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## The cultural pragmatics of event-ness: the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair

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### Introduction

Imagined communities generate events that compel community-wide attention, regardless of size or degree of social and cultural differentiation. Early in the twentieth century Durkheim famously argued there "can be no society that does not experience the need at regular intervals to maintain and strengthen the collective feelings and ideas that provide its coherence and its distinct individuality" ([1912] 1995: 429). Rituals, he specified, represent the processes through which solidarity and collective identity are rejuvenated. While social and cultural differentiation has made ritual-like processes in twenty-first-century America more difficult to sustain, this imagined community (Anderson 1983) continues to produce events that draw issues of collective identity and solidarity to the fore of its individuals' consciences (cf. Larson and Wagner-Pacifici 2001).

Contemporary ritual-like events, however, differ markedly from the processes Durkheim described. They are subject to much higher degrees of conflict, disconsensus, and contingency. Victor Turner (1969, 1974, 1982) responded to this critical fact when he pushed his ritual framework towards the theory of social dramas. Social dramas represent events in the making that compel community-wide attention, generating narratives, oftentimes conflicting, that define and explain what has occurred and its seriousness. The Clinton/Lewinsky Affair, which dominated the national spotlight in 1998, was just such a drama. It appeared to erupt from an initial occurrence for which the vast majority of the country's citizens wanted, if not demanded, an explanation and some form of redressive action. The resulting fourteen-month-long social drama was structured by the thrusts and parries of multiple publics competing to control the meaning of the event *in media res*.

Explaining Monicagate, however, requires that we analyze the particular cultural and political context out of which the social drama erupted. Early in

Clinton's first term, Congressional Republicans, with the support of an exuberant, solid quarter of the nation's citizens, began to construct Clinton's assumption of power as representing a national "fall from grace" drama. After meeting with some narrative success that enabled significant political victories, the persuasive power of the Republicans' dramatic narratives began to erode. Towards the end of its first term, the Clinton Administration became increasingly effective at controlling social dramas. The Administration's new-found social dramatic acumen enabled it to weather the right's relentless symbolic and political onslaughts. The Administration's narratives shored up support from its Democratic base, and increasingly secured the sympathy of the silent, swayable, middle majority of American citizens. In this chapter I will analyze the cultural pragmatics, or structure and action dialectics, that produced Monicagate's frenetic beginning and shaped the contours of the event's unfolding. In so doing I will show how the cultural pragmatic framework explains the apparent paradox of how Clinton, though impeached by the House Republicans, remained in office to finish out his second term with high approval ratings, and the sympathy and support of a majority of American publics.

#### The theoretical roots of cultural pragmatics

Cultural pragmatics addresses a range of social phenomena that are variously referred to in sociological literature as degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel 1956), secular rituals (Douglas 1966), moments out of time (Turner 1969, 1974, 1982), media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), and, of course, collective rituals (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Shils and Young 1953; Lukes 1975; Alexander 1988; Smith 1991; Edles 1998). These sociological conceptualizations describe highly orchestrated collective processes that produce a "break" from mundane, routine social life, and for this reason are central to the maintenance of social order and the formation and extension of collective identity. These processes emerge in response to initiating occurrences that appear to demand attention, interpretation, and remedial action. It was such *apparent* occurrences that precipitated events like Watergate (1972), the hostage crisis in Iran (1979), the Iran-Contra Affair (1987), Rodney King's videotaped arrest (1991) and the acquittal of his police subduers (1992), the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City (1995), and the death of Diana, Princess of Wales (1997), as well as Monicagate and the Clinton impeachment trial (1998). In each case, these event-processes demonstrate ceremonial qualities. On the one hand, as non-routine events, such processes conform to historically grounded, routine structures with more or less agreed upon beginnings, middles, and ends. On the other, they are adorned with overt aesthetic dimensions in the form of intentionally exaggerated symbolic performances. Such

event-processes concern themselves with attributing meaning to an initializing occurrence in order to bring about a change in the social status of an individual or group, simultaneously creating and resolving conflict between segments of a collectivity.

From mundane to extraordinary experiences, social life is inextricably infused with meaning. An "occurrence" is any cognized happening (Molotch and Lester 1974: 102), and cognition suggests some degree of interpretation. Yet, while meaningful, occurrences exist only temporarily and relatively discretely in a social actor's awareness; they neither transcend their originating contexts nor take root in a larger public's consciousness. An "event," by contrast, is a set of narratively interconnected occurrences that achieves "generalization," drawing a public's attention away from the specificity of everyday life (Alexander 1988; Smelser 1963). As unusually significant meaning constellations, events become lasting points of demarcation in the flow of collective time and retain the potential to inform ongoing social experience. Structurally, events take shape from stark clashes of meaning structures within a broad cultural system of shared sign relations. At the same time, such clashes are both orchestrated and reactively mediated by purposeful, creative human agents who narrate the interconnections between occurrences.

What explains event-ness's natural feel, the sensed rightness of its status, and the passions it can generate, a naturalness that belies the self-conscious quality of an event's orchestration? Durkheim's late work ([1912] 1995) explains one absolutely critical piece of this puzzle.<sup>1</sup> As anchoring nodes in the cultural fabric, Durkheim explains, the sacred and the profane stand in diametrical opposition to one another as "hostile and jealous rivals" ([1912] 1995: 37). It follows that "the mind experiences deep repugnance about mingling, even simple contact, between the corresponding things, because the notion of the sacred is always and everywhere separate from the notion of the profane in man's mind, and because we imagine a kind of logical void between them" ([1912] 1995: 37). Durkheim concludes that rites and ritual ceremonies function to maintain this logical void, re-establishing and reaffirming individuals' understandings of their community's symbolic boundaries between good and evil and right and wrong. Individual actions are shaped by the way actors understand their situations vis-à-vis these meaning structures. By focusing on the processes that establish the foundations for social understanding, Durkheim laid the groundwork for a cultural sociology. Such cosmological mechanisms must play a central role in any explanation of social order or variations thereof. By retaining the theoretical centrality of meaning, Turner (1969, 1974, 1982), Alexander (1988), and others (e.g. Smith 1991; Edles 1998) have demonstrated that the basic processes Durkheim illuminated explain the structure and outcome of even the most conflict-laden, chaotic, or violent

contemporary events. Collectivities, whether wracked by violent expressions of difference or seemingly seduced into sleepy indifference, are ontologically tethered to the world via cultural systems that render social interactions sensible by structuring lived experiences into coded discourses, myths, genres, and narratives.

The "natural" repugnance or shock many Americans demonstrated during the Clinton/Lewinsky Affair's inception, which contributed to the precipitation of full-fledged event-ness, exemplifies this symbolic dynamic of a perceived profanation of a sacred space, for instance, counter-democratic actions being found in a democracy's sacred center (see Alexander 1988; Alexander and Smith 1993; Douglas 1966). Degrees of exasperation point to the interconnectedness of affect and meaning structures. The logic of structuralism – the culture system's relative stability, its constitution of consciousness – suggests particular actions, like taking another human's life, are culturally predetermined to provoke purifying, restorative rituals: the sacred's status seems natural to us and the "logical void" between it and the profane is not negotiated or reflectively considered during everyday, mundane experience. Rather, this cultural structure informs our worldly interpretations even though it is socially constructed and its idiosyncratic contents are essentially arbitrary.

Despite the natural feel of such breaching events, turning an "occurrence" into an "event" in postmodern, highly differentiated, late capitalist America – gaining control over its meaning by persuading countless anonymous others to share one's interpretation and recommendation for remedial action – is an exceedingly contingent and combative process. Social actors and parties work to create events, to define occurrences as such, often in the face of considerable opposition from actors who would rather let this occurrence pass by unnoticed. When an eventworthy occurrence develops, and widespread public attention does shift towards investigating and making sense of it, multiple and motivated parties emerge to impose on this eruption a "master narrative" (Wagner-Pacifi 1986). Their goal is to control its ultimate interpretation and effects. Controlling the event's outcome points beyond meaning to such "material" effects as determining the meting out of punishments, redistributing resources such as money and positions of power, and restructuring institutions.

*A theoretical caution: the cynical tendency towards reduction*

Normative and political orientations may tempt us to reduce Monicagate to partisan politics, prurient titillation, and "mere scandal." This interpretive urge is strong enough for some scholars to "wonder if the events themselves were not imaged, or imaginary" (Larson and Wagner-Pacifi 2001: 736). They point to polls that showed "only a minority of Americans followed the impeachment

hearings closely" and to the fact that the Affair appeared "discontinuous, [and] unsupported by any 'plot'" (Larson and Wagner-Pacifi 2001: 737). Yet this is precisely *not* to understand what makes an occurrence into an event, and what differentiates contemporary social dramas from earlier rituals.<sup>2</sup> As will be shown, it is the competition between groups of producers, actors, and partial audiences that characterizes *any* contemporary "affair," and multiple plots are the rule. It will require introducing a much more elaborate theory of social performance to allow me to further explain these points.

