SEBASTIAN M. HERRMANN

Presidential

Epistemic Panic,
Cultural Work,
and the
US Presidency

Unrealities

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Introduction

"[W]e live in fictitious times."
(Michael Moore)

* * *

"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."
(Diane Rubenstein)

* * *

"The strange coincidence [...] points to the powerful collusion of reality and fiction in contemporary U.S. political culture."
(Trevor and Shawn J. Parry-Giles)

* * *

"[T]o reenergize literature's social mission [...] to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives."
(Robert L. McLaughlin)

Prologue

"[W]here should such a question be studied within the academy?" Thus asks, prominently, Paul Lauter, and the "question" he refers to is the question for the "cultural work" a particular book does in American culture. The book itself is of no relevance here, but the question Lauter refers to is. To him, it is a question so interdisciplinary in its direction—so nondisciplinary, one might say, in effect—that it cannot be answered through the scrutiny of any of the old, established disciplines. The question for cultural work is not a question for English Literary Studies and it is not one for History.

> So the question remains: where—and how—do we study not so much the texts themselves as what I have been calling the 'cultural work' they perform? Where, moreover, do we ask how and why certain texts or objects come into existence in the particular historical landscapes of the United States?
> The brief answer, I think, is in American studies. (Lauter 24)

Lauter's question, as much as his answer, is central to the analytic project of this book that engages an "object" at least as elusive, as spurious, and as interdisciplinary as the question Lauter seeks to have answered and that does so in a similarly emphatic assertion of the value of such inquiry. Put

bluntly, this book asks: What cultural work does the notion of unreality in the US presidency do?

With so little context, the question must necessarily seem somewhat opaque, and I will use a brief example to explain it and to show why it is a question both difficult and productive to ask. Temporally, this example is situated a few years back—in the middle of the presidency of George W. Bush: When the film *Bowling for Columbine* received the 2003 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, its director, the activist filmmaker Michael Moore, used his acceptance speech to comment on the war against Iraq that had begun but a few days before. Speaking for himself, his producers, and for his colleagues, the (less fortunate) fellow nominees for the award, he announced that

> they are here in solidarity with me because we like nonfiction. We like nonfiction and we live in fictitious times [...] where we have fictitious election results that elect a fictitious president [...] where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons. Whether it's the fiction [sic -smh] of duct tape or fictition of orange alerts, we are against this war, Mr. Bush. (qtd. in "Moore Fires")

His speech—politicized and politicizing as it was; earning immediate, strong reactions, both boos and cheers, from a deeply divided audience; and drowned out by the award ceremony's fanfares, the well-established marker of a scandalous performance—obviously constituted a frontal assault against the Bush administration that he almost directly accused of lying. In this sense, the "fictitious reasons" referred to the untrue claims by the administration that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the "fictitious election results" to the 2000 presidential election that had been decided by the Supreme Court not by the voters' will. The "fictitious times" and the "fictitious president," however, work on a different plane altogether: They are not code for specific falsehoods. Instead, the "fictitious times" speak of a more general postmodern feeling of a 'crisis of the real,' a "widespread, cultural malaise" (Norris 16) that gets pinpointed in the notion of a "fictitious president." Together, they evoke a broad concern at the time, most succinctly expressed in a much-quoted piece by Ron Suskind in the *New York Times Magazine*, that the (second) Bush administration had "left behind" the "reality-based community," that Bush and his aides were somehow able to "create [their] own reality," and that this ability to create unreal, artificial realities had paved the way to the presidency, to empire, and to war (Suskind). Read thus, Moore's statement of the "fictitious president" and the "fictitious times," then, points to what I will refer to as an 'epistemic panic,' a discursive operation of casting questions of truthfulness and lies in politics as a matter of knowability that peaked during the W. Bush years but that is, as I will show, by no means limited to this timeframe. Using the "symbolically meaningful institution" of the presidency as "focal point of public discussion [and] cultural angst"

(Parry-Giles and Parry-Giles 2), this panic fused a widespread concern about epistemic limitations, the ability to obtain 'factual' knowledge at all, with a concern over the existence of anything 'real' that can be known. The "fictitious times" and the "fictitious president" in this sense are not simply statements of fact, observations on a political, epistemological or ontological status quo at the beginning of the twenty-first century; by evoking the notion of the 'unreality' of the president, they constitute a rich, productive, and distinctly US-American site of discursive performance, created as much as referenced by statements such as Moore's and limited by no means to the Bush presidency.[1]

