



From Britpop to Hip-hop

The increasingly prominent role of celebrity politicians and popular culture in contemporary politics

Elín Tinna Logadóttir

Lokaverkefni til BA-gráðu í stjórnmálafræði

Félagsvísindasvið



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

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Abstract

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the increasingly prominent role of popular culture and ‘celebrity politicians’ in contemporary politics. Many argue that style has taken presence over substance and therefore it is important to examine the role of celebrity politicians and their influence in contemporary democracies. A theoretical framework focusing on postmodernism, the connection between postmodernism and popular culture, postmodernism and politics and finally the concept of celebrity politicians will be presented to provide a foundation for the analysis. Subsequently, two examples of celebrity politicians will be introduced: former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the current President of the United States, Barack Obama. Based on these two examples it is argued that celebrity politicians play an increasingly prominent role in contemporary politics. Blair’s association with Britpop is examined along with Obama’s connection to hip-hop and other ‘celebrities’. It is argued that their connections allowed these politicians to enter the world of celebrities and use popular culture for political gain. Furthermore, it is argued that once in office, it can be difficult for celebrity politicians to continue to use popular culture and their celebrity status to remain popular. While the examples of Barack Obama and Tony Blair seem to validate the concept celebrity politician it is important to remember that most politicians do not follow the celebrity path.

Útdráttur

Tilgangurinn með þessari ritgerð er að skoða hið sífellt stækkandi hlutverk dægurmenningar (e. popular culture) og stjórnmáladægurhetjunnar (e. celebrity politician) í nútíma stjórnmálum. Margir telja að samhliða þessari þróun sé minni áhersla lögð á raunverulegt inntak. Það er því mikilvægt að skoða hlutverk stjórnmáladægurhetja og möguleg áhrif þeirra á nútíma lýðræði. Notaður er kenningarammi sem byggir á póstmóðernisma, sambandinu á milli póstmóðernisma og dægurmenningar, sambandinu á milli póstmóðernisma og stjórnmála og að lokum hugtakinu stjórnmáladægurhetja sem grunnur fyrir greiningu þessarar ritgerðar. Í ritgerðinni eru tvö dæmi um stjórnmáladægurhetjur skoðuð: Tony Blair, fyrrum forsætisráðherra Bretlands og Barack Obama, núverandi forseti Bandaríkjanna. Út frá þessum dæmum eru færð rök fyrir því að stjórnmáladægurhetjur fái sífellt stærra hlutverk í nútíma stjórnmálum. Samband Blair við britpopp er skoðað nánar ásamt sambandi Obama við hip-hop sem og aðrar dægurhetjur. Því er haldið fram að samböndin hafi gert þessum stjórnmálamönnum kleift að færast inn í heim dægurhetjanna og að þeir hafi notað dægurmenningu til þess að ná ákveðnum árangri í stjórnmálum. Því er jafnframt haldið fram að eftir að stjórnmáladægurhetjur hljóta embætti sé erfitt fyrir þær viðhalda vinsældum á grundvelli dægurmenningar og stöðu sinnar sem dægurhetjur. Þrátt fyrir að Barack Obama og Tony Blair séu góð dæmi um stjórnmáladægurhetjur er mikilvægt að hafa í huga að flestir stjórnmálamenn halda sig fyrir utan heim dægurhetjanna.

Formáli

Þessi ritgerð er lokaverkefni mitt til BA prófs í stjórnmálafræði við Háskóla Íslands. Hún er metin til 12 eininga (ECTS) af 180 eininga námi í stjórnmálafræði. Leiðbeinandi minn var Jón Gunnar Ólafsson og ég vil þakka honum fyrir frábæra leiðsögn og gott samstarf. Hann hefur gert þetta verkefni skemmtilegra en mig nokkurn tímann gæti órað. Ég vil þakka móður minni, Ólöfu Dagnýju Óskarsdóttur fyrir ómældan stuðning í BA námi mínu sem og öllu lífinu. Einnig vil ég þakka Agli Þorsteinssyni fyrir óþrjótandi þolinmæði og skilning. Ég vil þakka Elísabetu Björnsdóttur fyrir félagsskapinn og yfirlestur ritgerðarinnar. Að lokum vil ég þakka Margréti Elísu Rúnarsdóttur fyrir ófáar kaffistundir í lærdómspásam.

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1 Introduction

It can be argued that most politicians are not ‘cool’. They are often considered boring, dry and disconnected from the general public. When imagining a ‘typical politician’, a picture of a middle aged ‘white guy’ often pops to mind. A man who knows nothing about Jay-Z or Noel Gallagher and hasn’t even heard of the TV show *Friends*. At first glance it would seem that the world of politics and popular culture are two separate spheres. The world of politics belongs to the politicians and the world of popular culture belongs to the celebrities. There are however some politicians who have been able to break the mold and connect these two separate spheres, some more than others. These politicians have transcended the world of politics and entered the world of celebrity. A noticeable example of this is Barack Obama.

Obama’s suave personality and cool persona made him extremely popular. It can be reasoned that his popularity resided not only in the United States but stretched around the world and this ‘cool politician’ infatuated people from Iceland to Australia. One can furthermore argue that Obama is no longer ‘just’ a politician but rather has been transformed into a celebrity. Even though much attention has been paid to Obama’s possible celebrity status in recent years, one can argue that he is not the first politician to make this transformation. The distinction between politicians and celebrities has been blurring for decades. This could be seen for example with the election of Ronald Reagan, a Hollywood actor, and more recently in Tony Blair’s ‘Cool Britannia’ campaign as will be illustrated in the subsequent discussion. In the case of Obama and ‘celebrity politicians’, it can be argued that the normally separate spheres of politics and popular culture have become indistinguishable to a certain extent.

This blurring of the boundaries can be linked to postmodern theory. Postmodernism is a theory that surfaced around the 1950s as a rebellion against metanarratives, i.e. ideas that make absolute, universal and all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth. Postmodernism rejects these theories that claim to tell the whole truth, and it is argued instead that the world is constructed of many different theories, each telling a partial truth (Strinati 2004, 209). Popular culture and media are increasingly becoming a large part of people’s lives and it is stated that the distinction between fiction and reality is becoming irrelevant.

It can be contended that postmodernism and the birth of the celebrity politician are closely connected since the rise of politicians as celebrities is linked to the blurring of the boundaries separating politics and popular culture. John Street separates celebrity politicians into two different categories. First, celebrities who move from a career in show business to politics (Street 2004, 437). An example of this type of celebrity politicians is the Hollywood actor George Clooney, who is a committed human rights activist and has spoken against the violence in Darfur and demanded political action (United Nations Messengers of Peace, George Clooney) and actress Angelina Jolie, a Goodwill Ambassador for the UNHCR, who has worked with refugees in over 20 countries (UNHCR, Angelina Jolie). These celebrities use their celebrity status to raise awareness of political issues. The second type of celebrity politicians are those who have a career in politics but use artifacts, icons and expertise of popular culture (Street 2004, 437). Examples of this would be Tony Blair's alignment with the Britpop movement and Obama's alignment with prominent celebrities such as Oprah and Jay-Z.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the increasingly prominent role of popular culture and celebrity politicians in contemporary culture, focusing on the latter category introduced by Street, i.e. politicians who use popular culture as a mechanism to gain popularity. Tony Blair and Barack Obama will be utilized as examples in the discussion. It can be argued that politicians' use of popular culture is increasing with the widespread use of social media and the Internet. It can be reasoned that the contemporary media requires the news to be entertaining therefore transforming the nature and shape of contemporary politics (Muir 2005, 56). For that reason politicians are, to a certain extent, increasingly becoming more like celebrities than simply 'typical politicians'. Many have criticized this 'celebrification' of politics arguing that it destroys the foundations of democracy. There have also been many who discredit the role of celebrities in politics and believe that while they are prominent, they are powerless. Here it is argued that it is important to take a closer look at celebrity politics to understand today's politics and politicians in the contemporary globalized world. It will be illustrated that the celebrification of politicians is increasing.

