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Media Spectacle and the 2008 Presidential Election: Some Pre-election Reflections

By Douglas Kellner



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

By spectacle, I mean events that are out of the ordinary, habitual, daily routine which become special media events. They involve an aesthetic dimension, and often are dramatic and bound up with competition like the Olympics or Oscars. They are highly public social events, often taking a ritualistic form to celebrate society's highest values. Media spectacle refers to technologically mediated events, in which media forms like broadcasting, print media, or the Internet process events in a spectacular form. Examples of political events that became media spectacles would include the Clinton sex and impeachment scandal in the late 1990s, the death of Princess Diana, the 9/11 terror attacks, and, currently, the meltdown of the US and perhaps global financial system in the context of a US presidential election. In these pre-election remarks, I want to note how the 2008 election has played out as a media spectacle and to highlight the role of media spectacles in contemporary U.S. politics.

Presidential campaigns in the U.S., but also globally, have become major media spectacles, often decided by spectacular events. During the 2004 U.S. presidential election, media spectacle was a major determinant of the campaign with the so-called Swift Boat attacks on John Kerry's war record and daily ads and Republican demonstrations dramatizing Kerry's alleged "flip-flopping."²



In this article, written two weeks before the November 4 presidential election, I will review the role of media spectacle in the Democratic Party primary where it played a major role and in the general election contest between Barack Obama and John McCain.

Primary Spectacle

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



From the first primary in Iowa where in January he won a startling victory, it has been the Obama spectacle, a spectacle of Hope, of Change, of Color, and of Youth. In addition to his campaign speeches on the stump everyday that have mobilized record crowds, after every primary election, Obama made a spirited speech, even after his loss in New Hampshire and other primaries. He gave a magnificent Super Tuesday victory speech that could have been the most watched event of the primary season and was probably the most circulated speech on the Internet that week:

Obama pulled slightly ahead in a multi-state primary night, and then won 11 primaries in a row. He made another magnificent speech after the Wisconsin primary where he took over the airways for about an hour, providing a vision of the US coming together, mobilizing people for change, carrying out a progressive agenda, getting out of Iraq, using the money spent there to rebuild the infrastructure, schools, health system, and so on. Even when he lost primaries, he gave inspiring and impassioned speeches.

There has also been an impressive Internet spectacle in support of Obama's presidency. Obama has raised an unprecedented amount of money on the Internet. He has over two million friends on Facebook, and has mobilized youth and others through text messaging and emails. The YouTube (UT) music video "Obama Girl," which has a young woman singing about why she supports Obama with images of his speeches interspersed, has gotten over 5 million hits and is one of the most popular in history.

More interestingly, grassroots campaigns for Obama illustrate the vast potential 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 alternative media artifacts can inspire and mobilize individuals to support Obama.³

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...⁴

In addition to this alternative media artifact made by professional musicians, there are grassroots-based videos made by ordinary people who have produced their own videos and narratives to support Obama, collected on a YouTube (UT) website.⁵ On behalf of Senator Obama, traditionally underrepresented youth and people of color have vigorously utilized UT-style self-made videos as an innovative platform for grassroots political mobilization. The videos inspire and consolidate potential Obama supporters on and offline by featuring personal narratives as well as reasons they support Obama for President.

Obama art posters have appeared throughout major cities like Los Angeles, and all over LA, on stop signs, underpasses, buildings and billboards there are hundreds of posters and stickers on Obama with the word HOPE emblazoned across. Even street artists have been doing Obama graffiti and urban art in public places.⁶



So in terms of stagecraft and spectacle, Obama's daily stump speeches on the campaign trail, his post-victory and even defeat speeches in the Democratic primaries, and his grassroots Internet and cultural support have all shown that Obama is a master of the spectacle. As for Hillary, she simply wasn't 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 spectacle of Hillary the Fighter emerged as she relentlessly campaigned day and night and was just barely beaten by Obama.

