

Neal Gabler

*The Aesthetics of
Politics 2004:
I'm Wrong, But
I'm Strong*



Dean's Open Forum: Politics, War ... and more

Annenberg School for Communication

University of Southern California

November 18, 2004

USC ANNENBERG

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CENTERTAINMENT

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

The Aesthetics of Politics 2004: I'm Wrong, But I'm Strong

USC Annenberg School Dean Geoffrey Cowan and Lear Center director Martin Kaplan hosted a special postelection presentation by author, columnist and Lear Center senior fellow Neal Gabler titled "The Aesthetics of Politics 2004: I'm Wrong, But I'm Strong."

Participants

Neal Gabler, Lear Center Senior Fellow; author, *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*

Martin Kaplan, Associate Dean, USC Annenberg School; Director, The Norman Lear Center

The Norman Lear Center

Founded in January 2000, the Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce and society. On campus, from its base in the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the Lear Center builds bridges between schools and disciplines whose faculty study aspects of entertainment, media and culture. Beyond campus, it bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. Through scholarship and research; through its fellows, conferences, public events and publications; and in its attempts to illuminate and repair the world, the Lear Center works to be at the forefront of discussion and practice in the field.

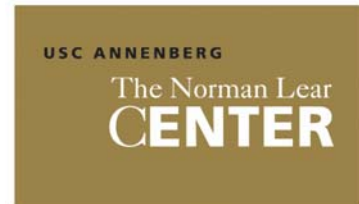


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PARTICIPANT BIOGRAPHIES



Neal Gabler

Neal Gabler, senior fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center, is an author, cultural historian and film critic. His first book, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize and the Theatre Library Association Award. His second book, *Winchell: Gossip, Power and the Culture of Celebrity* was named non-fiction book of the year by *Time* magazine. His most recent book is *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*, and he is currently at work on a biography of Walt Disney.

Gabler has contributed to numerous publications including *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Esquire*, *New York Magazine*, *Vogue*, *American Heritage*, *The New Republic*, *Us* and *Playboy*. He has appeared on many television programs including *The Today Show*, *The CBS Morning News*, *The News Hour*, *Entertainment Tonight*, *Charlie Rose* and *Good Morning America*. Gabler also hosted *Sneak Previews* for PBS and is a regularly scheduled panelist on the weekly cable show *Fox News Watch*.

Gabler has held fellowships from the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center and the Guggenheim Foundation. He has served as the chief nonfiction judge of the National Book Awards and judged the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prizes. Gabler has taught at the University of Michigan and at Pennsylvania State University, and graduated summa cum laude from the University of Michigan. He holds advanced degrees in film and American culture.



Martin Kaplan

Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center, is associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication. He graduated from Harvard College *summa cum laude* in molecular biology, where he was president of the *Harvard Lampoon* and of the Signet Society, and on the editorial boards of the *Harvard Crimson* and *Harvard Advocate*. As a Marshall Scholar, he received a First in English from Cambridge University in England. As a Danforth Fellow, he received a Ph.D. in modern thought and literature from Stanford University.

He was a program officer at the Aspen Institute; executive assistant to U.S. Commissioner of Education Ernest L. Boyer; chief speechwriter to Vice President Walter F. Mondale; deputy op-ed editor and columnist for the *Washington Star*; visiting scholar at the Brookings Institution and a regular commentator on NPR's *All Things Considered* and *CBS*

Morning News. In the Mondale presidential campaign he was in charge of policy, speechwriting, issues and research. Recruited after the 1984 election by Jeffrey Katzenberg and Michael Eisner, he worked at Disney for 12 years, both as a studio vice president in live-action feature films, and as a writer-producer under exclusive contract.

Kaplan has credits on *The Distinguished Gentleman*, starring Eddie Murphy, which he wrote and executive produced; *Noises Off*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich, which he adapted for the screen; and *Max Q*, produced by Jerry Bruckheimer for ABC.

He is editor of *The Harvard Lampoon Centennial Celebration*; co-author (with Ernest L. Boyer) of *Educating for Survival*; and editor of *The Monday Morning Imagination* and *What Is An Educated Person?* 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 in Media & Politics; Campaign Communication; and Entertainment, Communication & Society.

***THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICS 2004:
I'M WRONG, BUT I'M STRONG***

Introduction, Martin Kaplan

Associate Dean, USC Annenberg School
Director, The Norman Lear Center

Presentation, Neal Gabler

Senior Fellow, The Norman Lear Center

Martin Kaplan: Neal Gabler is a Senior Fellow of the Norman Lear Center, here at the USC Annenberg School. If you don't know what the Lear Center is, I won't plug it now. But the Web site is learcenter.org. And you can find out more about it there. He's been a collaborator in our work since the Lear Center was founded, which is now almost five years ago, amazingly.

