

**Obama and World-Making: Art, Language, and Leadership –
Imagery as Constitutive of Political Action**

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Preface

The 2008 Obama Presidential campaign will likely become one of the most discussed, debated and analyzed political campaigns this century. It was a fascinating spectacle and provides much food for academic thought. For our purposes, the campaign provides a context for testing a template for interpreting political activity. This essay will attempt first to describe this template and its core assumptions. This will require the political scientist's patience since it draws on models beyond the boundaries of the discipline conventionally conceived. Second, we shall illustrate our understandings at work in the Obama campaign.

Most of us would admit that the content of political thought and action may be affected to some extent by its form. In short, charisma, style, and rhetorical skills may act as allies to content. But this is a minimal claim, even if we assess political leaders from Kerry to Gore, Blair to Brown, or Harper to Ignatieff using these measures. The stronger claim would be that form may *constitute* content rather than merely reflect or adorn it, and this is the claim that we shall defend. But what kind of claim is this? What kind of evidence could be adduced to make the claim plausible? Our intent is for readers to conclude that this claim is not an intellectual romance but crucial to understanding how meaning is made and shared. But we wish to argue that the emergence of a particular sense of form or what we shall term *imagery* may be less a strategy than an ontological and epistemological condition. Imagery is no less than the process by which art *works* and in turn, the arbiter of political success.

There can be few issues that have received the level of interdisciplinary study that now surrounds the ways in which language operates. From the essays of Orwell to the structuralist theories of Chomsky and Levi Strauss, we have become used to the idea that language is a lot more complicated than vocabulary and syntax. For fifty years, we have become more sophisticated in our understanding of particular aspects of language – of, for example, the mechanics and function of tropes such as metaphor. We have witnessed a resurgence of interest in semiotics and rhetoric, and sociology has continued to develop theories around language and the media.

We have taken as our starting point the work of two theorists – Lakoff and Edelman. Through Lakoff’s interest in metaphor and framing and Edleman’s conviction about the power of art in constructing meaning, political science has an opportunity to reexamine some of its epistemological assumptions.

The contribution that we offer is the suggestion that a concept of *imagery* may help to illuminate the successes and failures of political strategies. An image is a picture. But four things are important to our analysis.

1. this picture may be actual or imagined such that poetry as well as paintings may “conjure up rich imagery”.
2. an artist’s imagery refers to more than subject matter – we are invited to enter a world of connections, a nexus of values.
3. imagery has the power to transform us since a convincing world suspends our disbelief.
4. we engage imagery through feeling or intuition which always trumps our capacity to reason.
5. Images are created *Art process*. This process involves three phases - art, design and craft.

This work is an exercise in multidisciplinary collaboration - Dr. Jeffrey MacLeod is a political studies professor at Mount Saint Vincent University (Halifax, NS) and Dr. Nick Webb is a professor of historical and critical studies at NSCAD University (Halifax, NS).

Part 1

Frames and Narratives

George Lakoff argues in *The Political Mind* that we acquire mental *frames* through the process of neural binding, which leads to acquiring ever deepening narratives (Lakoff, 2008). In the interests of constructing meaning, we continually assemble wholes from what may be disparate signs – i.e. we seek connections that will constitute a template for interpreting the world. In short, we participate in producing the lenses through which we see. Lakoff notes that cognitive sciences now show that mental frames can be formed and activated by both words and pictures. An interesting aspect of this is that much of this framing occurs at the unconscious level - it happens whether we will it or not. For example, the label *prime minister of Canada* immediately evokes a mental image. Even if we are not aware of the physical characteristic of the current prime minister, an image appears in our mind's eye. That image comes from a frame(s) - perhaps one featuring a picture of an older Caucasian man in a business suit, and phrases such as *24 Sussex Drive*, or *Parliament Hill*. In turn these pictures and phrases conjure up political parties, arguments, policies, and the evening news. If we allow ourselves another level of reflection, perhaps we reach a plethora of personal convictions – senses of right and wrong action. And all this culminates in deeper narratives - our senses of community, democracy, freedom, equality and justice. So perhaps it is more difficult for someone not caught by our collective frame to become prime minister.