The Obama vs. McCain[Palin] Spectacle

Hence, eventually, Obama secured the Democratic presidential nomination and set himself to run against John McCain as the presumptive Republican Party candidate. Thus, during the summer months, we have had the Obama vs. McCain spectacle, intensified during the party conventions in late August and early September and now on full-blast for the final two months of campaigning. Since Obama is the master of the spectacle, McCain presumably has to give good spectacle himself, or produce anti-Obama spectacles. From the time Obama

cinched the nomination, McCain has largely attempted to create an anti-Obama spectacle through TV ads, planting anti-Obama stories in the press and circulating them through the Internet, and eventually savagely attacking Obama everyday on the campaign trail.

Although Obama benefited significantly through his supporters' Internet and other cultural productions, he was temporarily put on the defensive in the summer with the YouTube released videos of the inflammatory speeches of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, the Chicago pastor of his church:

The deluge of Republican and then mainstream media circulating the Rev. Wright speeches and Wright's appearances on television and making inflammatory speeches led Obama to break with his pastor. However, Obama gave what many believed to be a brilliant speech on race in Philadelphia, another spectacle that became a major cultural event on both the Internet and mainstream media.

Underneath the spectacle on the broadcasting media, a Republican campaign that circulated through the Internet claimed that Obama was really a Muslim, was like Rev. Wright and anti-American, and even an Iranian agent.⁷ In addition to these underhanded sneak attacks, parallel to the Swift Boat attacks against John Kerry, the McCain campaign released TV ads equating Obama with Paris Hilton and Britney Spears as an empty celebrity:

That ad 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; her YouTube video received over one million hits in a single day.

See more [Paris Hilton](#) videos at Funny or Die

In another ad, McCain attacked Obama for high-energy prices and ridiculed Obama’s proposal to inflate your

tires, as if this were Obama's entire energy program.

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

Desperate for attention and needing a little spectacle of his own, John McCain appeared with his wife Cindy at the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally with Kid Rock:

As the bikers roared their engines in approval, McCain engaged in blustering, if often incoherent demagoguery, shouting that Washington is broken, that while the country is in crisis the Congress is on vacation, insisting he would make them come back to work during the summer to the roar of the motorbikes. He received his loudest cheers and roars 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 it clear, that this involved nudity and becoming a sex object before a drunken crowd.

As the campaigns neared their party conventions, traditionally a great TV spectacle, the presidential race seems to be establishing once again the primacy of TV democracy where the candidates battled out the election on television --although print media, Internet, and new media are also significant, as I have been suggesting. Following the great spectacle of the Democratic convention in late August with memorable speeches by Obama, Al Gore, Bill and Hillary Clinton, and a moving appearance by Senator Ted Kennedy, McCain desperately needed some spectacle and got it in spades when he announced and presented his Vice-President candidate Sarah Palin, a short-term Governor of Alaska and former small town mayor who nobody knew anything about when he introduced her. It turns out, however, that Palin gives good spectacle: she's a gun owner and NRA activist, and the footage all day during the convention showed her shooting guns.



She was also a high school basketball star so there was good spectacle of her playing basketball (although Obama could probably beat her one on one). Palin's husband was a snowmobile champion so you got more good sports spectacle, and Sarah's a beauty contest winner, winning local contests and coming runner up as Miss Alaska, so there were a lot of images of her as pin-up girl that first day which introduced her to the American public. Gov. Palin's a mother with five children, so you had great family pictures, including a newborn baby with Down syndrome. After her initial speech with McCain introducing her, her family and the McCains went shopping and she was shown as an enthusiastic shopper marking her as a typical American.

One might think this is all pretty stupid, but American elections are often won on image and spectacle and obviously Sarah Palin gives good spectacle. Republicans initially hoped that she would get Hillary Clinton voters and women, because she's a woman, but since Palin opposes abortion rights, is militantly antiabortion, has no record on environmental protection, and believes environmental crisis is not man-made, she appears to have never picked up substantial support among Democratic party women. Furthermore, Palin supports drilling oil everywhere without environmental regulation, preaches teaching creationism and religion in the schools and taking offending books out of libraries, and is militantly anti-gay, so any true Hillary Clintonites who vote for this rightwing ideologue have taken leave of their senses....