The ritual and social dramatic analytical frameworks that have dominated earlier sociological interpretations of such events have contributed significant insights. For instance, demonstrating a prescient cultural pragmatic sensibility, Alexander's (1988) analysis of Watergate offers a thickly described hermeneutics of the event's primary phases and explains its outcome in terms of "non-rational ritualization" becoming the order of the day.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the same time Alexander was demonstrating culture must figure robustly in sociological explanations, others were arguing that late-capitalist, postmodern societies' meaning systems are too fragmented and commodified, their audiences too jaded and skeptical, for ritual-like productions to actively engage members of an imagined community (Wagner-Pacifi 1986; Jameson 1982: 84–5). This latter line of theoretical speculation performs a kind of contorted dance: simultaneously attributing central explanatory importance to culture while arguing capitalism has reduced culture's contents to commodities and instruments of power, forces some interesting theoretical contradictions.<sup>4</sup>

In her analysis of the kidnapping and murder of Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, for instance, Wagner-Pacifi (1986) argues the cultural realm has been fully colonized by postmodern capitalism and symbols reduced to commodities and weapons. In a nutshell, culture is determined by the mode of production and infused with power. While her analysis is rich with conceptual insights into the pragmatics of social-dramatic productions, Wagner-Pacifi's theoretical presuppositions of postmodern society undercut her analytical gains. On the one hand, she makes culture structures important to the event's outcome. The event's self-appointed interpreters make use of socially pre-structured meanings to influence their audiences, and audiences rely on these frames to make sense of Moro's situation and fate. Yet, at the same time, Wagner-Pacifi also argues that, once capitalism has commodified symbols, their effectiveness gets diminished, that, as commodities, symbols are ubiquitous, degraded, and cheapened through repetitive use. Consumer-savvy moderns are thus uninterested and too apathetic and disenchanting to be taken in by elite narratives about Moro's predicament. Within this ontology about culture's relation to human life, in which symbols are reduced to superficial, empty vessels, how can meaning and interpretation be central to the event's dynamics (cf. Alexander and Smith 1998)?

Goffman drew our attention to the "problem of misrepresentation" (1951: 298), that people have the ability to present persuasively false meanings, and it is certainly true that political and normative predilections pull on epistemology (Said 1978; Clifford 1988). Still, it is vital that sociology resist subsuming meaning to collective power and individual practice. Yes, culture is in part a "tool kit" (Swidler 1986), and studies such as Wagner-Pacifi's demonstrate this in a powerful way. We use words intentionally to try to communicate particular ideas for particular reasons. Yet culture's relevance to social life depends on its relative autonomy from the social structure, in its structural form, or *langue* (language) (see Kane 1991). While culture is made present through *parole* (speech), or through an actor's use of a particular "tool," it is made meaningful and comprehensible, and therefore socially influential, because of the "tool's" analogical and antipathetic relations to other tools in the "kit" that are not explicitly in play, but which, nonetheless, exercise power in the experienced social situation (Barthes [1968] 1977a; Eco 1976; Saussure 1985). Action is always citational (Derrida 1988). Each instantiation of meaning draws forth unseen signs and symbols, rooted in the cultural fabric, into momentary if non-conscious presence.

There is also the matter of temporality. A "tool's" meaning in social life is the product of its relation to other tools that are made present by actors in a temporal flow of successive instantiations. Flows of signs demonstrate structures; they are discourses, narratives, myths, and genres. Understanding a tool's particular meaning at a particular time requires locating its presence in relation to the overall structural flow. Just as the meaning of a word is determined by its location in the structure of a sentence, so the sociologist must account for where a particular tool stands in relation to the more general cultural-structure in which it is invoked. These are the structures of social life, and must be the center-pieces of sociological explanations. Limiting our sociological understanding of action to "what gets done," and seeking to get beyond the problem of meaning (Wuthnow 1987) inevitably attributes inordinate degrees of instrumentality to social practice. The meaning of action is thus shaped more by the structure of the sociologist's explanatory narrative (for instance, see Larson and Wagner-Pacifi 2001), than by the experiences and understandings of the social actors actually engaged in an event.

However, sociology that simply debunks and elucidates is insufficient and partial. Sociology must aim to understand and explain. Cultural pragmatics is an analytic solution to the philosophical conundrum of how theory and practice interact in the production of everyday life. It provides a conceptual framework for mapping, and thickly describing, the incongruities between words and deeds. It enables us to explain events in terms of their meaningful contents for participants, the power relations brought to bear in the event, and the influence

of material factors on event production and reception, without negating the background culture's continuing structural effects (Derrida 1988).

### The Clinton/Lewinsky Affair

#### *Monicagate's dramatic prelude*

Monicagate was a coded, narratively structured social drama, given form through the interactions of political and social elites, critics and interpretive entrepreneurs, and multiple American publics. At different times throughout the event, each of these three clusters of agents assumed the lead role in focusing the production's spotlight, while the other two groups assumed the role of audience, as though inhabiting the seats in a darkened theatre, celebrating or booing the production along. Each cluster of agents simultaneously enacted a role and interpreted the others' performances. The form and outcome of Monicagate was the product of these interactions.

Yet the event's interactions were themselves structured by participants' reliance on shared, collective representations. Adopting the cultural pragmatic perspective, it becomes clear that the symbols and discourses mobilized during the political battles that preceded the scandal, and were continually invoked throughout Monicagate, combined to form identifiable narrative structures. Agents' invocations of particular symbols during the event, such as regular recourse to the symbol "Slick Willie" to villainize Clinton, suggest dynamics sociologically more profound than the fact that particular agents used symbols instrumentally as tools or weapons. Cultural pragmatics acknowledges social actors orient towards meaning with intent, but it analytically probes deeper by asking, for instance, why a particular symbol is meaningful, what makes it damaging like a weapon, and why does its invocation produce positive reactions in some audience members and adverse reactions in others?

Monicagate's main protagonists drew on dramatic structures from two popular film genres, the bank robber and gangster films of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and the bad cop films and television news narratives of the 1990s. Rooted in America's political and social history, these popular culture structures are latently present in civil society members' understandings of citizenship. While these cops and robbers genres shape American participants' understandings of routine flows and hiccups in the everyday meting out of justice (Christensen 1987; Gibson 1994; King 1999),<sup>5</sup> it is during political scandals and social crises that their dramatic tropes are most forcefully deployed and their social, interpretive power made explicit. Monicagate's three clusters of agents routinely drew upon these culture structures' tropes to describe themselves as victims or as agents of justice on the one hand, and to frame the

other clusters in the social drama as villains and perpetrators of injustice on the other.

Elements from the bank robber and gangster genres began to permeate civil discourse during Clinton's bid for the Democratic nomination in 1992, most notably in the mushrooming use of the name "Slick Willie" to capture the candidate's charisma, charm, and sharp intellect, on the one hand, and the suspicion that within him lurked a penchant for mischief and a talent for deceit, on the other. The use and force of the symbol increased its hold over American imaginations from early 1992 until late in 1995, when tropes from the bad cop genre forcefully emerged in the discourse of civil society to describe Republicans investigating the president and accusing him of criminal wrongdoing. While American publics – whether composed of Clinton enthusiasts, ambivalent moderates, or unwavering conservatives – were exposed to and invoked these genre idioms with increasing frequency during these time periods, the way any particular public oriented towards these symbol-complexes remained contingent. In effect, the idioms came to serve as lexicons for, and sites of, symbolic contestation between publics.

Clinton entered office in January 1993, having won the election with the smallest portion of the popular vote (43 percent) since Richard Nixon's 1968 victory.<sup>6</sup> Exit polls indicated Clinton, Bush, and Independent Party candidate Ross Perot, all drew remarkably high unfavorable ratings, and the *New York Times* editorial page framed Clinton's victory as a "fragile mandate . . . of tenuous proportion."<sup>7</sup>

It was Clinton's impressive biography that helped the candidate win the trust of the Democratic base and a decisive portion of the nation's undecided moderate middle. The facts of Clinton's rise to the national stage resonated with the American myth that any boy with talent and pluck, no matter how humble his origins, could become the president of the United States. Clinton's campaign overcame its candidate's "character issues" and assuaged voter suspicion by emphasizing his rise from a broken home in rural Arkansas to becoming a Rhodes Scholar, Yale Law School graduate, and governor of his home state. Clinton's campaign combined these biographical facts with their candidate's youthful enthusiasm to construct the image of a natural populist.<sup>8</sup> Within the narrative context of a nation adrift in economic stagnation, the Clinton campaign's dramatic strategy was extraordinarily effective, particularly when the candidate was juxtaposed to Bush Sr.'s genteel aloofness.