According to John Street most of the discussions concerning celebrity politics has been confined to either the United States or the United Kingdom and there has been relatively little attempt to compare these two countries (Street 2012, 7). In this dissertation an original contribution to the academic discussion on this topic will be made by comparing the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and current U.S. President Barack Obama. Blair and

Obama have been two of the most influential politicians of our time and it can be debated that a lot of their power and influence can be credited to popular culture and their celebrity status, as will be illustrated. It can be argued that Blair and Obama have much in common. Both came on the horizon as young, 'cool' politicians promising change. While they do have much in common one can state that the use of popular culture in politics has intensified over the past few years. Blair was in many ways a celebrity politician, but as will be argued, Obama has surpassed this category to a certain extent and can be viewed as a celebrity without the traditional political label.

The first part of this dissertation focuses on a discussion of postmodernism in order to construct the theoretical framework of the analysis. The relationship between postmodernism and popular culture and postmodernism and politics will be emphasized. Subsequently the concept of 'celebrity politicians' will be explored. Utilizing the postmodernism framework introduced in the next chapter, Tony Blair's use of popular culture, Britpop especially, to connect with the general public and attain a celebrity status will be discussed. Obama's appeal to popular culture will then be explored, focusing on the hip-hop movement in the United States and his relationship with talk-show host Oprah. Subsequently Blair and Obama and their use of popular culture will be compared and it will be demonstrated that popular culture has played a big role in their careers. Finally, this discussion will be utilized to argue that the role of popular culture and celebrity politicians in politics is increasing. The analysis in this dissertation will be built on previously published material on the subject such as books, peer reviewed articles and various other articles related to the topic.

2 Theoretical Framework

The following theoretical framework focuses on four main areas: postmodernism, the connection between postmodernism and popular culture, the connection between postmodernism and politics and finally the concept ‘celebrity politicians’. These terms and connections will be defined in this chapter and it will subsequently be demonstrated that they are interrelated in postmodern theory. This theoretical framework is an essential part of the analysis in this dissertation as will be illustrated in the subsequent chapters. It can be argued that postmodernism is a key factor in the celebrification of politicians as will be demonstrated with the examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama.

2.1 Postmodernism

Since it does not have one simple definition, postmodernism might seem like a confusing theory, which is difficult to grasp. In fact, having one clear-cut definition actually defies what postmodernism is all about. The rise of postmodernism in academia has been evident for the past few decades and it has entered many discourses and debates. The term ‘postmodernism’ is not new as it has been in circulation since the 1870s. However it was only in the late 1950s and 1960s that postmodernism, as the world knows it today, surfaced (Storey 2009a, 405). Susan Sontag explains postmodernism as some sort of ‘new sensibility’ and the consequence is that the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is not as meaningful as it was before (Sontag 1966, 302). The rise of postmodernism came as an attack against the elitism of modernism since the core of modernism is the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture. In modernism this was called the ‘great divide’ that insisted on the categorical distinction between high art and mass culture. Postmodernism rejected this divide and the former absolute distinction between high and popular culture was now regarded as an ‘uncool’ perspective of the older generation (Storey 2009a, 405-406).

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Jean-Francois Lyotard, a key thinker in postmodern theory, defines postmodernism as ‘incredulity towards metanarratives’ (Lyotard 1984, xxiv). So what are metanarratives and how are they relevant to this discussion? “Metanarratives are ideas such as religion, science, art, modernism and Marxism which make absolute, universal and

all-embracing claims to knowledge and truth” (Strinati 2004, 209). It can be argued that metanarratives work as an inclusive and exclusive device where they try to create homogeneity out of heterogeneity. It has been stated that this process silences other voices and discourses in their attempt to promote universal goals and principles. Postmodernism however signals the collapse of all metanarratives. It rejects theories of ‘one truth’ and instead embraces plurality and the idea of ‘many truths’ with an insistence on difference and diversity. It is possible to state that postmodernism has proclaimed the end of one true ‘Culture’ and the emergence of a plurality of cultures (Storey 2009a, 406).

Jean Baudrillard, another key thinker of postmodernism, defined postmodernism as a world of ‘simulations’ and ‘hyperreality’. Baudrillard’s postmodernism is a culture of the ‘simulacrum’ – an identical copy without an original. According to Baudrillard the very distinction between the copy and the original has been demolished and he calls this process ‘simulation’. Baudrillard calls simulation “the generation by models of real without origins or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard 1983, 2). This hyperrealism is the distinguishing quality of postmodernity. In this hyperreality there is no clear distinction between the ‘real’ and simulation. The real and imaginary continually collide with each other and the difference becomes irrelevant (Baudrillard 1983, 3-4).

As has been described postmodernism has a few key aspects. First of all it is not a grand theory, i.e. it is not a theory that seeks to explain everything. Postmodernism can better be described as a plurality of theories, each holding claim to some sort of ‘partial truth’. Second, it does not make a distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art. It therefore rejects modernity and states that the distinction between the culture of the elite and popular culture is dated and irrelevant. Finally postmodernism emphasizes that the distinction between reality and simulation is becoming increasingly irrelevant and these two separate spheres continually collide with each other making the difference obsolete. The blurring of reality and simulation will be discussed below as the connection between postmodernism and popular culture is further examined.

2.2 Postmodernism and Popular Culture

The term ‘popular culture’ can be linked to many things. In the widest sense, popular culture can be understood as one form of art that is commercially produced for the purpose of entertaining a mass market (Street and Inthorn 2010, 474). Over the past few decades, popular culture has attained new legitimacy in the scholarly world and it has become an ever-growing subject in universities around the world (Shudson 2009, 556). Postmodernism and popular

culture are closely intertwined and it would prove extremely difficult to define postmodernism today without some reference to popular culture. According to postmodern thinking, mass media and popular culture are very important and powerful institutions in contemporary society. It can be argued that the media plays a crucial role as it, in many ways, dominates the way people sense reality and how they define themselves and the world around them. As has been stated previously postmodernism entails that the line between fiction and reality has been blurred with the result that media images and popular culture are increasingly taking over in defining how people sense reality. Many believe that style has taken presence over content and any meaningful distinction between art and popular culture has been lost. (Strinati 2004, 205-206). It can be contended that in the contemporary globalized world there is growing immediacy between global 'space' and 'time', making these terms nearly obsolete. Previously constructed ideas about space and time have been distorted and deconstructed and postmodern popular culture is now a culture without borders, outside of history (Strinati 207-208). Lyotard believes that popular culture or 'contemporary general culture' in postmodernism is a culture where anything goes and taste is irrelevant and the only sign of value is money (Lyotard 1984, 76).

The connection between postmodernism and popular culture has been apparent for decades. The postmodernism of the late 1950s and 1960s was in part an attack on the elitism of the high art of modernism. The American and British 'Pop Art' clearly rejected the 'great divide' between 'high' and 'low' culture. Lawrence Alloway, the movement's first theorist explains:

The area of contact was mass produced urban culture: movies, advertising, science fiction, pop music. We felt none of the dislike of commercial culture standard among most intellectuals, but accepted it as a fact, discussed in detail, and consumed it enthusiastically. One result of our discussion was to take pop culture out of the realm of 'escapism', 'sheer entertainment', 'relaxation', and to treat it with the seriousness of art (quoted in Frith and Horne 1987,104).