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

The Republicans were forced to postpone their convention because of another spectacle, the Hurricane Gustav spectacle that was said to be twice as dangerous as Katrina, but turned out to be only half as bad. Once the Republicans got their convention started, it turned out that Sarah Palin gave an electrifying speech that mobilized the rightwing Republican base and a new star was born.

For a couple of weeks after the Republican convention Sarah Palin was the spectacle of the day and the media buzzed around the clock about her past and her record, her qualifications or lack of them, and her effect on the election.

The Stupid Season in the campaign was over, however, on Monday September 15, 2008 when the collapse of the Lehman Brothers investment company helped trigger what appeared to be one of the great U.S. and global financial crises in history. Suddenly, the election was caught up in the spectacle of the possible collapse of the U.S. and global economy, and economics took front and center. During this period, the mainstream cable news channels covered the ongoing crisis 24/7 and the Internet and YouTube videos were decentered by the spectacle of television news, which in times of crisis is the central focus of audience attention. Of course, the late night talk shows and comedy skits continue to be important, as do the Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert news satires and, as for decades, Saturday Night Live!

In two wild weeks of campaigning, McCain first insisted that the "fundamentals" of the U.S. economy were sound, and when everyone ridiculed him, he recognized the significance of the crisis and said that as president he would fire the head of the SEC (Security Exchange Commission), although this official does not serve directly under the president, and everyone from the Wall Street Journal to the television networks admonished McCain for trying to scapegoat someone who experts knew was not responsible for the crisis. Zigzagging wildly, McCain thundered one day that he was against federal bailouts, but when the Bush administration announced the biggest bailout in history that was allegedly necessary to save the whole shebang, McCain flipped into support, resorting at the end of the week to blaming Barack Obama for the crisis, claiming he was part of a corrupt Washington establishment (overlooking that McCain's top economic advisor Phil Gramm had been instrumental in pushing deregulation of the economy through Congress and that top lobbyists were running his campaign, including McCain's campaign manager who was instrumental in lobbying for the failed Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac financial institutions that some in the Mc-Cain-Palin campaign were trying to blame for the economic meltdown).

Obama seemed to gain momentum during the economic crisis as he made measured and intelligent statements on the economy; and so the Republicans desperately began a strategy of the Big Lie: endlessly distorting his tax proposals, accusing him of crony relations with disgraced federal officials who he hardly knew, and making ridiculous claims about Obama's responsibility for the economic mess. It was becoming 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. It was becoming clear that Sarah Palin's candidacy was based on Big Lies, as McCain introduced her as the woman who had stopped the Bridge to Nowhere in Alaska and was a champion of cutting "earmarks" 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 to Nowhere from the beginning, had hired a public relations firm to get earmarks for her district, and had in fact received more earmarks per capita than almost anyone in the country.

With the September 22, 2008 meltdown, however, when it looked like the U.S. economy was in a freefall meltdown and the Bush-Cheney administration proposed a multibillion dollar bailout package, John McCain embarked on one of the truly incredible political spectacles in U.S. history, trying to position himself as the savior of the economic system and then making an utter fool of himself as day after day he engaged in increasingly bizarre and erratic behavior. Just before the first presidential debate on September 26, McCain announced he was suspending his campaign, was going to Washington to resolve the financial crisis and would stay until it was resolved, threatening to miss the presidential debate.

After a lot of negative publicity, he showed up for the debate, viciously attacked Barack Obama in probably the most thuggish debate performance in U.S. political history, with his website declaring him the winner before the debate even took place (subsequent polls showed that Obama got a bounce from the debate and the candidate's performances in response to the financial crisis).

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

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

During the debate she proved herself to be a good script performer as she acted out the predigested sound bites to each question, winked and talked folksy if she wanted to distract the audience, and generally played cutesy rather than actually debate the questions with Biden, who provided coherent answers to questions and criticism of John McCain, which Palin ignored.