Unconscious or otherwise, we would agree with Lakoff that our values reside deep within us, such that they guide our felt responses even before we translate our responses into language - i.e. we feel or intuit before we know. In terms of framing, deep frames inform our surface frames.

The implications of Lakoff's work and the scholarship related to cognitive and neuro sciences, for investigating political activity are profound. If we accept his theory, how should political science respond? From the outset, Lakoff directly confronts the tenets of the liberal Enlightenment's conceptions of reason. He argues that liberal reason conceived as being conscious, universal, disembodied, logical, unemotional, value-neutral, interest-based, and literal - is simply misconceived: "Enlightenment reason does not account for real political behaviour because the Enlightenment view of reason is false" (Lakoff, 2008, p. 8). But it is this Liberal reason that informs many of the theoretical frameworks that guide contemporary

political science. For example, *rational choice* theory and *classical realism* are both rooted in the notion of the individual agent as a self-interested, rational being. If accepted, Lakoff's thesis demands that we re-think the assumptions implicit in our principles of rationality and realism.

The threat to conventional assumptions has not come just from Lakoff. For example, some social science theorists use a *narrative analysis* framework to interpret reality (see Clemons and McBeth, 2009, pp. 197 -199 and Emery, 1994). History too has subscribed to such analysis. For example, W.B. Gallie understands all social activity as narrative - a concept parallel to our concept of deep frame. Gallie describes history in terms of an effort to follow a story:

Following a story is, at one level, a matter of understanding words, sentences, paragraphs, set out in order. But at a much more important level it means to understand the successive actions and thoughts and feelings of certain described characters with a peculiar directness, and to be pulled forward by this development almost against our will: we commonly appreciate, without needing to articulate to ourselves, many of the reasons and motives and interests upon which the story's development up towards its climax depends (Gallie, 1964, p. 22).

Lakoff too uses the idea of narrative:

We live our narratives. The lived story is at the center of modern personality theory. The theory of neural computation...shows how our brains not only permit this, but favour it. The typical roles played in narratives include Hero, Victim, and Helper...The roles in narratives that you understand yourself as fitting give meaning to your life, including the emotional color that is inherent in narrative structures (Lakoff, 2008: 33).

Within political science, the work of Murray Edelman directly challenged the discipline from a vantage point sympathetic with Lakoff et al.. He spent most of his career defending the notion that art rather than *decorating* political concepts, actually *defines* them. It is worth acknowledging Edelman's work in order to set a context for Lakoff's notion of *framing* and figuration as a lens for viewing political behaviour.

Edelman's *From Art to Politics: How Artistic Creations Shape Political Conceptions* was engaging and innovative for both the worlds of both art and politics. Artists search constantly for affirmation and politicians seek consistently to theorize the essentially practical endeavour of keeping community in tact for somebody's benefit. And so potentially artists can feel less marginal and decorative, and political scientists can potentially gain insight into the nature and role of a social engineering tool often invisible to the theorizing eye. Edelman's work was largely an account of twentieth century art objects seen from a political perspective. Perhaps Edelman's most important observation was that the arts could be seen as means for the construction of plausible and convincing narratives. He notes that there is no "immaculate perception" and that our sense of the world is gained

through a variety of constructs that we strive to interpret as objective and rational, but which are the results of artistic images:

Works of art generate the ideas about leadership, bravery, cowardice, altruism, dangers, authority, and fantasies about the future that people typically assume to be reflections of their own observations and reasoning.....Political beliefs and actions spring from assumptions, biases, and news reports. In this critical sense politics is a drama taking place in an assumed and reported world that evokes threats and hopes, a world people do not directly observe or touch. (Edelman, 1995 p.1-3).

Like Lakoff et al, Edelman maintains that we perceive and conceive in the light of narratives - seeing is "based on expectations and imagination" and politicians of any persuasion "protect fantasies from challenge" (Edelman, 1995, p.16).