The election drama carved the nation's citizenry into three distinct audiences. Both the Democratic and Republican Party bases, each comprising roughly a quarter of the voting public, reacted to Clinton's campaign and victory with strong feelings. Yet, despite the political passions stirred in both parties' bases, Clinton's five-percentage point victory over Bush Sr. indicates the nation's enormous third audience at the political center was decisive in the contest, and

voted as much against Bush's poor handling of the nation's economic malaise as for Clinton himself.

Despite his compelling personal narrative and the hope he inspired in many, Clinton entered the presidency with a binary character as a result of the bruising symbolic battles of the Democratic primaries and general election contest. In addition to representing the best and brightest of a new generation of political leadership, Clinton entered the White House as "Slick Willie." An editor of Arkansas's most widely read newspaper, the *Democrat-Gazette*, initiated the symbolic linkage between Clinton and this gangster symbol in the late 1980s. The moniker was picked up by national media outlets<sup>9</sup> and fused to Clinton's national character early in 1992, as a tide of allegations of womanizing, dope smoking, and draft evasion threatened to overwhelm the frontrunner's campaign for his party's nomination. The allegations themselves cast a shadow of duplicity around Clinton, and ironically, this suspicion was only strengthened by the deftness with which Clinton rhetorically evaded and confounded his critics and questioners.

Was the symbol simply a nickname, a "tool" designed for practical effect? Quite the contrary, the symbol's invocation, spread most effectively by the *New York Times* liberal political commentator and satirist, Maureen Dowd, indicates the initial formation of a negative and polluting cultural structure. Though often used in jest, the symbol, rooted deeply in American popular and political culture, would play a large role in Clinton's later emplotment in Monicagate.

The prototypical gangster of this genre comes from an impoverished rural area to the big city, rises through the ranks of a criminal organization through hard work, ambition, quick wits, and a kind of business acumen, to become the head crime boss of an enormous profit-making enterprise, a role quite similar to the president of a legitimate corporation. Bold, charismatic, reckless, and vainglorious, a top gangster is an outgoing and expansive performer driven by an uncontrollable lust to show the world that he is *somebody*. His desires are boundless. While his rural roots have left him lacking in cultural knowledge and manners, he nonetheless remains a ladies' man. Not needing love in the traditional sense, the gangster associates with "loose women" because of their easy and eager availability. These associations ultimately come at a high price. Because he always wants more and must constantly conquer new territory, the gangster's ultimate defeat seems a natural product of his desires and demands of life (Sobchack and Sobchack 1987). Though a master of escape to his very end, the higher he rises the more others seek his demise, and the more isolated and paranoid he becomes.

Willie Sutton, the original "Slick Willie," was a bank robber in the early 1930s known for the gentlemanly and personable demeanor with which he handled his victims when plying his trade. Bank robbers like Slick Willie Sutton, and gangsters like Al Capone and Baby Face Nelson grew to mythic stature



in Depression-era America, when American society was seen as failing average Americans, and lenders and wealthy capitalists were foreclosing on small businesses, farms, and homes. Though flawed in important respects, gangsters were interpreted as more similar to average Americans in life circumstances and moral sensibilities than were representatives of material wealth and institutional power.

In the American collective imagination the gangster symbol, in both its real person and filmic forms, came to represent a kind of romanticized outlaw, a good-bad guy, or a pragmatic Robin Hood. The intensity with which portions of the Depression-era public came to identify with these social renegades is perhaps best illustrated by people's reaction to John Dillinger's violent death by the guns of FBI agents outside the Biograph Theatre in 1934, Chicago. Immediately after his fall from the gunshots, hordes of onlookers descended on the scene and began mopping up the icon of romantic populism's blood with their clothes.<sup>10</sup> Just as Dillinger drew fire from the feds, the highly popular gangster film genre came under institutional fire as well. Drafted in 1930 and strictly instituted in 1934, the Hays Code represented a quasi-governmental, religious reaction to the gangster's increasingly beloved status in the American imagination. The product of collaboration between William Harrison Hays, who served in President Warren Harding's cabinet, a grab-bag of religious figures, and Hollywood moguls whose industry was plagued by scandals, the Hays Code was a self-regulatory code mandating that criminal acts should "never be presented in such a way as to throw sympathy with the crime as against law and justice or to inspire others with a desire for imitation." The simultaneity of these regulatory mechanisms' enactment, and the Hays Code's explicit reference to the connection between real gangsters and the cinema's version of these outlaws, suggests that the existences of real objects and representations of real objects mutually constitute one another through a feedback loop dynamic (Schechner 2002; Turner 1982).

While Clinton entered the White House tenuously as a good-bad guy, by July 17, 1995, the *Washington Times* was describing the Clinton White House as shrouded in a "Climate of Suspicion." *TIME Magazine's* headline the following week was "Whitewater Tricks; New Hearings Prompt the Clintons to Make New Revelations – Only to Be Caught Short Again." What led to these constructions in which, for a sizeable portion of the nation's political center, Clinton was increasingly associated with the negative codes of gangsterism?

1993 saw the development of several Clinton White House scandals: "Travelgate," concerning charges of nepotism and the mismanagement of federal travel funds;<sup>11</sup> Vince Foster's suicide;<sup>12</sup> the failure of Arkansas' Madison Guaranty S&L run by the Clintons' friends and periodic business partners the McDougals.<sup>13</sup> The White House staff's resistant and evasive responses

combined with the developments themselves to create the *Times's* "climate of suspicion."<sup>14</sup> While Congressional Republicans' approval ratings began to rise, Clinton's approval ratings repeatedly set record lows, hovering between the mid-30s and 40s until spring 1995.

The single most significant political consequence of the climate of suspicion surrounding the Clinton White House was the Democratic Party's loss of control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in 1994's November elections.<sup>15</sup> This transferred an enormous amount of institutional power to the Republicans who treated their sweeping victory as a mandate from the public and as an indictment of the Clinton White House.<sup>16</sup> Earlier that year, Attorney General Janet Reno had appointed Robert Fiske to head the investigation into the Whitewater land and S&L dealings and Vince Foster's suicide. November's shift in Congressional power enabled the Republican-controlled Senate to remove Fiske and appoint Ken Starr to the role of special prosecutor. Additionally, the House and Senate Banking Committees both began hearings on Whitewater. And Newt Gingrich, as the new Speaker of the House, became increasingly vocal in his criticisms of Clinton, announcing upwards of twenty new task forces and subcommittees to investigate him – a number he was later forced to reduce.

A shift in the dramatic landscape, in which new villains emerged, occurred after the Republicans won control of Congress. While the bank robber and gangster genres continued to shape civil discourse after 1995, polls indicate that a growing majority of citizens began to both orient towards their idioms with greater degrees of irony, and to emphasize the quasi-heroic dimensions of the gangster figure when describing Clinton. The declining significance of the gangster genre's *polluting* dimensions was due in part to the rising power in the discursive arena of the "bad cop" film genre (cf. Christensen 1987; King 1999), whose tropes were increasingly drawn upon to characterize the investigative authorities pursuing Clinton and working so hard to assassinate his character. These symbolic shifts facilitated one another, and as Clinton's political team became more successful at morphing the president's accusers into bad cops, Clinton's transformation into the quasi-heroic, quick-thinking, gangster escapist accelerated.

The bad cop picture represents a mutation of the rogue cop genre film popular in the mid- and late 1970s. Rising to prominence in the wake of Watergate, the rogue cop picture pits a stoic, everyman cop-figure fighting for justice against both street criminals and representatives of institutional authority. His departmental superiors and political authorities have become sources of corruption, and instead of representing authors and protectors of justice, they are portrayed as standing in the way of justice. Shifting the locus of corruption, the bad cop genre proliferates in the wake of 1991's widely and frequently televised

home-videotape clip showing Los Angeles policemen violently subduing African American motorist Rodney King.

