

**THE BLOG****The Narrative Narrative**

By Marty Kaplan

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Meta makes the MSM go round. Reality isn't real any more; to the press, all the world's a stage. Or rather, all the world's an onstage and a backstage. Candidates don't have beliefs; they have positions. Campaigns don't have meanings; they have narratives. In the postmodern funhouse that imprisons prestige media, the job isn't to cover events, but rather to reveal their theatricality; the trick isn't to find truth, but to disclose "framing"; the task isn't to establish facts, but to transform them into he-said/she-said Mexican standoffs.

The Washington Post's coverage of the CNN circus in Las Vegas set the tone: "For Clinton, it was a chance to change the story line." Not only is this a depressing observation about what politics has become, and a dispiriting illustration of what political coverage has turned into; it's also, tragically, true. Was there anyone in that Nevada audience who believed that Hillary's asbestos pantsuit line wasn't scripted in debate prep? Did anyone mourn when the rhetorical role reversal of Obama and Clinton on drivers licenses for illegals actually meant a victory for Dobbsian demagoguery on immigration reform? Did any candidate care that the price for delivering this sexy spectacle to CNN was Wolf Blitzer's bearbaiting and Campbell Brown's (Mrs. Dan Senior's) branding?

As far as the media's concerned, the purpose of politics isn't democracy; it's to provide product that's not-boring. For the networks, campaigns are just another kind of "reality" programming, equally cheap to produce, equally suspenseful, personality-driven, and potentially — deliciously — humiliating. For print journalism, campaigns are an opportunity to put more reporters on the show biz beat; everyone's now a theater critic. Apparently it's our fault, too. If we audiences didn't demand entertainment *uber alles*, if Amy Goodman or Bill Moyers weren't such niche tastes, Big Media wouldn't be serving up so much cockfighting to us. You want more vitamins in your news, America? You're sick of politics-as-horserace or -as-boxing match? Hey, says the *New York Times* public editor, if you want broccoli, that's what the internet's for.

It kills me to quote [Peggy Noonan](#), it really does, but on this point she got it right the other day:

"[O]ur political coverage consists of daily disquisitions on 'targeted ads,' 'narratives,' 'positioning' and 'talking points.' We really do make politicians crazy. If a politician cares only about his ads and his rehearsed answers, the pundits call him [sic] inauthentic. But if a politician ignores these things to speak of great issues we say he lacks 'fire in the belly' and is incompetent. So many criticisms of politicians boil down to: He's not manipulating us well enough!"

There are American kids who will be wounded, or worse, in Iraq and Afghanistan this week. I bet that they and their families won't experience what happens to them as a "storyline." There are Americans whose homes will be lost to foreclosure this week, or whose illnesses will go untreated because they can't afford health insurance. I bet they don't live their lives as "narratives." Just because the political/media class treats politics as kabuki doesn't mean that all Americans have completely abandoned their existence as citizens in favor of their roles as audiences and consumers.

Sure, the Founders cared about their images, too. But when Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths" in the Declaration of Independence, I don't think he meant, "We frame these talking points." The Preamble to the Constitution starts with "We the people" — not "We the polled." It's ironic how, in this post-9/11 world that was supposed to be so post-ironic, "authenticity" is as phony a concept for the candidates as it is for those who cover them. As for the rest of us, it looks like people who actually *have* values, and who think that the notion of "values voters" does condescending violence to what is in their hearts, just haven't gotten the media's memo yet.

DEPRESSING UPDATE: If you're masochistic enough to want an illustration of the media's covering Giuliani as a gladiator — rather than as someone whose dishonesty might be terrifyingly germane to America's fate under his possible presidency — check out Greg Sargent's takedown of this *Meet the Press* moment. It's a good thing this press pathology doesn't have any real consequences to real people, isn't it? Oh, wait.

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