And at that point, he had a book come out called *Life the Movie: How Entertainment Conquered Reality*. That theme of entertainment taking over everything else is the theme of the Lear Center. He's also written *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, the history of the studio moguls, and a biography of Walter Winchell. He's now working on a biography – what will no doubt be the definitive biography – of Walt Disney.

You also may know him from his op-ed pieces and features in the *Los Angeles Times* Opinion section. And, beyond that, just to show you how ecumenical he is, he's a regular on the Fox News media program *News Watch*. And so you can see him opining there in the belly of the beast. It's my great pleasure to invite him to take the podium. Please welcome Neal Gabler.

Neal Gabler: Thank you very much. I feel like saying welcome to Day 16 of the longest wake in history. Or, as we like to call it where I come from, "America Held Hostage." I felt, and I am sure a lot of people do – I'm giving away my politics here in saying this – that I went to bed in one

country, and woke up in another on November 2nd. And that day, November 3rd, the country in which I woke instantly was being analyzed to see what happened.

Almost all the pundits fastened immediately on the exit polls on November 2nd that showed that 22 percent of the voters identified moral values as the reason they cast their vote. An overwhelming percentage of those people who identified moral values as the reason they cast their vote voted for George Bush. And therefore, in short, that explained what had happened. I think it explains absolutely nothing.



I am very dubious about any kind of instant analysis, including my own.



I am very dubious about any kind of instant analysis, including my own. So you should take everything I say with a few grains of salt. I am particularly dubious about this analysis. As many of you know, particularly those of you floating around in the blogosphere, there are many problems with that 22 percent, one of which is that it was a list from which people were asked to choose which issue they based their vote upon. And when you have a menu that has Iraq, Terrorism, Health Care and Moral Values, I am amazed that only 22 percent identified moral values, and not a much higher percentage, regardless of where you're coming from politically, or on the so-called values spectrum.

Secondly, you may know that the Pew Research Center recently did a much more extensive study in which they had a control. They gave a list of subjects or issues on which you predicated your vote, including moral values. And then they asked you, without any list, to name the issues on which you predicated your vote. And when they provided the list, moral values got, I believe, 23 percent. When they did not provide the list, it was something like 13 percent, which immediately tells you that

there is something wrong with this whole polling. And I think there is something wrong with the analysis.

So let me tell you what I think. I think that elections in America – and this is not only true of the election of 2004, but it's been true of many, many elections – are not dependent on policy or even issue, more broadly defined, or by values, even more broadly defined. I think these things are almost incidental to the way that most Americans – and I don't exclude myself from this either; I don't want this to become an us and them, dumb people versus smart people, blue state versus red state – I think most of us, when we cast our votes, are casting our votes on the basis of narratives and aesthetics. Elections are waged and won on the basis of who has the more compelling narrative and who has the more appealing aesthetic. And because we live within narratives all the time, because our lives are dominated by narratives, because narratives – if you buy the thesis of my last book and the thesis of the Lear Center – impregnate themselves into every aspect of our lives, narratives prevail over everything.

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Elections are waged and won on the basis of who has the more compelling narrative and who has the more appealing aesthetic.
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Narratives and aesthetics trump everything. And so it behooves us – if we're going to understand this election, and not only this election, because narratives are evolutionary, and seldom are revolutionary; occasionally they are, but in American they seldom are – to understand what these narratives are, what the competition between narratives was, what the competition between aesthetics was. I think this will give us a better handle on what happened on November 2nd than does 22 percent of moral values, which in my estimation gets subsumed into this larger notion.

Having said that, I think it's also important to understand this is no simple matter. Narratives exist in a welter; they don't exist singly. There is, one might say, a giant metanarrative that almost everyone subscribes to, whether you are on the left or on the right, whether you're in or outside the media. I call it the Teddy White narrative. And it's important to understand this narrative, because it helps explain many of the things that happen afterwards in analyzing an election, no matter which direction you come from within the media.

I call it the Teddy White narrative because Teddy White, Theodore White, wrote *The Making of the President, 1960*, the first of many bestselling books in which he gave a narrative of the presidency and the presidential election itself, which then set a pattern for the kind of coverage we were going to get from 1960 on. Teddy White operated out of a thesis, which was "the system works." Doesn't make any difference who gets elected. "I am giving you a narrative not about Richard Nixon or Hubert Humphrey in '68, or about Kennedy and Nixon in '60. I am giving you a narrative of how the system works." And by works I mean not the mechanics of it, but that in the end it all turns out all right. How often do we hear about "the wisdom of the American people," and "you have to trust the wisdom of the American people?" I am not going to challenge that idea. But I think it's important to know that all analysis of elections in the media almost always operates within the Teddy White metanarrative.