In the bad cop genre no character is left completely innocent or virtuous; rather, all characters are portrayed as struggling against social forces to maintain a civilized dignity. The bad cop is one of the few that gives up this struggle completely and exercises his power in frequently arbitrary, yet always self-interested ways. While the pervasiveness of corruption amongst the league of police foot-soldiers is left ambiguous, those with the power to investigate and physically subdue others are portrayed as the clearest representatives of potential evil. This genre's presence in the collective constitution of the real was powerfully demonstrated in 1995, when attorney Johnny Cochran represented OJ Simpson's official police investigators as bad cops. The investigators' exact motives for targeting Simpson remained rather ambiguous; they were simply sinister, if shaped by racism and desire for notoriety.<sup>17</sup> Actor Denzel Washington, the lead in this genre's quintessential filmic representation, *Training Day* (2001), received one of the film industry's highest honors for his portrayal of a bad cop whose "nihilistic magnificence" and "underhandedness" left onlookers – both in the film and in its audiences – rapt in a state of puzzlement.<sup>18</sup>

After successfully gaining control of Congress by running explicitly against the Clinton Administration during 1994's midterm elections, the Republicans' increase in institutional authority appeared to reflect a similarly impressive increase in symbolic authority and trust vis-à-vis American voters. However, as the number and severity of their attacks on Clinton increased, the Republicans' tactics and subjects of scrutiny began to alienate the moderate swing voters who had helped them gain their new-found power.

During this time the president and his staff grew increasingly adept at shaping the political arena's dramatic landscape, and moved to formalize their processes of meaning production with the development of a new scandal management team (Woodward 1999: 275). In 1994 and 1995 several convictions resulted from the Whitewater investigations. While initially quite damaging politically, the Clinton Administration grew increasingly skilled at framing such convictions as inconsequential prosecutorial successes against obscure land developers and speculators. The convictions drew only scant coverage by national news-casts, and received most of their attention in late-night talk show monologues, which mocked Gingrich and the Republicans' repeated promises that Clinton's undoing was nigh. To the contrary, Clinton's symbolic framework began to improve, a process that was catalyzed by his masterfully presidential reaction to the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in April 1995.

Additionally, November and December of 1995 were dominated by narrative constructions of Clinton versus the Congressional Republicans in a battle over the federal government's budget. Clinton's handling of the stalemate led

the Republicans to take the extraordinarily unpopular step of officially shutting down all government services, twice. The powerful and emotionally charged performances Clinton delivered throughout these battles over the budget solidified a shift in the political arena's symbolic landscape. By the end of the battle over the budget, talk of "scandal fatigue" began to emerge to describe the shifting mood amongst the nation's moderate middle. Whereas during the prior two years Clinton was effectively coded as evasive and worthy of suspicion to many, the Clinton versus Republicans show-down marked the dramatic recasting of the Republicans in the political sphere's role of the bad cop. The Republicans' various investigative efforts were increasingly interpreted as less motivated by democratic ideals and more driven by counterdemocratic forms of partisanship. During this shift in symbolic landscape a critical plot-point occurred: Clinton began his intimate relationship with Monica Lewinsky three days into the government shut-down.

Independent Council, Ken Starr's investigative reach was expanded in 1996 by Attorney General Reno to include "Filegate"<sup>19</sup> and allegations of Clinton officials lying to Congress. This increase in Republican investigative power fueled the symbolic expansion of their villain framework and catalyzed what could be called the "Gingrich-ification" of Ken Starr. Undaunted by, or unaware of this trend, the Republicans continued to insinuate that the investigative efforts would "reveal" mortally damaging facts about the Clinton White House. Despite the periodic unearthing of White House improprieties and questionable past dealings,<sup>20</sup> none of these instances was symbolically transformed into the damning evidence the Republicans had been promising. As a consequence, (1) the Republicans' continual promises of a mortal blow fueled "scandal fatigue," (2) Starr's investigative expansion resulted in the symbolic linkage of his political motives with Newt Gingrich's, and (3) the Republicans were increasingly framed as bad cops, driven by counterdemocratic motives and by a personal dislike for Clinton.

A critical plot development occurred in 1997. As the investigations continued, an anonymous call was placed to Paula Jones's attorneys alerting them to Clinton's relationship with Lewinsky (retrospectively presumed to have been made by Linda Tripp). An important series of additional plot points followed that led to the public revelation of Clinton's involvement with Lewinsky. Lewinsky was subpoenaed by Paula Jones's lawyers, for instance. She also met with Clinton to "practice" for her deposition, was offered a job at Revlon by Clinton's friend, Vernon Jordan, and she shared a copy of a document titled "Points to Make in an Affidavit," containing instructions for responding to questions about the Kathleen Willey case, with her then friend, Linda Tripp. Shortly later, Tripp contacted Starr and agreed to tape conversations with Lewinsky about her relationship with Clinton. Starr then requested and was allowed to expand his

investigation to include possible perjury and obstruction of justice in the Jones case. FBI and US attorneys questioned Lewinsky and offered her immunity in exchange for testimony. And finally, on January 17, 1998, Clinton gave a deposition denying he had been in a sexual relationship with Lewinsky.

In the months to come, the Republican dramatic production worked to frame these events as part of a chain of discovery of facts about Clinton's true nature. They also sought to frame initial public reactions of shock and intense interest as constituting a natural response to what should be considered a clear transgression of sacred boundaries. The Clinton production team, on the other hand, and Democrats more generally, dramatically framed these events as part of a long-standing, secretive, villainously orchestrated plan to attack Clinton personally for political gain.

### Monicagate's first phase

The social processes resulting from the news release of Clinton's possible relationship with Lewinsky appeared to take on a life of its own. The breach occurred on January 21, 1998, at 1:11 a.m. when Matt Drudge posted the headline "Blockbuster Report: 23-Year-Old, Former White House Intern, Sex Relationship With President" on his website. After learning of Drudge's web-posting, the *Washington Post* ran the story on the 21st as well with the headline "Clinton Accused of Urging Aide to Lie."

The news's rapid spread sparked massive, widespread shifts in attention among people working in political institutions and news media, and pulled citizens away from their mundane routines to center on a particular occurrence. One Administration official stated that an "air of unreality" had taken hold in Washington;<sup>21</sup> those in the Washington D.C. area were described as "flabbergasted" and "shocked beyond belief;"<sup>22</sup> and one commentator, reflecting on the qualitatively new tone in the nation's capital at the close of the event's first week, symbolically linked the event with Watergate, stating "Friday evening brought to close a week [not seen] since the darkest days of Watergate."<sup>23</sup>

Audiences actively engaged the emerging ritual-like process as well. Breaking from their routine affairs, people flooded Internet news websites, crashing many servers due to the heavy traffic, bought newspapers in record numbers, and tuned into cable news networks, which experienced dramatic increases in viewership.<sup>24</sup> E-civil spheres mushroomed online, as chatrooms filled with people seeking to discuss and debate the events.

Watergate continued to play a central role in the event's symbolic framing. Conservative critic William Safire invoked a piece of Watergate's naturalistic imagery, characterizing the atmosphere around Clinton as a "firestorm that [is] going to break out around him."<sup>25</sup> The metaphors Watergate and firestorm are

images of uncontrollable, natural forces. Safire's use of firestorm symbolically links Clinton with Nixon, and characterizes the press and public reactions as natural, uncontrollable, and furious reactions to the assumed corruption.

Sam Donaldson's spontaneous, oft-repeated response to the breach indicates the event's fused, ritual-like feel of irresistible momentum: "If he's not telling the truth, I think his presidency is probably numbered in days. This isn't going to drag out. We're not going to be here in three months talking about this . . . I sat here during Watergate, we all did. I am amazed at the *speed with which this story is going*."<sup>26</sup> Actively partaking in the telling of the story, Donaldson nonetheless describes the process as propelled by a momentum all its own.

Clinton was the central character in the initial stages of the incipient drama. In terms of *mis-en-scène*, the critics rendered him a lone figure at center stage. His physical performance in his initial interview with Jim Lehrer on *The News Hour* was described as "visibly shaken and unsteady in his responses;"<sup>27</sup> he appeared as though a "picture of isolation," and "withdrawn . . . secretive and evasive."<sup>28</sup> His verbal performance was framed critically as "legalistic and evasive," "carefully worded . . . cryptic, partial, and insufficient," and "dependent . . . so heavily on omission and factual elision."<sup>29</sup> Clinton was quickly framed a "counter-democratic" (Alexander and Smith 1993) character. He was cast in the image of a guilty man who was once thought of as heroic if flawed but had been revealed as an impulsive fraud.

Within the first couple of days after the news's release, polls registered dramatic changes in public opinion, indicating a substantive expansion of a ritual-like process and the fusion of audiences with the Republican drama.<sup>30</sup> The number of Americans who disbelieved both of Clinton's denials – of having an affair with Lewinsky and suborning her to perjure herself – rose substantially, from 28 percent disbelieving Clinton on January 21 to 62 percent disbelieving him on January 23. Desires for Clinton's resignation were on the rise as well, with 67 percent wanting his departure from office if the allegations were true, and 56 percent favoring impeachment if he refused to step down voluntarily (ABC News).