It must be said that Edelman's ideas have not changed the direction of political science. We believe that had he reflected upon art as a form of thinking, a process, a way of engaging the world, rather than as an aggregate of objects, his influences would have been the stronger. It is easy to be blinkered by personal and often domestic experiences with art objects and our ensuing judgments – we all know what we like. But suppose we put on hold our personal art exemplars and our evaluative criteria of virtuosity, beauty, verisimilitude etc. Suppose instead that we imagine Art as a somewhat complex *process* that features three temporal phases – free envisioning, engagement with constraints, and making. Put differently, if we allow art with a small "a" to connote the envisioning phase, then the Art process includes art, design, and craft. We shall argue that the result of this process is the production of an *image*. We shall then contemplate the role of the image in constructing and maintaining frames.

Form as spin

We have become accustomed to the minimal claims of form. For example, we expect the *spinning* of political content - the selective limiting or tilting of content so that rhetorical effect is maximised. There is sleight of hand involved - *spin* is an engineering strategy to achieve a predetermined end – and it is this predetermination that renders spin what Collingwood would call a *craft* rather than an art (1938). Lakoff (2004) noted that subject matter, whether in words or pictures, operates within a "frame" – i.e. that words connote other words or that linguistic lint attaches to every sign. These connections are cumulative and build wholes. We can attempt to build or amend frames consciously. By way of example, Lakoff notes the Republican history of reliance on the word *taxation* operating in a negative frame – we are, for example, "oppressed by a government taking what is ours". He notes the Democrat reliance on a positive frame - that taxation is what "provides services for, and builds community". What matters here is that concepts have valances – they link with other concepts. The developing frame determines the links and may be crafted and recrafted. Spin

and style are the strategies of frame builders (Lakoff, 2004).

Similarly, in everyday language, an *image* is a construction - "she took care to keep up her image" or "her image required that she always dressed in style". We may note that image here, like *spin* has an almost fraudulent sense – it is constructed as a mask. It is worth probing the nature of *imagery* a little further. If we say on leaving an exhibition that "I admire the artist's skill but remain unmoved by his imagery", we have lost the fraudulent sense. We are also referring to more than simple re-presentations. We are not referring merely to subject matter, but to the range of ideas that the subject connotes – i.e. the *frame*. Imagery in this sense presents an artist's worldview - *a particular nexus of ideas and values*. Put simply, *re-presentation* is merely a vehicle for the content of the frame. The "tenor" (Wheelright, 197), the point or message of art, is always *presented*. This was Langer's point in arguing that an "art symbol" differs from a regular symbol in that the art symbol stands only for itself. This is the sense in which the art work must be presentational. Put differently, the artist cheats conventional language and finds analogies or *images* of human feeling, where feeling is not limited to *emotions* (which in turn may be interpreted as symptoms of feeling).

We may succeed or fail in our efforts to mould form or to image. But we should remember that content must also be interpreted by those who engage it and so meaning may always be more or less than we intend. It is important to note that imagery seems to be an amalgam of mind's eye pictures (remembered and imagined) and words, stated or tacit, – an amalgam that is not reducible to its components. In short, idea is *embodied* in form; picture in word and vice versa. The implication of this is that politicians and political scientists might consider that art and imagery are not so much decorative devices or strategies but more like *ways of being*. They provide entrance to *worlds* that we are strongly invited to inhabit. As Max Black noted, metaphors not only "demand uptake" – they *interrogate* us. The power of Churchill was in his being Churchill, not in his acting capabilities. Churchill was, in a sense, an *image* or a world. To recognise the power of the *image* is to be empowered. Some will argue that it was simply Churchill's *character* or *personality* that made him an icon of leadership. These are elements in the frame as are the historical context, his voice, his clenched expression, his clarity, his cigar, his dog etc., and his uncanny sense of competing frames.

The medium of political discourse is language - clarity, insight, and persuasiveness are prerequisites for success. But this language and the thought it permits is not merely spoken – it may be *imaged*. A number of thinkers (Collingwood, Langer, Gadamer, Dufrenne), have used the distinction between *speech* and *language* precisely to make this point. Language is a historical concept. Speech is emergent.