Andy Warhol a key player in the Pop Art movement refused to take the distinction between commercial and non-commercial art seriously. The way he saw it was that commercial art was in fact real art and real art was commercial art. 'Real' art is just defined by the taste of the ruling class of that period. Warhol believed that commercial art was just as good as 'real' art since its value was simply defined by other social groups (Storey 2009b, 183).

According to Andreas Huyssen (1986) the relationship between popular culture and pop art can only be fully comprehended when located within the larger cultural context of the British underground scene and the American counterculture. He explains: "Pop in the broadest sense was the context in which a notion of the postmodern first took shape, and from the beginning until today, the most significant trends with postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture" (Huyssen 1986, 188). It was no longer 'cool' to absolutely distinguish between high and popular culture. This was clearly evident in the popular culture of the times where artists such as Bob Dylan and The Beatles had a new tone of seriousness in their music and demanded that their work was taken seriously (Storey 2009b, 184).

Baudrillard's theory of 'simulacrum' clearly focuses on the amalgamation of fact and fiction. It is unclear where reality ends and fiction begins. Pop culture has saturated our everyday life in a world of hyperrealism where the real and imaginary collapse into each other. Evidence of this hyperrealism is everywhere. People write love letters to characters in soap operas, i.e. not the actors but the people they portray on the screen. When visiting New York people can go on a special sight seeing tour where they view the city not as 'itself' but how it appears on *Friends* or *Sex and the City*. The difference between fiction and reality has become less and less important (Storey 2009b, 187). Baudrillard calls this 'the dissolution of life into TV' (Baudrillard 1983, 55).

In a postmodern world it can be argued that the media is no longer providing a secondary representation of peoples' reality. The media influence and produce the reality that they themselves mediate. According to John Fiske, the ability to make an event a media event is not only in the hands of the media but rather the event must successfully articulate the concerns of both the public and the media. A clear distinction between a 'real' event and its media representation is no longer evident. This was crystallized in the O.J. Simpson arrest. Local people went down to O.J.'s house to be there at the showdown but took their portable TV's with them as they knew that actually being at the spot did not substitute the news coverage but rather complimented it (Cited in Storey 2009b, 189).

As has been discussed, popular culture and postmodernism are very connected. Popular culture can be viewed as art that is created to entertain the mass market. It can be argued that popular culture is apparent everywhere in people's lives and, as the examples of *Sex and the City* and *Friends* above demonstrate, the difference between reality and popular culture is becoming less apparent. One can also argue that reality and popular culture are becoming ever more connected in a fragmented globalized world where the media plays an important role. A

sphere, where the merging of popular culture and reality is becoming increasingly apparent is the political arena. In the following chapter the connection between postmodernism, popular culture and politics will be discussed in further detail.

2.3 Postmodernism, Popular Culture and Politics

According to postmodernist thinking, the media and popular culture have saturated many aspects of peoples lives. This includes the political arena. It can be argued that popular culture is becoming increasingly evident in the political realm. The media plays a vital role in political campaigns where politicians rely on the conviction politics of the ‘photo-opportunities’ and the ‘sound-bite’ to win the hearts of voters (Storey 2009b, 188). There is a long tradition, deriving from a diverse range of fields and disciplines, that links art and culture to political involvement. It stretches as far back as Plato, through Rousseau to Adorno and beyond (Street and Inthorn 2010, 472).

Social movement theorists, who seek to explain why social mobilization occurs, are increasingly aware of the role of popular culture in politics, not just in conveying a movement’s political message but also in animating those who share it (Street and Inthorn 2010, 477). Over the past few decades modes of authority have changed and the political culture has increasingly become more informal. Popular culture has become an important arena for political legitimacy and it can be reasoned that the previously separated spheres of popular culture and politics have become increasingly indistinguishable from one another (Luthar 2010, 695).

The role of popular culture is generally speaking most apparent in the political behavior of young people and many of them use different forms of popular culture to express and understand their relationship with politics (Scott et al. 2011, 502). Young people can often use the content of entertainment television, such as the plots of soap operas, to discuss political issues (Scott et al. 2001, 508). Popular music can also be a resource for young people in expressing political opinions. The use of popular music can help young people relate to public issues that are discussed in popular music in their own lives. It can also explain how the lyrics themselves can connect them with the wider society (Scott et al. 2011, 509). It can therefore be argued that popular culture is relatively successful in allowing young people to create a relationship between their personal experiences and wider public concerns (Scott et al. 2011, 510).

A research project conducted by Scott et al. was based on interviews with young people where they discussed their relationship to politics through popular culture. The interviewees

frequently expressed a connection to politics in their discussion about television. They used it to express their relationship with sources of power, to position their identities, to draw connections between the personal and political and to make a connection to the national arena. Their relationship to politics was expressed through their reasoned judgment about the content of television programs (Scott et al 2011, 512). This clearly relates to postmodernism where young people use their sense for an imagined reality to construct their understanding of their own reality.

The postmodern world is the world of surface and appearance, and popular culture mediates this world to the people. Good examples of the blurring of politics and popular culture are political satire shows such as *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*. These shows satirize the blurring of the real and the virtual, the political and the parodic. The mainstream media pays close attention to the ‘fake’ news of the hosts, Stephen Colbert and Jon Stewart, and politicians are desperate to get on their shows. While this makes for a brilliant comedy, it trivializes the seriousness of both the politicians and the satire turning everything into one big ‘meta-joke’ (Colletta 2009, 866). It can be argued that the ‘fussing’ of politics and entertainment has become a goal of many news organizations in the attempt to gain more viewers. This however moves away from producing knowledge and evacuates the public domain of any serious debate and discussion over collective priorities and needs (Colletta 2009, 868).

The blurring of popular culture and politics has not been without controversies. It is possible to state that politics has lost any real dimension of speciality and capacity for transformative action and is becoming increasingly impotent and disabled. In the contemporary media-saturated world politics takes place in a social or civic vacuum, thus degenerating to the level of a spectator sport. Citizens are no longer active but rather passive viewers inactively absorbing a bombardment of ready-made images and formulas. This results in politics becoming some sort of spectacle, where politicians are transformed into a character rather than a representative with the interest of their constituents at heart (Boggs 2001, 369). Many believe that popular culture is a symptom of general political malaise, the most notable example being Robert Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* in which the consumption of popular culture is linked directly to political disengagement (Street and Inthorn 2010, 473).

As has been demonstrated postmodernism is highly relevant to today’s politics. It can be argued that popular culture and postmodernism have transformed politics into a spectator sport. It can be contended that the role of the voter is no longer to simply choose the candidate

who is close to his or her stand on the issues, but rather to choose the candidate who has the most ‘media appeal’. In the next chapter the subjects of the previous chapters: postmodernism, popular culture and politics will be amalgamated in one phrase: ‘celebrity politicians’. It can be stated that celebrity politicians are the quintessential form of postmodernism.

2.4 Celebrity Politicians

As has been discussed, politicians are rarely perceived as ‘cool’ or ‘groovy’. Magazines such as *People* or *OK!* tend to focus on celebrities that are famous for being on television or in the music or film industry and not on politicians. Many would therefore argue that the political and entertainment spheres are, for the most part, unconnected (Marshall 1997, 203). However, as postmodernism would suggest, the distinction between popular culture and politics is no longer as clear as one would think. It can be demonstrated that for some politicians there is a linkage between these two spheres. Before the analysis on celebrity politicians can begin it is necessary to define the term ‘celebrity’. As Marshall argues, the word celebrity: “refers to those people who, via mass media enjoy a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than are those who make up the rest of the population. They are allowed to move on the public stage while the rest of us watch” (Marshall 1997, ix). It can also be argued that celebrities have an economic function as they popularize and promote products of popular culture and they help to sell a wide variety of goods and services (Hollander 2010, 390). Politicians who enter the sphere of celebrity are coming to terms with this consumer culture and attempt to personalize or ‘brand’ their leadership constantly adapting their political communication strategy to communicate through evolving media, such as radio, television and the internet (Marsh et al. 2010, 325).