"Look, it works, somehow. Don't despair. Somehow it all works out. The wisdom of the people is important." And it's important to understand that, because no one ever challenges the so-called wisdom of the people, or the wisdom of the system. No one ever says – although you may have been saying it in the last few weeks – "Well, you know, sometimes the system breaks down. Sometimes the system fails." Sometimes what we find out at the end of it all is that this doesn't operate the way it's supposed to operate.

Now I'm not saying that that happened in 2004. All I am saying is that you have to understand that general context. My favorite example of that is Watergate, because at the end of Watergate, people so congratulatorily said, "the system works." To which I would say, "You're absolutely right. The system works."

■ ■ ■
The system doesn't work!
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If a president of the United States is dumb enough to record every conversation he has, if he's dumb enough not to destroy the tapes when it's clear that if they ever get revealed he will be impeached, if he has minions who are disloyal enough to go before Congress and announce that he's got these tapes, if somehow the system allows them to get the tapes, if they then listen to the tapes, and I could go on and on and on, but in a kind of 12-step program, if you hit each of those thresholds, then the system works. Answer: The system doesn't work! That will never, ever happen again in the history of this country.

So, understand that narrative. Then underneath that narrative, there is what I think most of us would refer to as the master narratives. Presumably there is a master narrative for the Republican party, and a master narrative for the Democratic party. We're all extremely familiar with the master narrative in the Republican party, because it's been operating now for at least 24 years, since 1980, and presumably, since Republicans don't seem to have any inclination or reason to change this master plot, I assume it's going to continue for the next 24 or longer. And that is that this is a country of individuals. This is a country of people, like Frederick Jackson Turner, who have been forged on the frontier. This is a country of people who stand alone. This is a country of people who are responsible for themselves. This is a country of people who need nothing or anyone other than themselves.

This is a country, the threat of which is to that sense of individualism. Whether it's communism, or whether it's government, anything that imperils that sense of standing alone is the danger, and must be destroyed. And when communism *was* destroyed, conveniently, terrorism – well, first Bill Clinton, and then terrorism – moved in to fill the breach, because every narrative needs heroes and villains. Every

narrative. That's how narratives work. That's why you go to the movies. That's why you watch TV.

And you have to think of these narratives in exactly those terms. We're talking about essentially political movies, the only difference being this: that movies generally don't vie against one another. Of course you can go to a theater and say, "Do I go to see this movie tonight or that movie?" But they're not mutually exclusive. But when it comes to political narratives, they are mutually exclusive. You choose one. You defeat the other. And that's a major difference between the kind of cornucopia of narratives that you have in the popular culture.



Next to *9-11*, the word you heard most in this election was *strength*.



So you have that master plot. And I am not going to address the Democratic master plot, advisedly, for a reason that I will get to in a moment. Then underneath that master plot, you have how that plot is tailored to the individual time and the individual actor. You've got a plot, but it can be cast in many, many different ways. Ronald Reagan performed within that narrative in a very different way, for example, than George Bush did in 2004.

But here is the plot, the plot of the strong, individualistic Americans, set out against government, set out against terrorism, people who need nothing else. And that narrative was tailored, as you saw very quickly and very overtly, to George Bush. "Strong. He's strong. He's strong. He's strong. He's strong." Next to *9-11*, the word you heard most in this election was *strength*. The idea they obviously were counting on was that in a narrative, it makes no difference what you are strong about. Strength is a narrative value that is more important than any other value.

So the idea that he's wrong, but he's strong, the wrong element is negated by the strong element. It doesn't make any difference if he's wrong, because it doesn't make any difference what he's strong about. It's the strength that is the imperative here. It's the strength that is the narrative value. In movies, whether it's Schwarzenegger or whomever, we have heroes going about, doing their thing, individualistically. And we don't really think all that much about what it is they are setting out to do. That's what Alfred Hitchcock called the maguffin.

In a sense all of politics, every issue in politics, is a maguffin. It's all irrelevant if you're strong, and if you're the actor within that master narrative, tailored in this way. And Bush did something else, it seems to me. Bush or Rove or whomever, within this version. He didn't present himself as Rambo. The idea wasn't "I'm so strong that I will run over anything." The strength had a kind of almost looney romantic element: the idea that we'll bring democracy everywhere.

It occurred to me as I was watching this campaign that Bush was starring in *Field of Dreams*. That's really what his version of the narrative was. Build it and they'll come. Aw, but you're crazy. What are you doing? Doesn't make any difference. See. Have faith. Even the father-son element works in this if you really want to go Freudian. But the idea, his narrative was *Field of Dreams*. And he was saying, "Look, are you going to buy *Field of Dreams*? Are you going to buy my looniness, even? Are you going to forgive my looniness on the basis that it's looniness with a purpose? It's romantic looniness. It expresses my strength. Are you going to do that?"

