

# This Is Not a President

*Sense, Nonsense, and the  
American Political Imaginary*

Diane Rubenstein



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

*New York and London*

# Contents

	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
1	Introduction: My Own Private Presidents	1
	Organizational Note	23
2	The Mirror of Reproduction: Baudrillard and Reagan's America	25
3	Oliver North and the Lying Nose	50
4	This Is Not a President: Baudrillard, Bush, and Enchanted Simulation	73
5	Bush, the Man Who Sununu Too Much: Male Trouble and Presidential Subjectivity	85
6	"Chicks with Dicks": Transgendering the Presidency	116
7	"Honey, I Shrunk the President": Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, and the Clinton Presidency	146
8	"Father, Can't You See I'm Bombing?" A Bush Family Romance	170
9	Hillary Regained	201
	<i>Notes</i>	237
	<i>Index</i>	293
	<i>About the Author</i>	299

# 1

## Introduction

### *My Own Private Presidents*

The object casts its shadow on the subject.

—Christopher Bollas

This book is about the vernacular use of the American presidency. For the American presidency enters into the every day life of its citizens in myriad ways, both marked and, often, oblique. Presidents figure in the currency we use as we go about our tasks (in contrast to pre-euro France, whose currency featured both St. Exupéry's *Little Prince* and Berlioz, and Germany, which put the mathematician K. F. Gauss on the ten-Deutschmark note). Every President's Day we see the representations of Washington and Lincoln hawking furniture and discounted Chevy Blazers. "George Washington" himself advertises the new one-dollar coin, seemingly nonplussed about his replacement, dancing in a disco or driving through a highway tollbooth ("I look good on paper"). "Abraham Lincoln" (played by Martin Short) does a quick star turn for the Biography Channel ("But I always wanted to be a dancer"). People increasingly consume biographies and nonfiction books about the presidents in both popular and scholarly versions and read about the difficulties with "plagiarism" that plague public presidential historians (e.g., Joseph Ellis, Doris Kearns Goodwin). It is indeed difficult to open the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* or cable-surf (the History Channel, A&E, the Biography Channel, Turner Classic Movies) without experiencing a "presidential moment" even if one is not watching *24*, *Commander-in-Chief*, the Emmy-winning *West Wing*, or *Battlestar Galactica*. Commercials for a sleep-inducing pharmaceutical (Rozerem) feature dream sequences starring Lincoln (alongside an astronaut, a talking beaver who accuses Honest Abe of cheating at cards, and a human).

In a younger niche market, there are punk groups (“Dead Kennedys”) and pop recording artists (“The Presidents of the United States”), and most of my undergraduate students can sing all the words to the “mediocre presidents’ song” from *The Simpsons*. (“We are the mediocre presidents / You won’t find our faces on dollars and cents”). Presidents appear in animation cartoons, making cameo appearances on *The Simpsons* and on *Beavis and Butthead*. Their real counterparts, both candidates or elected leaders, make the round of the talk shows or do bit parts in Hollywood releases, as Bill Clinton did in Bob Zeckis’s film *Contact*. More recently, they appear on reality shows such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, as Laura Bush did after Hurricane Katrina, or both Bushes on *American Idol*. Families on vacation at Disneyland, in California, can share some “great moments with Mr. Lincoln.” On a recent vacation, one family traveled from Disneyland to visit President Gerald Ford’s body, lying in state at Rancho Mirage. Alternatively, families can drive either to Yorba Linda, where they can select from an array of Nixon-Elvis souvenirs (mugs or watches, the most popular item) at the Nixon Birthplace and Library museum shop, or to Simi Valley, where they can interact in a simulated situation room or push a button and end the Cold War via holographic images of Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan in a Geneva cabin replete with a fake burning log. Or they can visit one of President Reagan’s brown suits from his Hollywood days. In Orlando, an animatronic Bill Clinton joins the roll call in the Hall of Presidents, situated right next door to the Haunted House at Disney World.<sup>1</sup>

While the presidency has always served as a subject for the great Hollywood directors and actors (Henry Fonda as *Young Mr. Lincoln*, Spencer Tracy as aspiring candidate in *State of the Union*, Gregory Lavaca’s *Gabriel over the White House*), its presidential monuments, such as Mount Rushmore (*North by Northwest*), the Jefferson Memorial (*Born Yesterday* and Hitchcock’s *Strangers on a Train*), and the Lincoln Memorial (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, Tim Burton’s *Planet of the Apes*), perform a crucial diegetic function for a plot’s narrative tension. These monuments often appear heroically as metonyms for normative citizenship or, in postmodern fashion, as in *The Simpsons*’ “Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington” episode, where Lincoln’s “father function” is ironically underlined by a throng of citizens asking Mr. Lincoln such questions as “How do I get my kids to brush more often?” and “Do you think I should grow a mustache?”<sup>2</sup> The Lincoln Memorial serves as