Actors in an incipient social drama respond to a breach and mounting sense of crisis by working to control the meaning, and thus the consequences of the news. They invoke symbols with great metaphoric reach, and try to discursively construct and embody favorable symbols, codes, and literary archetypes in their actions. Actors' control over the means of symbolic and emotional production, their access to power, and their approaches to establishing the drama's *mise-en-scène* contribute to the formation of audiences' interpretations.

The Republicans' dramatic intentions included encouraging ritualization, liminality, and a collective sense of being "out of time." Narratively and dramatically this involved establishing and maintaining narrative clarity and simplicity,



and a sense of narrative boundedness in which the beginning had just occurred with the "revelation" of the Lewinsky Affair. The subtext of their early efforts was that "we have discovered an evil in the social center, now we must expel it." Their narrative and dramatic efforts were also aimed at hiding the machinations that went into preparing and bringing the social drama into being. That is, they sought to hide their backstage efforts that went into bringing the drama to stage; or, put theatrically, to hide their multiple "investigative rehearsals" that contributed to the news's outing.

The Republicans sought to encourage spectators' "natural outrage" at the news. Durkheim's (1995) and Mary Douglas's (1966) work on the relation between the sacred and the profane suggests the public's shock was in some sense culturally predetermined. Both argue that the profane must be removed from a sacred center via ritual means. The US office of presidency is perhaps the most sacred symbol in the US's national cultural order. Clinton's actions of sexual indiscretion and alleged perjury, if judged by the broad consensus that followed the news, were initially interpreted as representing a profanation of that sacred center.<sup>31</sup> It must be reiterated, however, that in highly differentiated democratic societies the sense of flow that audiences experience when they are fused with a social dramatic production is never self-sustaining. It demands constant effort and performative style to maintain the representation of compelling substance. In this regard, the Republicans found themselves in a dramatic bind.

Despite signs of shock, outrage, titillation, and civic re-engagement across American publics, the breach could not sustain itself. Social dramas require that producers claiming interpretive authority and legitimacy engage in a continual process of narration. Yet producers are constrained by their emplotment in the developing social drama. Audiences interpret a producer's claims to non-partisanship, neutrality, and disinterestedness, for instance, *vis-à-vis* the claimant's character development in the drama thus far.

In January 1998, the Republicans were confronted with a social-dramatic paradox: to successfully pollute Clinton they needed to narrate the breach's meaning and dramatize Monicagate's consequences as representing a dire threat to the nation's political center. Yet, they were prevented from engaging the social dramatic battle for fear of further concretizing the bad cop image the Clinton team had so successfully attributed them to date. The genre posits that bad cops pretend to be heroes. They use their authority to manufacture crises so that they can benefit from appearing to resolve them. In more concrete terms, bad cops plant evidence only to claim to discover it. Once "discovered," the bad cop removes the social threat – the evidence and the framed criminal – and assumes the role of hero for having protected and restored what is sacred in society.

A memo sent to Congressional Republicans by party strategist Frank Luntz during the breach's first week indicates Luntz sensed he needed to warn Republican characters against playing into the bad cop genre's logic:

If you comment, you will take a non-partisan, non-political situation and make it both partisan and political. Do not speculate. Do not hypothesize. Too many Americans justify the President's behavior because they dislike his accusers. Please don't add to that justification.<sup>32</sup>

To have fully engaged the breach and dramatized it as representing a crisis of democracy, the Republicans would have run the risk of portraying themselves as bad cops who had manufactured the evidence against Clinton only to have "discovered" it in order to reap the rewards of a new-found heroic status. Such actions would have solidified the Clinton team's well-developed narrative: that "Monicagate" simply represented the latest installment of Republican machinations to delegitimize the president. Yet, simply acting as if they were neutral onlookers would not prevent the Clinton team from dramatically situating Monicagate's news within a narrative of a long, secretive, meticulously orchestrated Republican plot to frame the president. Dramatically checkmated, the Republicans were unable to engage in dramatic contestation over the news's meaning and consequently they quite quickly lost narrative control over the incipient event. Within two weeks they were effectively coded and dramatically defined as unfit carriers of the ritual project.

The Democratic production faced no such dramatic restrictions. As the only character *en-scène* in this early phase, Clinton used his vast power and means of symbolic production to contest the veracity, and therefore the meaning of the allegations. He had at his disposal the media's unwavering attention and the symbolic props of dignity and grandeur afforded by the White House setting, which he employed masterfully. For instance, in what was scheduled to be a press conference on education policy on January 26, 1998 Clinton stood dramatically below an image of Teddy Roosevelt, "The Rough Rider," on horseback, and forcefully denied the charges to the riveted media and nation. Wagging his finger in scorn at his viewers, he famously declared, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. These allegations are false."

Most critics raved about the performance, suggesting it seemed to flow naturally from Clinton's knowledge of and comfort in the truth. With "his eyes narrowed and his finger stabbing in the air,"<sup>33</sup> Clinton appeared "strengthened and energetic."<sup>34</sup>

Clinton looked at the American people in the TV eye. He put on his most determined face and punched the air with his finger to drive his point home. There was none of the parsing of the facts that he used to cover his hindquarters in past scandals. No, these were direct, declarative sentences.<sup>35</sup>

Sympathetic and traditionally moderate critics reasoned the performance was too seamlessly compelling, its authenticity too perfectly embodied and delivered, to be the product of a consciously, intentionally deceptive actor. It

would demand an unimaginable will to deceive and unto hitherto unforeseen performative skills for Clinton to achieve felicity through falsity under such extreme conditions, critics assumed. Deception, it was believed, would have left a revealing trace. On the other hand, convinced that Clinton always lied, the Republican base marveled at the performance, reading the president's assertiveness as indicative of a certain degree of pathology.

Clinton received aid from a skilled supporting cast as well. In a powerfully dramatic intervention the following morning, Hillary Clinton appeared on NBC's top-rated morning show, the *Today Show*, and synthesized all of the elements of the Administration's dramatic strategy into a succinct, coherent plot. Up to this time Mrs. Clinton had been a polarizing figure. The core of the left championed her as a representation of how capable women could serve and improve the public sphere. The core of the right distrusted her and saw her as inappropriately presumptuous and ambitious in her role as First Lady. Neither of these audiences would be swayed by her *Today Show* appearance. Her performance as a loyal wife who believed and would defend her husband under such embarrassing circumstances, however, won her the respect of the critically important political middle still reeling from the just-released allegations.

During the interview the First Lady assumed the authoritative tone and demeanor of a drama's narrator, a role whose interpretive authority stems from its critical distance from, and narrative omniscience of, the action on center stage. Successfully taking on this role would allow Mrs. Clinton to appear as though she were capable of perspicaciously overseeing the event's overall plot, and would thus cast her as a neutral expositor in the eyes of the drama's followers.

She stated the plot simply and matter-of-factly:

*This is the great story here, for anybody willing to find it and write about it and explain it, is this vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president. A few journalists have kind of caught on to it and explained it, but it has not yet been fully revealed to the American public. And, actually, you know, in a bizarre sort of way, this may do it.*<sup>36</sup>

The First Lady's unproblematic access to the US's highest rated morning news show placed her face in the living rooms and kitchens of millions of people across the nation.<sup>37</sup> The timing was impeccable, though it was emphasized very early in the interview that her appearance had been scheduled weeks in advance and was to address a different subject. In contrast to her husband's performance the night prior, Mrs. Clinton entered people's lives unofficially, during their familiar routines, and she treated her audience as if she were a friend dropping in to discuss a personal problem. Her role and title of First Lady brought her added deference from the interviewer, and allowed her to

enact her script without interruption, oppositional retorts, or the elaboration of counternarratives. Of course, it would be either bold or stupid dramatic practice to be interviewed by a hostile critic.

During her performance, the First Lady worked to shift the drama's *mise-en-scène* by emphasizing what her tone and demeanor suggested should be obvious to all witnesses, that "the great story here" was not about her husband but about his accusers. In this manner Mrs. Clinton helped shift the social-dramatic focus from Bill Clinton to his accusers while simultaneously drawing on systems of representation that framed the investigators as counterdemocratic villains.

The phrase "right-wing conspiracy" invoked imagery of a secretive, coordinated orchestration to oust her husband from office. Her wording, "against my husband," conjured imagery of the private sphere, thus emphasizing the sexual dimension of the accusations as opposed to the issues more directly related to Clinton's office. "Husband" instead of "the president" suggested that the accusers were taking aim at an unfair target, the family, which is perhaps the very hub of the private sphere.