As has been discussed the spheres of the entertainment industry, the media and the political have begun to overlap more visibly resulting in the phenomenon of ‘celebrity politicians’. This affects many areas of political life such as campaigns, election and international affairs (Marsh et al. 2010, 322). The emergence of celebrity politicians crystalizes the connection between postmodernism, popular culture and politics. Political celebrities have become the focal point for the discussion of a wide range of issues. It is possible to argue that the political persona constructed by the media has become an important means of the articulation of politics through the popular media (Luthar 2010, 691). The categorization of politicians as celebrities includes their activities in a broader realm than just the world of politics. It allows people to look at the politician on the basis of his or her ‘affective function’ in the

organization of issues and interests. In many ways politicians try to appeal to the voters emotions rather than their sense of rationality. This is especially apparent in political campaigns (Marshall 1997, 204). Over the past few decades the link between the political and the entertainment spheres seem to have become even stronger. This can be documented by the rising number of former celebrities who are making their way into politics, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger an actor who was voted the governor of California and Jesse Ventura, a former wrestler who was voted the governor of Minnesota. There are examples of this all over the world in Australia, Pakistan and even Iceland where the mayor of the capital Reykjavik is a comedian and a former member of a punk group (Bennet 2011, 86; Street 2004, 437; McGrane 2010).

The development has not only been that former and current celebrities are dipping their feet into politics but elected politicians have also jumped on the celebrity bandwagon. Politicians are increasingly promoting themselves as celebrity personas and using certain celebrity PR tactics. Examples of this vary from Tony Blair's 'rock star' imagery through to Barack Obama's use of Twitter¹ (Bennet 2011, 86). So it can be argued that the 'celebrity politician' is on the rise. However it must be noted that this is not a brand new phenomenon as there have been examples of this throughout history, notably Ronald Reagan, a former actor who became governor of California and later the president of the United States (Marsh et al. 2010, 324).

As previously discussed, John Street (2004) categorizes celebrity politicians in two main groups. The first type is an elected politician or a nominated candidate who has a background in the entertainment industry, show business or sport and uses this background to get elected. This category would include Arnold Schwarzenegger, Ronald Reagan, Clint Eastwood and so forth. The second type is an elected politician or a candidate who uses his or her connection to celebrities to enhance their image and allows the candidate to get his or her message across (Street 2004, 437). In the next chapters the focus will be on the latter type, i.e. politicians who use celebrities to draw attention to themselves.

Politicians use a variety of techniques to associate themselves with celebrities. One technique is an association with celebrities through photo-opportunities where a link is staged between the celebrity and the politicians. Examples of this would include Tony Blair posing with the England football team and former German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder on stage with the rock band Scorpion. Another technique is the use of non-traditional platforms to

¹ Both of these examples will be discussed in further detail later in this dissertation.

promote the politician. A famous example of this is Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*. A third technique would be the adoption of the techniques and expertise of those who market celebrities. An example of this would be the established filmmaker Spike Jonze directing an election broadcast for a candidate (Street 2004, 437-438).

It has been demonstrated that, in many ways, being a celebrity and being a politician is closely linked. Today it is possible to see both types of celebrity politicians frequently, from singer Bono who has been named ‘the most political effective celebrity of all times’ to Barack Obama who has extremely important connections in the entertainment industry (Brownstein 2011). In the following chapters two celebrity politicians will be examined. The first is Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The second is Barack Obama, the current president of the United States of America. It will be demonstrated that these two politicians have both used the techniques listed above to link themselves to celebrities in order to gain popularity. It will also be demonstrated that the use of popular culture and celebrity power in politics is increasing as the examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama will demonstrate.

3 Blair, Britpop and ‘Cool Britannia’

This chapter focuses on the example of Tony Blair as a celebrity politician. The discussion as presented here will be utilized in subsequent chapters with regard to the aim of the dissertation as set out in the introduction. It can be argued that Tony Blair has through the years shown many of the characteristics of a celebrity politician. The chapter will begin by discussing the rise of New Labour with Tony Blair in charge. Subsequently, Blair’s ‘common persona’ will be examined and his supposed infatuation with rock music. The connection between Blair and ‘Britpop’ will then be discussed. Finally Blair’s fall from grace will be observed. This chapter demonstrates that as Tony Blair ran for office he had many of the characteristics of a celebrity politician. However, once in charge it can be stated that he eventually transformed into a regular ‘boring’ politician.

3.1 ‘Modern Life is Rubbish²’: The Rise Against Thatcherism and the Dawn of New Labour

There was a long period in the Eighties when people were confused about what it meant to be English . . . In the Thatcher years, things were changing so fast that nobody really understood what was happening. It’s only recently that we’ve had time to reflect on what happened in the Eighties and come to terms with what Englishness means in the Nineties (Damon Albarn quoted in Wilde 1995, 19).

This was how Damon Albarn, lead singer of the popular Britpop band Blur described the English morale in the eighties. Many would agree with Albarn that the Thatcher years had left Britain in a state of confusion where the country was experiencing high rates of unemployment and poverty, leaving many people extremely disconnected from the government, creating an ‘underclass’ of some sort. Tony Blair recognized this disconnect and addressed the issue in a speech at the Ayelsbury housing estate in London in June 1997: “There is a case not just in the moral terms but in enlightened self-interest to act, to tackle what we all know exists – an underclass of people cut from society’s mainstream, without any

² The title of Blur’s second album.

sense of shared purpose” (Blair quoted in Lund 2008, 47; Welshman 2006, ix). The conservative ways of Thatcher and later John Major were proving for many to be ineffective and isolating, leaving many people longing for a change. This change proved to be ‘New Labour’ under the leadership of Tony Blair.

Tony Blair was elected as the leader of the Labour party on July 21, 1994, following the death of John Smith. Many say that this was the date when the New Labour era formally began (Gamble 2012, 1). Under Tony Blair the Labour Party was able to distance itself from the ‘Old Labour’ policies by adopting ‘The Third Way’. The Third Way embraces a market economy but seeks to combine social solidarity with a strong economy. The emphasis is on equal opportunities rather than equal outcomes. It promotes pluralism in welfare supply and concentrates on income and wealth creation rather than their distributive pattern. By adopting this new policy the Labour party was able to sideline the Tories under John Major’s leadership (Lund 2008, 43-44). In 1997 ‘New Labour’, the phrase that the Labour party had coined to signal the transformation the party had gone through, won a landslide victory in the British Parliament securing 419 seats and a 43,2% share of the vote (BBC News 2005). This victory was in line with the breath of fresh air many thought Tony Blair and New Labour would bring with them. However it can be argued that it was not only The Third Way that signaled the success of New Labour. There was something about Tony Blair, the party’s leader, that was ever so cool and evoked fascination with both celebrities and the general public.

3.2 ‘I Want to Live Like Common People’³: Tony Blair – The Common Man.

The fact that a guy who’d been in a band, owned an electric guitar and has probably had a spliff was Prime Minister really meant something, after years of John Major and Margaret Thatcher. He just *might* be one of us. (Noel Gallagher quoted in Daily Mail 2007).

This is how Noel Gallagher, lead guitarist in the widely successful British band Oasis described his original fascination with Tony Blair. The New Labour leader was able to distance himself from the widespread view that the majority of politicians were out of touch with the general public. He was young, one of the youngest Prime Minister ever to serve in the UK, and he brought with him a vibe of coolness. Journalist John Harris described London after the election of Tony Blair as: “brimming with a dizzy kind of enthusiasm about the

³ Lyrics from the song ‘Common People’ by the Britpop band Pulp.