a tragic backdrop in Oliver Stone's *Nixon*, or it frames the "infantile citizenship" of Forrest Gump's address at the March on Washington, a film that splices in actual presidential footage (in *Zelig* fashion) within a traditional fictional narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Lincoln has functioned as well in avant-garde performance pieces, colorized in blackface in *Holiday Inn*, impersonated by African American actors and women (a recent performance piece begins with a woman draped alongside a black Lincoln Continental, only to have a "car crash" into history and survive in the form of a "female Lincoln"!). There are "Lincoln impersonation conventions" where an array of Lincolns and other people in period dress chant "Ready and Abe-L."<sup>4</sup> Lincoln also enters, in a very displaced way, in Ben Stiller's *Zoolander*, in which a male-model conspiracy theory of presidential assassinations is proposed, with John Wilkes Booth characterized as a "male model." (Oswald wasn't a male model, but a viewer is shown some footage and asked to check out "those two guys on the grassy knoll" who are filmed in postures reminiscent of *GQ* and *Esquire* layouts.) The assassination is fodder for a Sondheim musical, *Assassins*, and going to that musical is part of Sarah Vowell's best-selling *Assassination Vacation*. Most recently, Lincoln appears as a depressive in the biography by (and marketing of) Joshua Wolf Shenk's *Lincoln's Melancholy: How Depression Fueled His Greatness* and in the History Channel's two-hour documentary derived in part from the book (and is also presented as potentially "queer" for his intense homosocial friendship with Joshua Speed). A review by the *New York Times* theater critic Patricia Cohen asks: "Can the generally disappointing crop of national leaders today be attributed to the Prozac generation's addiction to cheeriness . . . ? The emotionally suffering artist stokes our imagination, the emotionally suffering politician evokes panic; who wants to think about Eeyore nose to nose with bin Laden?"<sup>5</sup> Doris Kearns Goodwin's popular *Team of Rivals* fuels speculation about improbable fusion tickets in the 2008 presidential race, such as a McCain-Clinton pairing. Lincoln becomes a talking-point comparison after George W. Bush's "new" Iraqi surge policy (like Lincoln, he had to change some generals). This meets up with its hilarious *Daily Show* counterpart, a found recording of Lincoln mangling "A house divided" ("You can't stand in a divided house") to illustrate yet another similarity between W-Bush and Lincoln.

The Kennedy assassination itself could supply material for several books about the vernacular use of the presidency. From the more literary

“novelizations” such as James Ellroy’s *American Tabloid* or Don DeLillo’s *Libra*, to Oliver Stone’s film *JFK*, the assassination itself, as well as its dispersive metonyms and part-objects—Dealey Plaza (site for the ending of DeLillo’s first piece, *Americana*) to Jackie’s pink Chanel suit and pillbox hat (forever emblemized in *The House of Yes*, where a reenactment of the motorcade scene and shooting serves as a prelude to acts of brother-sister incest and repetitive family trauma), pervade popular culture. In David Cronenberg’s *Crash*, a protagonist, Vaughn, suggests that the Kennedy assassination is just another iconic car crash, along with those of James Dean (DeLillo sees Oswald as a poor man’s James Dean), Jayne Mansfield, and Albert Camus. These mergers of national history and family or personal trauma are increasingly played out during the Clinton presidency films (even in comic ones like *Dick* that ostensibly treat other presidents), such as *Absolute Power*, *Murder at 1600*, and *The Contender*. Moreover, we might locate a Lewinsky affair legacy in the increasingly forensic view of the White House, in particular, in the siting of the Oval Office as crime scene, and in the beginnings of the procedural or reality TV shows that have displaced earlier detective genres. For the Lewinsky affair did demonstrate, as shows like *CSI* do so ably, that “truth” resides outside consciousness/cognition in the forensic object—the blue dress or the bloody glove, to cite just two Clinton-era relics. There is even some speculation that the popularization of the Lewinsky affair made the revelation of the Catholic Church abuse scandals easier because of the Clinton scandal’s matter-of-fact presentations about oral sex.

The Clinton presidency marked an intensification of these cultural trends in more conventional ways, as well. Michael Rogin’s insightful reading of *Independence Day* discusses not only how the film entered the 1996 campaign (where both Clinton and Dole felt obliged to “endorse” it) but its most popular trailer, which shows the blowing up of the White House.<sup>6</sup> Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks!* covers much the same territory; alien invaders destroy most of monumental Washington, with a president played by Jack Nicholson and Glenn Close as first lady (dressed in Nancy Reagan red). The president became an action hero to identify with when Harrison Ford took on the role (in *Air Force One*, Clinton’s personal favorite). Clinton claimed that the best perk of being president was not Air Force One or Camp David but the inhouse movie theater. Bill Pullman (in *ID4*) forgot his constitutional role and flew an airplane himself to defeat the aliens. W-Bush’s “Mission Accomplished”

photo op on the deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln* mimics Pullman's presidential performance.<sup>7</sup> Great comic actors such as Jack Lemmon and James Garner played unwitting ex-presidential heroes in *My Fellow Americans*. Kevin Kline played a convincing (GHW) Bush-style president in *Dave* and exposed corruption in the executive branch while his friend Charles Grodin, as Murray the accountant, balanced the budget. John Travolta convincingly portrayed Clinton, fictionalized as Jack Stanton, in *Primary Colors*, and Jeff Bridges was in many ways an even more compelling Clinton in *The Contender*. Gene Hackman was the president in *Absolute Power*, promoted from his cabinet position in *No Way Out*. Clint Eastwood didn't get to be the president but was at least in the Secret Service in *In the Line of Fire*. Morgan Freeman comforted the nation in the comet-disaster film *Deep Impact*. Of all the demographically viable popular Hollywood actors, perhaps only Mel Gibson did not get a presidential role (although it could be argued that he did pave the way historically in *The Patriot* or that he was preparing to appeal to a "higher authority" in the W-Bush years with his *Passion of the Christ*).

At other times, the merger of Hollywood and Washington could be dizzying. Marilyn Monroe's singing of "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" is endlessly circulated in biographies of Marilyn, of JFK, of Jackie, and of the Rat Pack (the Peter Lawford connection). It is decontextualized and recontextualized in an eerie impersonation by Drew Barrymore on the cover of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s *George* magazine. And, to return to my opening example, an ad for a car-leasing deal on President's Day 2001 claimed that the offer was democratically available, even to those who weren't "big shots" like the president: "You don't have to be a Washington or Lincoln to get the presidential treatment and there is no residency requirement" (intimations of Hillary Clinton's Senate campaign—where the ad also appeared—in 2000). Even the Florida recount after the 2000 presidential election became grist for the mill, as in the Doritos Chip inspector ad where chips, substituting for ballots, are held up to a light while the inspector says, "I've lost count." Bob Dole's public-service (erectile dysfunction) ad for Viagra is indexed in his Viagra-inflected Pepsi ad shown during the 2001 Superbowl, in which he extols his "little blue companion" and seems to be having a lot more fun on the beach than he did in the original public-service announcement/ad, in which he was shown alone in his office with an American flag. Bob Dole made his first Viagra disclosure on *Larry King Live*, and,

again in 2001, a NASCAR with the Viagra logo is shown racing around a track and then stopping, the driver opens the door, takes off his protective helmet, and asks, “Who were you expecting—Bob Dole?” One can argue that W-Bush did a lot of product placement in his appearances for the 2002 Winter Olympics. The ubiquity of these examples is not just a recent effect of a celebrity culture or some epiphenomena of infotainment.

