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# Performance and Politics

## President Obama's Dramatic Reelection in 2012

*Jeffrey C. Alexander*

*One of the things you realize fairly quickly in this job is that there is a character people see out there called Barack Obama. That's not you. Whether it is good or bad, it is not you. I learned that on the campaign.*

—Barack Obama (in Lewis 2012)

Modernity has been critically perceived, from both the left and the right, as the triumph of mechanism over meaning, a process of social and cultural rationalization that produces the disenchantment of the world, a movement from ritual to record. Modern rationalization is supposed to have made myth and ritual impossible, and it is alleged that in art, as well as in life, mechanical reproduction has destroyed the aura of authenticity that makes powerful emotional experience possible. In this discourse of suspicion, such European thinkers as Marx, Nietzsche, Weber, and Benjamin come especially to mind. But one can put a more American and optimistic spin on the same narrative: With modernity, we are all can-do pragmatists, not dreamers and believers.

Yes, it is sometimes acknowledged, symbol and rhetoric can break through into modern life, but this narrative of rationalization claims such extra-rational intrusions are deployed for spectacles whose drama is empty and whose aim is merely mystification. In the spectacle societies of modernity, everything is top-down; nothing comes from the bottom up. We occupy Foucaultian subject positions; we can never be active, drama-producing agents ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

### The Idea of a Cultural Sociology

It was to challenge such a desiccated view of modernity that I introduced the idea of a cultural sociology three decades ago, though the contemporary field is much broader than the “strong program” vein I have been mining with students and colleagues in the years since. (Alexander

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1. I develop this critique of the “spectacle” approach to social drama in “The Fate of the Dramatic in Modern Society: Social Theory and the Theatrical Avant-Garde” (2014).

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1996; Alexander and Smith 2001 and 2010). The fundament of cultural sociology is that individuals and societies remain centrally concerned with meaning. Social dramas and theatrical forms remain at the heart of modern societies themselves.

This theoretical effort goes back, in some important ways, to the later writings of Émile Durkheim, the fin-de-siècle French scholar who was one of sociology's founding figures. Durkheim's early and middle work, in the 1890s, promoted the standard, rationalized view of modernity, albeit in a markedly moralistic form. Durkheim's subsequent work, however, initiated a radical break with the standard view. His *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* conceptualized society as dependent on emotionally intense ritual, the division between sacred and profane symbols, and morally expansive solidaristic ties ([1912] 1995). This late work applied Durkheim's suggestive new theory to Australia's aboriginal society, the most "primitive" form of human social organization ever studied by social scientists. Did Durkheim intend his ideas to supply a new basis for anthropology, regarded in that day as the social science that specialized in early human societies? Or could *Elementary Forms* be understood, instead, as the first step in creating a new, alternative sociology of modernity? Was Durkheim challenging the standard view of modernity, or subtly reinforcing it?

My interpretation of Durkheim's later work points to what I believe to be its wider ambition. Erving Goffman's interest in contemporary ritual performances (1959) emerged from the intellectual radicalism of late Durkheim. So did the thinking of more macro-oriented sociologists of contemporary ritual and civil religion, such as Edward Shils (1975), Robert Bellah (1970), and Randall Collins (2004). Granting the scope of Durkheim's ultimate intellectual ambition, however, points to another, equally significant question: Is his ritual theory of society really modern enough? Can the notion of a society of rituals be reconciled with the pragmatics, conflicts, fragmentations, and competing institutional powers that mark contemporary social life? Can ritual process and experience be conceptually intertwined with such phenomena instead of being presented as an alternative to them? Too often, Durkheim and his successors seemed to deploy a ritual theory of modernity in order to avoid coming to terms with the complications of contemporary social life.

To think clearly about this problem, it is necessary to ask another fundamental question: What is the difference between ritual and performance? This was exactly the question posed by the neo-Durkheimian anthropologist Victor Turner when he met the avantgarde director and scholar Richard Schechner 40-some years ago. From this encounter, Schechner moved to theorize social rituals as secular performances, and vice-versa (1976).<sup>2</sup> Schechner's idea was that we could capture the worthwhile in late-Durkheim, and avoid its pitfalls, by thinking of modern life as resting upon social performances rather than rituals per se (see Schechner [2002] 2013). If this is so, then social theory needs to incorporate ideas from the practice and philosophy of drama. That Turner wholeheartedly agreed is reflected in the title of his last book, *From Ritual to Theatre*, the wording of which he took over from Schechner's seminal paper published the decade before (Turner 1982).

## The Cultural Pragmatics of Social Performance

These converging insights have been central to my efforts to theorize the cultural pragmatics of social performance, the fulcrum of which is the continuity and tension between ritual and performance (see Alexander 2011a). I have argued that social theorists must use the tools of dramaturgy, drama theory, and theatre criticism to develop a cultural sociology of social performance and, with it, a new sociology of modernity. I conceptualize ritual as a particular kind of social performance, a highly "successful" one in which actors, audience, and script become fused.

