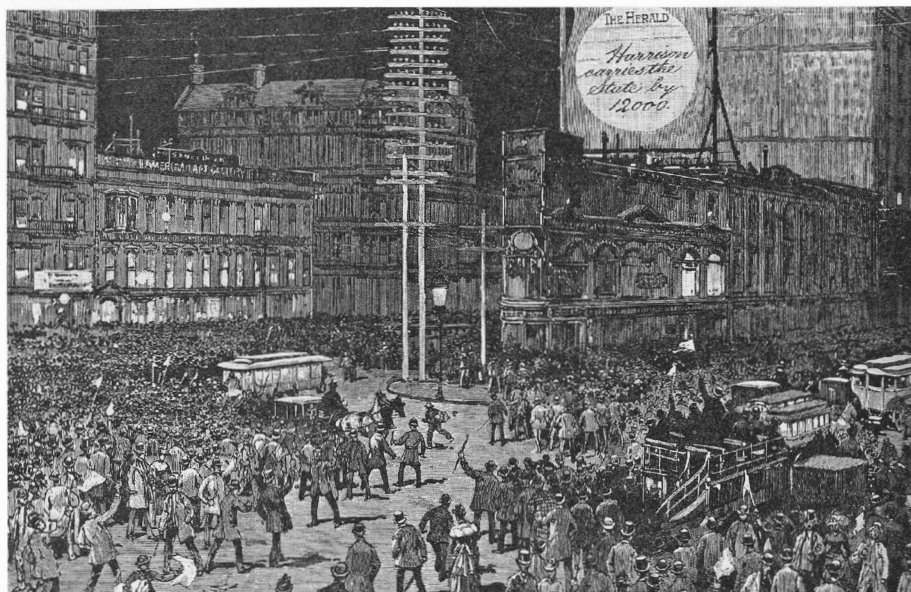# PRESIDENTS IN THE AGE OF TECHNOLOGICAL REPRODUCIBILITY
Geoffrey Winthrop-Young on Charles Musser's
Politicking and Emergent Media

Madison Square on election night, New York, November 6, **1888** (*Harper's Weekly*, November 17, 1888).

Charles Musser, *Politicking and Emergent Media: US Presidential Elections of the 1890s.* Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016. 288 pages.

EVERY FOUR YEARS, the world gets hooked on two competitive extravaganzas—the Summer Olympic Games and the US presidential elections. The similarities are obvious; in fact, the only real difference is size. The elections take place on a larger scale: They go on for longer, their two displays of stadium-based pageantry last a week rather than a night, they are even more dominated by Americans, and their television coverage is even more dismal. In 2016, Russia has emerged as an even more suspect player in the US election campaign than in track and field, and the physical constitution of those running for office appears to be of even greater concern than the health of those merely running for medals. And who can deny that the political blunder games have produced far more—and far more memorable—Ryan Lochte moments.

Some of the most intriguing similarities, however, are related to the two events' respective media histories. Both spectacles passed through crucial periods of technological change that defined their appearance for decades to come. Whether you're watching Beijing 2008, Rio 2016, or Tokyo 2020, you are and will be watching Berlin 1936. The visual and ceremonial protocols established by Hitler, Goebbels, and Leni Riefenstahl, and later refined by Avery Brundage and other IOC proconsuls, continue to operate smoothly. Charles Musser's impressive *Politicking and Emergent Media* demonstrates that the four presidential elections between 1888 and 1900 are to today's elections what the 1936 Berlin Olympics are to today's games. Although the showdowns involving Benjamin Harrison, Grover Cleveland, William McKinley, and William Jennings Bryan took place well over a hundred years ago, they are much closer to our present-day contests in form than they are to the Lincoln v. Douglas antebellum stump jousts. In the 1890s, politics was irrevocably transformed into something we are still cursed with today: the art of mastering the techniques of image dissemination and sound-bite control.