Blairite New Dawn . . . the country's glorious exit from the Tory nightmare" (Harris 2003). This enthusiasm about Blair was understandable as he was an expert in infusing politics with non-political breeziness. He seemed to be in tune with the 'hyperactive, primary-coloured' Britain that the Conservative party could not begin to understand. His tastes were rooted in the high street and he was described as 'smart but casual' and that helped gain an audience with different people who Old Labour had lost touch with long ago (Harris 2006).

Tony Blair was infatuated with rock'n'roll and stated at the *Q* music magazine awards: "Rock'n'roll is not just an important part of our culture it's an important part of our way of life" (Tony Blair quoted in Harris 2004b, 191). As an aspiring rock god he even headed to London at the age of 19 with a single bag and his guitar, which he had nicknamed Clarence. He ended up spending his first night in London sleeping on a park bench, an incident he would later cite as proof for his empathy for the homeless (Farndale 2006). His friends described him as a 'wannabe' Mick Jagger and his appearance, demeanor and desire suggested he wanted to be a rock star. He became the lead singer of the student band Ugly Rumours and even though he only played six gigs with the band the rock star imagery became an important part of Blair's persona (Powell 2006).

Although Blair had dreams of becoming a rock star at a young age he was often perceived as a 'regular guy'. When he first came into office, Blair was described as: "the happy young dad, the virile family man, the good-natured ordinary bloke next door, the voice of common sense in a party that had for so long been dragged down by the fruity loopies of the hard left" (Parsons 2003). It was important to Blair to communicate that he was culturally in tune with the public and described himself as a regular guy, often sharing his love of The Beatles and The Rolling Stones. This idea of Blair as a regular guy, no different than you or me, became an important part of Blair's public persona (Page 2007, 463; Harris 2004b, 191). This can be demonstrated through various photo-opportunities where Blair can be seen as having a pint at the local pub, reading a newspaper while travelling on the train or having fish and chips, the popular take-away food in Britain (Guardian 2003).

By 1995 Blair had developed a reputation for mixing churchy piety with the clear desire to be perceived as being ever-so-slightly groovy (Harris 2004b, xiii). An analysis of the coverage of British Prime Ministers in *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* showed that Blair was the first Prime Minister who received more references to his private qualities and personal life than to his leadership qualities (Smith 2008, 559). It can be argued that Blair's 'common persona' was advocated with the help of 'spin-doctors', most noticeably Alistair Campbell

who was *The Daily Mirror's* political editor and later became Blair's Chief Press Spokesperson (Andrews 2006, 37). It was this 'bloke next door' character along with his infatuation with popular culture that would pave the way for 'Cool Britannia' and Blair's connection to Britpop, something that would transform him into a celebrity politician.

3.3 'For Tomorrow'⁴: Blair, Cool Britannia and Britpop

There are seven people in this room who are giving a little bit of hope to young people in this country. That is me, our kid, Bonehead, Guigs, Alan White, Alan McGee⁵ and Tony Blair. And if you've all got anything about you, you'll go up there and you'll shake Tony Blair's hand, man. He's the man! Power to the people! (Noel Gallagher quoted in Holz 2007, 8).

This was an acceptance speech made by Noel Gallagher at the 1996 Brit Awards. His words show a tremendous amount of faith in the leader of New Labour. They also show the power that celebrities have to raise awareness of political issues and politicians. There he was, with his band members, in front of hundreds of celebrities in the audience and thousands of people at home watching, expressing great confidence in Tony Blair. Support from celebrities like Gallagher was an important part of Blair's strategy. In fact as early as the spring of 1995, the previously quoted Damon Albarn, lead singer of Blur, was invited to the Houses of Parliament. There he had been invited to meet a handful of key figures in the Labour Party: John Prescott, who would later become deputy Prime Minister, Alistair Campbell, Blair's strategist and Blair himself. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss, informally, how Albarn might assist the Labour Party to appeal to the young (Harris 2004b, xiii, 197-198). It was around this time that the 'Cool Britannia' era began.

Cool Britannia was a brand that the magazine *Vanity Fair* labeled the hotchpotch of Britpop, British fashion and young British artists. It also included Tony Blair's New Labour (Street 2012, 2). Even though Blair did not invent the term, under his leadership, New Labour was able to seize a golden opportunity. Cool Britannia was a term coined during the mid nineties that was supposed to describe the new and cool Britain. By 1994 the media had begun to notice a sudden revitalization of British art and culture and in 1996 Cool Britannia was at its peak. *Time* magazine called London the 'coolest city in the world' and Ben and

⁴ The title of a song by Blur.

⁵ Paul "Bonehead" Arthurs, guitar player of Oasis, Paul "Guigsy" McGuigan, the group's bassist and Alan McGee, the head of Creation Records.

Jerry's, the famous ice cream company, launched a new flavor of ice cream labeled 'Cool Britannia'. Britpop was at the height of its success and coolness of the British culture was sold across the globe as Cool Britannia (Urban 2004, 355).

Tony Blair and his party had a vision for Cool Britannia. Blair attempted to make New Labour and Cool Britannia one and the same. Under his leadership New Labour looked at Britain as a commodity that could be marketed and managed. By aligning New Labour with this cool youth movement, the party could distance itself from Old Labour and the Tories and appeal to the younger voters of the country. It can be argued that this act became very important for the party since Blair's Third Way economic policies were in many ways similar to those of the Tories. This left Blair open for accusation for being nothing more than Thatcherism 'lite' (Urban 2004, 355-356).

The appeal with the youth was especially apparent in Blair's alignment with key Britpop musicians. After 1997 the use of celebrities was increasingly apparent in New Labour's delivery of policy (Street 2012, 3). The idea of Britpop comprised of two different strands. Firstly, it referred to the idea that young British musicians were knowingly connecting with their British musical heritage, stretching from The Beatles to punk rock and secondly, it was built around commercial success. Britpop came as a response to the 'Americanization' of music, with lyrics that expressed a unique 'Englishness'. Britpop bands such as Blur, Suede, Pulp, Oasis and Elastica became increasingly popular in Britain, regularly appearing on top 40 lists (Harris 2004b, xv-xvi). Blair was actually on the fast track of becoming a Britpop celebrity himself, repeatedly showing up at music awards ceremonies, chatting with musicians and industry figureheads and, as has been stated before, enthusiastically talking about his deep affinity for rock'n'roll (Harris 2003).

For some time Blair's flirtation with popular culture was mutual. As previously illustrated the band Oasis, especially lead guitarist Noel Gallagher, came out in full support of Tony Blair. A fact that contributed to a large amount of press coverage with many newspapers leading with the headline: 'What's the story? Don't vote Tory,' a wordplay on the Oasis bestselling album *What's The Story? Morning Glory* (Page 2007, 463). Oasis were truly Tony Blair's most visible rock'n'roll associates and three months after New Labour's election victory, Noel Gallagher and Alan McGee, Oasis' manager, were invited to a victory party at Downing Street where they toasted in champagne with the newly elected Prime Minister (Harris 2004b, xviii). The famous photograph of Blair and Noel Gallagher toasting in champagne in Downing Street would seem to demonstrate just how close their connection

was (Harris 2004b, 298). The promise of Cool Britannia played an important part in establishing Blair and New Labour as ‘cool’ and in touch with their young constituents. Blair seemed to thoroughly enjoy this and participated in the cult of celebrity (Page 2007, 463). However as the story is with many romances after the honeymoon days, Blair’s relationship with Britpop quickly fizzed out.

3.4 ‘Charmless Man’⁶: New Labour – Old Politics?

In hindsight, it turned out he was just a politician like all the rest. I was brought up as a Labour voter and it *was* euphoric when they got into power. I didn’t realise it wasn’t New Labour at all – it was the Tories dressed in red. (Noel Gallagher quoted in Daily Mail 2007).