Image and picture

There are few who fail to see the power of pictures in our cultural life. We understand that the Internet and TV are visual media, that consumerism depends on attracting our attention and pictures do that well. For half a century, we have expressed concern over the *power* of the media and particularly the visual ones. The power is derived from the fact that media messages are broadly cast, biased by necessary selection, and often significantly visual. We have even ensured that children receive courses to help them interpret and even resist this power. Part of our concern is that we have long recognised that *a picture may be worth a thousand words*, whether for good or ill. Many parents still believe that comics will likely stunt their children's intellectual growth. But it is *images*, not merely *pictures* that they should fear - for *image* carries ideas and values.

Often equated with creativity or innovation, we should note that *imagination* is literally the power to *see* what is not there. *Imagining* a poodle is to see one *in our mind's eye*. But what if words are less separated from pictures than we had thought? What if we do not have an on/off switch for our *mind's eye* and that word and picture may be mutually embodied within imagination - what if *imaging* is the operative principle of art.

Philosophers such as Langer and Collingwood were among the first to recognise that language (which was not for either restricted to spoken or written code) has twin powers – the abilities to *communicate* and to *express*. Communication requires that two people share a common code – e.g. English language or math notation. Since the code is relatively stable, meaning passes between us. “I opened the car door” requires only that I understand what cars and doors are and what kind of action opening entails. Similarly, $2x - 4 = 10$ may be solved as $x = 7$ because the conventions are stable. But if I am assured that “man is a thinking reed” (Pascal), or that “love is blind”, my concept of communication seems inadequate to the task of understanding how meaning is to be derived. Clearly, more is intended than the literal meaning of the word labels used. It is possible that we may not understand the intention of the speaker – i.e. figurative language, unlike literal language, may “require uptake” (Max Black) and we must contribute to meaning by framing it. We must think through the implications in Pascal's "Man is a thinking reed". We must consider the *reed-man* or *man-reed* phrases and engage the interaction and tensions of the combination. So we could conclude that there are two kinds of language – one literal, discursive or communicative, the other figurative and expressive. (fn Lakoff has noted that, in one sense, all language is figurative since the words themselves are arbitrary labels.)

Implications: Imagery and Art

What relevance has the discussion thus far have for the interpretation of political action? Even if we were to bring to the table only the distinction between *communication* and *expression*, or between *style* and *world*, we would have gained a potentially powerful interpretive tool. Image is the process of expression and imagination the power of intuiting a world.

The use of the word *art* is accompanied by a frame but not the same one for all of us. Confident that, for the majority, the idea of art brings with it notions of “Starry Night”, Mont St Victoire, Beethoven, and Shakespeare, we think it may be important to try our observations thus far on images that may be test our categories of *art*. Then at least, we will know that we are not resting on memories of objects, but rather thinking about the processes at work. For that purpose, we propose to use the work of Jenny Holzer although it is useful to note that we could choose painters, poets, architects, or musicians for imaging is endemic to all art forms.



Holzer began writing her *Truisms* instanced above in 1977. Here, *insight* takes precedence over skill, materiality, or representation. In the case of her electronic billboard plea - “Protect Me From What I Want” - the appearance of the words in terms of font seems of little importance. But the placement of the phrase over the

New York Freeway or in Time Square, or Las Vegas is not only relevant, it is crucial, for geographic placement determines much of the *frame*. Moreover, the contrast of the banality of the electronic ad. with the depth of the philosophic intent constitutes the *image*. Her work is marked by contrast and surprise. But it is the ambiguity (explicitness terminates wonder) and insight – qualities of an *image* charged with value that are primary. The uncertainties of meaning make us participate and we recognize the insight by the way that we refocus the world through a new lens. Moreover, content is engaged as much by feeling as by cognition. The only thing that separates Holzer from poetry is the visual play of her work – she develops *imagery* by allowing text and context to mingle and embody one another.

