

on writing

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Lyndon Johnson once said, “If one morning I walked on top of the water across the Potomac River, the headline that afternoon would read: PRESIDENT CAN’T SWIM.”

The question of whether it’s possible to have truly objective reporting has been debated as long as events have been reported. But there is also a place for reporting that is unapologetically personal. And in that kind of reporting—commentary—the writer’s voice has a chance to be clearly heard.

In this, our second pre-election issue since the 2004 presidential election, we are publishing political essays by Guild members with no attempt at objectivity. And as was the case in 2004, the pieces in this issue reflect the point of view of each writer and not necessarily of the Writers Guild.

We are very grateful to David Levine for allowing us to feature caricatures from his upcoming collection of drawings, *American Presidents by David Levine*, which will be published by Phantographics in November 2008 with an introduction by Bill Moyers and Michael Winship. Reprints of the images are available at: davidlevineart.com.

—Arlene Hellerman



I HAD A DREAM THE OTHER NIGHT that someone called from the Obama campaign asking me to make a documentary to help get his man elected. Suffused with the kind of pleasure that comes with the sleepy satisfaction of a wish, I said yes. And then I opened my eyes to the bright light of morning and saw at once the problem my dream had shrugged off: I don't respond well to propaganda films.

No matter how effective, no matter how well crafted, there's something about ideological filmmaking that rankles me. I instinctively fight back when I feel I'm being manipulated. Keats once said that he disliked poems that had a "palpable design" on the reader. He was averse, he said, to having his pocket picked—a pretty fair description of what I feel when I watch Michael Moore at work.

Making a documentary should be like sailing out on a voyage of discovery, where the wind blows as it will and it's best not to try too hard to steer a steady course. A propaganda film knows precisely where it's going: It's always hard on the rudder, full steam ahead. There may be carefully honed craftsmanship, but there are few surprises, and little of the free, unfettered spirit of art.

An artist is open to experience; a propagandist is serving a cause. An artist observes the world around him and lets it change him; a propagandist wants to change the world. Nevertheless, if there's any truth in dreams, I guess I do want to change the world, or at least see Barack Obama in the White House.

Perhaps the conflict between my sleeping wish and my waking reluctance is actually a back-handed tribute to the power of propaganda filmmaking. It's not a bad idea to remember that when Woodrow Wilson saw *Birth of A Nation*—the first film ever screened in the White House—he said it was "history written with lightning." Griffith's film degrades African-Americans and makes heroes out of the Ku Klux Klan, but Wilson was swept away.

There's the danger. I very much want to see Obama in the White House. But the power of film can be hijacked to serve any cause. What Obama's media people can do, McCain's can do just as well. Is this how we ought to conduct our democracy?

For a long time, I wondered why the Athenians, the people who invented democracy, valued the study of rhetoric. I agreed with Plato who, though he was an Athenian, characterized rhetoricians as lying tricksters whose oratory made "the worse seem the better cause"—until I realized that Plato was a master rhetorician himself. While Plato depicted his teacher Socrates as a philosopher who pursued the truth with disinterested passion, he portrayed Socrates' enemies, the Sophists, as skilled rhetoricians who mangled the truth to advance their cause.

In fact, the Greeks expected every citizen to participate in the democratic process, and rhetoric was a way of thinking about an issue, reaching a conclusion and constructing an

argument to support it. They invented an entire discipline to foster lively debate in the public arena, and in an era before the written word was a widespread medium of persuasion, oratory became a weapon of engagement.

Today, we have inherited their skills and put them to compelling use in a medium with far greater reach and explosive power: We harness language to images, sounds and music, and make films of enormous persuasive force. Today, as Woodrow Wilson reminds us, we have at our disposal a medium as dangerous as lightning.

Politics is struggle, and to succeed, we use what weapons we have. Film is one of them. But must we resort to lies? With open eyes, I can fantasize that I am making a film to serve Obama's campaign: I tell his operatives that the most effective propaganda has its foundation in fact, and I contend that the Swift boat advertisements were lies that did their damage only because the response was slow, ineffective and irresolute. Propaganda can be the servant of a good cause, I continue to argue, and it doesn't need to lie. It may not have the consoling or revelatory power of art, but that is not its purpose. Propaganda is a call to action, and if it spurs people to make the right choices, that is more than enough.

Perhaps I really am dreaming, but at least I am no longer conflicted. If the call ever comes, I would make Obama his documentary simply by trying to tell the truth. ★

David Grubin writes, produces and directs documentaries. He has been nominated six times for Writers Guild Awards, and won four. His film *The Trials of J. Robert Oppenheimer* will air on PBS *American Experience* in January 2009.