Scholars such as Murray Edelman, Barbara Hinckley, Jeff Tulis, and Anne Norton have noted the specifically rhetorical or symbolic aspects of the American presidency.<sup>8</sup> Norton quotes Alexis de Tocqueville to the effect that the presidency is a *semiotic* function and links its signifying forms to practices of everyday life, from shopping and eating to popular court and lawyer television series. My presentation of the American presidents in this introduction focuses *less* on representative or semiotic (signifying) functions (which are addressed at length in chapters 2, 3, 5, and 7) than on their position as a site for an existential or experiential form of knowledge. In other words, one of the implicit claims I develop is that the *dialogue* between president and citizen is an *operational* as well as a *representational* form of knowledge.

When a major novelist like DeLillo in *Libra* speaks to us as Oswald, or a debutant author like Lydia Millet, in her more frivolous *George Bush, Dark Prince of Love*, stages an erotic transference, or a Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer such as Edmund Morris in *Dutch* casts himself in a Reagan presidential primal scene, these are self-conscious and publicized aspects of the daily use we make of our presidents, living and former. This “use” is often not conscious. Its logic is not necessarily linear and may be diffusely associative (what Deleuze might call rhizomatic),<sup>9</sup> but it can perhaps be best designated by what Donald Winnicott calls a transitional object and Christopher Bollas a transformational object.<sup>10</sup>

For Winnicott, transitional phenomena, both objects and spaces, “refer to a dimension of living that belongs neither to internal nor external reality; rather it is the place that both connects and separates inner and outer.”<sup>11</sup> Transitional objects and spaces are places of cultural experience, invention, and creative play, developmentally necessary for symbolization. In other words, in addition to a person’s intersubjective relations and intrapsychic world, “which can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war,” there is an intermediate (or third) area of expertise to which both inner and outer worlds contribute: “It is



an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated.”<sup>12</sup> The transitional object marks an important step in psychoanalytic theory between object-relating and use of an object; “from an observer’s point of view it is an aspect of the infant [subject’s] experience of his environment.”<sup>13</sup> What the pediatrician-psychologist Winnicott designates for a child-subject as an intermediate area is one between objective perception (i.e., that which is based on the reality principle or reality testing) and primary creativity.<sup>14</sup> It relates “subjective” reality to communal, “objectively perceived” shared reality and forms.

In Winnicott’s later writings, *The Place Where We Live*, he attempts to extend his insights from the child world to adult life, as a third way between behavioral therapy’s insistence on conditioned learning and traditional psychoanalysis’s exclusive focus on an inner life to the exclusion of environmental conditions (poverty, hunger): “If we look at our lives we shall probably find that we spend most of our time neither in behavior nor in contemplation, but somewhere else. I ask where? And I try to suggest an answer.”<sup>15</sup> The everyday spaces in which we live our lives are suggestive of those adumbrated by Anne Norton and Lauren Berlant, spaces in which daily citizen acts perform and reiterate ongoing processes of national identity construction (Norton) or form what Berlant designates as the national symbolic: “the National Symbolic is there for use, for exploration to construct a subjective dependency on what looks like the *a priori* structures of power.” Or, more generally, in a Walt Whitman-like formulation: “a National Symbolic, the common language of a common space.”<sup>16</sup>

Winnicott is attentive to the ways psychoanalytic theory does not adequately address the places and, more important, the kind of activity that goes into living one’s life as a citizen. Winnicott asks:

What for instance are we doing when we are listening to a Beethoven symphony or making a pilgrimage to a picture gallery or reading *Troilus and Cressida* in bed or playing tennis? . . . What is a group of teenagers doing participating in a pop session? It is not only what are we doing. The question also needs to be posed: Where are we (if anywhere at all)? Where are we when we are doing what in fact we do a great deal of our time, namely enjoying ourselves?<sup>17</sup>

Winnicott and certain object-relations analysts would argue that our transitional spaces are circumscribed by the national cultures we find ourselves in, and in engaging in these daily spaces we constitute ourselves as subjects/citizens. I am calling the “vernacular” what Winnicott and his followers would designate by the terms “culture” and play.” “Playing and cultural experiences are things that we value in a special way; they link the past, the present, and the future; they take up time and space. They demand and get our concentrated deliberate attention, deliberate but without too much of the deliberateness of trying.”<sup>18</sup> If I am insisting somewhat on using Winnicott’s conceptualizations, it is because his idea of the transitional phenomena is enunciated in a fashion similar to the presentation of those “rights” in the American Bill of Rights. Transitional phenomena allow for the pursuit of happiness: “In the normal person, a highly satisfactory experience such as may be obtained at a concert or at the theater or in a friendship may deserve a term such as ego orgasm, which draws attention to the climax and the importance of the climax.”<sup>19</sup> While I do not recall finding the exact expression “ego orgasm” in the documents of our Founding Fathers, Winnicott’s follower Christopher Bollas uses a more legally resonant language: “*Jouissance* is the subject’s inalienable right to ecstasy, a virtually legal imperative to pursue desire.”<sup>20</sup> And what I find most constructive in Winnicott’s formulation is a certain unresolved question about transitional phenomena: whether it was solely a result of a subject’s volition or simply a felicitous accident, a found object creatively utilized: “*Of the transitional phenomena it can be said that it is a matter of agreement . . . that we will never ask the question: Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from the start?*” (italics in the original).<sup>21</sup>

### *How the President Came into My Life: Screen Memories of a Citizen Theorist*

*Anthony De Curtis:* The Kennedy assassination seems perfectly in line with the concerns of your fiction. Do you feel you could have invented it if it had not happened?