This is Musser's story—how late-nineteenth-century elections were reshaped by a Cambrian explosion of modern media. Forget, for a moment, the names of the incumbents and challengers, forget the parties and issues, and think instead of these campaigns as struggles between diverse technologies of reproduction and exhibition. Think of the stereopticon and early cinema, phonography and photography, telephones and bicycles, railroads and rallies, as competing agents vying for the right to store and communicate human bodies, words, and voices. All of them, in turn, are challenging the dominance of the press as the traditional alpha medium of politics. The fate of the players differs. Some enjoy a brief moment of impact only to fall into oblivion. The stereopticon, which gained prominence in 1888 when it was used to deliver high-profile illustrated lectures on controversial tariff policies, soon disappeared, but not, Musser argues, without giving birth to the political documentary. The genre far outlived its original delivery system. The entertainment industry, quipped German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, is "an abuse of army equipment." Musser, in turn, argues that presidential electioneering appropriated practices established for entertainment purposes. But no matter what the real historical relationships may be among the three, media came to determine our political situation, not least because of its successful blurring of the boundaries between war, entertainment, and electioneering. Since the late nineteenth century, American presidential campaigns have managed to combine war and entertainment so successfully that you are left to wonder why America goes abroad to war so often, given that the nation has perfected such an engaging domestic substitute.

"BLOWING" HIMSELF AROUND THE COUNTRY.
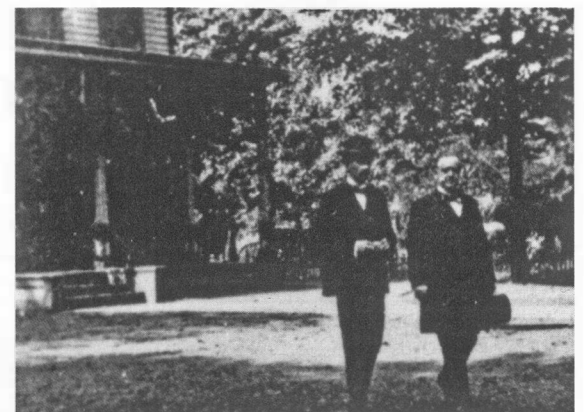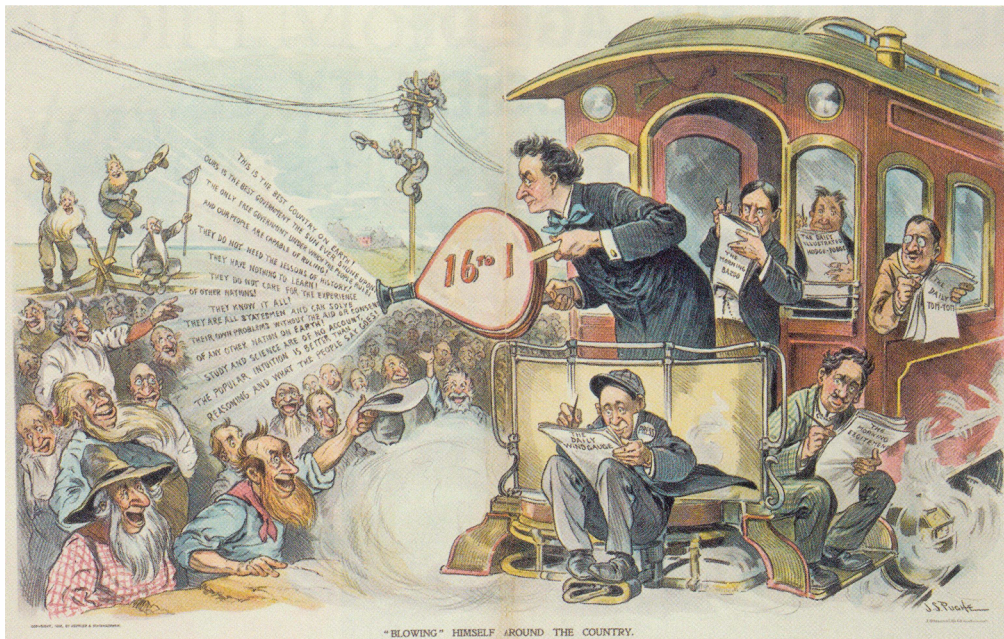
Left: **Cartoon by J. S. Pughe depicting William Jennings Bryan's 1896 whistle-stop tour** (*Puck*, September 16, 1896). Above: W. K. L. Dickson, ***McKinley at Home, Canton, Ohio***, 1896, 68 mm, black-and-white, silent, 36 seconds. William McKinley and George B. Cortelyou. Background: Ida Saxton McKinley.