Where, then, should such an object be studied within the academy? The 'fictitiousness' of politics in the 2000s Moore speaks of *is* being studied primarily in political science, in media studies, in journalism studies, and in rhetoric. Often, inquiries in these disciplines have agreed with the overall assessment of "fictitious times" and have attributed it to a number of different factors, each according to their own disciplinary interests. Political science, for example, has tended to stress how the rise of "electronic electioneering" (Schram 210)[2] has made the presidency more hyperreal or how neoliberalism and neoconservatism have come together to create political subjectivities "relatively indifferent to veracity" (Brown 690); media studies has read the emergence of a post-factual society as an effect of the convergence of different media, as a changing dominance of different "[regimes] of truth" (Jones 129); journalism studies has read it as an effect of the decline of the media's gatekeeper function and the rise of a "redactional" society (Hartley); and these are just some of the more dominant themes in these fields, all of which, notably, link presidential unreality to the postmodernization of American society.[3] In fact, pointing out, as Kathleen Hall Jamieson does, that research on the "symbolic action of politics [has] bridged the disciplines of political science and communi-

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1   As will become clearer in the following pages, 'unreality' here is a concept similar to Baudrillardian notions of the simulation (or the simulacrum). Since I am interested in a decidedly US-American tradition of popular theorizing of the postmodern condition, I will generally speak of 'unreality' rather than using more 'French' terminologies. Historically, the term makes early prominent appearances in the postwar years, e.g. in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World Revisited*, where it is part of a larger argument about propaganda (35). Within the discursive traditions I am interested in here, it can be traced back to Daniel Boorstin's 1961 *The Image* (cf. my section on "Selling the Image" starting on page 166).

2   To Schram, "political campaigns increasingly reflect the broader cultural preoccupation with unraveling the tensions between appearance and reality" (210), "privileging this struggle over all others" and encouraging a "futile question for the nonexistent 'real' leader" (211). In result, the "grammar of electronic engineering" is "obsessed with finding the 'true' self of each candidate" (211).

3   I will reprise most of these perspectives in my discussion of the interdisciplinary interfaces of this book, albeit from slightly different angles (beginning on page 22).

cation" (Jamieson, *Eloquence*)[4] sells short the interdisciplinary valency and attraction of political 'unreality.' By today, the dichotomy of real and unreal has come to undergird scholarly debate on the postmodern presidency, informing inquiries into how presidents create authenticity, how they are always already mediated public figures, or what the reasons for their unrealness are.

Other aspects, however, become more salient, aspects not typically central to the disciplines named above, when reading Moore's statement not for what it refers to, but for how it operates, what textual and, ultimately, cultural work it does, and by thus reading it as part of a larger discourse: Moore's "we," later on referring to all the citizens of the United States, originally has a different function: it constitutes Moore and his fellow documentary filmmakers as a 'textual' community—embattled and in need of "solidarity," marked by the allegiance to specific textual practices and to a specific genre.[5] After all, once one looks beyond the scandal, Moore's speech is about genre at least as much as it is about the president's lies or the presidency's fictitiousness: a metatextual (re)assertion of the social and political potential of art via its referential quality, a commentary on the advantages of one genre over others. At the same time, this referential quality of the genre of the documentary, of course, is a matter of textual conventions, a reality effect, not the result of an unproblematic and transparent presence of the real,[6] and this complication shows in how Moore refers to the government's actions not as 'fiction' but, in a surprising coinage, as 'fictions.' Matters of genre, moreover, are key to understanding Moore's statement on yet another level: As a cultural period, the Bush administration was marked by a flood of publications making claims similar to the acceptance speech: the president is a "Lying Liar" who tells lies, a book by Al Franken in the same year emphatically insisted, along with many others beating the same drum.[7] One could read this as suggesting that there was

4   The observation is part of a dedication of the book to Murray Edelman, whose "insights about the symbolic action of politics" she credits with such a bridging of disciplines.

5   Of course, Moore's credentials as a documentary film maker are debatable. It is a label he chooses for himself and sharing the stage with his fellow nominees is part of this self-fashioning. Online discussions of his Oscar performance, up until today, tend to gravitate toward the question of whether or not his films qualify as documentaries. Apart from the observation that these discussions also link opposition/allegiance to his political agenda with the question of his (movies') truthfulness and with genre, the question of whether Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* can be considered a documentary is of no relevance here.

6   The subject matter of this book would encourage using many single quotation marks for concepts such as the 'real' (meant as a semiotic concept, not in a more Lacanian sense throughout), 'unreality,' 'truth,' 'image,' etc. To improve readability (and trusting my readers' awareness of the constructedness of such categories), I will omit these unless I feel that they help readability or are unavoidable for clarity.

7   For an extensive list of such bestsellers, cf. Douglas Kellner (106).

indeed something wrong with this president. In any case, such an outpouring of highly similar texts marks them as a popular genre at the time, an object of popular culture. Indeed, by 2006, John Powers, reviewing one of these books for *The Nation*, observed that the intended readers could already "recite the long list of Administration malfeasances like fans at a Neil Diamond concert singing along with 'Sweet Caroline'" (32). Powers's comment, then, points to another important aspect of Moore's complaint about the "fictitious president": This genre is not only extremely prolific during the Bush years. It is a genre so broad, so 'popular,' that it comes with its own sets of pleasures that, again, might go beyond its referential qualities. As Powers suggests, it interpellates its audience "like fans" as consumers of cultural and political critique. The connection Moore makes between the unreality of the president and the question of competing genres, then, is not incidental; nor is the extent to which Moore's audience is able to immediately read it and respond to it. The question of the 'fictitious president,' the events at the Academy Awards ceremony suggest, is particularly hospitable to questions of textuality.