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2. The fullest version of this essay was published the year following, in *Essays in Performance Theory* (Schechner 1977).

Those watching the performance don't see it as a performance; they identify with the protagonists and experience enmity toward the antagonists onstage; they lose their sense of being an audience, experiencing not artificiality but verisimilitude. The fourth wall of drama, which exists not only inside the theatre but outside in society, breaks down, or is broken through.

Rituals become less frequent as societies become more modern. In the course of social and cultural evolution, such fused performances become more difficult to pull off. If we analytically differentiate the elements of social performance, then we can understand how they have slowly but ineluctably become de-fused over the course of historical time (see Alexander and Colomy 1990). For the first 90,000 years of human history, social life was organized inside small face-to-face collectivities, like the bands and tribes of Australian aborigines of Durkheim's studies. In these simplified and intimate contexts, mounting symbolic performances was not particularly challenging. People understood their social world as anchored by truthful myth and amplified cosmos. Rituals dramatized such legends. The props and stages for such ceremonies were the stuff of everyday social life, and participants and audience members were interchangeable. With the neolithic revolution starting about 12,000 years ago, and the movement away from hunting and gathering to domestic cultivation, class societies emerged. Centralized states formed to administer more complex social structures, acting on behalf of tiny subgroups of elites sequestered from the working masses. In the postprimitive archaic societies of kings, pharaohs, czars, and emperors, collective rituals were not nearly so participatory and inclusive. They seemed more like performances, like spectacles contrived to project ideological meanings to audiences at one remove, the powerless groups outside the elites.

The invention of writing (see Goody 1986) intensified the de-fusion of the elements of social performance. The narratives and classifications forming the basis for symbolic performance were transformed from primordial myth to humanly created scripts, like the Dionysian festivals of the ancient Greeks and the Easter plays of medieval Europe. The objectification of social meaning into written scripts, whether sacred or secular, separated the background representations that informed social performances from both actors and audiences. Writing created a new category of specialists: keepers of sacred scrolls whose concern was to ensure correct symbolic interpretation. Were the social figures performing ceremonial scripts doing so in the correct way? Only specialists in textual interpretation had the credibility to say. Such mediation gave birth not only to conservative and dissenting theologians but also to intellectuals; both created heterodoxies and new symbolic forms (see Eisenstadt 1982).

Theologians, religious dissenters, and intellectuals were the first critics (Bellah 2011). Consider Confucius and Machiavelli. Each emerges amidst the breakdown of fused rituals inside steeply hierarchical societies. Their writings addressed the question of how social authorities could sustain legitimacy in precarious times, not only among elites but among the masses. They advised emperors and princes and aristocrats about how to present themselves to others in order to gain performative effect, how to modulate social representations in such a manner that the rent seams of social order could be sewn back together again. Lower level gentry, middling urban strata, and peasants were audiences that elites made assiduous efforts to persuade. Thus were state ceremonies deployed with dramatic intent on occasions great and small.

The emergence of theatres gave to this growing "artificiality" of social drama an aesthetic form, crystallizing the de-fusion of the elements of performance. Theatre is a conscious and pragmatic effort to create dramatic effect—via art. The metaphysical props of ancient ritual are kicked away, but the performative challenge remains. Theatre aims to re-fuse the disparate elements of performance—to overcome the distance between actor and script, performance and audience. In the West, we locate the transition from ritual to theatre in the transition from the Dionysian performances of Thespis to Greek drama in the fifth century BCE. Dionysian rituals were proto-performances. On the one hand, they evoked an unquestioned cosmic order; on the other, they acknowledged the contingency of that order by forming a traveling troupe whose purpose was to figure out creative ways to display it, by expressively acting it out. Greek

drama went one crucial step further; it was internally agonistic and overtly contrived, and its success was contingent and sharply contested, so much so that prizes were awarded for writing and acting. While referencing myth, Greek dramas were not mythical themselves; by this time in Greek history, the elements of such performances had become too de-fused. Plato longed for the re-fusion with archetypal forms, but Aristotle embraced differentiation. His *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) offered a cookbook for creating dramatic effect, providing recipes for plot, for triggering cathartic connections between script and audience, for how playwrights could create sympathy for the suffering onstage.