*DeLillo:* Maybe it invented me.<sup>22</sup>

The American presidency functions as a transitional object for me in yet other ways. As I have argued, the American citizen meets or discovers

the president while going about her everyday life, or, as we say in the American idiom, going about one's business. My business or "day job" is that of a theorist trained in nineteenth- and twentieth-century continental thought and, more specifically, in contemporary French cultural and literary theory. My graduate training began with structural Marxism (Louis Althusser), Marxist semiotics (early Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard), and, in later moments, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Pierre Bourdieu. I later found "practical applications" of these theorists in my study of French fascist intellectuals and elite educational institutions. I spent the years 1979 to 1982 in France doing research, and I went back at every possible interval when I was not teaching French theorists or European institutions.

To make a long story short, I encountered the American president not in my early graduate training or teaching but in a far more banal and exemplary American way—on television. Returning from a summer's research trip to France, I arrived in America in time for the 1984 Republican convention. While watching the play of screens through which Reagan introduced himself via videotape (a photo of this moment was on the original book jacket of Michael Rogin's *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*), I was finally able to appreciate the two little *semiotexte* books by Jean Baudrillard (*Simulations* and *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities*) sent to me by an enthusiastic Yale student of mine, now a professor of German at Princeton. Tom Brokaw's frustration as a TV anchor ("I don't know what's real and what's electronically real") perfectly illustrated Baudrillard's notion of the "hyperreal," which I had previously found of little use in my research or teaching lives. As I began to read more Baudrillard, certain aspects of Reaganism that seemed to mesh perfectly with the idea of a hyperreal simulacrum became more salient.

Baudrillard enabled me more closely to engage with what was going on in America during Reagan's presidency, to pay attention to a situation that I had previously just hoped would go away. It would not be an exaggeration to say that Baudrillard made me a more informed American citizen and initiated a series of activities (paper giving, independent studies, conferences) that led to a professional involvement with American Studies. But Baudrillard (and later Lacan) functioned as a transitional object for me in another way, as well. While teaching a course on ideology at a large Midwestern university, I discovered that many conceptually difficult and verbally abstruse ideas of contemporary French

theory could be explicated to a heterogeneous undergraduate student body (without the requisite history-of-philosophy formation of my Yale students) by using the 1988 campaign as a sort of *lingua franca*. As the Reagan presidency gave way to that of George Herbert Walker Bush, I increasingly saw the American presidency as enacted or performed French theory. And, if Baudrillard improved my citizenship and teaching life, it was the first Bush who made me a Lacanian.

In other words, the postmodern presidency of George H. W. Bush drove me to Lacanian psychoanalysis, and Lacanian psychoanalysis in turn enabled me to watch Bush for four years. Bush was the medium through which some of Lacan's most seemingly opaque pronouncements (e.g., "the unconscious is on the outside," "I identify myself in language only by losing myself in it as object") finally made sense. Indeed, I began to wonder what people who did not read Lacan could possibly make of Bush. Indeed, Bush's parapraxes, what Lacan calls "linguistricks" ("*linguisterie*") or the "wacky lyricism" that Mark Crispin Miller has described as "a weird patois: the pidgin English of an old preppy on acid,"<sup>23</sup> necessitated a theoretical shift in my treatment of presidential rhetoric away from the semiotic and toward a more psychoanalytic approach. As will be explained at greater length in my reading of Bush's failed 1992 campaign (chapter 6) and of Clinton's botched first hundred days in office (chapter 8), parapraxes exemplify the unformalizable or unsymbolizable side of language that is most obvious in unconscious utterances, dreams, omissions, jokes, interruptions, and verbal or behavioral slips (bungled or symptomatic actions).

Bush, read in conjunction now with Lacan, initiated a shift in my critical standpoint that highlighted my divergence from linguistically inflected understandings of other scholars such as Edelman and Rogin. Edelman's description of leadership as a "banal dramaturgy"<sup>24</sup> whose major function was its sign value could accommodate a Bush as easily as a Reagan. Rogin was less willing than Edelman to see the presidency as an empty sign and placed greater emphasis on the referential or contextual in the service of a grand meta-narrative of American demonology. Rogin's brilliant knack for discovering and incorporating the often absurdist aspects of historical coincidence enriched his historicist perspective. Rogin did appeal (as we will see in chapters 2, 3, and 8) to Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalytic concepts and ably described the repetitive process of historical trauma and disavowal.

Lacanian psychoanalysis shifted my reading away from the rhetorical

or symbolic politics tradition that focused on *purposive signs* or *intentional* framings of the speech situation and toward symptomatic effects or what is unconscious. The priority of the unconscious is subtended by a claim about the nature of knowledge: “Knowledge is what is already there, but always in the Other.” Knowledge, in other words, is not a substance but “a structural dynamic . . . (which) comes about out of the mutual apprenticeship between two partially unconscious speakers which *both say more than they know*” (emphasis mine).<sup>25</sup>

### *Baudrillard Goes to Washington*

It is no longer theories which adapt themselves to events, but the reverse. Events now adapt themselves to the most hostile environments, like species adaptation. —Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*<sup>26</sup>

The first Bush presidency not only displaced my critical posture from semiotics to psychoanalysis. I also became increasingly aware that the presidency was telling a meta-theoretical story about Baudrillardian sign theory where presidents would mark different moments of the simulacrum. “The Mirror of Reproduction: Baudrillard and Reagan’s America” was my first attempt to situate the presidency away from discussions of representation and toward a more radical recasting of the semiotic object. Ronald Reagan has remained for many the iconic post-modern president, raising the scripted or televisual Kennedy communicational legacies to the new art form of the photo op. In his Simi Valley Presidential Library, there is a room dedicated to the “second Reagan revolution,” resplendent with displays of television sets tuned to CNN and VCR machines, reminiscent of a Nam June Paik installation. So it is perhaps not inappropriate to organize my narrative around Baudrillard’s concept of the simulacrum as the “iconic postmodern concept.”<sup>27</sup> I am not doing this to reduce Baudrillard’s theoretical contribution to a narrow “simulation” fashion moment (which would play as the bad “irresponsible” episode in a parallel-universe theory genre series “I Love the Eighties”). Rather, the simulacrum is key to Baudrillard’s critique of the real as a semiotic category. It is this category of the “real” and its putative erasure or endangerment that has increasingly become an object of concern in our political culture today—whether in derogatory references to the “reality-based community” found among

W-Bush's advisers<sup>28</sup> or generative of inventive neologisms such as Stephen Colbert's "truthiness." It also became an issue when John McCain made a cameo appearance on 24, provoking charges of genre-blurring induced propaganda.