Indeed, it is textuality that this book is first and foremost interested in. By asking for the cultural work, for "how and why" this concern over the fictitiousness of the president comes into being as an object in US culture, it seeks to broaden perspectives similar to how I have done in the example above. The question of whether and why US presidents, or politics general-ly, have become more unreal, more postmodern, or more substanceless, I thus propose, cannot be disentangled from questions of textuality, questions such as: What (else) is being said in claims that the president was unreal? What is the history of this concern as a discourse? What kinds of audiences does it interpellate? What are its pleasures for these audiences? Which statements does it afford? Looking at the notion of presidential unreality in this way, then, means looking at it more as a 'motif' or a 'theme' in textual production than as a historical condition reflected by texts; it means looking at it from an angle of literary studies as cultural studies, not as a matter of empirical inquiry.

This shift of perspective obviously does not aim to invalidate or retire other perspectives on the rise of unreality in politics, but rather to interro-gate an object *created* or *maintained* in text (not least in text produced in political science, media studies, communication studies, and others) from a perspective that is geared toward textual work, cultural effect, narrative dynamic, and discursive history. In the following, I will thus only very briefly dwell on describing the epistemic panic that manifested so acutely during the Bush administration and that constituted a (if not the) central paradigm by way of which large segments of the American public made sense of politics during that time. The main work of this book will instead be to analyze the 'fictitious president' as a quasi 'pop-cultural' discursive motif that comes with a discursive history and with intertextual, interdis-

cursive connections that make it speakable and that determine its meanings, its appeals to relevance, and its cultural effects. By investigating the notion of a 'fictitious president' from this particular perspective, by, in other words, casting it as a popular discourse that does cultural work, this book proposes that speaking of presidential unreality does more than speak of politics.

Most importantly, I will argue, the motif of presidential unreality establishes an arena in which American culture interrogates the role of significatory practices, of textuality in a wider sense, of the relationship between representation and reality, and where it casts this question as a matter of profound and pressing public concern.

This argument entails two other propositions: First, in alleging that 'unreality' thrives in politics, in operating the motif of a 'fictitious president,' the texts I analyze below seek a public venue to engage the postmodernization of American society, an aspect that is visible in at least three dynamics: in the way in which the notion of presidential unreality responds to and works through a perceived 'crisis of signification' often considered synonymous with postmodernity; in the way that texts discussing it resonate with other concerns frequently tied to the postmodernization of American society—the dissolution of gender roles, the decline of inner-direction, the fragmentation of the public sphere, etc; and in the way that texts on 'fictitious presidents' fuse their discussion of such a postmodern condition with a discussion of their own textuality. In all three, these texts, circulating broadly among a sizable readership, constitute a form of popular postmodernism. In a second underlying proposition I argue that, by using politics as an arena in which to discuss the postmodernization of US society, discussions of presidential unreality do not just popularize the crisis of signification, they also provide to the diffuse postmodern "panic sense of the hyperreal" (Hutcheon, *Politics* 23) an object of immediate, obvious, and broad social relevance. Again, there are several aspects to this: One, as a motif, the 'fictitious president' gives particular social relevance to discussions of simulation, mediatization, hyperreality, and other postmodern threats to personhood—it maps a set of concerns that is often about the individual onto the social/public.[8] It, secondly, provides a claim to relevance to the texts I will analyze below: Operating the gesture of 'speaking truth to power' endows all the primary texts discussed in this book with an appeal of undeniable social relevance, an aspect that at once powers and complicates their textual project: Diagnosing a fundamental crisis of signification, a large-scale 'decline and fall of truth' as one of these texts puts it, they

8   There is a similar dynamic in conspiracy theory/fiction that similarly validates a (white) crisis of masculinity by mapping it on a national/political crisis. As Antje Dallmann observes, the "construction of a national 'latent history' in O'Donnell's sense cannot be divorced" from conspiracy fiction's function to "express male unease" (109). Cf. also Birte Christ's "What Kind of a Man Are You?" (330-31), as well as my page 234 below.

struggle to retain a position from which they themselves can speak, a position, as it were, where truthful signification still is possible. If, as I argue, the motif of presidential unreality invites and accommodates discussions of significatory representation, texts that rely on this motif tend to not only reflect on proper and improper significatory practices, but to cast this question as one of fundamental, political importance.