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

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

Investigative reporters indicated that Obama had only a casual relation with Ayres, whereas Palin and her husband were involved in an Alaskan secessionist party whose rightwing and anti-Semitic founder had a long history of outrageous anti-American ranting, racist ramblings, and ultra-right politics: Palin's husband had belonged to that party and just this year Sarah Palin addressed their party convention wishing them "good luck." Another [investigative report](#) linked Palin to a number of extreme rightwing groups and individuals who had promoted her career (McCain, too, [it was revealed](#), had been associated with an unsavory lot). But Palin's week of infamy came to a proper conclusion when the Alaskan Supreme Court ruled on October 10 that a [report into the "Troopergate" scandal](#) could be released and the report itself pointed out that Palin had "abused her authority as governor" and violated Alaska's ethics regulations. Thrown off her moralistic high horse, Palin nonetheless continued to be McCain's attack dog and raise controversy on the campaign trail?⁹

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." They were connections that were obviously false, but the associations worked to sell the war to their base, gullible Democrats, and the media. Republicans had long sold their rightwing corporate class politics to voters by associating the Democrats with gay marriage, abortion, secularism, or other diversionary issues.¹⁰ Would the public and media wake up to the Republicans' politics of lying and manipulation or would they continue to get away with their decades of misrule and mendaciousness?

Economic news got worse by the day as the stock market continued to plunge and the global economy appeared to be collapsing, and in this atmosphere the McCain-Palin spectacle of distraction appeared increasingly appalling. With a backlash against Palin's rabble-rousing and Republican negative campaigning, McCain and Palin slightly toned down their attacks on Obama, 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.



But the major theme of the debate, which seemed to have become the main focus of the endgame of McCain's campaign, was how Obama's answer to Joe the Plumber proved that he was going to raise taxes on small business. In an Obama campaign event the previous weekend, the man who McCain referred to as Joe the Plumber told Obama that he had been a plumber for fifteen years and was trying to buy the business he worked for -- and since it cost over \$250,000, he would be forced to pay higher taxes since Obama's tax reform proposal would increase taxes on those making over \$250,000 and lower those making less. It turned out the dude's real name was Samuel J. Wurzelbacher, that he was not a licensed plumber, that his income the previous year was around \$40,000, and that he owed over \$1,000 in back unpaid taxes. These paltry facts did not stop McCain and Palin who continued to raise Joe the Plumber in every campaign stop and were obviously making it the major theme of their campaign, trying to generate an opposition between Obama the tax-and-spend liberal who would raise your taxes contrasted to 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.¹²

The McCain-Palin "Joe the Plumber" tour narrative, however, was interrupted daily by a scandal or juicy news story that tends to dominate news cycles in the era of media spectacle. It was [revealed that the Republicans had spent over \\$150,000 on the Palin family wardrobe](#) and that Palin's stylist was paid twice as much in early October as his 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, which is a basic tool of genetic research and has

helped produce understanding of autism, among many other things; Palin's campaigning was interrupted the same day by the need for her and her husband Scott to do another deposition in the so-called Troopergate scandal; and Palin's negative rating continued to rise, as did numbers that claimed she was a drag on the campaign.¹³

The same week went bad for the McCain campaign as well: a young woman who worked for the McCain campaign argued that a big black man had raped her and carved a "B" for Barack on her face which led to a bevy of rightwing attacks on the Obama people when the McCain campaign released the information -- which the police quickly questioned and by the next day the young woman admitted she made it up; and to top the week of October 20 off, [Joe McCain called 911](#) 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 the Brother said, "Fuck you," and hung up!

As the campaign entered its final two weeks, it was clear that 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, potentially the first woman president, as Obama was potentially the first president of color. 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.