Now, interestingly, Kerry, within his own individualized, tailored plot, said *he* was going to be Rambo, I mean that was essentially a kind of mild version of Rambo. What Kerry set out as his own plot was, "I'm a hero. I'm a hero. I'm a hero." And we all know, again, that it was very overt, in the same way that Bush's was overt. The plot was, "You can't attack me, because I'm heroic." And there are two kinds, basically two kinds of protagonists in our movies. There is the charismatic hero, and there is the plainspoken common man.

That's essentially the dichotomy. Bush clearly chose, "I'm the plainspoken common guy with a purpose. And I'm going to follow it through." And Kerry, alternatively, since there was no way

he could pose himself as the common man, said, "I'm going to take on the idea of being the heroic figure." So immediately the election kind of conforms itself to the two main heroic types in American culture. The problem is that there is yet another set of narratives, what I would call the counternarratives.

It's not enough to present a narrative of your own. What you must do, because these narratives are vying with one another in a way that movie and television narratives don't, is provide a counternarrative that does two things: negates your opponent's narrative, and defines your opponent.

So when the Swift Boat veterans came out and attacked Kerry's narrative, they immediately, immediately knocked out the very basis of Kerry's heroism, and the very basis of that entire narrative. And what they did, interestingly, is converted his *Rambo* narrative into *Apocalypse Now*. So now what you had is an election: *Field of Dreams* versus *Apocalypse Now*. Need I tell you which is going to win that kind of battle? There was no doubt which was going to prevail.

The counterplot also was very interesting in that – and this may be the single most important narrative component of the entire campaign – Bush and Rove or whoever came up with this decided – and this is why I didn't talk about the Democratic master plot earlier – "This is the real narrative!" The real narrative is – and I will risk sounding French here – the real narrative is the narrative of no narrative.

What we have here is, "Look everybody: Our story is that they have no story! What's his story? He's got this heroism thing. Well, we already knocked that out." What's the master plot and what's the individual plot? "Folks, I'm building *Field of Dreams*. I'm going to build it and they'll come. I'm a looney, but I believe in my lunacy. They have no narrative." And how many times in this campaign did you hear the narrative of no narrative? Again, and again, and again, every single day: They don't have any narrative.

They didn't use the word *narrative*. What does he stand for? He doesn't mean anything. *Flip-flop* is the two-word version of the narrative of no narrative. He's a flip-flopper, because he doesn't have any narrative. And when you talk about values, ultimately this is what values really resolve themselves into. Values equal plot. "We've got values, because we've got a plot. I'm strong. That's my plot. Those are my values."

"They have no values, because they have no plot." And when the narrative of no narrative *became* the narrative, I am telling you, if you were a Democrat or you were John Kerry, there was trouble. Now, let's bring into this mix another component, which is aesthetics. It's one thing to write the plot, but all plots, when they're realized, have an aesthetic component, not only a narrative component.



There's no problem being dumb when you're running for president.



It's not enough just to write the plot. You will have, perhaps four years from now, Bill Frist trying to act or perform the GOP master plot. And unless he changes, you can see in your gut this is going to be a hard sell, because Bill Frist doesn't have the aesthetics to perform that master plot, even as it is tailored to his own dimensions. It will be very difficult. Bush's aesthetics are obviously apparent. Bush has done everything in his life, in fact it's almost by design, to create the common man hero aesthetic, which is why this notion that he's dumb never has any traction. In fact, if it has traction, it's positive traction.

There's no problem being dumb when you're running for president. It's meaningless. It's positive, because it means that you are not an elitist. It means that you're plain spoken. It means that you may not know how to articulate it, but it doesn't make any difference, because

That ranch has more
brush than any ranch in
the history of the world.



These candidates are not
candidates. They are actors.

conviction is what counts. And your inability to articulate something in some ways is an advantage in proving how deep your convictions run.

And it's all of a piece, as we all know. I mean, clearing the brush constantly on that ranch. That ranch has more brush than any ranch in the history of the world. How much damn brush is there? And the boots and the shirts and the flubs themselves, some of which I believe are probably deliberate. All of these are of a piece in saying, "I am not only in the narrative of *Field of Dreams*, but you know what kind of guy I am within that narrative. You know exactly what you're dealing with here. I'm one of you. There is no question, I'm one of you." He essentially was designed to play this role. And he plays it very well. As much as you can knock him, denigrate him, you have to understand the power of that role in the larger narrative.

Kerry, on the other hand, genetically – and it is genetic. I'll just take a small digression here. Let's say you had a CGI artist who could completely redo Kerry, completely redo Bush. Essentially their voices were the same, which is obviously an aesthetic component. But everything else was different. How different would this election have been if John Kerry didn't look like John Kerry? Now there's a certain pathos in saying that an election is largely dependent not on even something like moral values, but on the fact that a man has a long face. But I'll tell you, after a lifetime of moviegoing, that's how we react to people. And these candidates are not candidates. They are actors.