To prepare the ground for this analysis, this introduction will proceed in three larger steps. To make things more tangible and to provide a better sense of what this book does, I will first discuss, in the remainder of this first section, the overall structure of my argument and the logic shaping my three analytical main chapters. I will then, in a second section, provide an overview over three different scholarly debates that constitute the academic ecosystem this project lives in and that help further position the project in academia. In a last section, I will then elaborate methodological and disciplinary influences on my own reading practice—influences that do not just impact the analytical tools I employ but that also shape the analytic interests I follow.

Reading the 'Fictitious President'

In order to investigate the cultural work done by discussions of presidential unreality, this book will perform exemplary in-depth readings of primary texts, both fiction and nonfiction, for how they invoke and employ the motif of unreality in the US presidency. Recognizing that, as a discursive phenomenon, the motif of presidential unreality is shaped by specific cultural discursive contexts, each of my three analytic main chapters will approach this motif via one such context. Accordingly, all three will each comprise three sections, one that introduces the respective context, and two that each read one primary text in depth.

I will thus explore the cultural work of the motif of presidential unreality through three distinct but interrelated inquiries into three discursive 'bodies of resonance.' In my first chapter, I will look at how texts on presidential unreality resonate with popularized versions of the linguistic turn, how they, in other words, cast the obliteration of the real in politics as a problem of language, of spin, of fictioneering, of the power of narrative, or, more generally speaking, as a matter of a rupture between signifier and signified. In a second chapter, I will look at Hollywood as a cultural symbol, arguing that texts that lament the Hollywoodization of politics as the source of presidential unreality do not simply describe structural similarities between, for example, politics and acting. Instead they call upon a dense network of meanings organized around a perceived unrealness of California and, particularly, of the 'dream factory.' It is, I will thus argue, the availability of Hollywood as a conventionalized, well-established symbol for hyperreality and the simulacrum that drives texts to link the rise of political unreality to Hollywood. In my last chapter, I will look at how a long-

standing discourse of advertising critique works as an important touchstone for texts alleging that the president or politics had become unreal or artificial. Again, my point will be to detach the arguments my primary texts advance from 'actual' developments in electoral campaigning or governing. Instead, I will focus on how a concern over the increasing influence of advertising agencies on politics, over the 'degeneration' of the public sphere into a market, and over the rising role professionally engineered (electronic) images play in politics—all developments that primary texts link to a rise of unreality—are established tropes, metaphors and metonymies, by which American culture responds to the (post)modernization of the national public sphere.

The concept of discursive bodies of resonance therefore is crucial to the analytic work of this book: It helps focus on the extent to which the primary texts analyzed below intertextually rely on existing, broadly circulating discourses to make their point.[9] Like most musical instruments rely on a resonator to amplify the otherwise miniscule vibrations of a string or reed, texts require resonance to gain authority, truth value, and meaning. As I will show in more detail in each of the main chapters below, texts on the 'fictitious president' draw on established, vibrant discursive intersections that provide them with authority and with truth value, and that simultaneously and fundamentally impact their vocabulary, their rhetorical operations, and their cultural work. While the three analytical main chapters of this book, each focusing on one such discursive cluster, implicitly follow a historical trajectory, moving from the 2000s back to the late 1960s, this is not to suggest that each of the bodies of resonance they investigate is restricted to a particular historical epoch. Indeed, primary texts evoking these resonances tend to draw on more than one resonator, while the boundaries between these resonators are blurry in themselves. Moreover, the extent to which my chapters emphasize larger epochs is not meant to suggest a coherent genealogy of the motif of presidential unreality, and my reverse chronology is meant to counter any impression of a necessary succession, a chronological or causal logic in how the motif resonates in culture. After all, delineating these bodies of resonance and mapping out their particular dynamics is an interpretative, hermeneutic operation in its own right. Justified and validated by the readings they enable, the contours of the bodies of resonance discussed in the main chapters of this book are the result of the interpretations they facilitate.

As none of these bodies of resonance are sufficiently established as such to simply call on them in my analyses, I introduce them in the three main

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9   Despite a certain methodological openness of my project to new historicist influences, this notion of 'resonance' thus is markedly different from a new historicist interest in resonance as "the power of the object [...] to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged" (Greenblatt, "Resonance" 19).

chapters' first sections. Doing so, I do not simply map their outlines. Instead, I perform brief discourse analyses to make visible these bodies of resonance's cultural functions, to scrutinize and show the way in which they constitute distinct responses to the postmodernization of American culture and society and in which they find and establish distinct vocabularies to confront the resulting social changes. Most frequently, they do so with a sense of crisis: according to these discursive bodies, the linguistic construction of reality fundamentally complicates any appeal to reason or to fact, the power of the motion picture ushers in an era of superficiality and narcissism, and advertising and TV atomize both people and the public sphere, turn the former into products and the latter into a market. In diagnosing such comprehensive social maladies, in attributing them to (post)modernization, and in pitching their own textual power against it, the discourses underlying these three clusters share a generic affiliation to *kulturkritik* or to jeremiadical writing,[10] calling for a restoration of values eroded by the ongoing modernization of society and placing their hope in their own ability to educate or morally better their readers.

