POP, Politics and Propaganda

Annenberg School for Communication
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The Norman Lear Center

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The Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities

The Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities was founded in 1998 to create an intellectual center for our city by bringing together academics and writers, musicians and dancers, curators and critics, journalists and poets. The Institute's broad purpose is to stimulate a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas. The biweekly lunches for fellows explore many of the social, scientific and cultural ideas of the day with a greater variety of experience and intellectual outlook gathered in one room than any given fellow is likely to experience in the course of his or her daily life.

The Institute aims to be international, urban and inclusive in its outlook, avoiding viewpoints predictably to the right or left. It seeks to integrate intellectual life with the active civic life of the city, as well as to reflect the diversity that is so palpably a hallmark of Southern California as it continues through the twenty-first century. For more information, please visit www.usc.edu/libraries/partners/laih/.

Participant Biographies

Robbie Conal
Robbie Conal grew up in Manhattan, where his parents, both union organizers, used the city's art museums as day-care centers. He earned an M.F.A. at Stanford (1978). In 1984 he moved to Los Angeles, where he began his late-night poster campaigns, satirizing televangelists, global capitalists, politicians and bureaucrats who he felt had abused their power. His posters also address issues of censorship, women's freedom of choice, and the environment. Conal's work has been featured on CBS's This Morning and Charlie Rose and in Time, Newsweek, The New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, and numerous arts magazines from Interview to Beautiful Decay. A major retrospective of his paintings and drawings is scheduled for October 2008 at Track 16 Gallery in Santa Monica. He is an adjunct lecturer at the USC Roski School of Fine Arts.

Marc Cooper
Journalist Marc Cooper has written about politics and culture for more than 30 years. His award-winning international and domestic reporting has appeared in dozens of venues, ranging from the Los Angeles Times and Rolling Stone to CBS News and PBS's Frontline. He is a contributing editor to The Nation and a visiting professor at USC's Annenberg School for Communication. His latest book is The Last Honest Place in America: Paradise and Perdition in the New Las Vegas.

Martin Kaplan
Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center, also holds the Norman Lear Chair in Entertainment, Media, and Society at the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He graduated from Harvard College, received a First in English from Cambridge University in England, and received a Ph.D. in modern thought and literature from Stanford University. He was chief speechwriter to Vice President Walter F. Mondale and is a regular commentator on NPR's All Things Considered and on CBS Morning News. He was recruited by Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, and worked for them at Disney for 12 years. Kaplan wrote and executive produced The Distinguished Gentleman and adapted Noises Off for the screen. His articles have appeared in publications including The New York Times, The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, Time, U.S. News & World Report, The American Scholar, The Woodrow Wilson Quarterly and The New Republic. At USC he has taught graduate and undergraduate courses.
Participant Biographies (continued)

Steven J. Ross
Steven J. Ross is co-director of the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities and a professor of history and chair of the History Department at USC, where he teaches courses in popular culture and American social and film history. He holds degrees from Columbia, Oxford, and Princeton University. He is the author of Working-Class Hollywood: Silent Film and the Shaping of Class in America; Movies and American Society; Workers on the Edge: Work, Leisure, and Politics in Industrializing Cincinnati, 1788-1890; and numerous articles on film and social history. He is currently finishing his latest book, Hollywood Left and Right: How Movie Stars Shaped American Politics. Ross is a recent recipient of a Film Scholars Award from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Carol Wells
Carol A. Wells is founder and executive director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, an educational and research archive with more than 50,000 domestic and international protest posters. Wells has been producing political poster art exhibitions on a variety of human rights themes for more than twenty years. Her articles have appeared in numerous publications and catalogues, including Just Another Poster? Chicano Graphic Arts in California; Che Guevara: Icon, Myth and Message; Los Angeles—At the Center and on the Edge; Decade of Protest: Political Posters from the United States, Vietnam and Cuba; and Kunst & Krieg: 1939-1989. Her essay “Can Design Stop a War,” has been published here and internationally.
Pop, Politics and Propaganda

Steve Ross: I want to welcome you here today for the second Dialogues event sponsored by the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities in partnership with the USC Libraries and the Annenberg School for Communication. My name is Steve Ross. I’m the chair of the History Department and the co-director of the Los Angeles Institute for the Humanities. And today’s panel discussion of “Pop, Politics and Propaganda” is part of Visions and Voices, which is the USC Arts and Humanities Initiative, generously sponsored by our Provost Max Nikias.

Let me briefly review today’s format with you so you know what’s going to be happening. We’re going to start off with our moderator – who I will introduce in a moment – introducing our panelists, and then they are going to talk about how political parties have used art and popular culture for political ends. And they’ll –

Robbie Conal: That’s the topic.

Steve Ross: That’s the topic.

Robbie Conal: I told you.

Steve Ross: They’re going to go until they have nothing else to say to each other –

Robbie Conal: You know, I was telling some of my students that if they’re interested in history, Steve Ross is a great teacher to take, and they said, “History? No.” Doesn’t mean he isn’t still a great teacher.

Martin Kaplan: Go ahead, Steve.

Steve Ross: What can I tell you? No respect. Anyway, we’re going to go for about 40 minutes, and then we’ll turn it over to you for a question-and-answer period. Then we’ll break and have a more informal conversation with the panelists. You can stay here, leave, have whatever’s left of our delicious refreshments, and enjoy yourselves.

Martin Kaplan: Have a cookie.

Steve Ross: Have a cookie. No milk, but have a cookie. It gives me great pleasure to introduce today’s moderator, my good friend and colleague, Marty Kaplan. Marty is an especially appropriate moderator for today because over the course of his career, he has traversed the worlds of politics, entertainment, and academics. He was an undergraduate at Harvard, where he majored in molecular biology, while also serving as president of the Harvard Lampoon. Afterwards, he got his Ph.D. at Stanford in modern thought and literature but wound up working in Washington, D.C. as Vice President Walter Mondale’s chief speechwriter.

Robbie Conal: How’d that work out?
Steve Ross: You just took my punch line. What can I tell you? Just shows you anybody can get employment at USC. In 1984, he served as Mondale’s deputy campaign manager in his presidential run against Ronald Reagan.

Martin Kaplan: Now, you can ask.

Robbie Conal: How’d that work out?

Steve Ross: Well, we know how that worked out. Marty left Washington to go work for the mouse company in Burbank as a vice president, where he also was a writer/producer. During that time, he both wrote and produced *The Distinguished Gentleman* and adapted Michael Frayn’s play, *Noises Off*, for the screen. Marty eventually left Disney and came to USC to become associate dean of the Annenberg School for Communication, where he also serves as the director and creative genius behind the Norman Lear Center, which studies the impact of entertainment on society.

In his spare time, Marty manages to write for *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *LA Times*, *Time Magazine*, and *US News World & Report*, and you can see him on a fairly regular basis on *The Huffington Post* – he has a regular blog there – as well as listen to him on *Marketplace* and *All Things Considered*.

I’m delighted that Marty has agreed to serve as our moderator this afternoon. Please join me in welcoming Marty Kaplan.

Martin Kaplan: Thank you, Steve, and the fact that you didn’t crack a smile or say a word about our eyewear suggests that you’re the perfect audience for us to pitch this at.

If any of you want to wear shades, you’re welcome to. This was a prop just for the sake of helping you get through that introduction.

I want to thank Visions and Voices and the Humanities Institute. All four of us here on the panel are fellows of the Institute for the Humanities and if you know what that is, we’d be glad to find out.

Robbie Conal: Carol just looks like a woman, but she’s a fellow.