Many agreed with this sentiment of Noel Gallagher after New Labour had been in power for a while. Many had also criticized Blair’s celebrity persona. The Pulp song ‘Cocaine Socialism’ displays deep cynicism towards Blair’s attempts to connect with Britpop: “Well you sing about common people. So can you bring them to my party and get them all to sniff this and all I’m really saying is ‘Come on and rock the vote for me’.” The lead singer of the band Jarvis Cocker allegedly wrote the song after the Labour Party tracked him down on holiday and asked him to support them in their election campaign. Cocker was said to have told the party representative to ‘piss off’ (NME 1998). Blair was also criticized by many of his opponents for being all style and no substance and lacking ideological roots. Some people believed that the promotion of Blair’s celebrity persona was a substitute for ideological depth. Even members of his own party recognized the problem stating that the New Labour brand was contaminated and undermined by a combination of spin, lack of conviction and apparent lack of integrity (Needham 2005, 353).

Soon after Blair was elected Prime Minister he lost many of his supporters. For all of Blair’s rock’n’roll poses it was becoming increasingly apparent that the more traditional areas of government policy were very unlikely to commend them to anyone close to a bohemian disposition. New Labour’s imposition of student tuition fees made Tony Blair increasingly unpopular with the young people who had in the beginning been such avid supporters. The dole-denying strictures of the ‘New Deal’ also raised questions about New Labour’s ‘groovyness’ and it was becoming increasingly clear that New Labour were not nearly cool as

⁶ The title of a song by Blur.

many people had hoped. When Tony Blair decided to support President Bush to go to war in Iraq he was highly criticized sparking protests around the country. New Labour's fall from grace was underlined when a member of the anarchist band Chumbawamba emptied an ice bucket over deputy Prime Minister John Prescott at the 1998 Brit Awards (Harris 2004b, 357).

It was becoming clear that Blair was losing his support with the Britpop celebrities fast. On March 11th 1998, even before many of Blair's unpopular decisions linked to war and tuition fees, *NME* put Tony Blair on its cover with the headline: 'Ever Get The Feeling You've Been Cheated? Rock'n'Roll Takes On The Government'. Inside the magazine the governments youth-cultural credential where completely demolished where the opening editorial raged that: "New Labour is both taking us for granted and taking the piss"(Harris 2004b, 358). This was only the beginning as the Britpop movement increasingly disconnected themselves from Blair and New Labour. Jarvis Cocker, lead singer of Pulp would later say: "It's worse that if the Tories got in, in a way, because with the Tories you would expect the same old shit to happen" (Jarvis Cocker quoted in Simpson 1998).

However Blair soon found a new relationship that he could cling to, a political 'love affair' with U.S. President George W. Bush. Blair's decision to support the Iraq war was highly controversial and lost him a great deal of support from his voters. A young journalist named Laura Bailey appropriately articulates Blair's fall from grace in an interview with *Time* magazine in 2003:

We had lived most of our lives under a Conservative government and were itching to shake of its fusty gray mantle. We really thought Blair and New Labour would change the world for the better. Over the intervening six years Blair has disappointed my generation many times, but it was the war with Iraq and the love-in with the Bush Administration that sealed it. He isn't ours any more (Quoted in Harris 2004b, 370).

Tony Blair who had started out as highly popular with the public, the press and pop idols gradually lost support as they became tired of him, objected to specific policies or questioned his integrity over the invasion of Iraq (Giddens 2007, 106). Blair had strayed from his cool persona and transformed into a regular politician, who made unpopular decisions. However, soon another celebrity politician would emerge, this time on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean.

4 Obama, Hip-hop and ‘Yes We Can’

This chapter focuses on the example of Barack Obama as a celebrity politician. Obama will be compared to Tony Blair and the discussion as presented here will be utilized in the subsequent chapter with regard to the aim of the dissertation as set out in the introduction. It can be argued that like Tony Blair, Barack Obama has shown many of the characteristics of a celebrity politician and that he has, in many ways, transformed into a celebrity. The chapter will begin with describing Obama’s rise to power and an examination of the incredible buzz that surrounded him in his run for President of the United States. The connection between hip-hop and Obama will then be illustrated. Furthermore his association with other celebrities, most noticeably Oprah Winfrey, will be examined as well as the criticism he has received.

4.1 ‘Changes’⁷: Frustration With Bush and a New Hope on the Horizon

I need y'all to be really, really quiet for this. I need you to really understand what I'm telling you. Rosa Parks sat so Martin Luther King could walk. Martin Luther King walked so Obama could run. Obama's running so we all can fly (Jay-Z quoted in Martin 2008).

It can be argued that, in 2008, the United States was in a similar situation as the United Kingdom was after the Thatcher years. There was a cloud of disappointment looming over the U.S. and the people were longing for change. George W. Bush had been in power for eight years and over that period the United States and the entire world had changed a great deal. The terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 led Bush to declare a ‘War On Terror’, which would result in two costly wars, one in Afghanistan and another in Iraq. In 2008 these wars had become a contested issue as they were proving to be ineffective and extremely expensive for the United States Government (Lindsay 2011, 765). At the end of his second term Bush’s approval ratings were at an all time low and world leaders who previously supported him began to distance themselves from the Bush administration. The U.S. economy was beginning to crumble and the deficit topped at \$500 billion (Lindsay 2011, 771). In 2008 it seemed the

⁷ The title of a song by deceased rapper and hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur.

United States was desperate for a radical change and what could be more drastic than electing an African American as president of the United States for the very first time? The lyrics of the song *Changes* by Tupac Shakur, which was released in 1998, come to mind when the 2008 election is discussed. In the song Shakur, raps: “And although it seems heaven sent, we ain’t ready to see a black President”. Little did he know that ten years later the United States would be ready for a black president, and that president would be Barack Obama.

The selection of Barack Obama as the Democratic candidate and later his election as President of the United States was a truly remarkable journey. In the Democratic presidential primaries he started out as somewhat of an underdog, competing against the experienced Hillary Clinton who was believed to be a shoe-in for the Democratic candidacy. She had impressive credentials, having already been in the White House for eight years as the First Lady during the presidency of her husband Bill Clinton. In 2000, she was elected to the United States Senate, representing New York, and she was re-elected by a wide margin in 2006. She was well liked and had a great deal of support from both the masses and the elites. She also had the dramatic appeal of becoming the first female President of the United States (Walton Jr. et al. 2008, 19; Walker 2008, 1095). When Obama entered the race Clinton was leading in the polls with African American voters but slowly her approval ratings went down and Obama’s approval ratings went up. Clinton’s standing in the polls among African American voters went into a deep descent that she never recovered from. This descent would only accelerate when Senator Obama came out as the victor in many primaries and caucuses, in Iowa, South Carolina and on Super Tuesday on February 22, 2008. It soon became clear that the underdog had transformed into a potential President of the United States (Walton Jr. et al. 2008, 19).

The campaign of the freshman Senator Barack Obama was greeted with great enthusiasm by the masses and the media. The possibility of a non-white president with close African roots and the Arabic middle name Hussein promised a different kind of presidency, a change from ‘politics as usual’. It would symbolize a very different America, distant from the unilateralist warrior state of Bush. The appeal of ‘change’ that Obama brought with him was closely tied with more traditional values such as his classically elite American credentials from Harvard Law School (Walker 2008, 1095-1096).

After Obama had secured the Democratic nomination he campaigned against the Republican candidate John McCain for the presidency of the United States. The campaign was truly phenomenal. Record-breaking fundraising in the Obama campaign allowed the

candidate to pursue a fifty state strategy disregarding the traditional classification between red and blue states. This enabled him to put all ten battleground⁸ states into play where he ended up winning nine of the ten states. He only lost in Missouri by less than 3000 votes. Another factor that helped secure the battleground states was the fact that they had a large African American population (Walton Jr. et al. 2008, 24-25).