If you can then take that look and kind of jack up, gin up the aesthetic: "He's French. He's elitist. He's not one of us. He tries to be one of us." But the dichotomy between how he looks and what he's trying to do is another instance of the fact that he has no narrative. So in even

trying to neutralize his own aesthetic, all he winds up doing is reinforcing the narrative of no narrative.

"Here's a guy who is not comfortable in his own skin. And of course he's not comfortable in his own skin, because he's French. Look at the way he looks. Look at the way he talks. This guy is not one of us." And where you saw this, it seems to me, is at the moment of Kerry's greatest triumph, which was the debates. Now take a step back and look at the analysis of the debates.

The analysis of the debates was Kerry looked presidential and sounded presidential and Bush fumbled and seemed unpresidential. And if you were to look at this, and you were asked who is the president and who isn't, you would have identified Kerry as the president. Whether you believe that or not, how thoroughly does that debase the entire process? One person looks presidential, the other person does not. Outside of the blogs, there was virtually no analysis of the merits of what either man said during that debate – almost none.

You had to go online, and then the bloggers – because there is at least some gram of shame left in the press, although a very slight one in the mainstream press; occasionally they would respond to the blogging because they know that there are millions of people who read these things, then read *The New York Times* or the *L.A. Times* – would say, "What, are you complete morons?" The answer to which, of course is, "Yes."

I say this because one of the reasons that you have the dominance of aesthetics and the dominance of narrative is because the media love this stuff. It's essentially about all they can do. Aesthetic criticism is so much easier – anyone who has ever been a film critic can tell you this and I speak from personal experience – than doing the really hard work of analyzing policy, of weighing one set of policies against another. That's difficult work that people are not particularly interested in to begin with.

Political coverage has been, for a long time, almost always theater coverage. It's coverage of the aesthetics. And the media love to do it this way, because, as William Saletan of *Slate* admitted

just a couple of weeks ago, maybe five reporters in America know anything about economics, but hundreds of reporters write about it. He said the fact of the matter is something that I say on *News Watch* almost every week, "Reporters are lazy and they are stupid."

And, yeah, nobody wants to say this. But let's say it. Let's come out. Why do you get Jodi Wilgoren in *The New York Times* talking only about how much John Kerry's lunch cost, or writing a front-page story on John Kerry's butler? Why? This is *The New York Times*. This is the coverage that 100 years from now someone actually may look at the campaign coverage and say, "This is how the campaign was covered?" And it's covered that way, because they can't do any better.

Now there's one other set of aesthetics that I want to get to because it's also very, very important. I've talked about candidate aesthetics. But there are also campaign aesthetics. And they're very, very important, for this reason: One of the narratives in this campaign is the inevitability of Bush's election, or re-election. It was everywhere. It was even on the blogs. Why? Because Karl Rove cannot be beaten.

Karl Rove cannot be beaten. Republicans walk in lock-step. "Republicans are always on message. Republicans never make mistakes. Republicans organize better than anybody else." This is a narrative that gets blasted on a daily basis through this election, and presumably through the next one, and the one after that, even when Karl Rove has left the scene.

In fact, if you read the postmortem, which is a perfectly accurate way of describing it, in *Newsweek*, the issue-length postmortem, it shows you the myopia of the press itself. They said here:

The Bushies almost seemed to feel sorry for the Kerry campaign, in a condescending sort of way. Under constant scrutiny, all candidates misstep during the course of a long campaign. At his April press conference, Bush, frozen in front of the cameras, had been unable to think of a single mistake he had made since 9/11. In August the president told

a reporter that the war on terror was unwinnable and had to hastily “clarify” his remarks. In his familiar role of Dr. Doom, the designated hit man, Vice President Cheney suggested, outrageously, that by voting for Kerry Americans could be inviting another terrorist attack. Yet Bush and Cheney seemed to waltz away from their clumsy or embarrassing moments. Kerry, on the other hand, just dug himself into deeper holes. Somehow the Bush-Cheney campaign was able to keep Kerry's mistakes in the news, while the Kerry campaign was unable to do likewise with Bush's blunders.



The press loves the aesthetics of tyranny.



Somehow – and I think *somehow* is the key word here. It shows the absolute inability of the press to be introspective in any way, shape or form. Somehow? I'll tell you somehow. Somehow the Bush-Cheney campaign was able to keep Kerry's mistakes in the news, while the Kerry campaign was unable to do likewise with Bush's blunders. The press loves the aesthetics of tyranny. They would have loved Goebbels.