Martin Kaplan: And I’d also like to thank the staffs of the Institute, the Library and the Lear Center, for making today’s event possible.

I’m going to introduce the members of the panel, and I’ll start with a man who is happy to point out in his official biography that he was kicked out of San Francisco State by S. I. Hyakawa in 1969. For those of you who don’t understand the momentousness of that, perhaps we can get Robbie to explain that to us.

He moved to Los Angeles in 1984, and anybody who’s been in this city since then may have found him or herself ambushed by the sight of the most amazing guerilla art wall posters picturing all manner of public figures advocating on behalf of various causes on topics like televangelism, globalization, censorship, women’s freedom of choice, and the environment.
Robbie Conal: I’m for all of those!

Martin Kaplan: He is an adjunct lecturer here at the Roski School of Art, and next October, he’s going to have a retrospective of his work at the Track 16 Gallery in Santa Monica. Please join me in welcoming Robbie Conal.


Martin Kaplan: Oh, eight – sorry.

Robbie Conal: Yes, just in time for that little election thing.

Martin Kaplan: If you haven’t visited the website of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, I urge you to do so. The URL is politicalgraphics.org, and you will get there a sense, just a small sense, of the collection of more than 50,000 pieces of domestic and international political protest posters.

The founder and director of that center is here with us. Her latest essay has a title that I’d like to come back to in the discussion. It’s “Can Design Stop a War?” Please welcome Carol Wells.

And, finally, our other panelist is a journalist who you pretty much can’t avoid. The LA Times, Rolling Stone, The Nation; books, including Rollover Che Guevara – Travels of a Radical Reporter, and his most recent book, The Last Honest Place in America – Paradise and Perdition in the New Las Vegas. He also does something which I find extraordinary – this may take us back to the S. I. Hyakawa days – and that is he’s a superb practitioner of the art of ham radio, practically a dying art. Please welcome Marc Cooper.

As Steve mentioned, I’m the director of the Norman Lear Center at the Annenberg School. There is a book whose topic is quite close to the topic of this event, so I will shamelessly promote it not only by displaying a copy, Warner’s War – Politics, Pop Culture and Propaganda in Wartime Hollywood, but I will also point out that a number of free copies are here if you’d like.

One thing about this panel which Steve didn’t mention in terms of its format and design, is that there is absolutely no balance represented on this panel. I will, because I am sitting to everyone’s right, have to wear the mask from time to time of a person who is to their right solely for the purpose of provoking conversation, confrontation, drama, and dispute. However, during the question period, if any of you wants to relieve me of that artificial burden, I would be grateful. So fear not: If you find that the panel is unrepresentative of your own personal point of view, I will be striving valiantly to make a strong but fatally weak case for what you believe.
And I’d like to start – because it will be a while before you actually get to ask questions – by conducting a brief exercise with you. I’m going to ask you a series of rapid-fire questions, and I’m going to ask you to answer them, 10 questions, in rapid fire, one, two, three, four, five, without waiting. And, in fact, as you’ll see in a moment, you won’t even need to hear the questions after a bit.

I’m going to explain the topic to you and then ask you all to join me as I lead by counting off and get your answers in one voice. So if you would please, turn to one of your handouts. It’s the one – the cover has The Day the DNC came to LA. Turn to the second page. Look at the image. I’m going to ask you please to go across the word democracy and tell me what company’s logo is represented with each of the letters, starting with the “D.” “E?” “M?” “O?” “C?” “R?” “A?” “Y?” [Audience Responds.] And who did the arc that they’re on top of?

Unidentified Speaker: McDonalds.

Martin Kaplan: Well done. All right. We’ve now gotten a demonstration of the power of brand names and art and iconography to insinuate themselves so well into your brains that even by seeing a detail of them, you already know what they are.

With that complicity demonstrated by all of you and all of us, I’m going to turn to the panel and ask each of you first the same question. The title of this event is “Pop, Politics and Propaganda.” So I’m going to start with Marc. What does propaganda mean to you? What is propaganda?

Marc Cooper: It’s an interesting question because propaganda didn’t used to have the negative connotation that it has currently. In fact, translated into some other languages, like Spanish, for example, or Italian, it’s a word that’s currently used in politics without a negative connotation. So, for example, you can find political parties in Latin America who maintain what’s called a Department of Propaganda. Here, we call it something else. We call it Fox TV or something like that.

Having said that, I think our common usage, though, of “propaganda” is the one I’m most comfortable with: propaganda is information that is used to persuade somebody to a particular point of view without particular attention to the facts.
Martin Kaplan: Plenty to come back to. Carol?

Carol Wells: Well, there’s nothing he said that I don’t totally agree with. In the common discourse, at least in this country, what other people have to say is considered propaganda, what you have to say is considered objective, in fact. That would be the only addition I would make.

Robbie Conal: Of course.

Carol Wells: I mean the word itself, “propaganda,” means to get an idea out there. It doesn’t mean left, right, center, biased, not biased, objective. It is to communicate, to get ideas out there. But everything Marc said about how it’s used now I agree with.

Martin Kaplan: Robbie, are those prescription sunglasses?

Robbie Conal: Yeah. Tell me about molecular biology and the Harvard Lampoon. I mean molecular biology, that’s a regular riot, isn’t it? That’s just funny sh--, isn’t it? It’s a laugh riot. They sure are. I can’t see a fu----- thing, and I’m pleased to tell you that because I don’t want to.

Martin Kaplan: Propaganda.

Robbie Conal: Prop – oh, yeah. Well, propaganda, you know, to propagate, like Watergate. It means go out there and make stuff happen, like fructify and multiply. Do those make any sense to you? I don’t know; I’m into it. It’s all I do. I really think that I agree with them. Whatever they said, I’m with them.

Steve Ross: You have to provide balance now, Marty.

Robbie Conal: Yeah, yeah. I’m against Marty and with them.

Marc Cooper: Is all politics propaganda in America?

Martin Kaplan: Good. Answer your question, please.

Marc Cooper: Yes. I’d say it’s fundamentally propaganda. And the reason it is, to make a desperate attempt to link this to the title of our panel –

Martin Kaplan: That’s long behind us.

Marc Cooper: – Okay – is that the overwhelming tool of American politics has become television, and that overrides everything else. Politics is basically reduced to advertising spots during campaigns and then television appearances in between campaigns. And, as you know from your real academic research, it’s completely skewed the way politics is done. It has taken the intellectual discourse out of politics. It’s taken linear thought out of politics, and reduced it mostly to imagery. I just wrote last night about the Kerry kerfuffle and, having covered both of these gentlemen as a reporter, television gives you a completely distorted view of things.
On television, because of the way George Bush looks and speaks and carries himself, he actually comes off as being dumber than he is...

Martin Kaplan: Who was the other guy?

Marc Cooper: George Bush.

Martin Kaplan: Oh, yes, right.

Marc Cooper: On television, because of the way George Bush looks and speaks and carries himself, he actually comes off as being dumber than he is. I don’t know how smart he is or isn’t, but he’s smarter than he –

Robbie Conal: How dumb is he?

Marc Cooper: He’s smarter than he looks on TV. Got 150 more points than I did on the SAT. Then, again, he wasn’t coming down from acid when he took it.

Robbie Conal: Maybe he was going up.

Marc Cooper: On the other hand, John Kerry looks and feels and seems like a guy with a lot of gravitas and weight and that he’s very smart, and I can guarantee he’s not nearly as smart as his image appears. So in terms of these two candidates, one’s not really that dumb, the other’s not really that smart, and people make lots of life-and-death decisions based on what they see and feel from the TV.

