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The Binary Media

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Part II
Pedagogies of Popular Culture
and Everyday Life
McMuerto’s Inc. Opens McTland

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

MUERTO DATE: OCTOBER 16, 1999
MATANZA DATE: NOVEMBER 28, 1999
CONTACT: MCMUERTO’S INCORPORATION

McMuerto’s™ first opened its doors across America in 1998 in response to the public’s need for a quick, hassle-free celebration of death during Día de los Muertos (dee-ah day lohs mwer-toes). Now an expanding global operation, McMuerto’s™ provides a unique quick-
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McMuerto’s™ is proud to announce the expansion of its product line with the grand opening of McTland™—a magical place created especially for our young McMuerto’s™ consumers!

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McMuerto’s was an installation for Día de los Muertos at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (1998), the Oakland Museum (1999), and the Mexican Museum (2000).
You have noticed, to be sure, how our nation’s politics gravitates to the binary position year after year. Webster’s dictionary defines “binary” as “something made of two things or parts.” So, parties, politicians and voters are overwhelmingly either characterized as conservative—right wing or liberal—left wing.

I’ve never thought the binary approach was very useful; it is too abstract, too far from the facts on the ground, too stereotypical of variations within each category, and too constricting of independent thought that is empirically nourished.

What helps keep binary descriptions going, however, are desires for convenient narratives. So here is one to ponder.

Different aspects of our culture attract either mostly conservatives or liberals or, at least, are identified with one or the other political philosophies or self-characterizations.

Liberals are more identified with popular music—the more risqué or hip-hop, the more the label is applied. So too with movies on abuses of power by corporations and government. The China Syndrome, Norma Rae, Grapes of Wrath of years ago. Too many to recount today out of Hollywood.

When it comes to humor, the leaning is liberal whether on the monologues of late-night entertainment hosts, the John Stewart, and Stephen Colbert shows, Saturday Night Live or the Al Franken Show. It’s harder to poke fun at established power from a right-wing standpoint.

Documentaries are hands down in the embrace of the liberal-progressive producers. Recent titles include The Corporation, An Inconvenient Truth, Who Killed the Electric Car?, This Land is Your Land, The Take and, of course, Fahrenheit 9/11.

The larger, more reported political websites seem to lean toward liberal-progressive, the rumor-mill, Matt Drudge Report withstanding. Daily Kos and The Huffington Post are on the ascendancy.

On the other side of the binary, the conservative-corporate worldview dominates radio talk shows and cable talk shows. Just list the hosts—Limbaugh, Hannity, O’Reilly (though less so), and all the way down the ratings ladder.

The most politically motivated and get-out-the-vote people in the neighborhoods, when the chips are down, have been from the conservative communities. Ask the Democrats who had to rely on imported activists (Ohio in 2004) while their Republican opponents relied on people living in the Buckeye State.
Politically-active church pews are filled more with conservatives than with liberals. These are the people who have partially taken over the Republican Party and who supply the motivated cadres before election day.

Symbols of patriotism—often shorn of substantive followup—belong to conservatives. The flag, singing anthems, parading on the 4th of July, Memorial Day and Veterans Day belong to the people who describe themselves more on the right side of the binary, who would more often describe themselves as conservatives. So too is the case with membership in the American Legion and the VFW. So too as well with membership in the Main Street service clubs—Rotary, Kiwanis and Lions International.

It is fair to say that since 1980, conservative candidates have been winning overall more than have liberal candidates. From the presidency to the Congress to the state legislatures to the governorships, this trend has been much reported.

Moreover, the liberals who do win, like Clinton, Lieberman, Bayh and assorted governors are often more corporatists than liberals on major subjects such as foreign policy, military budgets, the Federal Reserve, corporate welfare, real regulation, tax policy and consumer protection.

It could be that more often than is normally recognized, the self-described conservative voters spend more time personally interacting with one another in situations where “social” can easily move to “political.”

More often than the liberal voters, they participate in activities associated with clubs, and churches where person to person conversations abound.

The above areas of liberal domination involve more passive, spectator, celluloid or “cool” Internet occasions. And after a while a chronically humorous way of looking at politics becomes a distraction, even though it may be a style that avoids commercial media censorship.

Of course, money in politics comes more easily to corporatist candidates, as does the media. For example, extreme right-wingers get on talk shows, receive media attention or have their own profitable shows like Pat Robertson does. Who are the extreme left-wingers, who receive any press, other than an occasional newspaper picture showing them being dragged away from a protest at the IMF, World Bank or toxic dump site?

The lesson? Politics, even in an age of electronic supremacy, is still strongly moved by the person-to-person, conversational, affinity, communal groupings in our society. Big TV ads cost money and the corporatists can buy them over and over again. But the word of mouth from friend to friend, relative to relative, neighbor to neighbor and worker to worker is not something anyone wants to sell short.