This critique of the real can be related to his earlier works of ideology critique such as *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, where Baudrillard performs a deconstruction of sign value analogous to that of Marx on exchange value and money in *Capital*. A secondary content in both sign and commodity first appears "natural" (or "external"). This is the signified or the referent for the sign, or use value or needs for the commodity form. This "secondary" or derived form then is shown to be actually *internal to* and *produced by* the hegemonic form that serves as its effective support. The exchange value (Marx) or sign value of the president (Anne Norton) "is not external, but is a product of the sign and its prior reduction of this complex experiential symbolic relationship."<sup>29</sup> Thus, "reality" or "reference" is like the money form for Marx—a phantom, a spectral effect, or a trace. In other words, what we call the real—this semiotic real of the president designated by Tocqueville and Norton—is only a "semiotic reality effect." Baudrillard uses the same example of the table as Marx. "The 'real' table does not exist. If it can be registered in its identity (if it exists), this is because it has already been designated, abstracted, and rationalized by the separation that establishes it in this equivalence to itself."<sup>30</sup> It is this "equivalence to itself" that marked Reagan's career as president, according to his biographer Lou Cannon. It was *the role of a lifetime*: himself!

One narrative trajectory in *This Is Not a President* tracks this semiotic critique of the real through presidencies read against turns within Baudrillard's theory of the simulacrum (as well as the defensive—or symbolic—resistance to this process of semioticization). Understanding of this concept is often obscured by Baudrillard's dual and at times inconsistent genealogies of it. As both genealogies frame my analysis of presidents, I will briefly outline pertinent aspects of each, retaining the original French publication date next to the translated English title.

Baudrillard's first genealogy, "The Order of Simulacra" (*Symbolic Exchange and Death*, 1976), begins in the Renaissance. Signs exchange against each other, rather than against the real. This is due to the structural revolution in value that he had previously outlined in *Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Semiotic processes (like those of economic-capital formation) accelerate and absorb the referent. This leads

to hyperreal forms that are conceived from the point of view of their reproductivity or model. Ronald Reagan begins here at this moment of the hyperreal simulacrum. The second genealogy, detailed in “The Procession of Simulacra” (*Simulation and Simulacra*, 1981), is more Nietzschean. It has more import for later presidents such as Clinton and W-Bush, who conform to the theories of Baudrillard’s recent formulations of virtual and integral reality (respectively, *The Perfect Crime*, 1996; *Paroxysm*, 1997; *Impossible Exchange*, 1999; *The Lucidity Pact*, 2004.) Here the story is about the sign’s *dissimulation*. We can begin with Reagan as a sign that dissimulates *something* and turn to signs (such as the first President Bush) that dissimulate *nothing*. The starting point for the second genealogy is with the Christian iconoclasts and addresses the divine referential or code-DNA (or its French homonym, *adonai-ADN*).

The sign that dissimulates nothing rather than something is the switchpoint that separates my presentation of Reagan in chapter 2 as a hyperreal (hologram) from my reading of Bush in “This Is Not a President: Baudrillard, Bush, and Enchanted Simulation” (chapter 4) as a *trompe l’oeil*. For the *trompe l’oeil* referenced in the title of this chapter (and the larger book title) responds to the oppositional logic Baudrillard names “seduction.” The hologram and *trompe l’oeil* both master the world of appearances, but they do so differently; *trompe l’oeil* withdraws a dimension, while a hyperreal hologram disturbs visuality by projection. Seduction disrupts the ideological process, which has been brilliantly resumed by Mike Gane as “the semiological reduction of the symbolic.” It is in *Seduction* (1979) that Baudrillard sees the sign itself as offering, in Charles Levin’s words, “the best available medium for the irruption of the symbolic.”<sup>31</sup> Another way to mark this turn is to see it as a reversal of the Levi-Straussian opposition between sign and symbolic order; now the sign becomes necessary to the symbolic’s realization. Baudrillard denotes this anthropological turn within the sign itself by the seemingly oxymoronic term, “the *enchanted* simulacrum.” The enchantment or charm comes from turning the “evil forces” (*le malin génie*) of appearance against truth itself. This is part of my reading of Bush’s otherwise politically tone-deaf response to the fall of the Berlin Wall.

The next stage of Baudrillard’s sign theory sets a “disenchanted” simulacrum against the enchanted one and comes to the fore during the Clinton presidency. As outlined in *The Perfect Crime* (1996), reality has

become excessively realized in a virtual order that is so technically perfect and absolute in its semio-realization of “reality” that it eclipses it. To distinguish this from Reagan hyperreality, I refer to this as “ultra” reality (as well as virtual reality or digital reality). It might be useful to consider another synonym for such technical perfection, first utilized in *Seduction*: “high fidelity” as the trope of the real’s relation to itself in time and dimension. High fidelity is, of course, also a homonym for the exciting cause of Clinton’s impeachment.<sup>32</sup> Baudrillard’s language is resonant here: “Something else fascinates (but no longer seduces) you: technological perfection, ‘high fidelity,’ which is just as *obsessive and puritanical as the other conjugal fidelity*” (emphasis mine).<sup>33</sup>

This virtual order described as the next level of the simulacrum is one of high definition and real time. Baudrillard sees it not as a flight from or overcoming of realism but rather a veritable *orgy* of realism: “rage . . . to summon everything before the jurisdiction of signs.”<sup>34</sup> This could be a better way to read the mania of the Starr report and all the investigations that plagued the Clintons, from the travel office inquiry to Whitewater to questions about the death of Vince Foster to the haircut logs, all of which are analyzed in the second half of chapter 7. Pornography becomes the condensation figure for this obsessive ultra realism, otherwise denoted as a “voyeurism of exactitude,”<sup>35</sup> where both the symbolic scene and relationality vanish.

