

*Sketches in Celebrity Advocacy:
The Passion of the Christ Meets
Fahrenheit 9/11*



March 11, 2005

USC ANNENBERG

The Norman Lear

CENTERTAINMENT

Exploring Implications of the Convergence of Entertainment, Commerce, and Society

Sketches in Celebrity Advocacy: *The Passion of the Christ* Meets *Fahrenheit 9/11*

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Respondent, **Steven J. Ross**
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Notes by **Johanna Blakley**
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Abstract of the paper

Why are *The Passion of the Christ* and *Fahrenheit 9/11* mentioned in the same breath when referring to the political campaigns of 2004? What role did these films play in the election debate? How did television code their reception, at once expanding and disciplining, tantalizing and moralizing, the public? The paper examines the entwinement of entertainment, media and politics in national debate, as the most talked about films of 2004 transmute wartime suffering into political purpose, each serving a similar function for respective Republican and Democratic campaigns, and each generating controversy stirred and strangled in multiple ways by televisual critics. The paper concludes by advocating a role for critical inquiry into celebrity advocacy – as artistic enactment, stylistic vision and mass media promotion. Studies of the multiple dimensions of celebrity advocacy should augment significantly our contemporary discussions of deliberative democracy.

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Introduction by Professor Goodnight

Professor Goodnight described his paper as an empirical exercise, which grew out of his belief that fiction plays an important role in democracy. Instead of using media theories, Goodnight sought to find out how we processed media messages about two successful and controversial films during an election year. He chose as his object of study televisual discourse, noting the styles of argument and concentrating specifically on the role that celebrity advocacy played in discussions of these films and the politics of their makers. Goodnight defined celebrity advocacy as “ideology by other means,” with artistic performance itself as a kind of advocacy.

While working on this project, Goodnight realized how tough it is for scholars to linger on “old news.” Once an election is over, there are few incentives to write reflective informed criticism about it. With the advantage of hindsight, Goodnight discovered that these two films, which seemed so fundamentally different to us at the time, were really the *same movie*: They were both about sacrifice – a topic that resonated with a public traumatized by war and terrorism.

In his analysis, Goodnight found that televisual discourse had the potential to serve as a “public sphere,” where controversies are deliberated, but he found that TV fell far short of this aspiration, ultimately doing the public a disservice by squandering precious opportunities to inform and engage its audience.

Opening Comments by Professor Ross

As a historian writing a book about Hollywood celebrities and their politics, Professor Ross felt it was important to explain why we should care about celebrity advocacy and movies. He argued that movies control the mind's eye, providing viewers with a visual vocabulary for real events and people – whether it's George W. Bush in *Fahrenheit 9/11* or Jesus in *The Passion of the Christ*. Movies reach people in a way that books do not, and citizens who do not have the time or inclination to research or deliberate the Bush presidency or the life of Christ will fill in the blanks with scenes from films.

Ross turned to Jürgen Habermas for a definition of the public sphere, which the philosopher and social theorist described as a place open to all citizens where public opinion is formed. With that definition in mind, Ross wondered whether any of the televisual discourse that Goodnight analyzed could ever qualify. After all, ratings, not serious debate, are the driving force of those programs, including *Good Morning America*, *Paula Zahn Now*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *Hannity & Colmes*, *Larry King Live*, *CBS Evening News* and *World News Tonight*. Without serious discussion, is it possible to have serious celebrity advocacy?

Ross named a few TV programs where active debate could take place, such as *Real Time with Bill Maher*, *Tavis Smiley*, and, strangely enough, *The 77th Annual Academy Awards*, where host Chris Rock joked that a Gap employee would get fired for delivering “bad intelligence” about a rival like Banana Republic, even though George Bush got reelected after being wrong about WMDs in Iraq.

Ross said he couldn't tell what Goodnight thought about the prospects of celebrity advocacy. In particular, Ross wanted to know how we ought to measure the impact these two films have had on the American public and American politics, and whether either of the films reaches beyond the already converted.

Open Discussion

Professor Goodnight described his melancholic attitude toward the results of the 2004 election and his ambivalence about TV's role in turning serious discourse into chatter. He claimed that it is impossible to answer the question about the relative impact of these two films, opposed to any other more or less effective films or celebrity activism that could have replaced them. However, both films had unexpectedly high ticket sales, suggesting that the depth and breadth of the public's engagement with these films deserves serious attention from scholars.