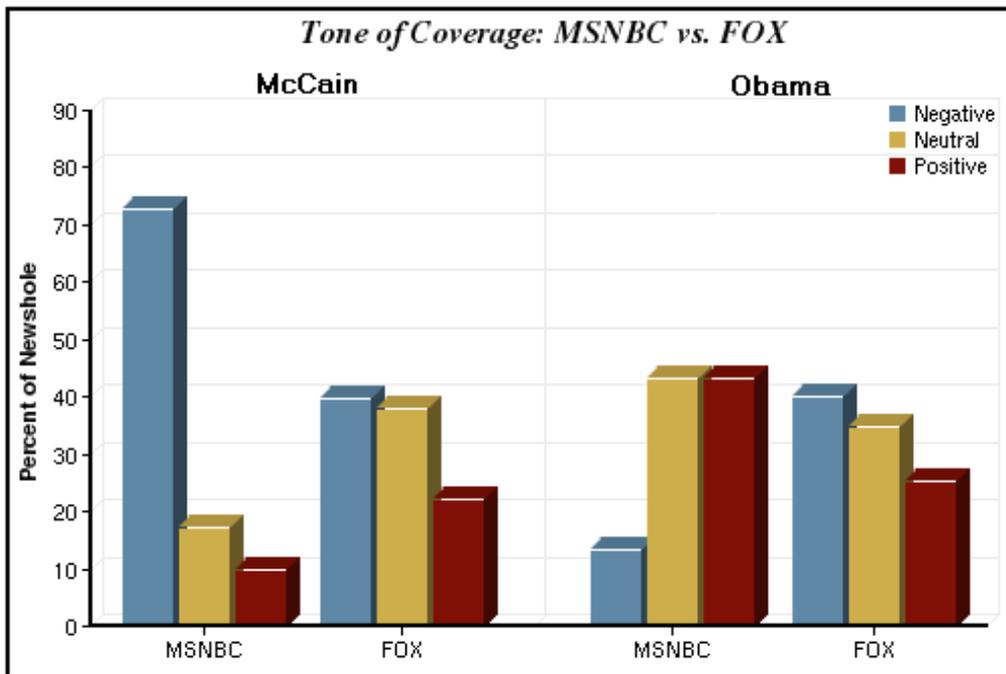
After the primaries, Obama continued to prove himself the master of the spectacle in a trip around the world where he attracted large adoring crowds and met with an array of world leaders, as well as at the Democratic party convention in Denver where he gave a soaring speech in the Denver football stadium to one of the largest live audiences and TV audiences in election history. Going into the general election, McCain appeared severely challenged since he was not known for his speeches or orchestration of media spectacles. Yet, as it turned out, McCain's campaign has produced some of the most audacious, if problematical, spectacles in U.S. presidential history. From the moment McCain introduced Sarah Palin as his running mate through the Republican convention where she made a well-received speech that enormously energized the Republican base, Palin became one of the most astounding media spectacles in U.S. political history. As noted above, McCain himself spent several weeks stunting and throwing out daily surprise positions on the global economic crisis trying to create a spectacle of McCain the Great Leader, although many found his performance erratic and unsettling. In the weeks leading up to the November 4 election, the McCain-Palin campaign, steadily dropping in the polls, have been increasingly aggressive again in daily campaign spectacles and appearances in the media, including Sarah Palin on a very bizarre episode of [Saturday Night Live!](#)

Barack Obama has continued to draw large and adoring crowds during his fall campaigning, but has tried to present an image of himself as cool, calm, competent, and presidential on the campaign trail and during media

interviews and the presidential debates. Unlike the McCain-Palin campaign, he has 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.

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, this year, MSNBC which has several shows that are blatantly partisan for Obama. About two weeks before the election, the [Pew Research Center released a report](#) wherein the study of the positive and negative representations of the two dominant party’s presidential and vice-presidential candidates revealed that McCain has received strongly negative coverage with more than half of the stories casting him in a negative light; while fewer than one-third of the stories about Obama were negative, about one-third were positive, and one-third were neutral.¹⁴



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 are devoted to polls so the leading candidate, in this case Obama, receives more positive representations from these stories. Analysts also noted that McCain’s negative stories were largely concerning his response to the dire financial crisis for which Republican policies and market fundamentalism were strongly blamed.¹⁵

As we confront the final two weeks of the campaign, it will be interesting to see if any major media spectacles will change the course of the election, or whether a long campaign orchestrated by competing media spectacles and presidential narratives have already shaped people’s opinions and determined their voter behavior.