Hypervisibility replaces previous modalities of spectatorial reciprocity. Saturation by absolute reality in the form of twenty-four-hour news channels on cable and satellite television and of the Internet exacerbate reality to the point of paroxysm, where it involutes of its own accord and leaves no trace. If Reagan was for Joan Copjec “the Shroud of Turin” (and *Spy* magazine, contemporaneous with his presidency, ran a visual gag—a cartoon of “guest towels of Turin where there was some traces left”),<sup>36</sup> the virtual revisits this figure in a more abyssal form: “In the shroud of the virtual the corpse of the real is forever unfindable.”<sup>37</sup> What Baudrillard’s title *The Perfect Crime* alludes to is the murder of reality by virtual reality. “Honey, I Shrunk the President: Psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, and the Clinton Presidency” (chapter 7) examines the way the real has now become an extreme phenomenon once it has been expelled from its own principle in the form of theories of wound culture and other practices of abjection I designate as “tabloid liberalism.” I read the pathologization of Clinton’s body and presidency, as well as the state-of-emergency tenor of the impeachment process as



signs of a virtual order in which referential substance has become increasingly rare and even events have adapted themselves to theory. The first part of the Clinton chapter in particular examines what happens in an era of ultra reality, when the political spectacle gives way to the reality show and the president shifts from serving as mirror to serving as a screen. In ultra reality, we no longer fight shadows but transparency.

Baudrillard's more recent writings (immediately pre- as well as post-9/11) have tracked the metaphysical disappearance of reality in ways that anticipate and disturbingly resonate with life in W-Bush's America. For it is not that the real itself no longer exists but rather that its *principle* has faltered (or, perhaps, reality has overwhelmed its principle). In *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact*, Baudrillard designates this as *réalité intégrale* (complete or integral reality), a specific form of virtual reality predicated upon the deregulation of the reality principle. The virtual has become reality's ultimate predator: "The differential of time having disappeared, it is the integral function that wins out."<sup>38</sup> Baudrillard relentlessly tracks "immaterial" technologies of immanence, immersion, and immediacy as operational fetishes that absorb exteriority, reabsorb interiority, and no longer allow for adequate representation. The mirror gives way to the "cold epilepsy and overcharged inertia"<sup>39</sup> of screens. And irony is no longer ours to exercise, as it now resides in the object.

Baudrillard states clearly that hyperreality is the simulacrum's last stage (Reagan will be its last president). And virtual reality (to which we have become accustomed since Clinton) is decidedly not a simulacrum. Computer-generated equivalents and images are not signs. Moreover, even the sign is not what it used to be, "since there is no longer any 'real' for it to be the sign of. . . . This is the era of the digital, where the technologies of the virtual accomplish this miracle of abolishing both the thing and the sign."<sup>40</sup> *Impossible Exchange* provides further philosophical elaboration of Baudrillard's insights concerning the virtual in *Perfect Crime*. These are discussed in chapter 7, on the Clinton presidency, but can be briefly summarized as the idea of *telepresence* (how the collapsing of time and distance short-circuits "real" life and how the media, and especially television, now inhabit real life from the inside, on the model of a virus and cell): *high definition* (real time is hi-def time; porn is hi-def sex, the human genome is hi-def body). The world described in *Impossible Exchange* is that of speculative capital: "As for the sign, it is passing into the pure speculation and simulation of the

virtual world, the world of the total screen, where the same uncertainty hovers over the real and virtual reality. *Once they go their separate ways, the real no longer has any force as sign and signs no longer have any force of meaning*” (emphasis mine).<sup>41</sup> This also changes the very nature of the object. “In all areas it evades us. It now appears only as a fleeting trace on computer screens. At the ends of their experimenting, the most advanced sciences can only register its disappearance.”<sup>42</sup> Reality itself has become simulative in ways that have unmoored semiotics and the possibility of a critical approach to presidents and to events.

In simulation, the real object is taken for a sign. “But in a subsequent stage the sign becomes an object again, but not now a real object; an object much further removed from the real than the sign itself—an object off-camera, outside representation, a fetish. No longer an object to the power of the sign but an object to the power of the object—a pure, unrepresentable, unexchangeable object, yet a non-descript one.”<sup>43</sup> Baudrillard references Agamben and says one can use the language of fetishism or perversion (as I do in my reading of W-Bush in chapter 9), but he marks this process otherwise. This transmutation of a sign into an object (a redoubled simulation) redoubles the abstraction (as it does in Marx’s analysis of commodities), rendering the fetish even more invulnerable and immunizing the subject from his object of desire. The metaphysics of fetishistic investment is at work in the presidency of George W. Bush (although the Democrats do help), which places him in a different relation to the truth and the real than Reagan, who also seemed at times untouchable by history or fact. Fetishistic investment is an extreme form of singularity and literality. (Singularity, in Klossowski’s definition, is “a sign without content.”)

Events (such as 9/11) increasingly displace the object, as they alone are real, as opposed to the nonevents of the news/information/media: “If we see history as a film, . . . then the ‘truth’ of information consists in the post-synchronization, the dubbing and subtitling of the film of history.”<sup>44</sup> The event resists or is recalcitrant to the nonevent of news/information. These mutations of the sign and the object into the more compelling figures of the fetish and the event suggest that there are more than surface dissimilarities between the conflation of fact and fiction or the exposure of presidential lies (Iran-Contra for Reagan, WMDs for Bush). This only underscores the temptation to read and reread these narratives in terms of their denouement or retrospective illusion.