Political science has wrestled with the question of where to place cultural studies and the humanities in context for providing insight into primary world politics. Image does not distinguish between fact and fiction or between what Tolkein would call the *primary* and *secondary* worlds. Thus it is that the narratives of Shakespeare, Hardy and Tolkein are all true. Tolkien explains that to create a world where secondary belief is invoked is very difficult. It is not simply a matter of an artist creating a beautiful picture with pretty words. Rather, the art must provide a figurative doorway for the spectator to enter. When done well, the spectator participates in the world-making. More accurately stated, the observer is really a co-creator in that what they bring to the narrative helps to complete the secondary world.

Like Churchill, Tolkien was successful in world-making. Tolkien created a world where the frame could be expanded beyond the author's initial intent; for the artist, this is an act of trust. They must be willing to let go and allow others to dwell in their imagined world. Tolkein, like Lakoff believed that powerful fiction help us recall and perhaps modify deeper frames. It is worth noting that Tolkien recognized the ability of secondary world creation to influence primary world politics. He warns that fantasy can be used for ill purposes suggesting that people

...have made false gods out of other materials: their nations, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice (Tolkien, 1998, p. 56).

It is our view that former Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (1917-2000), had an extraordinary knowledge of the elements of a *charged image* and was able to connect them to a frame. In general, Trudeau was framed as the philosopher-king battling the reactionary forces of provincial premiers and an unsophisticated mass media. His mantra was "reason over passion". However, he consistently demonstrated an understanding of passion and so while he immersed himself in the rhetoric of liberal and enlightenment philosophers, his lapel rose and his use of pirouettes at public functions became his trademark. His most dramatic framing

occurred during unscripted moments, particularly his signature image - his curt response to a reporter who quizzed him on how far he would go to suppress Quebec separatism. The glib “Just watch me” was hardly the height of reason but few would argue with its power to evoke feeling. Former Trudeau staffer, Jim Coutts writes that Trudeau consciously exploited images - “Just as his speeches were carefully rehearsed, he acted quite deliberately in striking the several memorable photographic poses that became icons of the man” (Coutts, 1998, p. 158). Some examples of Trudeau’s “heroic” images are the news photos of him defying hecklers at the St. Jean Baptiste parade on the eve of the 1968 election, and the image of Trudeau as a “gunslinger” - standing alone facing all challengers. Coutts provides another interesting example of how Trudeau used imaging to reinforce his world-making:

The public saw Trudeau as a quick-witted, almost insouciant man who tossed off casual remarks, slid down royal banisters, or made faces and gestures on whim. But he did and said little publicly that was not carefully rehearsed in advance... Most people assumed that the notorious pirouette Trudeau enacted in Buckingham Palace, in the presence of Queen Elizabeth, was simply a spontaneously rude and impulsive gesture. In fact, he planned it hours before because he strongly opposed the palace protocol that separated heads of state from heads of government. The well-rehearsed pirouette was a way of showing his objection without saying a word. (Coutts, 1998, p. 149).

Clarkson and McCall, criticise such descriptions of Trudeau as an oversimplification or caricature (Clarkson and McCall, 1990). Yet, the uses of symbolic gestures were not superficial, tactical adornments, but rather actions that speak to the heart of understanding his process of framing and world-making. We suggest that the *form* Trudeau portrayed revealed or is his *content*. His appeal resided in his authentic and artful frame, which many of his observers absorbed and made their own.

Part 2

A good political leader is like an outstanding athlete or entertainer. (Tom Flanagan, Harper’s Team, p. 5)

It is our contention that the processes we have described can be translated directly to political practice. Frames and narratives propel candidates into office - this is our argument with respect to the 2008 Obama presidential campaign.