When, in Europe, this movement toward social and cultural complexity moved backward toward simpler and less developed social structure in medieval times, drama as theatre disappeared. Cosmological, religious rituals became, once again, the only dramatic forms on offer. Western theatre reemerged only in the Renaissance, perhaps most prominently with the Elizabethans in England. As Richard McCoy explains, it was because of “the imperfect and tenuous relationship of actor and audience”—what I have called performative de-fusion—that the extraordinary dramatic effect of Shakespeare’s plays depended not on religious but secular, poetic faith:

Why do his plots seem so compelling, and how do his characters come to seem more real than the people sitting around us in the theater? [...] Recent scholarship has tended to sidestep and confuse these questions by conflating religious and theatrical faith and focusing on the plays’ theological contexts[, but] faith in Shakespeare [is] more theatrical and poetic than spiritual, about our belief in theater’s potent but manifest illusions rather than faith in God or miracles. (McCoy 2013:6, ix)

The newly aesthetic approach to performance, which for the first time comprehended drama as theatre, emerged during the same historical periods as new social possibilities for inserting collectively organized dramatic action into political life. Theatre appears roughly at the same time as the political public sphere—the polis in ancient Greece, the nation-state in the Renaissance. If theatre contrives to dramatize compulsive emotional conflict, so do publicly organized political movements strive to dramatize urgent social conflicts so as to publicly communicate the need for political and economic reform. But theatre and political movements project meaning to distant audiences via artificially constructed symbolic performance.

It is here, with the historical-cum-analytical intertwinement of theatre and politics, that we arrive at the empirical elaborations of social performance that constitute modern political campaigns. Over the past century, there has been an increasingly theatrical self-consciousness displayed in the pursuit of political power, both on behalf of, and against, the state. In my own recent work—*The Performance of Power: Obama’s Victory and the Democratic Struggle for Power* (2010), *Performative Revolution in Egypt* (2011b), *Performance and Power* (2011a), and *Obama Power* (with Jaworsky; 2014)—I deploy the concept “citizen-audience” to transform the narrowly deliberative theory of democracy in a culturally pragmatic way, examining the emergence of such distinctive performative elements as speech writers, performance coaches, advance men, focus groups, polls, and videographers, not only in the struggle for power but in the exercise of institutionalized power itself. Each of these new elements has become a focus of political specialization, responding to the increasing difficulty of creating political performances that seem convincing and authentic, a debilitating situation exacerbated by social media, which creates active audiences and immediate critical feedback.

From the Greeks and American founding fathers to modern political scientists, democracy has been misunderstood as an exercise in rationality. Voters are portrayed as employing unencumbered intellects, as evaluating issues and weighing their interests, as having the ability to understand truth and see through the distortions of the other side. But this simply isn’t the way political society works.

Voters do not decide whom to vote for by weighing their objective costs and benefits. They are not calculating machines, but emotional and moral human beings. Searching for the meanings of things, they want to make sense of political life, working out a grand narrative about where we've been, where we are now, where we're going in the future.

Political candidates project themselves into these social dramas as "characters," casting themselves as heroic protagonists and their opponents as wearing black hats. Citizen-audiences evaluate these shape-shifting performances, making identifications, not calculations. They support characters that seem life affirming and hopeful, and oppose those who appear evil and dangerous.

Those auditioning for presidential power aim to become collective representations, symbols that embody the best qualities of citizens and the nation. If a candidate succeeds in symbolizing the shared collectivity—America, Korea, Mexico, the Ukraine—for enough voters, she or he will be allowed to control the nation's highest office.

## Obama Character in Poetry and Prose

In 2008, during his first presidential campaign, Barack Obama created a truly inspiring character that compelled mass identification. In the first two years of his presidency, however, the emotional fusion binding this character to Americans on the left and center became attenuated. In some part, such loosening was inevitable. The symbolic intensity of Obama-character as it performed on the campaign trail could not possibly be sustained when Obama-President began manipulating the machinery of government.

There were also self-inflicted wounds. Obama's political autobiography was all about healing the polarizing wounds of the '60s, but he deeply underestimated the difficulty of creating such a vital center inside Congress. During the 2009 year-long health care debate, postpartisan compromise was merely a figment of the president's imagination. He came away empty-handed, without a shred of Republican support. While the Obama-character played the fiddle of reconciliation, the new, radical-right Tea Party made America burn. The Obama-character seemed cool and out of touch, neglecting—as he later acknowledged—narrative for the weeds of public health planning and economic policy. The political result of this performative failure? The Republicans smashed the Democrats in the Congressional midterm elections of 2010.

In the wake of their cathartic triumph, Republican leaders had the emotional energy of millions of angry, disappointed Americans in their hands. They had only to find a vessel for these seething emotions, a candidate who would become such a compelling collective representation that he could take back power in the 2012 elections. Republicans failed to rise to this creative challenge, emerging from the 2012 primary season with a cipher, not a symbol. Mitt Romney possessed a mile-long CV and a well-oiled political machine, but nary a shadow of charisma. He saw himself as a tool, not a vessel, an instrument of economic management rather than a vehicle for emotional and moral representation.