Martin Kaplan: Let me just pick up on one piece of what you said to ask Carol and Robbie a question. If television does dominate political discourse in our time, what hope does an artist who makes graphics have –

Robbie Conal: That’s an easy one, Marty.

Martin Kaplan: – to gain an audience?

Robbie Conal: YouTube. YouTube is going to surround and take over television, isn’t that right, kids?

Carol Wells: I want to actually –

Robbie Conal: And the Internet.

Carol Wells: – make another point before going back to yours and that is that all TV, all film, all books, everything is political. And so in the sense of it being political, it is also propaganda in that it’s putting out a point of view of the people, the station, the underwriters, whether or not they are conscious of it. I think they’re more conscious of it than we think,
even stuff that’s just entertainment.

In the ’80s, I was in Nicaragua, and most of the TV was from the U.S. I was watching *The Hulk* and trying to think how the Nicaraguans saw *The Hulk*. Entertainment, right? Every week, the guy has to get a new job because he’s got to escape because they’re after him. The Feds are after him. Every day, every episode, he’s got brand new, expensive, good-fitting clothes.

**Robbie Conal:** Yeah, those won’t last.

**Carol Wells:** Every week, he’s got to get a new place to live and a new apartment. So the underlying message is that in America, without papers – he’s undocumented – you can always get a good job and a good place to live with what they will pay you –

**Robbie Conal:** Even if you’re an illegal Hulk.

**Carol Wells:** Well, –

**Robbie Conal:** And you can be green.

**Carol Wells:** – that’s kind of a simple, comedic, not terribly deep example. You could look at some of the other shows that glorify the CIA or the FBI. My own daughter wanted to be an FBI agent for Halloween.

**Robbie Conal:** For Halloween?

**Carol Wells:** A few years ago, not now. This year she was a tree.

**Robbie Conal:** That’s progress right there, maturity.

**Carol Wells:** So everything is political, and it’s really --

**Robbie Conal:** Could you say that again?

**Carol Wells:** Everything is political.

**Robbie Conal:** Say it into the mike.

**Carol Wells:** Everything is political.

**Robbie Conal:** That’s a good one.

**Carol Wells:** So it’s really our job to figure out what the message is that we’re getting under the message.
Martin Kaplan: Given all the power of what one might call corporate media, where is the power of the artist putting stuff up on walls or doing graphics?

Carol Wells: It's a huge challenge. Let's talk about the image above the one you talked about, this one, the iPod/Iraq one. It was developed by two people at the same time on different coasts. They both had the same idea –

Robbie Conal: Bipolar.

Carol Wells: – to morph the Abu Ghraib torture image with the iPod image because the iPod image was everywhere internationally. And they put it on billboards, on iPod billboards; they would put one of the Abu Ghraib ones on it. People were just looking at this stuff without noticing, like “seen that, done that,” and then all of a sudden, “Wait a minute. Something’s not right.”

And so in a good political graphic, a good artist will grab your attention in the midst of the media overload, and that’s really where their talent is. Once they grab your attention, they’ve got to get that message out in two-and-a-half seconds. If the message takes longer than two-and-a-half seconds, it’s not good, it doesn’t work. In that moment, it makes you think about the world much differently than you did before, and that starts the whole movement of questioning what’s going on, questioning images.

Martin Kaplan: So, Robbie, if you arrived in LA not in 1984 but today –

Robbie Conal: That’s a good year. Think about it.

Martin Kaplan: – today in the midst of YouTube and the Internet, could you have had a comparable impact? Could you have broken through the noise and gotten attention in the same way you did then?

Robbie Conal: The same way? You mean running around like a maniac in the middle of the night with glue and sh--?

Martin Kaplan: Yeah.

Robbie Conal: I’d probably – I’m going to go home and do a YouTube tonight. I mean, because I don’t have any effect at all, it’s not that difficult to be me, to get somebody to pay for me. I want to go back to what Carol was saying about the different tactics for your angle of penetration into the media and propaganda blizzard that we are surrounded by, the creational soup that’s mostly commodified.

Do you know what people in Los Angeles call the Disney building in Burbank by any chance? Anybody? Mousewitz. He worked there. I don’t know how that happened.

Anyway, there are different tactics, and this is one. I know there are design students out there. You know, design is stealing, so this is a good example. You’ve got to steal well. So piggybacking on a multi-million-dollar advertising campaign that’s international, like Carol said, and twisting a very well known image just a little bit, tweaking it a little bit, that’s one way to do it.
Another way to do it is to put up something on the streets that just doesn’t belong there at all. And people look at it and go, “What the f--- is that doing there?”

That usually works really well in LA because Angelenos – you know, everybody thinks, everybody in the world – anybody ever been outside of Los Angeles, outside of the United States? It’s really educational to get outside of the United States – everybody in the world thinks Angelinos are superficial. Did you know that? And, of course, they’re right. But what they don’t know is that Angelenos are deeply superficial. We pay attention to surface like nobody else in the world. So if you put something out there on the surface of our everyday reality that doesn’t belong, Angelinos are going to see it, and they’re going to want to know what the f--- it is. And then at least you have their attention.

If you do something completely different from everything that’s out there, as opposed to piggybacking on something that is omnipresent, that’s everywhere, then it’s a matter of coverage, and that’s no mean thing. Now, I’m all for the Internet, and I think it’s a terrific tool for propagating our point of view or anybody’s point of view and reaching hundreds of millions of people worldwide, but not everybody – shocking, I know, to USC students – but not everybody has a computer. Not everybody has an iPod.

So in one way, if you put stuff up on the streets along with the YouTubing and e-mailing and jpegging and all that stuff, you reach people in a more unmediated way, literally and figuratively speaking. It’s more direct. Postering or just standing there handing stuff out to people or throwing stickers at them or whatever is the most direct, unmediated form of public expression available to a punk like me. I don’t have to have an iPod. I don’t have to have a laptop. I don’t have to have wireless Internet or anything. I could just go out there, cut and paste, scissors, just like the old punks, and – Carol might back me up on this – most political protest graphics are done out of desperation, total desperation, and it’s pathetic, in the nicest sense of the word. I mean it’s like totally pathetic. It’s done with the minimal and basest of ordinary, mundane materials, cut and paste, sniff the glue, cut the paper, go like this, use a copy machine, go to Kinko’s, that’s it. And you can make great art that way, and you can make terrible art that way, too. Of course, I’ve done that many times. But there is a charm to it because it’s so direct. Like when you guys leave, you might not know it, but you’ll all have my stickers on your backs. There’s a charm to that.

Martin Kaplan: Carol, where I’d like you to go after you say what you say is to the title of your essay because Robbie talked about his inability to change anything. Can design stop a war?

Carol Wells: Well, actually, I want to direct my comment to him because Robbie and I disagree on this. Every time he goes on the radio or we’re on a panel, he always says he doesn’t do anything, and to this day, I haven’t figured out if he’s just being overly modest or he believes it.
Robbie Conal: It’s working!

Carol Wells: Because the fact that he can make someone laugh at a politician means that he has taken some of the power away from that politician. If you can laugh at someone, they don’t have power over you as much as they did before you laughed at them. Some people may find it hard to laugh at George Bush, but the fact that you can point out his foibles in a cartoon or poster means that this man is deeply flawed. All we have to do is figure out a way of using the awareness of his flaws to convince other people of his flaws. I think those images, those posters do make a difference. They have to make a difference. You make people laugh at more politicians than almost any poster artist I know.

