of the ideals created by the community. This projection of the ideals and their embodiment in material form—dance, plays, architecture, news stories, strings of speech—creates an artificial though nonetheless real symbolic order that operates to provide not information but confirmation, not to alter