According to Lear Center Director Martin Kaplan, the press and popular culture have already decided the impact of Moore's and Gibson's films: Because Kerry lost, Michael Moore's film was bad for him, and Bush won because Gibson's film encouraged conservatives to do precinct work. Their conclusion has been that celebrity advocacy was a disaster for the Left. To illustrate his point, Kaplan described two Los Angeles billboards depicting Michael Moore, Sean Penn and Leonardo DiCaprio with a message from Bush saying "Thanks a lot!"

Professor Goodnight felt that the risk of this conclusion is that high-profile critics become self-silencing. Critical Studies Professor Michael Renov argued that *Fahrenheit 9/11* did not succeed in unseating the President, but it changed the way that people think about documentary. Renov disputed Moore's claim that his film was not a documentary, arguing that its use of newsreels and unscripted footage and its overt quest for truth placed it firmly in the documentary genre. Unlike other documentaries, Moore's film was made by a celebrity.

Professor Goodnight described *Fahrenheit 9/11* as emerging at the fracture point of controversy, which develops when the deliberation of issues is transferred to the public sphere. The undecidability of the film's genre (Is it a documentary or is it really a satire?) plays a role in the controversy, where the public decides

whether it should be lambasted for being an inauthentic documentary or praised for breaking and remaking the rules.

Goodnight commented on the military parallels that he found in both movies and the ways in which both campaigns attempted to exploit the films for their own purposes. When *The Passion of the Christ* opened in theaters on Ash Wednesday 2004, George Bush gave a passionate speech about the Defense of Marriage Act. Communication Professor Stephen O'Leary argued that Gibson reinterpreted the gospels in an attempt to mobilize evangelical troops for the election. Goodnight suggested that media commentators treated the film as if it had performed some kind of box-office "magic," instead of benefiting from a magnificent PR campaign. However, Professor Gross mentioned that Gibson's choice to use Aramaic undermined much of the potential PR power of the film, while granting it an aura of authenticity that it wouldn't have had otherwise.

The group discussed the importance that the movie-going experience played in the controversies surrounding these films and the 2004 election. Kaplan suggested that people may believe there's a "realer truth" in film than there is in television: Audiences flock to movie theaters to get the whole story about Bush and Jesus – something that the fractured discourse of television cannot offer them. Professor Renov emphasized the difference between watching something at home and going out to a movie theater, where people waited in long lines, having conversations about religion or public policy with perfect strangers. Kaplan mentioned the card tables in parking lots outside theaters screening *Fahrenheit 9/11* and the congregations that planned field trips to see *The Passion of the Christ*. Ross remembered the MoveOn emails exhorting its followers to go see Michael Moore films in order to convince Hollywood that left-leaning political films can be profitable. Deborah Hanan, a prospective graduate student at the Annenberg School for Communication, pointed out that it was considered a political statement to go see one movie or the other.

The group went on to lament the sad state of television, and particularly television news. Journalism Professor Larry Pryor suggested that audiences have shifted to the Internet and cable for their news because there's so little serious broadcast news – particularly compared to the 1950s when it was not uncommon to see a 90 minute treatment of a serious public issue during primetime.

Professor Ross suggested that Edward R. Murrow's programming once constituted "reality TV." Today, reality TV is about privatized life, not public issues. Goodnight added that a further shift has taken place on contemporary television: News has embraced the conventions of fiction and fiction has become reality television. English Professor David Eggenschwiller argued that the truth/fiction split has never held, but contemporary convention pretends that it's eternal. Even the 18th century literary satirist Alexander Pope criticized actual politicians in his verse.

Kaplan blamed the deterioration of television news on the transformation of news divisions into profit centers. The requirement to make money has made it essential for news to adopt entertainment values. Kaplan referred to Neil Postman's critique of news in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, in which he argued that the epistemology of entertainment manifests itself in the mantra of TV news: "Now this." Goodnight agreed that unmotivated juxtapositions of news items have a trivializing effect, weakening attempts at serious discourse in the public sphere. Professor Renov argued that the impulse behind "now this" is the heart and soul of modernism and its defining tool – collage. Kaplan argued that the difference between collage and the "now this" mélange is the same one between Modernism, which sought a greater meaning by combining seemingly random elements, and Postmodernism, which uses the same devices to demonstrate that there is no overarching truth.

Participants

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