Finally, Mrs. Clinton's use of the phrase "since the day he announced for president" framed the current events in the context of an ongoing, long-lasting historical effort. The First Lady's phrase countered the Republicans' dramatic intentions by pointing out that the allegations and "the real story" did not begin *that week*. Rather, her dramatic framing of the plot, suggesting that the story actually started long ago, functioned to erode the audience's sense of dramatic boundedness; to deflate spectators' senses of being "out of time" and in a "bracketed" moment. It further encouraged the audience to detach from the production to study it for signs of orchestration or manipulation. It suggested that if the audience members looked closely they would be able to see the elaborate history of backstage machinations and rehearsal efforts the accusers had engaged in. Mrs. Clinton's performance was orchestrated to play as an impassioned though reasoned request of audiences and media to interpret her husband's initial "evasions" as instances of restrained frustration. She asked onlookers to identify with and understand the hero's careful patience in the face of such personalized, counterdemocratic efforts. Her account invoked a romantic narrative of a reluctant hero, a kind of Robin Hood, a generally merry, peace-loving man, being forced to fight villainous conspirators seeking to harm him and his family.

Roughly twelve hours after his wife's performance, Clinton-the-accused entered one of the nation's most sacred physical spaces and delivered his State of the Union Address. Clinton's performance during this highly symbolic event capped Monicagate's first phase, and sealed his dramatic production's dominant, if tenuous narrative control over the event.<sup>38</sup> As *New York Times* columnist John Broder framed the evening's performance: "Few other politicians of his

generation – or any other – could have pulled off a performance like that of Mr. Clinton tonight . . . Mr. Clinton sailed forward into the stiff wind of adversity.”<sup>39</sup> In one of the most watched Addresses in the late twentieth century, Clinton made no mention of the scandal or of Lewinsky. His words and physical demeanor evoked the script “I am going back to doing the work of the nation.”<sup>40</sup> Counter to the Republicans’, Clinton’s script emphasized a return to the routine and mundane, and strove to further defuse the once ritualized atmosphere.

In addition to these performances, many of the Democratic production’s lesser characters and sympathetic critics worked vigorously to discursively frame Clinton’s accusers in a counterdemocratic light. Ken Starr, the Office of Independent Council, Linda Tripp, and Monica Lewinsky were all placed *en-scène* through this supporting cast’s efforts.

The loose symbolic framework of bad cop that had dogged Independent Council Ken Starr began to crystallize under the pressure of repeated portrayals of him as an abusive investigator relying on strong-arm tactics. For instance, Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz’s direct linkage of Starr’s tactics to those of overly aggressive police officers practically cast Starr in the lead role of a “good cop, bad cop” routine, in which the good cop leaves the interrogation room to allow Starr to “work the suspect over”:

Perhaps [Starr’s actions] will get [public officials] – and the public – to think about the broad implications of arming prosecutors and the police with untrammelled authority to conduct stings, to record conversations and to coerce cooperation by threatening prosecution. No citizen should be targeted by a sting without a “sting warrant” based on probable cause. Nor should any citizen be subjected to the abusive tactics used against the President by Kenneth Starr.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of Monicagate’s first phase Starr was coded as an extension of the Republican Party, enacting a conspiratorial plot to destroy the president politically and personally. Seeking to satisfy his personal and political interests, Starr was understood as relentlessly persecuting the president, stretching the law, and exceeding his mandate.

To paraphrase Derrida, nothing exists outside the coding. The Democratic production worked hard to dramatically frame the Office of Independent Council as a counterdemocratic institution that endangered the democratic ideals of the nation by granting a kind of ambiguous legal protection to the investigator’s expansive use of his position’s power. Anthony Lewis’s Op-ed column in the *New York Times* stated this sentiment succinctly:

I am sure of one thing. The Constitution was not meant to give us – and we should not want – a system of government in which a roving inspector general with *unaccountable power* oversees the President of the United States . . . Altogether, what we see in these events is the picture of an *exceptionally zealous prosecutor*. And we see one operating with *no meaningful restraints on his power*.<sup>42</sup>

As the first phase of Monicagate drew to an end, Democratic opinion-makers had largely succeeded at portraying the OIC as an unconstitutional character in the drama. Polls indicate that Clinton supporters and sizeable portions of the swayable political middle were beginning to consider the OIC a counterdemocratic institution that granted unlimited power and resources to an investigator that could assert his authority arbitrarily.

Once in place, the symbolic frameworks of Monicagate’s breach and crisis phases remained remarkably steady over the subsequent months. The majority of skeptical, swayable publics that constituted the political center had settled into understanding Monicagate through the Clinton team’s dramatic framework. Due to the Democratic production’s dramatic and discursive efforts, the Republicans were not perceived as legitimate carriers of the ritual project to this sizeable majority. The machinations of their dramatic production had been rendered highly visible, their back-stage effectively brought to the fore, and their script rendered overly artificial and contrived. On the other hand, though now in the minority, the conservative base remained passionately anti-Clinton, insisted the president was lying, and interpreted the Clinton team’s response as a farce that threatened the very foundations of American democracy.

#### *Monicagate’s middle phase*

Public opinion trends steadied after the State of the Union Address and a polarization between two publics solidified. By the end of July a majority (57 percent) opposed Clinton leaving office under *any* conditions while a small but devout 35 percent supported continuing efforts to investigate and expel him. There were two downward shifts in anti-Clinton public opinion after January: pro-resignation sentiments decreased 20 percentage points, and pro-impeachment sentiments decreased 16 percentage points (ABC News poll, July 31, 1998). Yet, alongside these trends, at the end of July, 68 percent of the social drama’s audience believed Clinton had an affair with Lewinsky and lied about it, an increase of 18 percentage points over the same time. These contrasting poll trends indicate an interesting dramatic dynamic took place between February and early August. A sizeable portion of the general public resisted identifying with the Republican dramatic production *despite* believing Clinton had lied about his relationship with Lewinsky, on the one hand, and that he had repeatedly, assertively lied about not lying, on the other. Starr’s late July disapproval ratings hovered around 60 percent. These trends indicate the Clinton dramatic production’s efforts succeeded during the previous six months, effectively vilifying Starr and further delegitimizing the investigative process. As mentioned above, the Republicans were unable to engage in any vigorous dramatic dueling because the Clinton team had successfully sculpted the dramatic landscape such that vigorous Republican action would be read through the idioms of the

bad cop genre. By keeping the past six years of relentless symbolic attacks on the president by Republicans in Monicagate's script, the Administration's production essentially neutered the Republicans of any symbolic power and cast in doubt their right to perform and narrate.

Within this context, two micro-events in the drama's middle phase nonetheless functioned to bring publics back to considering the Republicans' discursive and dramatic offerings, and reinvigorated the event's initially ritually charged atmosphere. In particular, Starr's investigative pressure eventually led the Clinton production to have its star publicly admit to an "inappropriate relationship" with Lewinsky (performed on August 17). This dramatic confession placed Clinton back *en-scène* and infused the Republican drama with new energy. The confession reinvigorated the right's base, and caused those at the political center, who had decided to back Clinton because they did not trust his inquisitors, to reconsider their loyalty to a guy that had lied to them. Once powerfully deflationary, Clinton's "finger stabbing in the air" performance became his "wagging his finger in shame" performance, and was used forcefully by Republicans to parody Clinton's initial performative enthusiasm and to reiterate his "slickness," the strength of his skills at deception.

Less than a month later the Starr Report's release on the Internet and in book form revitalized the event's prior, substantively charged atmosphere as well. The Report's Internet debut on September 11 triggered another break from the mundane in people's everyday lives.<sup>43</sup> "Americans across the country tried to participate in this unprecedented kind of electronic town hall meeting," a reporter described, but "were shut out because of the overload on the computer network."<sup>44</sup>

The *New York Times* editorial page's reaction to the Report's contents framed Clinton in terms that could be found in any film textbook's discussion of the gangster genre's anti-hero:

No citizen – indeed, perhaps no member of his own family – could have grasped the completeness of President Clinton's mendacity or the magnitude of his *recklessness*. Whatever the outcome of the resignation and impeachment debates, the independent counsel report by Mr. Starr is devastating in one respect, and its historic mark will be permanent. A *President who had hoped to be remembered for the grandeur* of his social legislation will instead be remembered for the *tawdriness of his tastes and conduct* and for the disrespect with which he treated a dwelling that is a revered symbol of Presidential dignity.<sup>45</sup>

Both of these micro-events reversed previous poll trends. Clinton's *job approval* rating dropped to 57 percent, tying its lowest mark set just after the scandal broke. Public calls to "just drop the matter" lessened substantially: down 17 percentage points from the prior month's poll, 47 percent of the public

avored ending the investigation with the Report's publication. On the other hand, 51 percent favored further investigations and congressional hearings on impeachment (ABC News, September 14, 1998).