Instead of symbolizing, Romney disappeared into the role of the problem-solving businessman, offering pragmatism as reason enough to elect him. But voters wrap practical promises inside gauzy symbolic blankets. What matters is what citizens can feel, the character of the candidate and his story. They can't scientifically evaluate the validity of promises. Is candidate Romney one of us? Is he up-from-the-bootstraps, a self-made American hero like Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon, or Bill Clinton? Is he a warrior hero like Eisenhower or Bush I? Is he an aristocratic hero sacrificing personal comfort to work for the American people, like Teddy Roosevelt, FDR, or JFK?

It didn't matter who Mitt Romney actually was, only what his character seemed to be. With some shrewd rebranding by Obama and the Democratic production team, the Romney-character emerged as "Bain Capitalist," the quarter-billionaire who wouldn't come clean about

his taxes, parked hidden money offshore, and loaded a dog atop his car. Romney may have had brainpower, but he seemed to be missing soul. The Romney-character signified self over community, a glad-hander who'd tell the American people what he wanted them to hear, not what he himself deeply believed.

The Obama-character presented a sharp contrast. The 2008 campaign had been poetry in motion, a hero promising salvation, but President Obama governed in prose, with no relief in sight. Whatever the practical failings of Obama-the-President, however, Obama-as-campaigner was still viewed as idealistic and honest, devoted to helping others rather than feathering his own nest.

Would Americans eventually come to see Obama-the-candidate as a good-hearted flop? The Republican performance team would have had it so. The dramaturgical challenge for the Democratic opposition was to transform the 2008 narrative so that Obama could be a transformative hero once again. The key was symbolizing economics. In 2008, Obama had promised to resolve the Great Recession and to restore America's economic might. Four years later, this had still not come to pass. Republicans portrayed Obama as a failed hero, a good-hearted flop. The Democrats repositioned Obama as inheriting, not creating, the nation's current economic mess. When former President Bill Clinton addressed the Democratic nominating convention in August 2012, he declared that the economic crisis had already begun before the Obama presidency arrived, shouting "750,000 jobs were lost in January 2008 alone!" No human being could have done any better job, Clinton assured the American citizen audience, than Obama had managed in the four years since. When, on the day following, President Obama formally accepted his party's nomination for a second term, he proclaimed that the nation was actually in the middle of an economic recovery, suggesting a new timeline according to which economic redemption would not be fully achieved for years to come, and only if he were elected for a second time.

The bounce in the polls that followed the Democratic nominating convention indicated the Obama-character had regained some traction with the center and suggested some re-fusion with the activist left. Even if Obama could no longer be an avidly romantic hero, he could, at the very least, be represented as working heroically for the people. The shape of the presidential contest finally crystallized. According to the polls, President Obama had stretched his lead over challenger Romney—narrowly at the national level but decisively in the critical swing states.

Campaigns are all about hope and bluff. Though no one would hear a discouraging word from the Romney campaign, the writing was on the wall.

In the two-months-long theatrical space that stretched from the nominating conventions to election day in early November 2012, conspicuous opportunities remained for performative failures and successes. Looming largest among them were the presidential and vice-presidential debates, televised live. No other events in the American political calendar so crystallize the triumph of ritual and dramaturgy over rational argument.

The *Huffington Post* invited me to comment on these performative encounters.<sup>3</sup> In the early morning of 4 October 2012, I posted "Downcast Eyes," describing the initial presidential debate as one that created dramatic reversal.

## Downcast Eyes—4 October 2012

The French poet Baudelaire spoke of "the grandiloquent truth of gestures on life's great occasions." Last night's debate was one of the formulaic great occasions of American political life. But President Obama's gestures were not eloquent, and because of this theatrical failure he couldn't get a handle on political truth.

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3. These posts are reproduced here, substantially but not in their entirety, with the permission of *The Huffington Post*.



Figure 1. Obama's subdued performance in the 3 October 2012 debate in Denver, CO, endangered his reelection. (Photo by Jim Bourg/Reuters Pictures)

Presidential debates are plays within a play. Campaigns are dramas, not fact-finding missions, and debates are theatrical episodes, not academic tests. Everybody knows the televised debates are artificial, scripted, rehearsed, and choreographed. Rhetorical, not deliberative, more professional wrestling than political argument.

Yet the 50 million Americans who tune in to these feigned encounters willingly suspend their disbelief. They are looking for a different, less rational kind of truth. By drama's end they will find it—a feeling truth that

depends on identification, character, agonistic plotting, and catharsis—truth in an aesthetic sense, a matter of performance, not about who is right.

In last night's drama, the president reprised a role that, two years ago, nearly destroyed his Presidency. He played The Last Rational Man, the policy wonk, the distanced professor. He worried over proper explanations. He spoke about numbers not adding up, about math and arithmetic.