The historic victory of Barack Obama could not have happened without his personal charisma. Roger Wilkins, a former history professor, describes Obama's charisma as: "a nonverbal form of communication, sending seemingly conflicting messages: the need for radical and sacrificial change, yet the reassurance to Americans that he's as sane and stable as the guy in the next barber's chair" (Quoted in Fulwood III 2009). It was this charisma that ensured Obama a great deal of support from the general public and A-list celebrities. In the 2008 elections celebrities played a much bigger role than usual. Rather than just lending their endorsements, stars from the world of music, movies and TV took active roles in getting the word out, especially in Obama's campaign (Newton-Small 2008). All of this contributed to Obama's ever-growing celebrity persona.

4.2 'A Star Is Born'⁹: The Whole World Has 'Obama Fever'

His youth, his being black, the way he speaks, the way he lays out his point of view. It's someone that looks more like you. I don't mean black, but I mean the young thing. And his name is Barack Obama (Talib Kweli quoted in Hamby 2007).

This is how the rapper Talib Kweli described Barack Obama. His description refers to Obama's personal charisma, an 'x-factor' that was discussed earlier. People sensed this charisma and felt that there was something special about Obama. It has often been stated that Obama is an incredibly skilled and inspiring speaker and his personality has proved to be very compelling with the people of the United States (Toal 2009, 376). Just like Tony Blair, there was just something that was so cool about Obama. He had the walk, he had the talk and he oozed self-confidence and *Ebony* magazine even declared Obama as one of "The 25 Coolest Brothers of All Time" (Cottle 2009, 15-16). Gerard Baker of *The Times* described Obama as 'The Fab One' comparing his popularity with that of the 'Beatlemania'. John Rentoul of *The Independent* described him as "Bill Clinton and Nelson Mandela rolled into one" (Cited in

⁸ Red states are states that tend to vote Republican, blue states are states that tend to vote Democrat. Battleground states or swing states are states that can go either way.

⁹ The title of a song by the hip-hop artist Jay-Z.

Cathcart 2008, 16). The ever-growing hype around Barack Obama quickly transformed him into a celebrity. It would seem that even though the example of Tony Blair had some of the characteristics of a celebrity politician, Barack Obama ultimately confirmed the arrival of the celebrity politician (Street 2012, 1).

The transformation of Barack Obama from a traditional politician into a celebrity was ever apparent in the media. A cover story in *Entertainment Weekly* titled him as 'President Rock Star' even stating: "He's bigger than Brangelina bigger than Beyonce: See how our new president is the biggest celebrity in the world" (Cited in Cottle 2009, 14). This would place Obama along with some of the biggest celebrities in the world, ranking him higher than many Hollywood A-listers. The celebrification of Obama started in 2004 and since then magazines and newspapers have used words like 'rock star' to describe the reaction he has gotten from crowds. The focus in the media on his backstory and his personal life rather than policy issues would also suggest that he was a celebrity rather than a traditional politician (Hendrickson and Wilkins 2007, 17). As discussed in the theoretical framework, the focus on personal issues of politicians is a characteristic of a celebrity politician. Obama's transformation into a celebrity can also be documented on the popular celebrity gossip site *perezhilton.com*, where he has been given his own category and the focus is on his personal stories rather than his presidential activities (Perez Hilton, Barack Obama).

Obama has worked hard to maintain his image as a man of the people, a tactic also utilized by Blair as previously illustrated. Obama has often used the opportunity to demonstrate that he is not just some out of touch politician but rather a regular guy. He has on numerous occasions made references to popular culture phenomena, whether it is stating that *The Godfather I and II* are his favorite movies or that his favorite TV show is *The Wire*, a show that portrays the harsh reality in the streets of Baltimore, even stating who his favorite character is on the show. He has often said that he listens to Jay-Z on his iPod (Cottle 2009, 16). He even appeared on the Ellen show essaying a 'cool dance' with the talk show host, showing just how 'hip' he really was (Street 2012, 1). His references to popular culture have given him a certain aura of coolness and it can be argued that this coolness allowed him to connect with voters, especially the youth voters. It can be debated that Reggie Love, Obama's personal aide, has helped Obama shape his cool persona since it was Love who introduced Obama to many of his references to popular culture such as the 'fist bump' and it was also Love who gave Obama an iPod and loaded it with Jay-Z and Lil Wayne (Cottle 2009, 16). It is therefore possible to argue that Love had a similar role to that of Alistair Campbell in Tony

Blair's campaign, who made sure that the Blair was relatable. One can state that Love and Campbell were important factors in shaping the coolness of the politicians.

It can be contended that Obama's connection to popular culture and his clever use of social media was an important factor in his success. His campaign relied heavily on social media, more than any campaign had before. The use of online media allowed Obama to communicate with young voters more easily and the youth votes played an important part in his election (Powell et al. 2011, 334). Many have argued that Obama's clever use of technology along with his connection to popular culture, inspired many young voters to go out and vote for the very first time. The campaign's use of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter became the latest incarnation of the postmodern election campaign creating a hyperreality where there is no clear distinction between the real and the simulation (Street 2012, 1; Baudrillard 1983, 3-4).

Social media played an important role in Obama's campaign. It can also be argued that it was an important tool for his supporters to express their support for him. A noticeable example of this would be the hip-hop artist will.i.am who created a YouTube video declaring his support to Obama by editing a speech Obama made to music. The video called 'Yes We Can' was star studded with appearances by Common, Herbie Hancock, John Legend and others. The video quickly went 'viral' and received over 13 million views on YouTube within two weeks (Knopper 2008, 11). Support from hip-hop artists such as will.i.am would prove to be an important part of Obama's popularity and further the creation of his celebrity status.

4.3 'Rappers Delight'¹⁰: Hip-hop's Infatuation With Obama and Vice Versa

He's fresh you know, he's got good style. As far as people in my age group and people that love hip-hop there's a love for Obama. He represented progress. He represents what hip-hop is about. Hip-hop is about the progress, the struggle (Common quoted in Hamby 2007).

These words of the rapper Common briefly describe hip-hop's infatuation with Barack Obama. With his words Common linked Obama directly to the hip-hop movement. It can be argued that the connection between hip-hop and Obama is not that far fetched. Many believe that hip-hop serves as a unifying force, a combination of entrepreneurship, community activism, creativity and innovation and it can be argued that these are some of Obama's main characteristics. His policies and approach to politics, such as the fight against poverty and

¹⁰ The title of a hip-hop song by the group Sugarhill Gang.

discrimination, demonstrated that he understood the needs and desires of the hip-hop community, thus making him a 'hip-hop candidate' (Peterson 2008). It can be argued that Obama's connection to hip-hop is similar to Blair's connection to Britpop. The music of hip-hop and Britpop address social issues. While Britpop focused on a specific 'Englishness' and disillusionment of the middle class, hip-hop lyrics often focus on issues of poverty and racial discrimination.

Hip-hop originated in the United States in the early 1970s. It has been described as "a source for identity formation and social status by and for Black and Latino young people" (Brunson III, 6). Hip-hop's cultural form is expressed through rapping, dancing, graffiti and DJ-ing. It also includes rhymes, poetry, theatre and some forms of activism (Brunson III 2011, 6). Hip-hop writer Jeff Chang argues that hip-hop activists made it possible for millions of new young voters to come to the polls and Chang believes that: "Obama's candidacy could not even have been imagined were it not for hip-hop. Hip-hop has desegregated the popular culture and produced many images of successful people of color" (Quoted in Goetzman 2009, 31).