The other thing I want to add to your description of the poster being done with cheap materials, is it’s probably the most cost-effective way of getting someone to protest out there. It’s also the most democratic way because it is (a) cheap, (b) done in multiples, (c) done on the street, where you don’t need a computer to see it, so it’s not done for profit.

Robbie Conal: And it helps if you don’t have a car.

Carol Wells: That’s true.

Robbie Conal: I’ll take yours.

Carol Wells: In New York, San Francisco and Chicago, political posters are much more visible than they are in L.A. for that very reason.

Robbie Conal: L.A.’s a special case because we’re so deeply superficial. I can’t stress that enough. We notice stuff that doesn’t belong, faux pas and stuff like that – oh, that’s French – stuff that doesn’t belong somewhere more readily than almost any other population of a major city. But also because L.A. is so huge, it’s a challenge to get a threshold of multiples, enough stuff up there so people will see. You know, everybody’s here, and I don’t mean in this room, although it looks like that is the case. [Pointing] He’s here. He’s here. Old people, nice old people, and anyway, I don’t know what the f--- I was talking about but –

Martin Kaplan: Well, this is a moment for an intervention. Marc, would you be your most hardboiled self and tell me whether Robbie Conal and Jon Stewart can stop a war?

Marc Cooper: Well, Robbie Conal and Jon Stewart, no, they can’t. They’re different things because they reach different audiences. Does Robbie make a difference? Of course, Robbie makes a difference. Does Robbie’s guerilla art play a significant or important role in the popular culture of Los Angeles? The answer is obviously yes. He’s the country’s most renowned guerilla artist. Those of us who grew up here –

Robbie Conal: This conversation is taking a nasty turn.

Marc Cooper: – Just hang on, I’ll get nasty in a minute. For those of us who grew up here and spent the 1980s here during the Reagan period, Robbie was – and I’m not saying he isn’t now, but that’s when he emerged – a significant cultural force. Everybody that I knew learned to know who Robbie Conal was because of the great posters coming out of the Reagan period and Iran-Contra, etc.
Does Robbie or Jon Stewart or political posters in San Francisco affect political change? Of course they don’t. What they do is they contribute to consciousness, and then people decide whether or not they’re going to affect political change. You know, there are books in the library and there are posters on the wall and there are shows on television and there are speeches on the radio, and there are songs on iPods that have an impact on people’s consciousness, and in the end, people decide whether or not there’s going to be social change.

Now, can I add something to that? When we get into the discussion of the relationship between popular culture and politics, I become kind of a fundamentalist. Now I’ll be a contrarian. I think that it’s impossible to understand American politics or modern politics almost anywhere if you don’t understand folks like Marshall McLuhan or Neil Postman or, to some degree, your colleague Neal Gabler. I’ll single out Postman, who happens to be my favorite, and I just wrote a long, 20-year retrospective of Postman’s book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, so I can plagiarize myself. I think where I have problems with my friend is that there is a vaguely Orwellian notion that there are forces, corporate forces and commercial forces and the forces of propaganda that, like Big Brother, impose certain images or ideologies on us, and I dissent from that. I take Neil Postman’s view and say, "Well, yes, we are looking at something vaguely totalitarian, but it isn’t Orwellian; it’s Huxleyan. Not to get too abstract, but it’s the vision of Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* rather than George Orwell in *1984*. The difference is that in *1984*, Big Brother watches you; in Huxley, you decide voluntarily to watch Big Brother.

So the mainstream culture in media that has enormous power over your consciousness, is – I hate to say this, but whether you like it or not – consensual. It has very little coercive power. It isn’t Mousewitz. I’m sorry, but I know three generations of people in my family who like to go to Disneyland. They know what it is. They decide to go. Some of them are more naïve than others. Some think it’s great, some think it’s hokey and vaguely sinister but go anyway. These systems of belief are consensual. They collapse when they begin to lose public credibility. Look at historical examples. Look at Russia in 1917 and Russia again in 1989 or East Germany in 1989. We can find one historical example after another where the media is absolutely controlled by the state – Iran in 1979, where the media is completely controlled by the state, a repressive, propagandistic, political, Orwellian deal – and they collapse overnight when people decide, “Well, you know what? This no longer has any credibility for me.”

**Robbie Conal:** So when Mickey loses credibility –

**Marc Cooper:** That’s right. You’re right.

**Robbie Conal:** You think Mickey Mouse is telling you the truth?

**Marc Cooper:** No. I think people have very complicated lives. They’re not quite as stupid as sometimes we think they are. I know very few people who go to Disneyland. I’ll give you a better example, Robbie. In a debate over Las Vegas, David Hickey was defending Las Vegas, as I often do, and David had this great line. He said,
“Well, don’t you think people get the joke? Do you think people really go to Las Vegas and believe that the pyramid is the pyramid? They know it’s a joke.” People’s lives are complicated. They seek solace in entertainment. Sometimes they seek it in church. Sometimes they seek it in sex. Sometimes they seek it in horseracing, and sometimes they seek it in watching *American Idol*.

And when those people decide that there is something more compelling that they need to do for personal or moral reasons, they will do it, and those institutions will be put aside because the only hold that *American Idol* and Mousewitz or any of those things have on us is to the degree that we decide to participate in them. It’s voluntary and consensual for the most part. I hate to sound like Jerry Falwell, but really, television is very easy to avoid. Don’t buy one. If you hate everything that’s on TV, great, don’t look at it. Simple.

**Martin Kaplan:** I want to toss a new question –

**Marc Cooper:** Is that contrary enough?

**Carol Wells:** Well, I actually want to talk a second about the question you originally posed to me.

**Martin Kaplan:** Oh, no. I want you to talk about the question before the question.

**Carol Wells:** The question before the question, not “can design stop a war?”

**Robbie Conal:** Is it Orwellian or Huxleyan?

**Carol Wells:** Well, I think it’s both because just look at what’s been going on with the Patriot Act. It’s consensual in the sense that people watch TV. More people watch *Fox News* in spite of all of the reports about the bias and lack of honesty and integrity. Anyway, about a year ago the Center was invited to send an exhibit to Iran.

We had an exhibit *Can Design Stop a War*. As soon as I started e-mailing back and forth to these artists in Iran, my e-mail got messed up. All of sudden, my e-mail got canceled. Nobody could figure out who canceled it. “You canceled it.” “No, I didn’t cancel it.” So there’s this counter intelligence program (cointelpro), all that stuff that’s been going on for 60 years or more –

**Marc Cooper:** That’s true with all governments. All governments are secretive and repressive and try to surveil their opponents.

**Carol Wells:** Well, in that way, it’s Huxleyan and Orwellian. It’s really both.

**Robbie Conal:** Well, how do we escape this culture and all those other people don’t? Are we smarter? Why is it that we can think all these things and have all this free will to reach these conclusions, but the masses out there are in the trance of Disney? How do we explain that?
**Unidentified Speaker:** Education?

**Carol Wells:** Well, we had an exhibit at Cal Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks.

**Robbie Conal:** CLU.

**Carol Wells:** CLU, thank you. It was an exhibit about immigration, back in the ‘80s. In this exhibit, there were posters about what the U.S. did here, what the U.S. did there, you know, all these atrocities done in the name of U.S. taxpayers. And we got comments. One woman wrote, “I’m in the richest country in the world. I’m in one of the best universities in the country. I’ve got one of the best educations under my belt. Why didn’t I know about these things done by the U.S.?”