Romney's numbers did not add up. The born again conservative blithely shrugged off Republican tax policy—which would balloon the deficit and slash entitlements—like an old suit that had become too tight: That's not my plan. I won't raise the deficit by 5 trillion dollars. I won't cut taxes for the rich. I won't reduce Medicare. I won't stop 26 year olds from being insured or cut off people with pre-existing conditions.

Bold lies! The Last Rational Man seemed taken aback. He tried explaining and reasoning, so the American people could see the Republican's numbers just didn't add up. "For 18 months he's been talking about his tax cutting plan, now, five weeks before the election, he says never mind." Soon, it was back to the numbers. "It's a matter of arithmetic." Obama kept asking Americans to do the math.

The president should have told stories to illustrate with narratives, not explain with facts. Romney did exactly that. When the exasperated president insisted on the size of Republican tax cuts and deficits, the Governor replied: "I've got five boys, I'm used to people saying what isn't true!" Figuratively, he became the father, and Obama the wishful, wistful, and wayward prodigal son.

There was more to Obama's dramaturgical failure than bad lines and an out-of-date script. Political performances are also about eyes and energy, about looking and being looked at, about seeming eager and interested and caring.

The Romney-character was animated, clearly relishing this fight. He was pink and cheerful and almost chirpy. Brimming with confidence, he could barely contain himself. His eyes were wide and open; he displayed a passionate mane.

The Obama-character kept his eyes downcast. He seemed sad and passive, smiling wryly as if to admit he was weathering painful blows. When he looked up, his answers were often agonizingly slow. He searched for words and they didn't come easily.

When President Obama did find his voice, he spoke quietly of "balance" and "responsibility." Governor Romney, eyes wide open and energized by a fire within, spoke fervently of apocalypse and salvation. He concluded with soaring rhetoric about the "two different paths for our future as a nation." Obama ended by gesturing to the same old, same old, the dreary past, not a bright shining future.

The president kicked off the public debate with a private message to his "Sweetie" on the evening of their 20th anniversary. "There are a lot of points I want to make tonight, but the most important one is that 20 years ago I became the luckiest man on Earth." Ninety minutes later, it seemed painfully clear that Barack Obama would have preferred to be out on a date. Mitt Romney was the happy warrior last night.



In response to these sharply contrasting political performances, polls recorded Obama's popularity tanking and Romney's on the rise. Obama's startled supporters accused the Democratic performance team of malfeasance. They had once been confident; now they felt kicked in the stomach.

Just one week later, on 11 October, the parties' vice-presidential candidates had their own debate. In one corner was the Republican Paul Ryan, a youthful, extremely conservative congressman from Wisconsin; in the other corner was Joe Biden, the venerable sitting vice president, formerly a Democratic senator from Delaware. In the wake of President Obama's stumbling performance in the first debate, a great deal was now theatrically at stake. Early in the morning of 12 October, I posted "Laughing Man and Choir Boy" on the *Huffington Post*.

## Laughing Man and Choir Boy— 12 October 2012

Last night, Paul Ryan played the choir boy. Blue eyed and innocent, pretending to be a flowing font of sympathy for his fellow citizens' pain, seeming guileless, all he wanted to do was help Americans get a job and speak God's truth.

Joe Biden laughed his head off.

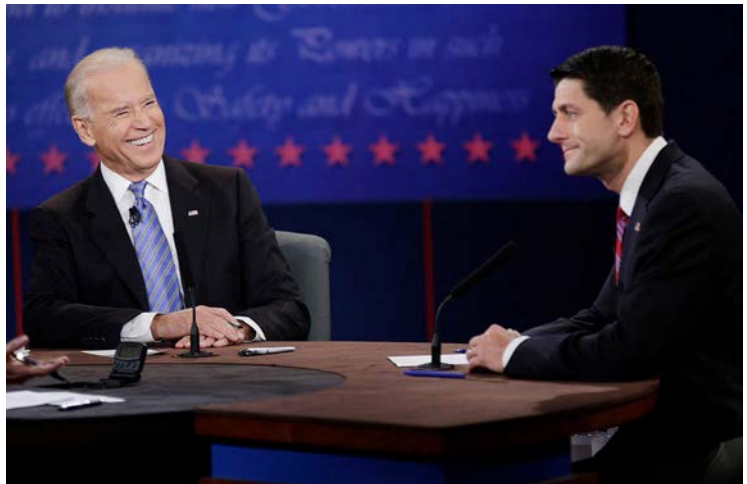
Paul tried telling his story of sincerity and concern. Joe sat in the back of the class, grinning, smirking, and grunting his amusement, often shouting out incredulous disbelief: You're kidding us, right?! Hey, we're in on the fun. We know it's a joke. It is a joke, right Paul? You don't think we're going to take this guff seriously, do you? It's all a bunch of malarkey!

Every school kid in America knows how this trick is played. Some fakey student sitting in the front row raises his hand, stands up, and drones on and on, trying to get on the teacher's good side. You and your friends glance at each other and start snickering in the back row. You don't have to say anything, but you steal the show. The attention of the class is diverted, and turns to you.