At the same time, the three bodies of resonance all negotiate the authority of competing significatory practices: The popularized versions of the linguistic turn I will explore below implicitly discuss the authority of the professions and practices specialized in determining fact—put bluntly: if there is only narrative, everyone can be a historian, an evolutionary biologist, a nuclear physicist. Similarly and dating back to modernism, Hollywood, I will argue, constitutes a canonical site for playing out struggles between typographic media and motion pictures, and between individual writer and the joint production of mass culture—themes central to tales of writers who have to sell out their talent to the studios and get corrupted in the process. Lastly, discussions of the rise of advertising and television similarly address the rise of new textual/significatory practices to widespread social relevance, and I will use the last chapter's first section to trace how these two compete with more established textual practices, not least with journalism as an established operator of the public sphere. In all three cases, then, the discursive resonators bring together a criticism of the (post)modernization of American culture with a discussion of competing textual practices, and it is this intersection of the social/political with the textual that primary texts on the 'fictitious president' invoke and dramatize.

Within these three clusters, I will then perform six large, exemplary primary readings, each making up one full section in my analytical chapters, as well as a number of smaller accompanying readings, to investigate

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10 On the cultural work of the original Puritan genre, cf. Sacvan Bercovitch's *American Jeremiad*). There is surprisingly little scholarship investigating *kulturkritik* as a genre from a literary studies or cultural studies perspective (cf., for a discussion from a German/European perspective, Bollenbeck). For at least a bit more detailed context on traditions of *kulturkritik*, cf. my comments on Adorno (120) and Boorstin (169; 173) below.

in depth how and to what effect discussions of presidential unreality
resonate with these underlying clusters. In the first chapter, I will thus read
Frank Rich's *The Greatest Story Ever Sold: The Decline and Fall of Truth
in Bush's America* (2006) and Larry Beinhart's *The Librarian* (2004) for
how they approach linguistic relativism. In the second chapter, I will read
Beinhart's previous novel, *American Hero* (1993) and Barry Levinson's
feature film *Wag the Dog* (1997) for their use of the trope of Hollywood
and Californian unreality. In the last chapter, I will read Joe McGinniss's
The Selling of the President 1968 (1969) and Ron Howard's film
Frost/Nixon (2008) for how they resonate with concerns about the power of
commodified, marketed images. In keeping with my argument that the
motif of presidential unreality allows for a broad discussion of
postmodernization, all of these larger primary texts are 'popular,' either by
audience, or by style, or by both, and their 'popularity,' their quality as
mass-market products, shapes the questions I ask of them. In all my
readings, I am therefore primarily interested in the reading pleasures these
texts offer and in the textual and cultural dynamics that facilitate (and
complicate) their meanings and their pleasures. At the same time, the
popularity of my texts also marks them as mainstream thinking that is
perceived as a 'legitimate' perspective in public discourse. Other than texts
in the genre of conspiracy theory, whose appeal lies not least in how they
suggest "illegitimate knowledge" (Birchall 4), almost all texts central to
this book position themselves as decidedly legitimate, almost
commonsensical perspectives. Accordingly, my own reading practice does
not align itself with scholarship on conspiracy theory—it, for example,
does not need to counter its texts' presumed illegitimacy or 'pathology,'[11]
and this difference in perspective is due not least to the popular appeal of
texts on presidential unreality.

   The selection of texts in my readings moreover intentionally mixes
(self-professed) fiction and nonfiction, as well as formats that are more dif-
ficult to classify (even though one of my arguments is that the former
distinction is by no means an easy one). I do this for three main reasons:
First, one central contention in this book is that the distinction between

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11   Such defensive moves, I would argue, constitutes a generic element in scholarship
     on conspiracy theory—arguing that despite its seemingly paranoid, delusional, or
     irrational operations, conspiracy theory might 'in fact' be a "poor person's cogni-
     tive mapping," as Fredric Jameson's famous phrasing claims. Also, texts in
     conspiracy theory, as much as scholarship on conspiracy theory, are frequently
     concerned with theorizing *totalities* of power; my texts, and scholarship, are not.
     Lastly, as mentioned above, conspiracy theory/conspiracy fiction tends to link the
     public 'threat' of conspiracy to the "discursive position of subject-in-crisis" (Sally
     Robinson qtd. in Dallmann 86), whereas the motif of presidential unreality does not
     rely on such notions of crisis. In fact, *American Hero* plays with this genre affilia-
     tion and with the presumed (!) illegitimacy of its claims. However, it does so, as I
     will argue, as an ironic, intertextual play (cf. my page 126).