**Marc Cooper:** I understand that because those are many of the positions that I would have taken in 1980, but I would argue that in the day of the Internet – and I don’t glorify the Internet – it’s a very difficult argument to make to say that information is not available. Maybe it’s not on the front page. Maybe it’s on A15. Maybe it’s on the Website of *The Guardian* or someplace else. But to say that the information is not there seems to me the opposite of the real problem. The real problem is that we exist in a 24-hour-a-day clutter of crap. Some of it is real information. Some of it is propaganda.

**Robbie Conal:** But it’s not just the clutter. It’s owned by six corporations.

**Marc Cooper:** So what?

**Robbie Conal:** Now, wait a minute. Wait a minute. First of all, what is the joke? Tell me the joke, the Las Vegas joke that people get.

**Carol Wells:** See, I don’t think they –

**Robbie Conal:** What’s the joke in Omaha? Hey, Omaha, Omaha! People get the joke in Omaha about Las Vegas? I don’t think so.

**Marc Cooper:** Well, first of all, if you’re an advocate of social change in the United States, you’re going to have to elevate your opinion a little bit of the American people.

**Robbie Conal:** I think the American people are brilliant.

**Marc Cooper:** Including those in Omaha.

**Robbie Conal:** No, I love them.

**Marc Cooper:** Having spent years working in Las Vegas and writing a book about it, my impression is that everybody gets the joke.

**Robbie Conal:** I don’t think it’s funny. I don’t even think it’s meant as a joke.

**Marc Cooper:** Right. But, unfortunately, 41 million people a year go there.
Robbie Conal: They go there, but not for laughs.

Marc Cooper: They go to Las Vegas – I can actually tell you why.

Robbie Conal: Tell me why.

Marc Cooper: They go to Las Vegas because it’s a wonderful break from the monotony of their lives, and they found that for three days and for a reasonable –

Robbie Conal: They found it?

Marc Cooper: – for a reasonable middle-class –

Robbie Conal: I walked through the desert, and I found Las Vegas!

Martin Kaplan: What I’d like to do now is freeze-frame that for further discussion from the floor. Let me add one more element and then start taking questions. There’s plenty of time to get back into all this.

Robbie Conal: Wait, I just found Disneyland. This is great, and it’s funny.

Martin Kaplan: Where are –

Marc Cooper: If we could, on the left, generate cultural phenomena that have the attraction, the popularity, and the credibility of Disneyland, we’d be in an excellent position.

Martin Kaplan: All right. That’s a set-up for the question, or it will have to be nevertheless, that I’d like to ask, which is where is the protest art, the political art from the right? Is that, in fact, Disney? What is protest art from the right? Where is it? Look at your collection, Carol. The history of protest art does not seem to be from the right.

Carol Wells: Protest art is art that protests the status quo. As long as the right is in power, there’s no reason for them to be protesting the status quo. So what they do is do Disney. They do art that doesn’t challenge the society because they’re perfectly happy with it. But, in fact, I was talking to someone on the right side of the Republican Party the other day and he kind of sneered and said, “Oh, you probably only collect left-wing stuff in your center.” I said, “No, actually, we have left-wing and right-wing. We have no middle-of-the-road protest art because that’s an oxymoron.” And he was interested. He said, “What’s your right-wing stuff?” I said, “You know, white-supremacist stuff, pro-Klan stuff.” He almost choked that I was defining that as right-wing, but they make art.

Marc Cooper: What did he think it was, what wing?

Carol Wells: He was just offended because he considers –

Marc Cooper: How would we classify the artists’ movement, say, in the 1980s, in the 1970s in Eastern Europe? These were very important movements against communist totalitarian governments.
Carol Wells: They were protesting against the status quo.

Marc Cooper: Right. Is that right-wing art or left-wing art, or is it just art?

Carol Wells: Well, I would actually define it as a pro-Democratic movement.

Marc Cooper: Some of them.

Carol Wells: Some of it.

Marc Cooper: Some of it was right-wing; some of it was left-wing.

Carol Wells: I don’t know. Some of what you would define as left-wing, they would see as pro-Democratic.

Marc Cooper: *The Passion of Christ* worked pretty well.

Carol Wells: In fact, I don’t know if you saw the exhibit –

Robbie Conal: Whip me again.

Carol Wells: It was an amazing exhibit, I think called “Graphic Agitation,” and it was ironic. It was underwritten by the National Endowment for either the Arts or Humanities the same year, 1989, that the NEA slashed its funding and started taking away funding already awarded to artists because they were too controversial. But they funded this Eastern European poster exhibit to prove that we have freedom of speech here and they don’t. This art basically had the same political position as the U.S. government, being anti-Communist. This exhibit was traveling around the country, supported by the NEA when the NEA was gutting the arts funding here.

And they asked me to give a lecture on it, and I said, “That’s not my expertise.” But they really pushed me, and I said, “All right. I’ll talk about this exhibit, but Eastern Europe is not my expertise.” Latin America I knew better.

I said, “If I can compare the Eastern European posters with the Latin American, the Cuban posters, then I’ll do it.” They agreed to that. And what was fascinating to me was that the anti-Communist Eastern European posters and the pro-Communist, pro-Socialist movements from Latin America were both using Biblical images and U.S. cowboy movie images. They were all using the same images. It was fascinating.

Marc Cooper: Why is that?

Carol Wells: Because those are the most powerful images out there. The crucifixion is powerful.

Robbie Conal: Because they have us surrounded. That’s why I want to get back to the monotony of the lives that Marc was talking about. Why do people, say, in Omaha, in the Midwest, why do they need relief from the monotony of their lives? Why are their lives monotonous? We’re surrounded and bombarded by millions
and millions, billions of dollars’ worth of advertising for these kinds of diversions from our monotonous lives. And we’re also surrounded by certain inflected information, like Fox.

There are only about five or six sources of information for news that really go out into the mainstream of our informational soup, and we really don’t get that much variety unless you go poking around or you’re the one kid in Kansas in his basement listening to Frank Zappa or something or you’re wearing shredded black things, whether you’re in Omaha or wherever. There’s always those kids, thank God. It’s not that I’m paranoid about it, but it is really a corporate machine pumping stuff into us – as Carol said, everything is political – with its politics embedded in it, almost in its DNA. Mickey has politics embedded in his DNA. Mickey is a minstrel. You know, he’s a black-faced white guy – a white mouse dancing around in his little outfit, and that’s where Mickey comes from. He comes from vaudeville, and he kind of comes from reverse race entertainment, and he still is that if you scratch the surface a little bit and hear him squeak. He’ll go, “Mammy!” Oh, sorry. I’ve got to work on that.

What I’m trying to say is we get addicted to this stuff, and it’s not so easy just because there’s all kinds of information out there to parse it, to get to it. I mean I have students who have never been to this library. We got them here today!

Marc Cooper: It’s not easy to find it and parse it...

Robbie Conal: So you’ve got to say to the majority of the people in the United States it’s a little bit of work to get to that.

Marc Cooper: No – see, the problem is right there in the construction of your sentence because it’s a top-down mechanism. We don’t have to tell the American people anything.

Robbie Conal: I’m not telling them.

Marc Cooper: The American people have the option of finding the information if they so desire it. Is it easy to find?

Robbie Conal: How about the addiction?

Marc Cooper: Hey, people are addicted to religion, drugs, sex, all kinds of things –

Robbie Conal: Gambling.

Marc Cooper: – the Bible, gambling, anything you mention.

Robbie Conal: And Las Vegas?