Biden played the joker, but he wasn't being funny. Like Shakespeare's fool, there was method to his apparent madness. As Ryan said his lines, our attention was pulled away by the audacity, the sheer riskiness, of the Vice-President of the United States acting out in public. With his comic antics, Biden took himself outside the text, but not off the stage. He ended up front and center. His subversive tactics gave us permission to be snide about Ryan's performance too.

Of course, dramatic plots can have only one hero. In the performance of American politics, that's the president. But every hero has a side-kick, a spear carrier who passes the ammunition, takes a pratfall for the team and always comes up good natured and smiling (but one step behind) in the end. The job description is to make the big guy look good. The Lone Ranger and Tonto, Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon, Superman and Jimmy Olsen, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Last night, Biden and Ryan auditioned for this secondary role.



*Figure 2. Joe Biden's deft, dominating performance against Paul Ryan in Danville, KY, on 11 October 2012 righted the Democratic ship. (Photo by John Gress/Reuters Pictures)*

For Ryan, this meant keeping the recently script-doctored Republican story going. The Democratic standard bearers are not heroes but wimpy failures. They're listless, don't care about America, have lost their purpose and energy. We Republicans are fighting ready. The Democrats portray us as wolves, but we actually are moderate Democrats in disguise. It's we who are on the people's side; the Democrats are on the side of the state.

Biden's task was to engage in a blocking maneuver. He aimed to stop the surging Republican performance of competence and caring by showing it to be just that—a performance. Not by reasoning but by gesturing. In a dramatic language more powerful than speech, he suggested Republicans are telling a just-so story that's too funny for words, and that it's okay to laugh!

Blocking Ryan's story, Biden gave Obama a chance to rewind his own. The president lost last week's debate by playing the prissy Explainer-in-Chief who would rather reason than fight. He listened politely, allowing Romney to pivot to the new Republican story.

Last night, Obama's sidekick gave his boss—the once and future hero?—a swift kick in the behind. Joe pulled Barack up off the ground, told him to stop being a doormat, to take off his shirt and flex his muscles and take back the role of partisan fighter who can throw a punch.

He did this by getting in the choir boy's face. Paul Ryan played the studious nerd, the sincere, blue-eyed innocent trying to please the teacher by knowing all the facts. Big Old Joe called him out, continuously interrupted, gave no quarter, controlled the debate.

Joe sat in the back of the room and laughed. He was a holy fool and a brilliant bully. If he didn't deliver a knockout, he certainly blocked the pilgrim's progress. Has he set the stage for the return of the hero next week?

This now became the burning focal point of the long-running presidential campaign. Could the hero come back? Barack Obama possessed an extraordinary gift for political performance, but time and time again he had also demonstrated a capacity to shoot himself in the foot, to crawl back into the shell of the Last Rational Man and leave the performance of politics behind. This desire to de-dramatize—emotionally understandable but politically self-destructive—had shattered the presidential performance in the first Obama–Romney debate. If Obama could not recover his balance in the second, party leaders and pundits on all sides agreed, the presidential contest might be irrevocably tilted to the conservative side.

This didn't happen. Obama found his dancing shoes. In front of 70 million viewers, he exuded confidence and poise. On the *Huffington Post* site, in the early morning of 17 October 2012, I posted “Courtroom Drama of Truth and Lies.”

## **Courtroom Drama of Truth and Lies— 17 October 2012**

In a democratic society, the struggle for power is not about force but ideals and aspirations, about the dream of justice and who has the courage to tell the truth.

The right-wing individualism of Republican free-market policies has crippled that party's ability to talk about justice while speaking the truth. Until Labor Day, Mitt Romney attacked redistribution, defended the wealthy, and described half the society as whining bottom dwellers. After Labor Day, Romney [shook] his Etch A Sketch and started over. New Romney is all about justice. Good jobs for all. Maintain taxes on the wealthy, middle-class tax breaks, and popular parts of Obama Care. New Romney even supports abortion, didn't you know?

Last week, good old Joe called this New Republicanism a bunch of malarkey. He's right, but the problem is how to get voters in the middle to agree? The empirical arguments are complex, the numbers numbing. Shouting “it's all lies” doesn't convince anybody who isn't already.

The challenge for Democrats is to dramatize Republican deception, not to assert it factually. “He said, she said” isn't a winning strategy. Theatre is about showing, not telling.

Last week, Biden showed Republican deception by grinning and snorting and laughing.

Last night, during the first two-thirds of the debate, President Obama used numbers and, on four different occasions, tried simply telling his audience about New Romney's untruth: “What Governor Romney said just isn't true.” “Not true, Governor Romney.” “Not true.” “It's just not true.”

Then Obama got a chance to show, not tell.