fiction and fact/nonfiction is crucial to the cultural work the motif of the 'fictitious president' does. Indeed, all texts investigated below actively address the fiction/nonfiction divide: They name it, they tend to lament that it has become muddied over the course of these 'fictitious times,' and they claim that this muddying presents a social and political problem. This dynamic becomes more pronounced, more visible, and analytically more productive if it is interrogated from both modal sides, as something diagnosed in fiction and in nonfiction alike. Second, I argue that the interest in the 'fictitious president' constitutes a broad social discursive phenomenon that is independent of mode. In other words: my point is that, regardless of whether it is employed in fiction or in nonfiction, the motif hails its audiences in similar ways and that, by implication, someone speaking 'in fact' (as Moore does in my introductory example) remains indebted to the same discursive influences as a fiction author, and vice versa. Third, my readings thus work to complicate the distinction between fiction and nonfiction. Such complication obviously arises in fictional texts about real presidents. More surprisingly, it is just as present in self-declared nonfiction texts about real presidents. As I will show, such nonfictional texts draw their power to convince not primarily from their referential quality, their ability to transparently signify anything 'real,' but from the quality of the narrative they provide, the power of their voice, the density of their metaphors, and from carefully constructed, conventionalized markers of realness and 'reality effects.' Even fictional texts that purport not to speak about a real president at all are subject to complications between the real and the fictional: For *Wag the Dog*, a movie that avoids making direct reference to any particular president, public reception immediately attempted to map this (remarkably absent) president on the 'real' president at the time, Bill Clinton, turning the question of whether the film was able to fictionally 'foresee' the Lewinsky-affair, of whether reality here, for once, imitated art, into a crucial facet of its cultural meanings. These three reasons, accordingly, do not only justify bringing together and reading alongside one another fiction and nonfiction. They also inform my interest in texts that are openly and programmatically in-between the two, with Beinhart's *American Hero* possibly being the starkest and most intricate example for such self-reflexively semifictional writing.

Within these parameters, intertextual interdependencies have informed my selection of texts. As I will argue, Rich's *Greatest Story* works as a representative of a large number of similar publications during the Bush administration. Among these, his book is particularly concerned about the relationship between the president's deceptions and the more longue-durée "decline and fall of truth" it speaks about. With a background as a theater critic turned columnist, Rich is also able to project a particularly playful voice that participates in the dynamics it describes and that, faced with an erosion of facticity, tentatively suggests that counternarration might be a more productive way to confront the administration's false "new national

narrative" (2) than referentiality is. The chapter's second reading, Beinhart's *The Librarian*, contributes a voice that is not playful at all. Here, ironically, it is the chapter's fiction book that insists on referentiality and that is marked by distrust in the nonreferential, performative qualities of language. Beinhart's book is part of the chapter for another reason: *The Librarian* is a follow-up to an earlier book by the same author. Analyzing two novels by the same author about the same problem written at different cultural moments allows me to pinpoint changes in how they engage the problem of the fictitious president.[12] Consequently, the second chapter then provides a reading of this earlier book, *American Hero*, together with the other 'adaptation' it has seen, the feature film *Wag the Dog*. Although *American Hero* is credited with being the basis of the movie, there actually are very few continuities between these two. Again, tracing these continuities as well as the changes allows me to point to aspects that have proven particularly resonant in culture. More importantly, *Wag the Dog* itself has shown to be highly influential in American political-culture-as-popular-culture: It arguably is a particularly important touchstone for many of the later texts (among them, of course, Rich's book), and this textual continuity underlines my argument about the continuity of the 'motif' of presidential unreality. Tracing this continuity also is the reason for the first text in the final chapter, Joe McGinniss's *The Selling of the President 1968*, possibly the single most important (and oldest) reference point in the history of this motif. The book, enormously successful—and unexpectedly so—revolutionized campaign reporting and helped inaugurate the notion of an 'artificial' president, an "illusion," a "human pseudo-event" (28) as a popular motif in American culture. The last chapter's second larger reading, the feature film *Frost/Nixon*, then brackets the timeframe covered by my project. Released in 2008 and set in the 1970s, the film is about the Bush Presidency and the Nixon Presidency at once, two presidencies that have triggered particularly energetic allegations of deception; and while my reading focuses on the chapter's main topic, the use of 'selling' and of 'image' in speaking of presidential unreality, the movie also resonates heavily with the themes central to the other two main chapters: the problem of narrativizing reality and the notion of Hollywood-unreality.

There are, then, four larger operations underlying my project of reading these primary texts in the context of three different clusters that each focus on a different set of cultural and discursive dynamics: The first is a recasting, as I have described above, of the 'notion of unreality in the US presidency' as a discursive motif, an operation that enables me to explore this notion's rhetorics, its poetics, and its cultural connectivity. The second is interrogating this motif for its discursive history, in other words, tracing how texts that speak about political unreality refer back to older texts as

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12   Cf. my reading of *The Librarian* as akin to a 'product update' to *American Hero* ("Narrating").

making the same claim, an operation that maps out continuities in the textual history of this motif. The third is analyzing how this motif operates (inter)textually by mapping out and exploring the textual/discursive resonances it is built on. My point here is that, as a quasi-literary motif, the notion of presidential unreality is determined and validated not simply by its referential qualities—its ability to name an 'actual' condition of contemporary society or politics—but also, and possibly more so, by its intertextual, cultural connectivity—the way it ties into other discourses. The fourth operation is looking at these resonating discourses that often, in themselves, constitute displaced, tropical ways of processing the postmodernization of US culture and society and of interrogating them for the social changes they speak of. Read thus for its cultural work, the motif of presidential unreality emerges as one important, particularly productive site at which to investigate how American culture negotiates the relationship between textuality and postmodernization.