But to do justice to some of the technology's human appendages: The Republicans came out on top. They won three of the four elections (1888, 1896, and 1900) not only because they profited from deeper pockets, economic upturns, and popular invasions, but also because they possessed a greater savviness in adopting new technologies, especially those of the visual domain. In the 1890s, they gained a head start that for large portions of the twentieth century would ensure their mastery over images, while Democrats—from Bryan with his speechifying and phonographic reproductions to Franklin Roosevelt and his fireside chats—appeared to be more attuned to voices. In any case, keep in mind Gore Vidal's trenchant etymology of *politics*: *Poly* is Greek for "many," and *ticks* are bloodsucking insects. For a media historian, that is undoubtedly correct: Following the 1890s, there never was a successful politician who was not also a skilled media parasite.

The elections under consideration in *Politicking* may have affected the continent, but this is a New York story. At the time, the city was the nation's media capital and the state an all-important swing state. Media that make it there will make it anywhere. The spatiotemporal focus— Manhattan in the 1890s—adds to the engaging clarity of Musser's account, as does his subject's obvious, if not downright intrusive, topicality. You cannot read two paragraphs without drawing parallels, in terms of their political impact, between the arrival of mechanical reproduction, the introduction of cable news, and the emergence of digital platforms. For all the ostensible progress,

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however, there is little reason for optimism. The more technologies change, the more politicians and their media promoters remain the same. Had CNN been around in the 1890s, the voluble Bryan would have monopolized *Larry King Live* much as Ross Perot did a hundred years later. And preparing the (or his?) Spanish-American War, William Randolph Hearst no doubt would have welcomed the opportunity to tweet about Hispanic rapists.

Those interested in the media-theoretical implications of Musser's study will note the looming shadow of Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility" (1936), the venerable urtext that relates to modern media theory much as the campaigns of the 1890s do to contemporary politicking. Take, for instance, Benjamin's remarks on the relationship between the exhibition value of the work of art and its subsequent reproduction. Increased exhibitability is said to precede and give rise to mechanical reproducibility. First you have Sarah Bernhardt's world tours, then you have globally consumable early Hollywood divas who need not travel anymore because their mechanically produced likenesses are everywhere—and the former is said to have created a desire for the latter, a desire, however, that could only be fully satisfied at a higher technological standard. Now consider one of the key media constellations of the 1896 campaign. Republican contender McKinley spends most of the time at home in Canton, Ohio, on his front porch, before which he is filmed by his media-savvy brother Abner, a kind of fraternal Roger Ailes closely associated with the fledgling American Mutoscope Company. *McKinley at Home*, the first successful campaign movie, contributes its share to the Republican victory. At the same time, cash-strapped Democratic candidate and noted orator Bryan travels around the country by train giving more than four hundred speeches. Both candidates are trying to bypass the press and appeal directly to the

people, Bryan by pioneering the whistle-stop campaign that will exhibit his body and voice in as many places as possible, McKinley by reproducing his even more transportable likeness. This subtler, post-Benjaminian analysis of the feedback between exhibitability and reproduction arises from a key point of Musser's study: The emergence of modern media in the presidential campaigns of the 1890s is indicative of far-reaching attempts to reestablish links between visibility and the public that had diminished with the rise of the press. There is a desire for allegedly less mediated connections between candidates and constituents, the people and their representatives—less mediated, that is, in comparison to print. We are dealing with the paradox of mediated immediacy, the fateful promise that new structures of mediation will give rise to immediacy and transparency. This is not an exclusively political illusion, but it is safe to say that politics— including presidential politicking—has peddled this tenacious humbug with particular relish and success.

Benjamin's account culminated in the famous claim that the new means of reproduction destroy the aura of the work of art. Musser's study tells the more contemporary and more irritating story about the use of reproduction to create a political aura (which is not to be confused with the aestheticization of politics Benjamin spoke about). The goal is to convince the public of an unmistakable political brand by creating—by means of repetition, reproduction, and, ultimately, simulation—a unique person at its head. The net result is the president as a work of art in the age of technological reproducibility. But it is not enough to realize how modern media came to determine politics; one must also grasp the reverse. Yes, compared to what was there before, the media of the 1890s changed politics in ways that made presidential campaigns all but unrecognizable; but in the process, politics was, in turn, instrumentally involved in transforming media into structures that are still recognizable today. □

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