Drastically miscalculating, Romney bitch-slapped the president: "When we have four Americans killed [in the American Embassy in Benghazi, Libya ...] the president, the day after that happened, flies off to Las Vegas for a political fundraiser, then the next day to Colorado for another [...] political event."

Obama was a shameless pol, not a patriot.

Tough stuff. Rather than apologizing, or even explaining, the president had the wit to call the lying Republican's bluff.

Obama: "The day after the attack, Governor, I stood in the Rose Garden and I told the American people and the world that this was an act of terror." Far from being weak-kneed, the president had been angry, and had told the unvarnished truth. Not only then but now. Playing the hard man, the president stared Romney's insinuating insult down.

Obama: "The suggestion that anybody on my team [...] would play politics or mislead when we've lost four of our own, Governor, is offensive. That's not what we do. That's not what I do as president, that's not what I do as commander-in-chief."

Romney maintained this was just what the president did do. Obama had backed down in the Rose Garden, and he was going to have to back down last night. The president was lying, not the New Republican side.

Romney: "I think [it's] interesting that the president just said [...] that on the day after the attack he went into the Rose Garden and said this was an act of terror."

The president's reply was pure as ice, and just as cold.

Obama: "That's what I said."

The exchange had become a confrontation, the stakes starkly raised. It was no longer about who was right about facts, but who was a liar. A direct accusation had been made against the President of the United States, who then called his accuser out. The narrative struggle between good and evil tightened, and the drama ratcheted up.

Now this was not a debate but a courtroom drama. The theatre plays nightly on TV as the tense struggle between crime and justice, with prosecutors and defense lawyers fighting to discover who is the shadow-faced liar and who the truth teller dressed in white.

Prosecutor Romney pressed his case: "You said in the Rose Garden [that] it was not a spontaneous demonstration, is that what you're saying?"

Obama's reply seemed scripted for a courtroom fight: "Please proceed, Governor."

Falling for the trap, Romney resorted to dramaturgical legalese: "I want to make sure we get that for the record because it took 14 days before he called the attack on Benghazi an act of terror."

The defending attorney now pulled the noose tight.

Obama: "Get the transcript."

Here comes the judge. CNN [debate] moderator Candy Crowley ruled for the defense. She didn't need to go to the Rose Garden transcript to confirm the truthfulness of the defendant's side.



*Figure 3. Obama returned to form in the second presidential debate. President Barack Obama and Republican presidential candidate and former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney participate in the second presidential debate at Hofstra University in Hempstead, NY, Tuesday, 16 October 2012. (AP Photo/ Charles Dharapak).*

At first, however, Judge Crowley hesitated. So much was on the line.

Crowley: "It—it—it—he did, he did, in fact, sir. So let me—let me call it an act of terror."

Obama seized this third party testimony of Romney's bad faith, but he wanted it more dramatically made.

Obama: "Can you say that a little louder, Cindy?"

She could: "He did call it an act of terror."

Objection sustained.

Dramatic plots turn on epiphanic moments of revelation. Republicans know how to lie with statistics, but they may find it difficult to resist last night's dramatic moment of moral truth. Their leader had called the president out, but the judge caught him in a stark and snarky bold-faced lie. Romney staked his integrity on humiliating Obama, but it was he who was humbled.

Last night, the Republic standard bearer didn't just stumble. In full view of 70 million Americans, he spectacularly fell from grace.

Two weeks later, President Obama decisively won reelection. As in 2008, he received more than 50 percent of the popular vote, the first Democratic candidate to do so twice in nearly 70 years. Not only media commentators but social scientists made a great brouhaha about the shifting demographics of the American electorate, claiming that its increasingly non-white, non-Anglo composition had guaranteed Obama victory. Yet, while such factors are hardly without consequence, they can no more guarantee an effective political performance than financial backing guarantees a Broadway play's success. Everything is open, in politics as in theatre. There is no warranty. The play's the thing.

During adolescence and young adulthood, Barack Obama had stripped off layers of social convention in order to establish a singular identity. Becoming his own man, he launched an inner-directed political career. How frustrating to discover, as he reached for the political zenith, that he had become a character in some melodrama that he would prefer not to play.

But for all his role-distancing and existential dread, Barack Obama knew that political success depended on becoming a central character in the publican play. Democracy does not engage the populace in a debating society but a stage. Political campaigns are epics splashed across a panorama that plays out in mythical, not historical time. Citizen-audiences come into contact not with actual candidates but with their symbolic representation. These semblances are projected by media outlets, supplied with content by political campaigns. The ambition of campaigns is to control the image. And the challenge of political performance is to become the protagonist in your own play. Politicians enact scripts that coil expectations, stoke anxious fears, and raise hopes high. As these social texts roll out, politicians offer themselves as candidates for the lead in the play.