No Textualization without Representation? Situating Presidential Unreality

Situating the object of this book in academic scholarship is not a simple task: Like many of the objects of cultural studies, the motif of presidential unreality does not constitute an established object of research, and most of my texts have received very little academic scrutiny so far. Moreover, the discursive clusters in which I interrogate this motif are also hermeneutically constructed in the process of my reading. Lastly, while the seeming nondisciplinarity invoked above is also an asset, a marker of true interdisciplinarity, and while a willingness to embrace such nondisciplinarity accordingly does place this book squarely inside the field of American studies, it also complicates further the task of situating this object in relation to existing scholarship. After all, there is no established set of previous work, no already-charted landscape, no canon of theoretical writings that I could outline in a research survey here. At the same time, there very much is an ecosystem of scholarship in which this project lives, a vibrant, energetic, and ongoing debate, held in different academic contexts, about the politics of representation (and, often, the representation of politics). Like much within this project, this debate is not restricted to academia. Indeed, throughout this book, the line between academic and broader social discourses proves to be a markedly blurry one—with academics addressing a larger public as public intellectuals and/or for profit and with public discourse clearly being shaped by an influx of (postmodern) theory, enabling, as I will demonstrate, a form of popular theorizing.

In the following few pages, I will thus contextualize this book not by recounting an existing canon of writing on the subject matter but by attending

to three different academic discussions—discussions neither of which I can simply cast as precursor to my own analysis and all of which nevertheless provide important context. These discussions share in how they view matters of representation as political; at the same time, they are distinct discussions that cannot be collapsed into one another without simplifying to the degree of meaninglessness. With none of these discussions fully overlapping with the direction of my own analytic interests, I think of them as beacons that help position my own work rather than as immediate neighborhoods. Indeed, a central achievement of the overall project of this book is its ability to enter the space between these discussions, to insert itself into this space, to offer or to open up interfaces to each of them, and to thus bring them into dialog.

EPISTEMIC PANIC, FACT PANIC, AND A PASSION FOR THE HYPERREAL

An important element in the background of this book is the larger epistemic panic I already sketched in the beginning of my introduction: Peaking around the millennium, public discourse in the USA cast politics as largely an epistemic problem, a question of knowing the true facts of reality.[13] Judging from the rhetorics of political debate and from the landscape of media formats, politics has become a matter of publicly obsessing about what is 'knowable' (Rumsfeld), of measuring truth with 'truth-o-meters' (in a CNN news segment), of 'checking' facts (several web pages with that mission), and of opening up self-declared 'no spin zones' (Fox News).[14] This 'epistemic panic' is paralleled in academia, and I will outline it by way of two contrasting takes on representation it entails.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson's work is exemplary of scholarship engaging this epistemic panic at the intersection of journalism, media studies, and communication studies with political science. Increasing rapidly in size, volume, and public reach since the early 2000s, scholarship at this intersection focuses on the decline of factuality in the American political and public sphere. Jamieson, a highly prolific scholar on presidential rhetorics "in an electronic age" (*Eloquence*) and on the emerging new modes of political communication (*Dirty Politics*), accordingly uses her and Brooks Jackson's *unSpun: Finding Facts in a World of Disinformation* to address a larger audience (and market). In its mass-market appeal, their text is characteristic of this 'fact panic' as a concern situated at the intersections of academic inquiry and public interest: Written in face of a presumed rise of spin and of deceptive political and marketing practices, it aims to instruct

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13   Cf. the *Wall Street Journal*'s noting "a larger journalistic trend that seeks to recast all political debates as matters of lies, misinformation and 'facts,' rather than differences of world view or principles" ("PolitiFiction").