Martin Kaplan: Round two has ended, and –

Marc Cooper: Round two has ended, but I really want to finish because Robbie keeps cutting me off about Las Vegas, and I don’t think it’s fair. Nor do I think it really makes for much of a democratic discourse.
Robbie Conal: I’m unfair?

Marc Cooper: You disagree with me; I understand that. I think if we as a people cannot create, or if there are not social forces that can create a moral narrative that can overcome Mickey Mouse, then I think we’ve got a problem. Disney is a powerful force, the imagery and the messages and the hidden messages and the yada yada of whatever Disney represents. Disney’s actually done some pretty good films – yes, it’s a strong force for the status quo and for all sorts of reactionary values, etc. That’s right. But it exists. It maintains its power by consensus. There’s no policeman who comes to your house and tells you you have to like Mickey Mouse. In other societies, there could be a policeman who would tell you that you can or cannot watch Mickey Mouse. Robbie, at some point didn’t they threaten to prosecute you? Or you were arrested for vandalism?

Robbie Conal: Many times.

Marc Cooper: And that’s serious. However, if Robbie did this in other societies, if he did the equivalent of the Ed Meese poster, made it look like Fidel Castro and tried to plaster it all over the streets of Havana and or if he did that in Iran and made it look like the Ayatollah, Robbie would be killed.

Martin Kaplan: First tell them who is Ed Meese, anybody?

Robbie Conal: He was an expert on pornography.

Martin Kaplan: Anybody, Ed Meese?

[Audience member responds.]

Martin Kaplan: Yes, he was Reagan’s attorney general. Robbie, did you want to respond?

Robbie Conal: In the long tradition of attorney generals who went to jail or were investigated by special prosecutors, these are the people – attorney generals like Ashcroft, like John Mitchell – who are responsible for justice in America.


Martin Kaplan: Are you all exercised enough by this conversation to want to join it?

Robbie Conal: Did you ask me if I wanted to respond?

Martin Kaplan: Yes. I thought – oh, sorry.

Robbie Conal: That’s all right. I have a seven-second delay. I have a Tom Delay.

Martin Kaplan: Would you like to?

Robbie Conal: Yeah, I’d like to say something.

Martin Kaplan: All right.
Robbie Conal: One thing I’d like to ask: When Marc talks about creating a social force, how do you do that? And, two, I think we have to give a little more weight to how surrounded and blanketed we are by the social forces of advertising for Disney, advertising for Las Vegas, the culture of that kind of entertainment we pretty much can’t avoid receiving, even as children, and it continues to come. It – is Dean Martin dead? Doesn’t seem like it. How long has he been dead?

Scott McGibbon: Ten years.

Robbie Conal: It’s just very powerful, and a lot of money and a lot of our economy is dependent on it, and I don’t think that it’s that easy to avoid.

Marc Cooper: It’s not easy.

Robbie Conal: So how do we develop a social force?

Marc Cooper: It’s omnipresent. It’s intoxicating.

Robbie Conal: I think you have to give a little bit of thought to that.

Marc Cooper: No, no, no, wait a minute. It’s omnipresent. It’s intoxicating. It occupies the lives of most people.

Martin Kaplan: All right. Point taken. Carol, do you want to join in?

Carol Wells: Well, I think the question is, what brings people to the point of wanting to change? Education is a big part of it, but the other part is realizing if you’re frustrated in your life, it’s not all your fault; there are parts of society that are organized in a way to constrict you, to keep you marginalized, without a voice.

So it’s a frustration that your life is not what you wanted it to be and then moving beyond that point and being able to start challenging or questioning. And that’s what the posters do, that’s what some films and videos do, too. They put things out there for people to say, “Hey, wait a minute. I relate to that.” Or, “I don’t like that,” or “I want to change that.” People have to be motivated to want to change because change is very difficult. Change is very painful because when you say, “Okay, I want to change. I want to go from here to there,” all of a sudden you’re saying there was something wrong with the last however many years of your life. And you have to be willing to accept that. Daniel Ellsberg is a perfect example of someone who changed. He had the guts to say, when he published the Pentagon Papers, that the last 40 years of his life were wrong. I think Arianna did the same thing.

Robbie Conal: A few times. She might do it again.

Carol Wells: She might do it again. People can change, but they have to be motivated to change.

Martin Kaplan: What I’d like the panelists to do is –
Robbie Conal: Rise up and move to Berlin!

Martin Kaplan: – continue this conversation by pretending to answer questions from the audience.

Robbie Conal: Right. That’s a good mechanism. Is that an e-ticket or –

Martin Kaplan: So could we have some human sacrifices? Yes, sir? Could you state your name and where you’re from?

Valpi Vasquez: Sure. My name is Valpi Vasquez, and I actually went to school here before the Internet –

Martin Kaplan: Sorry to hear that.

Valpi Vasquez: – and before there was discussion like this. It was a very right-wing university 30 years ago.

Martin Kaplan: Really.

Valpi Vasquez: And I remember a book, Ariel Dorfman’s How to Read Donald Duck, which I didn’t get from any of my professors. I got it from a study group in the community where we were organized.

Steve Ross: Ariel Dorfman’s now a professor at Duke.

Valpi Vasquez: And it really blew me away in terms of tying cultural imperialism to what I’ve seen over the last 30 years when I travel. The influence of American culture is all over the world. Anyway, I’m not sure of the question, but I wanted you to comment on that book and the impact it would have. I guess being Chicano, when there weren’t Chicanos here on campus, I never really had any professors with that political mindset of the “other.” I respect all of your opinions, and I really enjoyed this conversation. I wish I would have had it 30 years ago. My life might have been much better.

Martin Kaplan: Thank you. Let’s pick up a few more. Yes, sir

Gary Silber: Gary Silber. I’m from Culver City.

Robbie Conal: Here, take a microphone.

Martin Kaplan: No, no. That’s too dangerous.

Robbie Conal: Take my microphone, please!

Gary Silber: The first discussion about propaganda and how we’re so influenced by
it in this country begs the question of what it is about American culture that allows this seduction. I would like to explore that because I understand this seduction is probably greater in this country than in a lot of countries. Why is it so strong? Why have we succumbed and European countries perhaps have not succumbed to the same degree? I think it’s worth examining.

**Marc Cooper:** I read one of those secret articles in the L.A. Times the other day on the front page that said the biggest cultural phenomenon now in Vietnam is game shows. And that what most Vietnamese aspire to is to get on a game show (a) because they can win a few bucks and (b) it’s the most popular type of entertainment there.

I’m not a sociologist or an anthropologist or a psychologist, so I don’t understand the deeper mechanisms, but what it indicates to me is that we’re not so different, for better or for worse. We think we have to be careful because we live in a society where we’re told we’re the greatest in the world, which is obviously wrong, but the mirror reflection of that is to take that seriously and then to believe that somehow we are really very different and really much more sinful than other people, and I don’t think that’s true.

I think that our economic power and the standard of living we enjoy in this country, plus other factors, allow us to better grease the wheels of the entertainment industry. But given the opportunity, I believe the Vietnamese would also build a Disneyland and they would also have a Disney Studios and everything else.

Until a couple months ago, the prime minister of Italy – one of those advanced European countries – the prime minister of Italy owned all the media, so there wasn’t even the degree of separation that we have in this country. I think we’re sinners, but I don’t think we’re the devil.

**Martin Kaplan:** Carol, do you think it’s a global phenomenon?

**Carol Wells:** Well, American culture is clearly a global phenomenon.

**Martin Kaplan:** But how about if you agree that we as a society are susceptible to the seductions of propaganda and politicized information, does that make us any different from any other country?