At the culmination of Monicagate's first phase, three audiences had merged into two when the majority of publics in the political center came to understand the event largely through the Clinton team's dramatic narrative. Polls indicate that Clinton's admission to having lied combined with the release of the Starr Report to encourage the audience of Clinton sympathizers to split into two audiences. Once again the public was constituted by three audiences, each with a different interpretation of what was taking place in the political arena. Polls also indicate that some of the skeptical centrists who had come to sympathize with the Clinton team's narrative disassociated from both parties' dramas, indicating there was a likely chance this drama would end without heroes of any sort.

Later in Monicagate's second, middle phase, on August 21, Clinton's taped testimony before the Grand Jury was aired on national and cable television. The tape's release ultimately backfired on its creators. Seeking a successful degradation ritual, the Republicans intended the tape to shame Clinton in front of the nation. The cinematography framed Clinton like a criminal before a tribunal. He was taped only from the waist up, similar in style to a classic "mug shot" of gangster film imagery. While reporting on the event varied across the political spectrum, the tape's airing was largely framed as an extreme, unjust attempt to publicly degrade Clinton. Though multiple publics witnessed the event, the tape's airing appeared to further delegitimize all parties involved and to fracture any ritual resubstantivization processes that followed Clinton's confession and the Starr Report's publication.<sup>46</sup> The footage and its ironic consequences for the Republican dramatic effort again illustrate the contingency of such events and the dramatic producers' limited ability to estimate how their production efforts will be received by various publics.

In the November midterm elections the Republicans not only failed to increase their 55-to-45 margin in the Senate, but the Democrats picked up five seats in the House. This Democratic gain represents the first time since 1934 that the president's party gained seats in a midterm election.

#### *Monicagate's third and final phase*

The House hearings and impeachment proceedings contained some of the most dramatic settings and formally ritualized proceedings of the entire event, yet the Republicans were still unable to get a broader audience to cathect with their production. From the outset Republican Representative Henry Hyde tried to infuse the proceedings with an atmosphere of grave solemnity, invoking

Roman law, the Magna Carta, the Constitutional Convention, and referencing the Civil War's battles of Bunker Hill, Lexington, and Concord.

Democratic Representatives Barney Frank (Mass.) and Charles Schumer (NY) resisted accepting the Republicans' impeachment script that called for solemnity, reverence, and gravity, by performing comedy. In opposition, Frank and Schumer turned the hearings into a farce by repeatedly cracking jokes and making disruptions that frequently had the House Democrats rolling with laughter:

Frank: "Now, by the way, on that subject, my colleague from Arkansas challenged Mr. Craig before and said that the president never admitted to 'sexual contact' with Ms. Lewinsky; he used the phrase 'inappropriate intimate contact.' And I suppose they might have been having an inappropriate intimate conversation about which country they'd like to bomb together. (Laughter)."<sup>47</sup>

Though the hearings provided the Republicans the opportunity to intervene in Americans' lives more directly and forcefully than before, only a small portion of the American public tuned in the television to watch their production. The television-ratings story of the weekend was CBS's decision to break away from coverage of the impeachment vote to televise a football game between the New York Jets and the Buffalo Bills. When CBS cut away to the game, its ratings quadrupled to 12 million viewers, more than doubling CNN's highest spiked rating of the day at 5.3 million for Clinton's address to the nation.<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusion

Political power is constrained by and must operate through symbolic, dramatic power. This is an analytic distinction; it does not necessarily follow that the two exist separately in the empirical world in any strong sense. Yet Monicagate demonstrates we must certainly not reduce symbolic power to political power, as the Republicans were unable to establish the event's master narrative despite the vast means of symbolic production at their disposal and their superior numbers in both Houses of Congress.

In this chapter I have demonstrated how cultural pragmatics contributes a theoretical explanation for how events enter into social existence. The theoretical framework offers a set of concepts for analyzing the processes through which highly differentiated, imagined communities constitute an event's reality. These processes take the form of agonistic competitions undertaken to mobilize solidarity and consensus around scripted narratives.

Cultural pragmatics accounts for how meaning, in the form of background collective representations, shapes social actors and audiences' interpretations in a deeply structural way. Yet it allows for contingency by reconciling culture's deeply constitutive power with social actors' abilities to creatively and

agentially situate and strategize vis-à-vis the symbolic structures in which they are embedded.

Some earlier sociological analysts of Monicagate have argued that, "because no collective actions followed" Clinton's impeachment, "this symbolically most significant of events in our commonwealth *failed to occur* with the solemnity that would have allowed it to take its place alongside Watergate in the American political unconscious. It failed to induce despair, as it failed to induce shared indignation and togetherness" (emphasis in the original; Larson and Wagner-Pacifici 2001: 738).

My argument in this chapter, based not only on an alternative theory but on discursive and statistical data, contradicts these claims. Indignation and despair were felt, and togetherness was experienced, though perhaps not solely in the way that liberal sociologists might sympathize with or respect. But the theoretical lesson here is vital. Action is not the sole indicator of meaning. Because multiple audiences experienced Monicagate's events in several identifiable ways, analysts must be very careful not to conflate their own common-sense understandings of the event with those of the audience. Geertz (1983: 75) cautioned to be mindful of the taken-for-grantedness of common sense.

There are a number of reasons why treating common sense as a relatively organized body of considered thought, rather than just what anyone clothed and in his right mind knows, should lead on to some useful conclusions; but perhaps the most important is that it is an inherent characteristic of common-sense thought precisely to deny this and to affirm that its tenets are immediate deliverances of experience, not deliberate reflections upon it.

Indeed, hermeneutics begins where common sense ends. In this abridged analysis of the Clinton era I have argued that political actors and audiences alike understood Monicagate through the sense-making structures of the codes of civil society (Alexander and Smith 1993), and through the tropes of popular film genres that historically have dramatized the social relations and practices of justice. While each cluster of agents experienced these cultural structures as commonsensical, they were culturally constructed and contingent.

It was through these collective representations that America's imagined community dramatically reaffirmed itself as real. Monicagate's clusters of agents expressed disbelief, anger, resentment, and even hatred for one another. Between the competing parties and skeptical audiences, however, a common code of civil discourse, and shared popular cultural tropes about cops and their prey, sustained the energizing moral fabric of democratic life.

### Notes

1. Giesen's work on *epiphany* (ch. 11, this volume) establishes a theoretical framework for examining how social actors experience the sacred. In his empirical application



of the concept epiphany (ch. 8, this volume), Rauer examines how Brandt's kneefall before the Warsaw Memorial literally performed an interaction with the sacred, and initiated profound shifts in German collective identity as a result.

2. The normative tendency to reduce the significance of Monicagate is particularly strong after September 11, 2001. But this interpretive urge represents and reaffirms an important cultural sociological point. Understanding turn-of-the-century American life and collective identity requires us to treat this impulse as indicative of an important plot point in a narrative Americans tell themselves about themselves: contemporary civil discourse makes sense of an America before and after 9/11, which was not but now is serious, which was naïve but has been forced into a state of knowledge. Contemporary discourse indicates America believes it has been forced out of the Garden and made aware of the reality of evil. Post-9/11, many people look back on Monicagate and ask incredulously, "we were concerned about *that*?" This interpretive trend testifies to the fact that yes, we *were* concerned about *that*, and passionately enough to battle fiercely over defining what exactly *that* was, its seriousness, and what should be done about it. Far from being imagined or in some sense "not real," Monicagate continues, and will continue, to exercise influence over American collective sense making. Sociologically, representations diminishing Monicagate's seriousness (while empirically erroneous in their own right, in my opinion), must figure prominently in investigations of contemporary intra- and inter-national affairs.

Most significant are two sociological facts. First, in many ways Monicagate infiltrated people's everyday lives to the extent that the event assumed constitutive status, effectively defining the year 1998. Vast amounts of data demonstrate the event became the preferred communal reference point for Americans in their everyday interactions: from quantitative data such as polls, cable-TV news' ratings, Internet website and chatroom traffic indicators, and newspaper space allotted to covering the event, to such qualitative forms as the content of late-night talk show monologues, newspapers' letters to the editor, and frequently overheard heated discussions amongst friends and strangers about "what Clinton was thinking" and what should constitute an impeachable offence. Second, from the cataclysmic quality of the event's inception to its tepid finale, it was meaningful, and is explicable because it was dramatically and narratively structured and lived.