They love the idea – and I think there's a gigantic narcissism in this – of all this energy being devoted to manipulating *them*. And they judge a campaign on the basis of how well they are manipulated. So they sit back and they say, “All right, manipulate us. And do it well, because if you do it poorly, then we will call you on it. Dukakis on a tank. Oh, come on, did you really think we were that dumb? We're not that stupid. Now we're really going to knock the stuffing out of you.”

The importance of the aesthetics of tyranny as a value for the media cannot be overstated. It's absolutely essential. And it permeates the entire narrative, because there's a very short step, which the media makes, from “they can't run their own campaign” to “they can't run

the government." Or "everybody walks in lock-step, everybody stays on message," to "that's the kind of government we're going to have."

Now if you're not particularly fond of Democratic values, this is a perfectly wonderful thing. If you are fond of Democratic values, it may not be. If you're speaking not in terms of political values, but in terms of aesthetic values, this is terrific. We all want the trains to run on time. It doesn't make any difference if Bush is only talking to his own, if nobody else can get in, if somebody wearing a Kerry T-shirt is forbidden from getting inside there, while Kerry opens up his speeches to anybody.

In the press' eyes, Kerry's a *fool* for doing that. In fact, here is an object lesson. Anybody who read this *Newsweek* piece, it's an object lesson of the very thing I'm talking about, because Kerry clearly gave them complete access. So they're talking about the problems he has with his wife. And Bush gave them no access. Right here, without reading a word of this, you can see exactly what I'm talking about. They love Bush. They love him, because Bush wouldn't give in to them. And they castigate Kerry for being dumb enough actually to give them full access. "What kind of a moron are you to do that?"

Now, we're running out of time. I'm not a prescriptive person. Anybody who reads my work knows that. I'm not someone who says, "All right, here's the diagnosis, and this is the medicine we take." God knows there is a lot of medicine we'd like to be taking, some of it is arsenic. I'm among you on that.

Martin Kaplan: Zoloft.

Neal Gabler: Zoloft won't do. I'm one of these people who believe, and I'm generally not a pessimist, that we are in for four years of hell like you've never seen. We're beginning to see it now.

I'm one of the people who believe, and I've written about this, that this election was a referendum on whether we are a liberal democracy or a theocracy, and I think we're seeing the results of that now. Whether we can survive as a liberal democracy, this, in my estimation, is the most important election since 1860. And danger lurks ahead. I am not hopeful. I'm hopeless. There is no reason to be hopeful, frankly. None whatsoever.

But I will say this. If elections are determined on the basis of narrative and on the basis of aesthetics, then the Democratic Party – and even if you're Republican, unless you're Karl Rove who believes in a one-party system, you should subscribe to this – has to devise a master narrative. It has lacked one since Franklin Roosevelt. It needs one now. And it needs one that is powerful enough to compete with the very powerful narrative of individualism that the Republicans have used for quite a long time.

If they are to contend an election again, or to become the Tories of England, which I think is the real threat, they need a performer with the aesthetics to play out that narrative, because elections, as I said earlier, are waged and won on the basis of narratives and aesthetics. The other side has the narrative. And this year they had the aesthetics. If the Democrats don't learn that lesson, they will not contend. They will not win.

[Q&A portion begins.]

Martin Kaplan: Neal, you should know that in this room there is diversity. There are –

Neal Gabler: In this country there is diversity.

Martin Kaplan: There are people here who voted for George Bush, and look forward to the future with pleasure, not with fear. And there are people who would defend to the death the quality of American mainstream journalism.

Neal Gabler: I don't doubt that.

Martin Kaplan: So that's in this room, and I'm trying to make it a friendly space for expressing those opinions. Also, much as I want to call on Jon Taplin and others, I first want to call on students. So please.

Aram Sinnreich [doctoral student, Annenberg School]: What do you think of Barack Obama as an exemplar and describer of a new master narrative for Democrats? And what do you see as the failures of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and its kin as a counternarrative against the Republicans?

Neal Gabler: Well, first of all, let me start with *Fahrenheit 9/11*. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not a master narrative. It's a counternarrative. I think it's reasonably effective in what it does. It's preaching to the choir. It doesn't present a narrative that I think has a lot of room to get other people into the narrative. But I also don't think, as we're seeing now, that the Democratic Party wants to distance itself from that. I think that would also be a mistake.

As I said, conviction is paramount. You have to have conviction. Whether you believe that Bush's convictions are wrong or not, as I do – you know, they're dangerously wrong, not just wrong, but dangerously wrong – the American people believed that he had conviction. But at least 51 percent didn't believe that – and again I think that's important parenthetically. Republicans have spun this as if they have won this giant mandate. We hear this all the time, and of course the mainstream press – which I believe is indefensible so I don't know anyone who'd defend the mainstream press – the mainstream press already has genuflected before this idea that there was this giant mandate handed to him. I mean, there still are an awful lot of people who don't subscribe to the whole Republican agenda.