The election of Barack Hussein Obama as the United States of America’s 44th President is a dramatic story. However, we do not intend to catalogue that entire journey. Instead, we hope to demonstrate how the Obama presidential campaign was able to successfully construct *images* which formed *frames*. Moreover, the campaign, and Obama himself, were able to create an enticing world through the Art process (art, craft, and design). This world was accomplished, in large

measure, because the campaign "let go of the frame" and allowed others to participate in image-making - i.e. the campaign did not try to control the content of the frame. Because spectators *felt* a part of the campaign, they participated in framing its themes (values). Through forming an emotional connection with the candidate and participating with him in world-making they traveled with him, metaphorically at least, to the White House.

2.1 Metaphor and Re-Framing

The Obama campaign, in terms of its main themes of *Change We Need and Hope*, was not unique. Many candidates for political office have evoked these themes. Moreover, many of the elements of this campaign mirror elements of the opposing and previous campaigns. However, it is Obama's approach to these themes which warrants deeper consideration.

Returning to Lakoff, we deduce from his analysis that voters do not base their decision on issues or interests. Rather, they vote based on values that attach to frames already established. Lakoff maintains that Republicans have been more effective at maintaining their frames, which has resulted in more electoral success. For example, in terms of *family values*, Republicans promote the *strict father* metaphor - the state is analogous to a family unit with a dominant father. Values are siphoned through this frame. He lists them as: strong defence, free markets, lower taxes, smaller government. Conversely, Progressive Democrat values are framed through a *nurturing parent* metaphor involving: a stronger America, broad prosperity, effective government, and mutual responsibility (Lakoff, 2004: 81 – 95). Lakoff declares his bias in support of the Progressive frame. He argues persuasively that you cannot win against the Conservative frame by evoking its terms. Progressives are hampered by old Enlightenment assumptions that simply presenting "facts" related to our interests will persuade Conservatives to the cause. Unframed facts simply bounce off the hostile frame and do more to reinforce it than change it. We also must consider that frames are supported by reason and *passion* (i.e. feeling) The strengthening of a frame is accomplished through narrative, imaging, and changing the terms of the debate to support the alternative frame.

Lakoff has been linked as an advisor to the Obama campaign and has stated on website blogs that Obama understands the framing concept. Obama has worked for years to promote a more Progressive-friendly frame and deep narrative. For example, consider his 2006 book *Audacity of Hope*; he writes that: "It is the language of values that people use to map their world. It is what can inspire them to take action, and move them beyond their isolation" (Obama, 2006: 64). We argue that *Audacity of Hope* is an eloquently written value-framing document. Simply reviewing the chapter headings suggests this: Values, Opportunity, Faith, Race, Family etc. The content of this work is a personal story of black man in America woven through a lens of the values of hard work, taking advantage of

opportunity, nurturing children and so on (Obama, 2006). This narrative almost perfectly parallels the general Progressive values sketched out by Lakoff (2004).

Consider also the framing and imaging used in his first book, *Dreams From My Father: a Story of Race and Inheritance*. This is a well crafted narrative that transcends a simple biography through the artistic application of imaging. Obama frequently invokes the term *imagining, performance and narrative* to describe his life experiences, and those of others (2004). For example, while describing his involvement with the community development movement he frames his involvement as a form of spiritual quest:

I would dress up these impulses in the slogans and theories that I'd discovered in books, thinking -falsely- that the slogans meant something, that they somehow made what I felt more amenable to proof. But at night, lying in bed, I would let the slogans drift away, to be replaced with a series of images, romantic images, of a past I had never know...Such images became a form of prayer for me, bolstering my spirits, channelling (sic) my emotions in a way words never could (2004: p134).

Obama and the Power of the Image.

Professional staffers on political campaigns do not need to be convinced of the power of the image to sway opinion. For example, Warren Kinsella, senior advisor for Jean Chrétien's Liberal party campaigns, described his *The War Room* (2007), as a guide book toward creating successful political strategies. Kinsella observes,

"...on television, emotions count more than facts (our emphasis) – or, as B.C. Liberal Premier Gordon Campbell once told me ruefully, 'It's 10 percent what you say, 20 percent how you say it, and 70 percent how you look" (2007, p.97).