14   The use of the truth-o-meter is part of CNN's 'fact check' (cf. *CNN's Segment* for an example clip), among the web pages performing fact checking are politifact.com and factcheck.org.

its readers and to explain, for example, "how our own biology can blind us to accurate information" (Jackson and Jamieson xi). Doing so, it aims to provide the knowledge and the "tools for recognizing and avoiding spin and finding solid facts." Underlying this project is the well-known notion of the postmodern malaise of an elusive reality, a crisis of referentiality that presumably manifests not least in a rise of media that provide inaccurate information and, more fundamentally, in a social trend to use language less referentially.[15]

This concern over a changing function of language also is key to discussions of the changing role of and the diminishing possibilities for journalism to establish truth as a reliable social category. Again, this is a wide-ranging discussion, and I will have to limit myself to casting a single spotlight here:[16] In 2000, a survey by the Pew Research Center triggered a brief but acute concern over the rise of fake news shows to primary sources of information for the nation's youth that quickly became a hub for discussions of the shortcomings of the press, the youth, or American culture more generally.[17] At the same time, one of these fake news shows, *The Colbert Report*, with its coinage of 'truthiness' as a satirical name for 'felt' truth, provided a central keyword to the ensuing discussions, both in the public and in academia. Jeffrey P. Jones, for example, contributing to an entire volume devoted to *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology and Truthiness*, notes a rise of "redactional culture," a term he takes from John Hartley.[18] In "redactional culture," social truth is no longer cultivated by the press but by multiple actors in society who cater to smaller and smaller audiences. The result, Hartley notes, is "a more widely

15 Indeed, Jackson and Jamieson's account thus resonates with two of my three analytic chapters: Her concern with language and spin is something I discuss in detail in the first chapter, and her concern over advertising as a political tool is central to my third chapter (there is, indeed, a striking similarity of tone and project between *unSpun* and Vance Packard's *Hidden Persuaders*, the latter of which I read in detail below starting on page 166). For another highly visible discussion of such a change in the use of language, cf. Harry G. Frankfurt's two small books *On Bullshit* and *On Truth*, that constitute philosophical meditations on the matter. "Bullshit," Frankfurt argues in the former, is performative language that does not aim for referentiality (27) but for producing a certain kind of somewhat spectacular statement: Other than in referential speech, truth or lie, the bullshitter's secret "intention is neither to report the truth nor to conceal it" (55). Note also that the discussion has attracted attention from across the Atlantic in at least two newspaper articles (Eilenberger; Pilet).

16 Please also see the role new journalism plays in my last main chapter on market(ing)- and advertising critique.

17 Cf. Jeffrey P. Jones's "'Fake' News versus 'Real' News as Sources of Political Information: *The Daily Show* and Postmodern Political Reality" for an overview over research engaging this question (129).

18 Hartley is interested in the "traditional role of *representative* journalism [...] that brought the gigantic 'reading public' of modernity into being" (47) and in how this function of journalism is in decline in face of a spreading of media 'writing' skills.

dispersed and creative construction of truth than that offered by the old regime" (Jones 138).

These discussions, then, are summarized particularly succinctly by Diane Rubenstein, who observes that the "category of the 'real' and its putative erasure or endangerment [...] has increasingly become an object of concern in our political culture today" (*This Is Not* 11), an observation I return to throughout my project. Focusing strictly on the presidency, Rubenstein looks at what she calls the "vernacular use" of the presidency as an object that illustrates 'French' theory as much as it can be explained by it. For her, "the presidency [is] telling a meta-theoretical story about Baudrillardian sign theory where presidents [...] mark different moments of the simulacrum" (*This Is Not* 11).[19] More specifically, she aims to map the historical development of Baudrillardian thought on the ongoing sequence of presidents. Accordingly, for her, "Ronald Reagan begins here at this moment of the hyperreal simulacrum" (13), whereas Baudrillard's "second genealogy, detailed in 'The Procession [sic -smh] of Simulacra' [...] has more import for later presidents such as Clinton and W-Bush, who conform to the theories of Baudrillard's recent formulation of the virtual and integral reality" (13). In other words, "[w]e can begin with Reagan as a sign that dissimulates *something* and turn to signs (such as the first President Bush) that dissimulate nothing" (13). In line, perhaps, with her reading of the presidency as a "transitional object" that "belongs neither to internal nor external reality" (6), Rubenstein thus uses the presidency at once as an object of analysis and as a source of theory, a use that is markedly different from the analytic project of this book that is interested in the cultural work of a discursive motif. Still, her mapping of recent presidencies on the unfolding of the simulacrum and her notion of a 'vernacular use' of the presidency provide deep background to my own analytic project.

Even more decidedly countering a concern over the rise of unreality, Anne Norton's work stands out for how it programmatically moves the discussion of the 'real' in politics away from a worry over postmodern 'defects' in representation. She reads the presidency as one instance of a larger fascination American culture has with representation. Americans, "a people grown accustomed to signification" and trained in the "acceptance of the conventions that undergird legal rational authority and a credit economy" (102) favor a detachment of signifier and signified in politics because such a detachment validates the logic of representation. Accordingly, she reads, for example, President Reagan's remarkable detachment from reality as a sign of his significatory might, of his independence, as a signifier, from the signified.[20] Similarly, the Great Depression, to her, was a crisis not simply of the economy but of the principle of representation un-

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19   Cf. also her phrasing in a related article where she reads "the history of twentieth-century American presidents as a gradual loosening of the signifier from the signified" ("Mirror" 588).