**Carol Wells:** Well, I really agree with how Marc analyzed it because I don’t think we’re that different. I think the difference in this country is that what is out there for us to consume is really very homogenous. And there’s an incredible xenophobia. People aren’t going to read subtitles. I think all of that works together to keep us with a more limited mindset. How many parties do they have in European countries? And we’re fighting to keep the Greens off of a debate? How limited can you get? So I think it’s the limitation of what’s out there that we’re confronted with.

**Martin Kaplan:** And, Robbie, what makes or doesn’t make you principally an American artist? Is what you’re doing happening elsewhere? Do you depend on a particular condition in American society that’s different from other countries, or is it something more global?
Robbie Conal: I’d do a lot better anywhere else.

Marc Cooper: That’s true.

Robbie Conal: That’s true, isn’t it? Why am I here? I want to answer that question. The thing about the seductiveness and why we’re susceptible to it is we have a capitalist economy and we have a capitalist culture, and seductiveness is for sale and commodified in America more than anywhere else in the world. We buy it as a commodity. Whether it’s Spearmint Rhino, just down the street – I’ve got to go – or tschokes from Mousewitz or Las Vegas, we turn everything into consumables, and we buy it literally and figuratively, and that keeps our economy going.

Marc Cooper: Who doesn’t do that?

Robbie Conal: More than we do?

Marc Cooper: Given the opportunity.

Robbie Conal: We have more –

Marc Cooper: If you measure it with their economic development.

Robbie Conal: I think we buy more sh-- that is in the realm of seduction than any other country in the world, just a guess. Again, I’m not an economist.

Marc Cooper: The problem is we have more disposable income.

Carol Wells: There’s a playwright in Nicaragua who is related to one of the Bolts from England. His name is Alan Bolt. In the late 1970s, he wrote a play that he took to the fields in Nicaragua to teach the Nicaraguans their own history. This was during like the third inherited Somoza dictatorship and he wanted them to know Somoza wasn’t required by God to be their dictator.

He had a Good Humor man in the play, the guy with the ice cream and the ice cream music. And as he plays the music, he offers people refrigerators and clothes and houses and all the commodities that we take for granted. He gives them away for free as long as they learn the tune of his song and forget their own music.

Here was a perfect way of teaching people in an allegorical way how, if they give up their own culture and let U.S. culture dominate, they can have materialistic things.

Martin Kaplan: Steve, I’m going to call on you but not until I first ask someone with a strong voice in the back. Would anyone qualify for that?

Robbie Conal: No academics.

Martin Kaplan: Anyone in the back have a strong voice to ask a question? Yes?

Andrew Wolk: It’s kind of an art history question.

Martin Kaplan: Could you say who you are and where you’re from?
Andrew Wolk: Andrew Wolk. I work upstairs.

Robbie Conal: How far upstairs?

Andrew Wolk: It’s a question for Robbie. I have a double in art history, and I’m curious: As a guerilla artist, a lot of your art becomes ephemeral because it gets worn away by the weather, right? But people, I know, are collecting it, so how do you feel about your art becoming fine art, consumable art that will eventually be auctioned off for –

Robbie Conal: I can’t wait.

Andrew Wolk: – tens of thousands of dollars

Robbie Conal: That’s the whole gag, you know? You make stuff that’s supposedly ephemeral and you keep a few of them, and then you’re the only one who’s got them and you’re worth a lot of money. That’s America. It’s like my trick. Only thing is I might have to wait a little too long to cash in because people have to value it. I have them. I could line my crypt with the posters that I have that nobody else has, but they don’t particularly want them, so I’m screwed.

But I’d like to talk about the value of perspective, getting a different perspective on your life, your boring life, as Marc would put it. Let’s talk about Omaha, getting out of Omaha and coming to L.A. Do you want to go back to Omaha for summer vacation, or would you rather stay in L.A. if your parents would let you, and what are those conditions?

I have a student from the beautiful, wealthy suburbs of Nashville. For the end of her junior year in high school in the summer, she went to the Chicago Art Institute and that blew her senior year because when she came back to Nashville, she hated it. Not Nashville, but the school. It was so boring. She had been to this great place, the Art Institute in Chicago, and it ruined her whole senior year.

I was just in Berlin for a week. It completely f----- me up. It was great. I was just hanging out. It was cheap, unlike here. People were hanging out, eating great food, talking the talk, English, and I came back and – every time I go to Europe or somewhere, and I get dragged kicking and screaming because I don’t really want to leave the studio – I come back and my art changes. Now I’m doing skeletons, for Christ’s sake. What’s that all about? Because I was in Berlin and I was at the monument for six million killed Jews. There are a lot of skeletons.

Martin Kaplan: Steve?

Steve Ross: I want to pick up what Marc was talking about which is people go to Vegas and Disneyland not because they’re brainwashed but they want to have fun.

Marc Cooper: That’s right.

Steve Ross: Their lives are tedious, their lives in L.A. Everyone’s life gets tedious, monotonous. So here’s the question: can we imagine Norman Lear putting together a group of investors with his friends, aggressive investors, and opening up in Anaheim so that it would dovetail to people coming to visit Disneyland –
Robbie Conal: Sixtiesland?

Steve Ross: No, Democracy —

Robbie Conal: Fiftyland?

Steve Ross: — or AmericaLand. And what you would have to do is if it’s didactic, it fails. If it’s boring —

Robbie Conal: You’ve got to make that fun, right, Steve?

Steve Ross: So you make it fun —

Robbie Conal: Just like our classes.

Carol Wells: We need another name then.

Steve Ross: Call it whatever you want. Can you create a vision of — one of the things that makes Disneyland work is it’s fun, but it’s also got all these icons, easily recognizable icons. So with Democracyland you can have Lincoln, you can have Jefferson, you can have all these people —

Robbie Conal: I thought those guys were in Las Vegas.

Steve Ross: — and you spin it around. Can we imagine spinning around politics, popular culture and propaganda in a huge amusement park that offers a kind of counter-Disneyland vision of a more progressive America that’s fun, that’s iconic, that’s interesting and political?

Robbie Conal: Cuba.

Martin Kaplan: Well, let me answer that because I think there is actually a serious answer which you may not be aware of. It’s not a theme park, but it is — this is a true statement — a traveling road show which has moved around this country starting in the year 2000, and it’s still traveling. It’s called the Declaration of Independence Road Trip. Norman Lear purchased for $8.5 million the only available copy of the original Dunlap broadside of the Declaration which was struck on July 4, 1776, and he used it as the centerpiece of a traveling carnival, in effect, with musicians and poetry slams and lots of other entertainment which went from fairground to fairground, high school to high school all around the country, which attracted people through the vehicle of entertainment. And once they came, they were registered to vote, and a million people ended up registering as a consequence.

Marc Cooper: Based on what you just said and your question, it takes me back full circle to what I tried to posit at the beginning of the discussion, which is if you listen to this discussion from a bunch of lefties — probably we’re all agnostics or atheists — it’s vaguely Christian sounding. I don’t know if you hear it, but I hear it. It’s almost Christian. There’s a moralizing going on about sinners who are seduced by all these evils. Whether it’s the serpent or the mouse, we’re corrupted by all these forces that God or Disney has put in front of us. I’m not a Christian, but maybe the Christians were right. Maybe we are seduced. Maybe that is the problem. But we allow
ourselves to be seduced. I think the real issue here is not the embedded messages – have you been to Disneyland recently? I’ve been going since 1954/5 when it was built, literally, and Disneyland has shifted a lot of its narratives to be more politically correct, and there is a lot of genuflection to diversity. We can say it’s all hokey, and it is. But the narratives have shifted quite a bit with the times because Disney really just wants to make money more than anything else.