Finally, to be a literate reader of U.S. presidential campaigns, one needs to see how the opposing parties constructive narratives, media spectacle, and spin try to produce a positive image of their candidate to sell to the American public. In presidential campaigns, there are daily photo opportunities and media events, themes and points of the day that candidates want to highlight, and narratives about the candidates that will win support for the public. Obama’s narrative from the beginning was bound up with the Obama spectacle, a new kind of politician representing change and bringing together people of different colors and ethnicities, ages, parts of the nation, and political views. He has effectively used media spectacle and Internet spectacle to promote his candidacy and generally been consistent in his major themes and story-lines, although the Republicans tried to subvert his story with allegations of close connections with radicals like the Rev. Jeremiah Wright and Bill Ayres.

As Robert Draper noted in an article on "[The Making \(and Remaking\) of McCain.](#)" the McCain campaign has run 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 (see my discussion above of McCain ads linking Obama with Paris Hilton and Hilton's rebuttal); Team of Mavericks (i.e. John and Sarah) vs. Old-Style Washington (i.e. Senators Obama and Biden); 5) Narrative 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 current campaign with the nasty attacks on Obama).¹⁶ The article seems to leave out McCain's newest narrative which pits Joe the Plumber, who the Republicans will help, against the tax-and-spend liberals - the usual Republican line when they run out of ideas and attack strategies.

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

NOTES

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NOTES

1 This work draws on my studies of media spectacle in Kellner 2001; 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2007. See also Guy Debord's [Society of the Spectacle](#) (1967).

2 Kellner, Douglas. [Media Spectacle and the Crisis of Democracy](#). Boulder: Paradigm, 2005.

3 On Will.i.am, see <http://www.dipdive.com/archives/212>.

4 See <http://www.hopeactchange.com/creators/song>.

5 See the Obama videos at <http://www.dipdive.com/dip-politics/ywc/> (video #2 to 30). The following analysis was done by Gooyong Kim in summer 2008.

6 Linthkicum, Kate. "Tagged, He's It." [The Los Angeles Times](#) 23 August 2008: I1. The Obama art posters are available at <http://www.projecthope08.com/SearchResults.asp?Cat=6&gclid=CKL-m4zdwpYCFRg6awodqmM9xw>.

7 See "An Attack That Came out of the Ether." [The Washington Post](#) 28 June 2008: A1.

8 On Palin's unsavory connections, see Blumenthal, Max and David Neiwert, "Meet Sarah Palin's Radical Right-wing Pals." [Salon](#) 10 October 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, Alex. "The Return of Charles Keating." [Salon](#) October 10, 2008. .

9 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 Alex Kooperman, Alex. "Palin Booed at Flyers Game." [Salon](#) 12 October 2008. http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/2008/10/12/palin_booed/index.html.

10 Frank, Thomas. [What's The Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America](#). New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004.

11 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. For a video in which he exposes his rightwing views, see <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/10/16/joe-in-the-spotlight/>.

12 Elizabeth Bumiller report that McCain was on a "Joe the Plumber" tour. [The New York Times](#) 23 October 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/24/us/politics/24campaign.html?hp=&pagewanted=prin>.

13 [Salon's](#) "War Room" tracks the daily campaign trail of both camps. 24 October 2008. http://www.salon.com/politics/war_room/.

14 See the PEW Research Center Report. <http://www.journalism.org/>.

15 See Rainey, James. "McCain Found to Get More Bad Press." [The Los Angeles Times](#) 23 October 2008: A17. 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 studies' examples, however, were from earlier in the year and have been overtaken in the past few weeks, as have what the article suggested were largely positive tropes for Sarah Palin, who has 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>. 26 October 2008.

16 Draper, Robert. "The Making (and Remaking) of John McCain." [The New York Times](#). 22 October 2008.



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