

Constructing Clinton: Hyperreality & Presidential Image-Making in Postmodern Politics. By Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles. New York: Peter Lang, 2002; pp. ix-245. \$24.95.

Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles have completed a well-executed analysis of how Bill Clinton, his surrogates, and the media portrayed this most controversial president. According to the authors, the key to understanding the Clinton presidency is the context of hyperreality in which it occurred, a context in which we are saturated with images, making it difficult—if not downright impossible—to differentiate between what is “real” and what is not. The Parry-Giles argue that “presidentiality,” the rhetoric composed by a variety of rhetors and depicting a variety of perspectives, serves to “shape and order the cultural meaning of the institution of the presidency, ideologically defining the office and its occupants” (p. 3).

To understand the relationship between the images of Clinton and the current state of American politics, *Constructing Clinton* examines a number of mediated texts: the Clinton campaign film, *The Man from Hope*; the documentary, *The War Room*; Clinton’s 1996 campaign book, *Between Hope and History*; the novel and, to a lesser extent, the film *Primary Colors*; MTV’s *BIOrhythm* documentary of Clinton; and an episode devoted to Clinton in PBS’s 1999 series, *The American President*. Through their careful examination, the Parry-Giles show how messages that have largely been overlooked by rhetorical critics may have exerted a powerful influence on public perceptions of Bill Clinton. Specifically, they reveal the ways in which Clinton’s image was organized around the tensions between past and future, masculine and feminine, war and peace, black and white, public and private. The Parry-Giles demonstrate, for example, that messages often portrayed Clinton as sensitive to women’s issues, yet relegated women to the tra-

ditional role of “supporter,” largely ignored charges of sexual harassment against him, and dismissed his penchant for womanizing as a result of his idolatry of JFK or even Elvis.

Drawing upon a wealth of interdisciplinary scholarship, the authors show how texts about Clinton interwove these dualistic themes. *Constructing Clinton* accounts for both the verbal and visual dimensions of rhetoric, often with attention to fine visual details. We learn, for instance, that 65 visual images flashed across the screen in the first 17 seconds of the *BIOrhythm* documentary. Likewise, the Parry-Giles point out that people readily accepted the novel *Primary Colors* as an inside view of the Clinton campaign, yet dismissed the reality of the film version due to its visual style that was typical of a Hollywood feature film and the fact that an actor was playing the role of Stanton/Clinton. The Parry-Giles also provide thoughtful reflections on aspects of hyperreality, as when they observe that politicians frequently exploit personal information about themselves if it will help in the polls, while “simultaneously condemning the exposure of information that would tarnish their carefully constructed images or depress votes” (p. 120).

Without disparaging the accomplishments of *Constructing Clinton*—and it has many—I am also compelled to point to several of its limitations. First, the book is in need of an initial chapter that clearly establishes why Clinton’s was the epitome of the hyperreal presidency. Throughout *Constructing Clinton*, the Parry-Giles offer numerous cogent observations—e.g., that Clinton was the first president to establish his image outside traditional political venues (p. 126) and that the increasing number of media outlets and messages means he has had to deal with more “layers of image construction” than the presidents who preceded him (p. 193). The problem is that most of these context-setting points are distributed throughout the book

rather than developed in a more thematic way in Chapter I to establish a framework for the Parry-Giles' fine analysis. In particular, the authors might provide an explanation of the relationship between the Reagan administration and the development of the hyperreal Clinton presidency, as Michael Deaver's efforts at presidential image-making no doubt paved the way for what was to come.

Also missing from *Constructing Clinton* is a text from any rhetor who might be dubbed a "Clinton hater." Although the Parry-Giles are to be applauded for showing how various genres of discourse can influence us, all of the messages they examine are at least somewhat positive in their attitude toward Clinton. Even *Primary Colors* contains an underlying admiration of Jack Stanton's character, even if that admiration is mixed with disappointment. The inclusion of a different text might provide a fuller portrait of the ways in which Clinton was constructed.

Occasionally, the authors also overlook key points that would help their analysis. This is especially true in the chapter on the Clinton campaign film. Although they discuss later in the book Clinton's fondness for rosy depictions of the 1950s, the Parry-Giles do not observe how the film's *The Man from Hope* title mimics "The Man from Abilene" hook used in Eisenhower's early campaign spots, nor do they note the rhetorical significance of Clinton's decision to focus on Hope, where he was born, rather than Hot Springs, the town of gamblers and gangsters, where he spent most of his childhood and youth. Likewise, a more explicit connection could be made between the film's recounting of how Clinton stood up to his abusive stepfather to protect his mother and the film's conclusion where the candidate promises to defend the American people.