I think the key issue here – I’m just going to come back to it – is that until about 70 or 80 years ago in human history or in modern human history, at least since the 15th century, the only way to reach a mass audience was through printed words. The Gutenberg revolution is about 500 years old but completely changed the world, brought us the Enlightenment and the Renaissance, and all the modern institutions of literacy and democracy that we have were not possible without the printing press. And now we’re only about 70 or 80 years into an electronic revolution or 10 years into a digital revolution, which means we have no idea what it’s going to look like as it matures 100 years out.

But one thing that it’s done already is that it’s introduced a value into our society that we didn’t have before at quite the priority, and that value is entertainment. And I’m going to be pretentious and say when you strip away everything that everybody’s said in the last hour and 20 minutes, it really comes down to that: how do we catch their attention, how do we be entertaining, how do we get the message across because entertaining is good and boring is bad, and that’s true in our society, unfortunately.

The truth of the matter is, with all due respect to all the professors at the university, to all the people who make posters, to all the people who write articles, the truth of the matter is that everything you need to know to change the world resides in this building at the Doheny Library. You need go no further than here. You could erase all of us, and if anybody wants to take the time to be serious to read the books that are in this library, there’s just about everything you need to know to do anything. The problem is that we don’t want to do that. So that’s why I am such a skeptic about saying, “We’re going to shift this,” and “We’re going to shift that.” No, you’re not. There’s going to be change when people decide that their lives are important enough to them that they want to do something other than be entertained.

**Martin Kaplan:** I’m going to resist the five things I wanted to say in response to that fascinating comment to get a couple more people into conversation.

**Isa K. Mexon:** Well, this is driving me crazy.

**Martin Kaplan:** Could you stand and identify yourself?

**Isa K. Mexon:** Isa K. Mexon, and I have the –

**Martin Kaplan:** And where are you from?
**Isa K. Mexon:** I live in Echo Park.

**Martin Kaplan:** Okay.

**Isa K. Mexon:** And by hearing that, you should be aware that my life is not boring and uninteresting. I don’t know what you all are living. It shocks me because in Echo Park, there is just so much to be done, and we are doing it, and these statements are so global that you miss the subtlety of resistance. It takes place in many ways, in many forms, and it’s complex, and it’s so shallow to talk about it in this manner. I don’t want to talk about Las Vegas. Some people go to gamble there, something as simple as that.

But let’s take Echo Park. We have so many issues to deal with: gentrification; Barlow Hospital is going to be sold and the impact that that will have; the loss of this fantastic open space right next to the Dodgers and Elysian Park.

**Robbie Conal:** Tell people what it is.

**Isa K. Mexon:** Oh, Barlow is the first hospital made for tuberculosis in the United States, and so in World War I, when soldiers who had been gassed came back, they had a place to go. Then it became a respiratory hospital. It has lovely cottages. It’s very scenic, a fabulous place. We’re struggling now, the Citizens Committee to Save Elysian Park. I would like you to discuss graffiti and tagging –

**Martin Kaplan:** Panel, would you take on the question of graffiti?

**Robbie Conal:** Graffiti. What are you looking at? What are you looking at?

**Carol Wells:** Well, graffiti is clearly, as Isa said, a cry of resistance. Not a cry – it’s a rebellious act of resistance. What I find interesting is that more graffiti has overt political messages in Mexico and Europe than in the United States. Due to the depoliticized consciousness, more of the graffiti in the United States, even though it is an act of resistance, will be the type that says, “I am here. I am not invisible.” It’s somebody’s name. It’s somebody’s initials. It’s not “Smash the state.” It’s a tag.
Marc Cooper: Oh, I don’t know. I live in Woodland Hills. We don’t like graffiti, and I wouldn’t want somebody to graffiti my house. I’ve also lived in Latin America, where graffiti can be a form of political expression, and I don’t think it’s a wise thing to categorize the method itself. Graffiti can be an act of stupidity. It can be an act of vandalism. It can be an act of radical disregard for others. And it can be an act of heroic resistance, which can put your life on the line. So I don’t think it has any inherent value.

I also know that many people’s lives aren’t boring, but you’re my Exhibit A. You’re exactly my Exhibit A. Somehow, Mousewitz didn’t get you. Fox television didn’t hijack you. Apple didn’t get a chip in your head. And lo and behold in the middle of all of this, you’re able to organize with your neighbors and effect social change. I think you’re my argument.

Robbie Conal: It’s that “somehow” that we have to think about. I have to say we are not pessimists. We can’t be on this panel without being optimists. Do you know what I mean?

Carol Wells: Except for Marc.

Robbie Conal: No, him, too! Come on, he’s just got that propaganda show.

Martin Kaplan: That low blood sugar is making him –

Robbie Conal: Yeah, yeah. It’s his time of day. He needs a little pick-me-up, a cookie.

Martin Kaplan: Is there anyone here who won’t sleep tonight because there was something they were dying to say and didn’t get to say it?

Robbie Conal: Yeah, come on. Come on.

Sarah: I did have one question. I’m a sophomore here, I’m originally –

Martin Kaplan: What’s your name?

Robbie Conal: Where are you from?

Sarah: Sarah. I’m originally from Annapolis, Maryland. Now I’m here.

Just to start off, if everyone in the world was as compassionate and loving and as proactive as you, [Isa], there probably wouldn’t be war, which is – you know, I wish. But sadly, that’s not America, and that’s not where we are. I think USC is so very right wing and we’re so very conservative.

As teenagers and freshmen and sophomores getting into college, we’re still just sitting on our couches and watching TV. That’s kind of what I see, and I see a roomful of students who know exactly what I’m talking about. So thinking on that, do you guys know if there’s anything in the entertainment industry trying to impact a younger generation or reach out like graffiti art and guerilla art?
Martin Kaplan: Any quick takes? Robbie?

Robbie Conal: Sure. What are you doing Monday night? There’s a new movie coming out called Fast Food Nation, and it’s based on the book by Eric Schlosser. It’s a critique of the fast food industry, made by Schlosser and Richard Linklater, the director. They turned it into a fiction story, and it’s –

Marc Cooper: Is it a feature film?

Robbie Conal: It’s a feature film. They actually made the mistake of asking me to do some guerilla marketing for them. Not going very well. But they’re going to have a discussion which all my students are – better be – coming to, six o’clock, at Fox, 20th Century Fox on Motor and Pico. You’re invited, and there will be a lot of USC students there because a lot of USC cinema students were involved in that project.

But it’s an example of how, even under the tight watch of Rupert Murdoch, who owns 20th Century Fox, certain projects can get done. I was talking to my students the other day about this because I told them about The People’s History of the United States, the most popular, revisionist, alternative history of the United States, by a great historian, Howard Zinn. Matt Damon and Ben Affleck tried to turn it into a mini-series at Fox, which was a little bit of a mistake. But if they had gone to what is now National Geographic Films and put some animals in it, they would have got it done.

There are all kinds of small companies and independent movie companies and rock ‘n roll bands and people out there, theater companies, who are doing more progressive stuff here, right here, in your ‘hood, and yeah, come on down.

Martin Kaplan: I’m afraid that the low blood sugar of one of our panelists has rung the bells –

Robbie Conal: It’s a virus.

Martin Kaplan: – and that means this conversation will now get to continue over brownies, cookies, and caffeine. I would like to thank you for letting this music replace yours, and please join me in thanking the panel.

[Applause.]