## Enjoy Your Presidential Symptoms

Terrorists never stop thinking of ways to hurt the American people and  
neither do we. —G. W. Bush, August 11, 2004<sup>45</sup>

Our second theoretical trajectory concerns presidential subjectivity and the types of unconscious national identifications that undergird a president's appeal. For the president is less a symbol or a sign than what Lacan denotes as a master signifier, a locus for projections and desires that constitute our identity. In his recent book *Cruel and Unusual*, Mark Crispin Miller calls the current President Bush “our projector-in-chief.”<sup>46</sup> The term “master signifier” arises from a homonymic play between being and mastery. “*M’être à moi-même*” is the urge to master/be master [*maître*] myself by being myself [*m’être*] to myself.<sup>47</sup> Lacanian psychoanalysis is concerned with the intersubjective dialectic of identity construction, that is, the president as stand-in or avatar, our fetish in practice as well as in theory.

I move from an early presentation of the first President Bush in the 1988 electoral campaign (chapter 4) that uses his parapraxis as a signifying form (i.e., a *trompe l’oeil*) as illustrative of male hysteria to the interpellative appeal of his presidential performance as male masochist in 1992, the subject of “Bush, the Man Who Sununu Too Much: Male Trouble and Presidential Subjectivity” (chapter 5). My attempt to enjoy Bush’s symptom (in Žizek’s terminology) led me ultimately to read him as an *enactment* of what were (at the time) cutting-edge queer cultural studies and feminist film studies theories. Bush becomes in this chapter, as Hillary does later on (in chapter 6, “‘Chicks with Dicks’: Transgendering the Presidency”), a performance artist of contemporary 1990s theory concerning (possible) gender subversions—in the appropriation of formerly female-gendered pathologies (male masochism for Bush) or masquerade and drag (for Hillary).

There is also a meta-narrative about Lacanian theory in my presentation of presidents as related to the three registers—symbolic, real, and imaginary. Reagan exemplifies a symbolic identification. He was an “inimitable” figure. Symbolic presidents are great condensation symbols, serving as points of identification: “from the point from which I am being observed to appear likeable to myself.” The first President Bush and Bill Clinton are presidents illustrative of imaginary identification: “the

way I see myself in order to appear likeable.”<sup>48</sup> We identify with “imaginary” presidents (in Zizek’s formulation) to the point at which he is like us. (This is why Kerry, Gore, and Lionel Jospin never had a chance in an age of imaginary and not symbolic leadership.) The second chapter on Hillary Clinton (chapter 9, “Hillary Regained”) tracks the first lady’s successful transformation into senator and asks if her story is one of gender and its tie to the imaginary register. Or is her “electability” a question of sexuality linked to the real? (This is a question we also could ask about Barack Obama’s appeal.) A gender-oriented reading of Hillary would still be refracted from the masquerade and would situate her more coherent performance along the lines of “extreme” imaginary makeover. A reading premised on the real would see her less as an ego ideal than as an object of desire or *jouissance*. W-Bush’s war presidency (as discussed in chapter 8, “Father, Can’t You See I’m Bombing? A Bush Family Romance”) is situated on the terrain of the real. Successful presidential contenders for 2008 will be on the register of the real—displaying either perversion (McCain) or the Other *jouissance* (Hillary, Obama).

Another way of viewing the difference between Bush *père* et Bush *fil*s is tied to the changing status of the Oedipus complex in Lacan’s work, which views it less as a Levi-Straussian myth than as a “dream” to be interpreted. Different presidents represent different father figures. The contrast is greatest between Ronald Reagan and W-Bush. Ronald Reagan is the canonical Oedipal father. The Oedipal father establishes law, which comes before transgression. The father in the Oedipus complex is subject to the same law that he has transmitted to his child (e.g., the prohibition on incest). W-Bush, in contrast, is the model’s inverted figure—the Oedipal father as *père sévère* or pervert, as I argue in chapter 8. In Russell Grigg’s formulation, “the pervert is not limited by any submission to the law of an order transcendent to him.”<sup>49</sup> (He is “the decider.”) Perversion specifies a relation to the law, and we see this in W-Bush’s unprecedented use of signing statements to evacuate the contents of a law; in the crafting of the Military Commissions Act, which enables the president to, in effect, make law through his interpretation of Article 3 of the Geneva Convention; in his preemptive firing of U.S. Attorneys and his replacing them with others who are subject to no confirmation process or court approval; and in his attempts either to circumvent or to perform an end run around the FISA court.

This different Oedipal figure is presented in Lacan's *Séminaire XVII* as a "father retroactively created as the father who enjoys" in *Totem and Taboo*. (It is interesting to note that this 1968 seminar of Lacan, first published in 1991, has achieved prominence in the years of the W-Bush presidency in the works of Joan Copjec, Slavoj Žižek, Alenka Zupancic, and others of the Ljubljana school.) If the aim of paternal prohibition in Oedipus was to contain, regulate, or otherwise pacify the ferocity and omnipotence of the m/Other, this revised father takes on all this maternal power, cruelty, and omnipotence. My Bush family romance retrospectively reads the first George Bush as a primal father who enjoys (in chapter 8) and tracks the rhetorical displacements of the Bar m/Other from strong maternal superego holding AIDS babies during the 1992 State of the Union to a cold and cruel counterpart, revealed to devastating effect by the First Mother's remarks concerning the effects of Hurricane Katrina and on the Iraqi dead. On *Good Morning America*, Barbara Bush issued a preemptive strike against showing full war coverage on television: "Why should we hear about body bags and deaths and how many, what day it is gonna happen? . . . It's not relevant. So why should I waste my beautiful mind on that?" Her remarks on the displaced Katrina victims in the Houston Astrodome received similar media attention: "So many of the people in the arena here, you know, were underprivileged anyway so this is working very well for them."<sup>50</sup> This was not the strong, reassuring maternal figure of chapters 4 and 5 but a figure of sovereign enjoyment: haughty, cold, indifferent, and cruel.