3. See Schudson (1992: 155), and Schwartz (1998), on the persuasiveness of Alexander's account.
4. The combination of meaning's centrality with the reduction of symbols to commodities and instruments of power encourages the reduction of culture to practice. Social actors are represented as instrumentally orienting towards symbols as material tools to be used to dupe others in one's pursuit of desired ends. The theoretical contortion stems from trying to reconcile the centrality and persuasiveness of meaning with the need to reduce social actors to uber-agentic, savvy consumers of culture who are too jaded by culture's commodification to engage any symbolic performance of collective identity in the first place. Social actors are thus portrayed as influenced by the instrumental manipulation of symbols on the one hand, and maintained as too savvy and suspicious to buy into any symbolic production, on the other.

5. See Barthes (1977b), Schechner (1977, 2002), and Mukerji and Schudson (1991), for theoretical arguments that establish the need to examine popular cultural structures' influence in the creation of everyday understandings. See Christensen (1987), Gibson (1994), and King (1999), for empirical applications of this theoretical turn that demonstrate the interactive relationship between film and social life.
6. *Washington Post*, November 4, 1992. Clinton won 43% of the vote; Bush garnered 38%.
7. *New York Times*, November 4, 1992.
8. The authenticity of Clinton's populist image stemmed from an elegant symmetry between his campaign's selected means of symbolic production and a script that emphasized how the candidate's biography naturally demanded that he empathize with a public far removed from the world of Washington insiders. For instance, to highlight Clinton's differences from Bush Sr., – a distanced figure who seemed to personify the buttoned-down Washington establishment, who flew over the people's heads in Air Force 1, the archetypical symbol of governmental power – the Clinton campaign boarded a bus and headed into "America's heartland" (*Washington Post* July 18, 1992). During scheduled stops, the candidate who could "feel your pain" (*New York Times*, March 28, 1992) would toss a football with his running mate, and pledge to "give the country back" to ordinary citizens, who had been organized to appear as spontaneous audiences (*New York Times*, July 19, 1992).
9. The metaphor traveled from the Arkansas *Democrat-Gazette* across the Atlantic to the London *Times*, only to be picked back up in the United States by the *New York Times* shortly thereafter.
10. David Grann, *The New Yorker*, January 27, 2003.
11. In early July, 1993, the White House's report from its internal investigation was released.
12. Found dead on July 20, 1993 in Fort Marcy Park. Foster was the White House deputy counsel and longtime friend and business partner of the Clintons.
13. The *Washington Post* reported the Justice Department's investigative intentions in a front-page story on October 31, 1993, entitled "U.S. Is Asked to Probe Failed Arkansas S&L."
14. In terms of the "discourse of civil society," by 1995 the Clinton team recognized the need to change their scandal management techniques. Bob Woodward quotes Mark Fabiani, the publicity agent for Clinton's "Scandal Management Team" (a.k.a. "the rapid response team") stating, "look, we've got to build our reputation for openness" with the American public to both reduce the climate of suspicion and consequently to become more politically effective in terms of policy.
15. The *New York Times* reported that though the White House denied the election was a referendum on Clinton, many of the Republican victors had placed Clinton at the center of their campaigns for office (Berke, *New York Times*, November 10, 1994, A/1/6). "Morphing," a new advertising technique of slowly blending televised images together to form a new image, figured prominently in this election cycle. "In the Congressional races there'll be over 30 campaigns using some form of the morph and almost all exclusively using Clinton as the bad guy," said Dan Leonard, director

- of communications for the National Republican Congressional Committee (quoted in *New York Times*, October 29, 1994, 1/9/1). See Sobchack's (2002) analysis of the effects of televisual montage on historical consciousness for an examination of the relationship between televised performances (and other forms of televisual symbolic manipulation) and audiences' understandings of the event's progression.
16. Bob Dole became Senate Majority Leader in the Senate and Newt Gingrich became House Speaker.
  17. In this instance, even science's discursive hegemony was contained and controlled, as DNA evidence placing Simpson at the scene of the crime was narrated away through invocations of the bad cop genre's tropes. It was argued that Simpson's DNA was placed at the crime scene by bad cops investigating the double murder.
  18. Elvis Mitchell, *New York Times*, October 5, 2001.
  19. "Filegate" is the label given to the White House's improper procurement of hundreds of FBI files on Congressional Republicans and past presidential administrations' workers and advisers.
  20. The Government Reform Oversight Committee released its "Travelgate" report criticizing the employees' firing and the Clintons' evasiveness in the investigation, for instance.
  21. *New York Times*, January 22, 1998, A/25/1.
  22. *New York Times*, Clines and Gerth, January 22, 1998, A/1/6.
  23. *New York Times*, Broder, January 24, 1998, A/1/6.
  24. MSNBC and FOX News posted 100% increases, and CNN recorded a 60% increase (*Boston Globe*, January 25, 1998, A/10; *Washington Post*, January 27, 1998, D/1).
  25. *New York Times*, January 22, 1998, A/29/5.
  26. ABC's *This Week*, January 25, 1998; emphasis added.
  27. *New York Times*, Broder, January 23, 1998, A/1/6.
  28. *New York Times*, Berke and Bennet, January 23, 1998, A/1/23.
  29. *New York Times*, January 23, 1998, A/20/1.
  30. The number of people believing Clinton had an affair with Lewinsky rose 20% in the first three days, and the number believing he had encouraged her to lie about the relationship rose 14% (ABC News, January 24, 1998). For the first time in his tenure, less than half the public (49%) believed Clinton had the "honesty and integrity required to serve effectively" as President (ABC News, January 29, 1998).
  31. Given more space, I would argue that Clinton's symbolic framework is in part a product of the political and cultural battles of the late 1960s on the one hand, and more currently a product of the 1980s and 1990s culture wars on the other. It should be clear that I am not arguing that Clinton's actions in themselves, of necessity, compelled a particular public response.
  32. Seelye in *New York Times*, January 24, 1998, A/8/3.
  33. *New York Times*, Bennet.
  34. *New York Times*, Broder.
  35. *New York Daily News*, January 27, 1998, p. 28.
  36. NBC News Transcripts, January 27, 1998; emphasis added.
  37. NBC's *Today* show registered a 7.2 rating (percentage of the nation's 98 million homes with televisions) and a 29 share (percentage of sets in use) on January 27th, 1998, the day of Hillary Clinton's interview with Lauer. This was the show's second highest single-day rating since 1987. The previous high was set in 1989, the day after the San Francisco earthquake (*New York Daily News*, January 29, 1998, p. 4).
  38. A nuanced distinction began to emerge in a majority of Americans' understandings of Clinton's self in late January, shortly after the Address. Clinton's *public self* became understood as autonomous enough from his *private self* to allow him to adequately perform the duties necessary to be President. Additionally, late January polls began to indicate the majority of Americans were willing and able to maintain a subjective distinction between these two selves, and that they were more concerned with Clinton's political than personal actions. After the event's first week approximately 66% of Americans favored Clinton's resignation if he committed either perjury or suborning of perjury, a full 25 percentage points greater than the 41% that supported his ousting if he had simply engaged in the affair (ABC News). It is my argument that this distinction may not have occurred or remained sustainable had Clinton continued to appear "visibly shaken," nervous, and evasive before his intently curious audiences and critics.
  39. *New York Times*, January 28, 1998, A/1/6.
  40. In addition to focusing on his Administration's accomplishments and plans, Clinton tried to cultivate the theme of the American people *getting back to work together* for the good of the nation. For instance: "This is the America we have begun to build. This is the America we can leave to our children - if we join together to finish the work at hand" or "we must work together, learn together, live together, serve together" (*Washington Post* online).
  41. *New York Times*, January 28, 1998, A/25/2.
  42. *New York Times*, January 26, 1998, A/19/5, emphasis added.
  43. For instance, MSNBC's website more than doubled its previous web traffic record with more than two million people searching for the report before the web-managers could even get it fully posted.
  44. *New York Times*, September 12, 1998, A/11/3.
  45. *New York Times*, September 12, 1998, A/18/1, emphasis added.
  46. The tape's airing invigorated the Republican base, with 63% of registered Republicans voicing a "strong desire" to see Clinton removed from office (ABC News, September 22, 1998). However, the tape inspired sympathy for Clinton from a majority of viewers with 63% of the public agreeing Clinton was justified in his anger towards his interrogators, 61% feeling it was wrong for Congress to release the tape, and 62% disapproving of the way Republicans were handling the Lewinsky issue (ABC News, September 23, 1998).
  47. Federal Information Systems Corporation, Federal News Service, August 12, 1998.
  48. *New York Times*, December 23, 1998, A/24/2. The many channels from which the ritual's would-be audiences had to choose contributed to reducing the potential for liminality that characterized Watergate's Hearings. The limited channels during