Perhaps my biggest concern, however, is with the authors' optimistic view of the impact of hyperreality on our polity. The Parry-Giles disagree with recent assessments

that civic participation is declining, siding instead with those who argue that it may be evolving, that people may no longer go to PTA meetings, but they "talk about politics at work, or in an Internet chat room and they interact with others at the fitness center, or via cell phone on a conference call" (p. 195). The impact of evolution aside, however, one cannot ignore the declining number of citizens who vote. Perhaps more individuals are talking about politics on the Internet, but if they do not show up to PTA meetings to organize the new after-school reading program, how will the work of the community get done?

There is also evidence that we are joining together in ways that may be more segregated than they were only a short time ago (Freie, 1998), a trend hyperreality seems likely to exacerbate. The Parry-Giles themselves conclude that politicians will probably rely more and more upon "presidential imaging" with the result that "No longer will constituencies only be unified by interest or geography or ethnicity. Instead, they will also achieve identity as citizens from the visual images offered for their consumption" (p. 190). According to the Parry-Giles, texts like *The American President* during the Clinton administration served to unite citizens by depicting the American public as wise enough to defend the institution of the presidency from the political maneuvers of Ken Starr. The authors are correct to note that even postmodern messages may encourage citizens to unite in ways that are often overlooked. Yet, it also seems probable that political messages will increasingly be used to divide us, providing particular visual images to particular groups—what Joe Turow (1997) has dubbed "image tribes" (p. 184)—such that individuals from one segment are encouraged to talk with one another (rather than others) and to see themselves as different from everyone else (p. 3). And, of course, even if we are prompted to unite as a larger whole, the question is whether messages that

encourage a sense of shared identity will also urge us to embark on the hard work of citizenship. I may put a flag on my SUV, but will I reconsider my choice of vehicle or contemplate other ways in which I might work for the common good? And if politicians are increasingly immersed in image-making, when will they have time to do the thinking that wise policy-making demands?

In fairness to the authors, they do discuss some of the negative effects of hyperreality—e.g., an increasingly adversarial relationship between politicians and journalists—yet they weigh in more heavily on the positive side of this phenomenon. The Parry-Giles write that the result of intensified hyperreality may be “healthy skepticism” that challenges presidential images and motives, thereby “investing the public with a greater responsibility for the success of the U.S. democratic experiment” (p. 202). Alas, it is a small step from healthy skepticism to cynicism, with the adversarial nature of political image-making likely to feed the latter rather than the former. In sum, the Parry-Giles do not ignore the negative impact of hyperreality, but they let it—and themselves—off the hook too easily in the end.

Points like these notwithstanding, *Constructing Clinton* is an insightful book that illuminates both the Clinton presidency and contemporary political rhetoric. The Parry-Giles have made a welcome contribution to presidential studies.

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Hacker Culture. By Douglas Thomas. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002; pp. xxvii + 267. \$25.95.

The word “hacker” is now familiar within the American vocabulary, established through numerous venues from mainstream films to emailed security alerts from the network administrator. A common thread running throughout this discourse is the image of the hacker as a meddling, larcenous and destructive figure who serves as the warrant for the security concerns raised by law enforcement, the courts, and corporate America. Although pervasive, this image of the hacker and its accompanying rhetoric offer an incomplete account of the hacker’s role in our culture, according to Douglas Thomas, Associate Professor in the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California. Exploring the ways in which both mainstream society and hackers themselves shape the meaning of “hacker” in our society, Thomas argues that the figure of the hacker in culture reveals much about our attitudes toward our increasingly networked society and exposes fundamental contradictions in our relationship to computer technology and mediated communication.

Thomas’s book is engaging and readable text that critiques the history of our present attitudes toward hacking and technology. The central point of the book is that a monolithic view of hackers as hermetic, evil, digital anarchists is neither an accurate nor responsible characterization, and is ultimately misleading by obfuscating more about hacker culture than it explains. Thomas contends that, “the target of hackers’ activity is not machines, people, or resources but the relationships among those things” (38). Through case studies and critical analysis of hacker discourse, Thomas identifies several motives behind hacking, from experimentation to political activism. Most hackers, he argues, engage in a cooperative spirit of inquiry and investigation and are more interested in finding, sharing and discussing loopholes in order to understand and improve technology rather than exploit it for selfish