*Séminaire XVII* dramatically realigned the prior relation between the master signifier and enjoyment in Lacan's previous writings. *Jouissance* is a difficult notion to give an account of. It is, by Lacan's own statements, not definable, as it is precisely that which escapes symbolization.<sup>51</sup> In seminars such as *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the signifier was in an antinomical tension with enjoyment. Later, in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, both concepts were put together along the lines of a structural analogy of heterogeneous elements. It is with *Séminaire XVII* that enjoyment and the signifier are posited together as "an essential element of every discursivity."<sup>52</sup> And this co-imbrication reveals that enjoyment is a political factor. Lacan makes explicit the linkage between *jouissance* and politics in this seminar at the moment when he interrogates the place of psychoanalysis in politics.<sup>53</sup> *Jouissance* takes place in

the body through *invasions* and *inscriptions*. One of my favorite analyses is that of Parveen Adams, who says that there is no direct relation to *jouissance* and that we attain access to it through its leftovers. She issues a caveat: “I will add that *jouissance* isn’t very nice, and . . . your mother should have warned you against it.”<sup>54</sup> While the body is the “enjoying substance” (as Lacan discusses in *Séminaire XX: Encore*), one can know enjoyment only through the detour of a signifier. Paul Verhaeghe describes how this comes about in a language resonant of Bush as “wartime” president. *Jouissance* takes place in the body through *invasions*. But they are inscribed on the body through the *intervention* of the Other. “Walking along the road to *jouissance*, one will inevitably follow the signs that have been previously erected along the road. This instinctual knowledge is then grafted onto this mapping.”<sup>55</sup> This occurs through repetitions—as attempts to attain *jouissance*—yet with inevitable detours.

I conclude my situating of the chapters anachronistically—by recasting my first Lacanian reading, “Oliver North and the Lying Nose” (chapter 3), last. This chapter takes as its target a covert operation, Iran-Contra, that functioned as a surplus object to my earlier account of Reaganism. That this is what Žižek might call an “excremental remainder” or *objet a* might be confirmed by the fact that it was (once again) a “missing portion” during the necrospective extravaganza of the Reagan funeral media blitz. Iran once again figures prominently in the news. Mark Crispin Miller cites the rehabilitation of perpetrators of Iran-Contra; John Poindexter, Otto Reich, Elliot Abrams, and John Negroponte all work or worked in the Bush government. Fawn Hall’s testimony in support of Oliver North sounds very familiar in a post-9/11 world: “Sometimes you have to go above the written law.”<sup>56</sup> This necessary duplicity is invoked by the use of a religious figure: “What Ollie North did was basically the moral equivalent of what spies and Rahab did in Jericho. Rahab lied to protect lives.”<sup>57</sup> Robert Gates (an Iran-Contra protagonist) is now Donald Rumsfeld’s replacement as secretary of defense; Daniel Ortega is even president of Nicaragua again.

Daily news is punctuated with public disclosures of governmental “breaches” (a movie recently opened with that name): of secret rendition, warrantless wiretapping, the “outing” of an intelligence officer, Valerie Plame. Both the Iran-Contra affair and the W-Bush presidency share issues of dubious legality, obsessive secrecy, and hypocritical “leaking.” They both expose the relative impotence of hermeneutic unmasking ges-

tures. In this chapter, I present two nonhermeneutic models with which to interpret Iran-Contra: either as Derridean “open letters” or according to a model of such a radically designifed text that it must first be fantastically reconstituted. (Abraham and Torok). I suggest that we do the same for the current administration. Reagan vowed that he did not exchange arms for hostages; he parsed a health bulletin to the American people: “I did not have cancer. I had something in me that had cancer in it and it was removed.” W-Bush tells us about the Iraq war: “We are not winning. We are not losing.” We can read this media-critiqued “bubble of denial” as a crypt (as outlined in chapter 3): as a designifed utterance, along the lines of an *anti*-semantics. One of the lessons of Iran-Contra concerns not just the political robustness of an Oliver North or a Robert Gates—as recent cabinet choices have shown, there are second and third political acts, and you can go home (to Washington) again and again. Iran-Contra (like Operation Iraqi Freedom) is a story about how language in a national-security state is not about signification; neither metaphors nor literal meanings are used in an ordinary language sense. The meaning of signs now radiates in a radically undetermined way. This goes beyond Orwellian “doublespeak,” which is why that felicitous concept cannot apprehend it. (Partly this is no doubt also due to the processes described by Baudrillard as outlined earlier.) “Language is set at an angle with itself and shatters all linear correspondence.” Would this aphorism of Derrida’s provide a more productive framing than “hypocrisy” or “lies,” albeit a framing that drives Keith Olbermann nuts and provides grist for Stephen Colbert or Jon Stewart’s objective irony?

It (*Ça*) begins with a tickle and it finishes in a blaze of *gasoline*. That’s *jouissance*. (*Séminaire XVII*: 83)

Language set against itself and language inextricably linked with *jouissance* are my apparent alternatives to a more conventional study of presidential politics as symbol, media effect, or institution. But these are also ways of becoming more intimate with language’s “real,” its non-sense. Lacan’s most directly political *Séminaire XVII* demonstrated how closely bound were the signifier and enjoyment, but also how they exist in a paradoxical tension: “the signifier is both the cause of the impossibility of reaching *jouissance* and simultaneously, the path to its attainment.”<sup>58</sup> In these new times of war and death (to trope on Freud),

psychoanalysis presents a different way of “enjoying something that is not transcendent, but which lies within the subject, *though not hidden in its depths.*” I concur with Eric Laurent in finding Lacan’s teachings a warning against forms of prevalent fascist desire: “There are many ways of enjoying something besides the Other’s signifiers in me.”<sup>59</sup>