Kinsella explains that news media content is constructed around melodramas which display the attributes of fiction. When assessing the impact of a television political ad or media story, Kinsella states:

"I always watch it with the sound off. That way, I'm forced to consider the visual impact for what is a visual medium" (2007,p. 98).

These are lessons well understood by the Obama presidential campaign. We will now consider two of his strategies which support our analysis - *Yes We Can* (the viral music video), and Shepard Fairey's *Hope* graffiti posters.

Yes We Can

This music video was released on the internet through *YouTube*, in February, 2008. It was written and produced by former *Black Eyed Peas* member, will i am, and it had no official connection with the Obama campaign. The footage features the then primary candidate, Barack Obama, delivering a stump speech in New

Hampshire, with voice-overs from singers, musicians and actors parroting the words Obama is speaking - a hip-hop style poetic response to a spoken text shot in muted grey tones against a high contrast black-and-white field. The visuals and sound are compelling. Forty celebrities participated including: will i am, Scarlett Johansson, Herbie Hancock, and Sara Wright.

It is estimated that the video has been viewed 26 million times (New York Times). It won numerous awards including an Emmy and received considerable critical acclaim (Reuters). The campaign eventually posted it on its official website and a live performance occurred at the 2008 Democratic National Convention in Denver (Obama for America).

This video supports our claim that a campaign willing to let go of the control of the frame can inspire a 'viral' adoption of a powerful image. A traditional approach to campaigning rests on trying to control the content, whereas here the content was created by someone outside the campaign. This production served to support the frame designed by the campaign (it featured the text and picture of the candidate) yet created a layer of authenticity because it was produced by a recognizable hip-hop artist. In essence, it was not just the message that was absorbed but the medium.



Screenshot of "Yes We Can"

Fairey's *Hope* posters

Another example of the Obama campaign's nimbleness in relation to frame building is evident in the choice of the designer for its official campaign poster - Shepard Fairey. He comes from American street art sub-culture and describes his work as "made in anger". He claims to have been arrested thirteen times for public mischief and defacing public property in the pursuit of his art (*Modern Painters*, 2008, p.69-73). His previous "Obey" street art posters challenged viewers to be critical of democratic ideology and capitalism. But his association with the Obama campaign had a reciprocal effect - the sub-culture embraced the frame, and he produced the *Progress*, and *Hope* posters and then the Obama administration's official inauguration poster.



Joshua Bearman reports in *Modern Painters* that the Obama campaign commissioned 50,000 posters, raising \$350,000 for the effort and “other artist followed suit, creating limited editions under the banner of Artist for Obama (Modern Painters, 2008: 70).

Like the *Yes We Can* video, this poster went *viral* – users of social utilities like *Facebook* and *MySpace* posted it in their profiles, and altered it to suit their taste. In essence, through the contract with the Obama campaign, Fairey created the charged image and others came in to alter the image beyond the control of either the original artist or the campaign. This reinforces the contention that an artist cannot control the frame any more than the political spinner. The Obama campaign, either by design or intuition, did not resist this. Even Obama himself admitted in a *Time* interview in June, 2008 that he did not anticipate the role of the Internet as a tool for reaching supporters - this "was probably one of the biggest surprises of the campaign, just how powerfully our message merged with the social networking and the power of the Internet" (*Time*, 2009, p. 68).

Conclusion

We are not making the claim that the poster art of Shepard Fairey or the *Yes We Can* music video were alone responsible for the election of President Obama. Yet, these *artworks* helped to image a narrative. President Obama and his team understood the lessons from Lakoff and Edelman. It will be interesting to see if his administration can maintain the coherence of its own frame, and maintain a rhetoric that builds and extends the political world he bids us enter.

It is common practice for political teams and campaigns to employ a communications or public relations officer to ensure that ideas are sold effectively and consistently in relation to a narrative or set of values. These people are often the engineers of spin. But communication without expression persuades few. Politics is more of an art than a science - it is visceral not merely intellectual. It requires that we understand language as a complex textile woven from passion and reason, feeling and argument, fact and fiction, metaphor and premise. We must recognise the roots of political science in the humanities as much as in the social science.

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