But Barack Obama is a very interesting thing. I think Barack Obama has the beginning of a narrative, the beginning of one. Ultimately, as I said, there are kind of two heroic types in America: There's the plain-spoken man and the charismatic hero. I think ultimately, fundamentally there are two master narratives in America. There is the one I described, which is, "We're all individuals, we're all in this alone, we're all responsible for ourselves. And anything

else that inhibits our own personal responsibility is a danger." And then there is what I believe Barack Obama is beginning to say, and what I will say right now that in my mind ought to be the Democratic master narrative. So I'm never prescriptive, but I will be now, and that is that we are not all alone, that 280 million people operating separately is not a country. Only 280 million people operating together is a country. There are things we must do together. There are things we cannot do alone. And that's what government is for. Government is not our enemy. Government is not opposed to us. Government is not a separate entity from us. Government is us.

And the job of government is to do those things, limited though they may be now, that we cannot do alone. The narrative is about community. It's about how we must act together. It's about a cowboy versus an army. Those are the two basic ideas of this country. Either you are alone, there is no one there for you, that's it, or you are a part of a great enterprise that we can only realize if we do it together.

David Brooks is very fond of talking about national-greatness conservatism. It's meaningless to me. I don't really know what it means. It's a way that he can, I guess, modify himself enough to be palatable to the so-called mainstream liberal press. But I do believe there is something we might project as national-greatness liberalism. All the things that this country hasn't done, that it can do, if we act together. Red states and blue states. Individuals all over. I am not a great believer that this country is as culturally polarized as many of the pundits would have you believe. I think that, you know, on a plain, a mountain stands out. And there is that mountain of evangelicals, who do act together, vote together and believe together, but they're a relatively small percentage of this country.

Michael Russo [student, Annenberg School]: I'm from Bloomington, Indiana, which kind of leads me into my question, which is, we have a pretty convenient distance from the epicenter of the evangelical movement, 2000 miles away. But I think it's rather easy – and even people on the beltway are guilty of this – to forget about them as a voting block. But they really do wield a lot of influence. That's my opinion. And I think that maybe they've been underestimated, even in

the postelection analysis, just working with them on a daily basis in my everyday life. But my real question was you touched on the press, and them not being able to do any better. But at the end of the day, wouldn't it just be a matter of the American people not really wanting any better than what they're getting right now?

Neal Gabler: You know, there are two models of the American press that go all the way back, which is the press serves the public interest. That's our job. That's on one side. And the other side is that the press serves the public's interest, meaning what the public is interested in. Once upon a time there was no question that you had tabloid press that served what the public was interested in, and you had the mainstream press that served the public interest. And editors and publishers saw themselves as custodians of the public interest. That was their job. They didn't ask themselves, "Jeez, do you think people will be interested in this?" They did it. They did it because they understood that a democracy needs an inquisitive, engaged press. They did it because it was the right thing to do. Those days are over. Those days are virtually over. As someone who has to read newspapers and magazines and the Internet professionally on a daily basis, reading *The New York Times*, the *L.A. Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Chicago Tribune* and other papers, every single day, I can tell you that they are not serving the public interest. **They** even know it.

Now why is that so? I mean it's a chicken and egg question of course. Is it because of Howell Raines? The Howell Raines paradigm is that you hire people who are exciting, who get the scoop, who want to be stars, because that's what the public wants? Is that why it is? Or is it because people who are going into journalism don't have the stamina, the intelligence, whatever one wants to say? I'm sure there are journalism students in this room that I'll be insulting, but so what? And they don't have the curiosity, whatever it is to perform that public service? You know, I think it's a little of both. But in the final analysis, anyone who followed the election on the basis of the major newspapers and broadcast networks was not well informed about what was going on. If you didn't go into the blogosphere on a daily basis to find out what real reporters, with real shoe leather, real context were doing, you didn't know. Anybody who reads the blogs on a regular basis knows this. This was the real media story of this campaign.

Jon Taplin [television and film producer; USC Annenberg professor]: I was interested in your notion that the Republican narrative of the common, rugged individual, which is really formed out of being out of power for a long period of time, pretty much from Barry Goldwater on, and finally with Reagan they got a president. But now that they control all three branches of government, isn't that rugged individualism narrative going to run up against a different narrative, which is they are the government, they are the centralized nanny state that's going to tell California you can't pass an emissions law, going to tell gays you can't get married or tell states they can't do this? The Patriot Act, too, pushes against the kind of Libertarian side of their coalition. They're now the central government. They're big. And they're against the individualism of other places.