While creating a powerful narrative requires a highly developed feeling for the times, the role for which candidates audition is pretty much standardized. To be elected President, you must be a hero, or at least be seen as one. Heroes are extraordinary individuals with a touch of immortality about them. Taking great risks, they save people in dark times. Heroes transform and save. They lead people from darkness to light.

In 2008, the Democratic production team wrote a fresh and audacious script that seemed perfectly fitted to the spirit of the times, and Obama-character played the role of hero with flare, passion, and redeeming authenticity. Under the reign of evil Bush II, America had endured a dark era of duplicity, war, and corruption, and an arrogant refusal to address democratic domestic needs. Enter Barack Obama stage left. Casting himself in the image of Martin Luther King, Jr., Obama the youthful hero could also proclaim "I have a dream," as he promised fundamental change. He would create justice and reverse the rising tide of inequality. He would stop the oceans from rising and make the cities green.

Obama's "Performance of Politics 2008" was a brilliant success, but neither the narrative nor its protagonist survived the prose of Obama-the-President's "Performance of Power." In art,

challenging twists and turns of plot are carefully calibrated to reveal the hero's qualities. In life, heroes can be played the fool. Events spin out of control, presenting outsized challenges that can be difficult or impossible to overcome.

Faced with a spoiled identity, the only option for Obama's 2012 reelection campaign was to rewrite the play. Instead of the conquering hero, Obama played the little Dutch boy with his finger in the dike. Rather than promising to transform America, the 2012 Obama-character pledged, if elected, that things wouldn't get worse. Rather than promising to reason with recalcitrant Republicans, Obama *Deux* embarked on a battle to destroy their faithless, feckless leader. This 2012 plot depended less on pumping up the protagonist than dumbing down the antagonist and blackening him with a polluting brush. Through summer and convention time, this asymmetrical warfare worked. Romney was depicted as unscrupulous, elitist, extremist. He was not only against women, minorities, and "the 47 percent,"<sup>4</sup> but democracy itself.

But as summer turned into autumn, and conventions gave way to debates, the brutal exigencies of social—as compared with theatrical—performance came back into play. In social performance, you can write a script for your antagonist, but you can't make him play. Your team can plot a winning role for the protagonist, but there is no assurance he'll ably act it out.

For months, the Romney-character had been giving gifts to the Obama production team, falling neatly into their traps. Meanwhile, the Obama-character was being feisty and aggressive, connecting with audiences, seeming authentic, not a hero but a striver who well stood his ground. All this changed with the first debate. The Democratic plot turned inside out, protagonist and antagonist seeming to switch sides. The Obama-character was suddenly deflated with cast down eyes, while the Romney-character swelled and expanded with power. Before 70 million Americans, in what seemed an unscripted moment, Mitt Romney gave the performance of his life. The Republican successfully auditioned for the role of President.

In the weeks that followed, the Performance of Politics 2012 became a more even and deadly fight. Amidst Democrat moaning about lies and "Romnesia," the Republicans' lead character remained robust, white teeth shining, hair glistening, voice charged, and gestures ramped up.

The ancient Greeks distinguished between *kairos* and *chronos*. Chronos is calendar time, orderly and linear. Kairos is the right time, the opportune moment, improvised for the occasion. In early October, Romney had seized the day. Taking control of kairos, he pushed Obama into mere calendar time. The Obama-character struggled to get back into mythos. Though damaged, his wound did not prove mortal. In the second debate, the hero returned to the stage. Like King Arthur, Obama became not only the once but the future king.

## The Dramatization of Consciousness

Four decades ago, in a proclamation that seemed counterintuitive for a Marxist theorist, Raymond Williams insisted that contemporary societies must still dramatize social consciousness. Williams acknowledged that the transition from ritual to theatre—performative defusion—was a process that had nurtured critical intervention: "Drama broke from fixed signs, established its permanent distance from myth and ritual and from the hierarchical figures and processions of state." Yet, even if drama "separated," Williams suggested, it "did not separate out altogether"; for "beyond what many people can see as the theatricality of our image-conscious public world, there is a more serious, more effective, more deeply rooted drama: the dramatization of consciousness itself" (Williams 1983:16, 17–18).

Drama is fundamental to the search for meaning and solidarity in a postritual world. How else can character, virtue, and morality be sustained when the metaphysics of cosmological

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4. This was the famous secretly recorded remark by Romney at a \$5,000-a-plate fundraiser. Romney said that 47 percent of Americans were just "takers."

religion has broken down and social rituals are sporadic and incomplete? Drama displaces yet also encompasses shreds of the premodern religious order. Before theatre, the pragmatics of social performance was relatively simple. With the emergence of theatre, in the postcosmological world of complexity and de-fusion, social performances became extraordinarily difficult. Social theory must address these difficulties, examining how dramatic techniques not only separate and shape the elements of performance, but seek to put them back together again.

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