Neal Gabler: Well, I think you're absolutely right. I talk to Libertarians. And in fact Jim Pinkerton, the Libertarian, is on *News Watch* with me and he was against Bush. I think that Libertarian strain is peeling away. And the ideologically conservative strain has stayed, but there are clearly tensions, because –

Jon Taplin: The fiscal conservatives –

Neal Gabler: – the fiscal conservatives, the non-foreign adventurism conservatives, the non-government intrusion conservatives. In fact, one could say that anyone who is really conservative has got to be scratching his head and saying, "What the heck is this? We didn't bargain for any of this. This is not the conservatism that Barry Goldwater had laid out or even that Ronald Reagan had laid out." But because narratives are so powerful, they overwhelm fact. If this election has proven anything, I think it's proven that a narrative can overwhelm everything else. So they run against themselves. They will *still* attack government. They will *still* say how bad government is. They will still say that you've got to shrink government. But the facts show, as everyone who really knows, Bush has grown government far more than Bill Clinton did. Far more. But it doesn't make any difference, because when you've got a narrative, and you've got facts, what are you going to believe?

Martin Kaplan: One of the rules of narrative is, without conflict, no drama. So in the interest of injecting some drama, anyone want to contest, vehemently, some aspect? Yes, Tom? .

Tom Hollihan [USC Annenberg Associate Dean and Professor]: Neal, I want to thank you for the very provocative talk, about half of which I find myself enthusiastically agreeing with, and about half of which I wanted to contest.

Neal Gabler: Then I did my job.

Tom Hollihan: I have to agree with the argument that elections are conducted through narrative, that we evaluate the worth of candidates on the basis of how well both their story appeals to us and how well they as character types play out the role in the narrative. And I couldn't agree more that Kerry undermines his own narrative; you know, he salutes us at the Democratic Convention and we know that within days we're going to see all his anti-war statements coming back to flaw who he is as a character. But the part of your talk I really want to refute is the notion that the press was not observing some of these things. Particularly I want to protest your claim that we didn't get coverage of how the entire Bush campaign was essentially an orchestrated reality TV show, where even the characters in the auditorium weren't real, because they had to volunteer for service to be there. I thought the press was all over the top of that.

Neal Gabler: I totally agree with you. Totally agree.

Tom Hollihan: It got reported consistently. And with regard to the *Newsweek* argument you make, I would contrast the coverage of the Kerry campaign with the coverage that John McCain got when he was running four years ago, when what the press absolutely celebrated was his access. Here's a candidate who lets us sit on the bus with him and we have three- and four-hour at a time open press conferences, no issues off the table. And so I would submit that some of your criticism is really not fair to a lot of journalists who were working very hard to tell the story. I think that part of the criticism reflected in the question is: Do Americans get the kind of press they deserve? They get the kind of press they demand. And do they get the kind of politics they

deserve? Well, they get the kind of politics that they allow politicians to get away with. And so we ought to be concerned. But I don't think we should make the press carry as much water for the mess we're in as you say.

Neal Gabler: Well, actually we're not in disagreement.

Martin Kaplan: Shoot.

Neal Gabler: I am sorry to say, I absolutely agree with you that the press did cover the machinations of the Bush campaign. But what they didn't do, in covering the machinations – there was always the sense that this was *great*. This was *amazing*. Look at how on message, how manipulative this is, how well organized. It was always with a certain kind of awe that these guys just don't make a mistake. And I felt we might get our Mike Tyson-Buster Douglas moment after the first debate, by which I mean Mike Tyson was as inevitable as Karl Rove, as infallible as Karl Rove, until Buster Douglas knocked him on the keister in Japan. From that point on he was just a chump, a tomato can. And I thought that after that first debate we might have had Karl Rove as tomato can. "All right, it's all over. You know, pull back the curtain, it's *The Wizard of Oz*." It's almost literally *The Wizard of Oz* if he had a transmitter on. But it didn't happen that way. The press didn't react that way. They wanted to see whether Karl Rove was going to get back on the horse. And he did. So I agree with you that they covered it. But I think the tone with which they covered it was, again, admiring rather than not. In terms of do we get the press we deserve, well, it's a market-driven economy. And as Howell Raines said at great length in *The Atlantic*, even *The New York Times* is now a market-driven newspaper. "I was only making those changes at *The New York Times*, because I didn't believe we could compete otherwise. So if you want to blame me, blame yourself. It is a tough market. And what we're competing against is *Entertainment Tonight* and the *New York Post* and cable news and all of these things. And they're the ones who essentially set the default mechanism for us." That may be true. But it's a sad state of affairs. And I believe that there must be a certain kind of courage among journalists to resist it.

Martin Kaplan: For those of you who can stay around, I think Neal will be available to continue the discussion informally. And for everyone, please join me in thanking Neal.