This connection between hip-hop and Obama has been noticeable throughout his campaign for presidency and his stay in the White House. The hip-hop magazine *Vibe* titled Obama 'B-Rock' further establishing his connection to hip-hop (Hamby 2007) and as has been previously stated the music video 'Yes We Can' by will.i.am was purposely created to show support for Obama. Many famous hip-hop artists, such as Jay-Z and Kanye West have referenced Obama in their songs. 'The People' a song by Common uses the lyrics: "My raps ignite the people like Obama" (Hamby 2007). Another example of this is the song 'Black President' by Nas which demonstrates a great deal of hope for Obama: "On the positive side, I think Obama provides hope and challenges the minds of all races and color to erase the hate" (Quoted in Adaso 2012). These hip-hop artists along with Mos Def, Talib Kweli, The Game, 50 Cent and others were public advocates in Obama's run for presidency (Reid 2008). When speaking of Barack Obama, the rapper 50 Cent was quoted as saying: "I heard Obama speak. He hit me with that he-just-got-done-watching-Malcolm X [thing], and I swear to God I'm like, 'Yo Obama!'" (Quoted in Reid 2008). Indeed there was a considerable amount of infatuation with Barack Obama in the hip-hop community and at least for some time the infatuation was mutual. It would seem that Obama had a great deal of love for hip-hop.

Even though Obama has described himself as an 'old school guy' who listens to Miles Davis and John Coltrane he has stated that he's 'current enough' and listens to Jay-Z and

Beyoncé (Hamby 2007). During an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Obama stated: “my rap palate has greatly improved. Jay-Z used to be sort of what predominated, but now I’ve got a little Nas and a little Lil Wayne and some other stuff, but I would not claim to be an expert” (Quoted in Wenner 2010, 46). Obama might not be an expert but the name-dropping of some of the most famous artists from the hip-hop community definitely made him cooler than most politicians. His connection to hip-hop went further than just listening to the music. In 2006 Obama had a high profile chat with the rapper Ludacris where they discussed how to empower the young people of America. The previously mentioned ‘cool dance’ on *The Ellen Show* was to the song ‘Crazy in Love’ by Jay-Z and Beyoncé (Pereira and Klinkenberg 2011).

After Obama was elected, he maintained his connection to hip-hop inviting Jay-Z, Beyoncé, Trey Songz and Pharrell to the White House. His close ties with hip-hop even lead to a conspiracy that Obama had appeared in a hip-hop video in the eighties, a rumor that turned out to be completely false (Pereira and Klinkenberg 2011). One of the most noticeable examples of Obama’s connection to hip-hop was a gesture he made in a debate in North Carolina during the Democratic presidential primaries. In a gesture to sweep away concerns about his pugnacity he brushed the imaginary lint from his opponents of his shoulders. This was a reference to Jay-Z’s popular 2003 hit ‘Dirt Off Your Shoulder’. This wordless reference to Jay-Z’s hip-hop anthem made him look even cooler compared to his opponents suggesting that nothing could break his stride. Obama was arguably the first ever presidential candidate who made a reference to hip-hop in a speech (Dowd 2008).

The connection between Obama and hip-hop has not been without controversies. There have been many hip-hop stars that have endorsed Obama who have been criticized by the press, such as Lil Wayne, whose lyrics seem to support criminal activity and violence (Williams 2010). Ludacris was especially criticized for his song about Obama, ‘Politics as Usual’. The song’s lyrics were seen as offensive to both Hillary Clinton and John McCain, Obama’s main competitors at the time. Obama quickly distanced himself from the song and Ludacris instead of embracing the celebrity endorsement, as he feared that the endorsement would transfer negative feelings towards his campaign (Kuehl 2009, 185). Though his connection to hip-hop was controversial Obama had one connection that would arguably pave the road for his presidency and that connection was Oprah Winfrey.

4.4 ‘Yes We Can’¹¹: Rubbing Shoulders With Oprah

I think that what he stands for, what he has proven that he can stand for, what he has shown was worth me going out on a limb for – and I haven’t done it in the past because I haven’t felt that anybody, I didn’t know anybody well enough to be able to say, I believe in this person (Oprah Winfrey quoted in Zeleny 2007).

This is how Oprah expressed her reasons for supporting Barack Obama. As has been stated Obama’s close ties to popular culture was a key part of his campaign for the presidency. It can be argued that celebrity endorsements increased the awareness of Obama’s campaign. The role of these types of endorsements has been controversial as not everyone agrees that they are beneficial. However it can be argued that they can increase awareness of candidates and possibly transfer positive evaluations from the celebrity to the candidate. It has also been stated that celebrity endorsement can help undecided and independent voters to consider a candidate, which they otherwise might have overlooked (Kuehl 2009, 183). As has been previously illustrated the Obama campaign recognized the prospect of celebrity endorsement and it can be argued that few endorsements were as influential as Oprah Winfrey’s.

Oprah was no ordinary celebrity endorser. When she decided to support Obama publicly her show, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, drew 8.4 million viewers per weekday. Her magazine *O!* had a monthly circulation of 2 million. A study showed that books selected for her book club saw immediate spikes in sales so her endorsement was in many respects already a proven commodity. Another important factor of Oprah’s support for Obama was that it was the first time she had endorsed a candidate in a presidential campaign (Brewer and Pease 2008, 387). Oprah’s endorsement of Barack Obama had a huge effect on Obama’s presidential campaign. Her endorsement drew large numbers of voters that came to hear him speak and hear his policies. Oprah’s endorsement was able to distinguish Obama from the rest of the crowd (Kuehl 2009, 184).

With her endorsement, Oprah hoped to persuade her audience to invest in Obama as they had invested in many other products she had endorsed. This is linked to the ‘branding’ of politicians as was discussed in the theoretical framework. Oprah exclusively offered Obama access to her millions of viewers, which garnered a great deal of attention to the presidential

¹¹ The title of a song by will.i.am inspired by Obama’s slogan ‘Yes We Can’. The video features many celebrities such as Common, Scarlett Johanson and John Legend. The video can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjXyqcX-mYY> (Accessed April 20, 2012).

candidate. As her audience was primarily white, Oprah was seen as a ‘safe’ black woman who had apparently transcended race. This would lead Obama to accept her endorsement with open arms in contrast to the support of some artists from the hip-hop community, such as Ludacris and Lil Wayne, who were highly controversial. Although Obama accepted support from the hip-hop community, he had to be much more careful in doing so than in accepting Oprah’s support (Kuehl 2009, 185). With arguably the biggest celebrity in the world, the hip-hop community and many of the country’s most famous actors, actresses and singers, Obama seemed to have a unique connection to popular culture.

This connection was very present during Obama’s inauguration speech where director Steven Spielberg, who was in attendance, joked: “I couldn’t afford to do this shot in a movie.” The sheer number of A-listers was that great that Spielberg would have never been able to pay their salaries. Actors such as Denzel Washington, Dustin Hoffman and Samuel L. Jackson were just a few of the Hollywood actors who were in attendance. Hip-hop artists Beyoncé, Jay-Z and P Diddy were there to support Obama and many of the celebrities present had been prominent supporters of Obama. Oprah was honored with a place on the stage with the new president (Bingham 2009). This close connection made it almost impossible to tell where the show business ended and the politics began (Street 2012, 1). The hyperreal, which was discussed in the theoretical framework, can be linked to this moment, since it was to a certain extent, difficult to distinguish Obama, the celebrity from Obama, the politician.

It can be argued that in many ways Obama was much more of a celebrity politician than Blair, since the amount of support he received from celebrities was unprecedented. However, the support Obama had, when he was elected, faded rapidly and it would seem that Obama would have the same fate as Tony Blair, i.e. losing his celebrity appeal and becoming a ‘just’ a regular politician.

4.5 ‘Don’t Believe the Hype¹²’: Politics as Usual?

You know, a one-term president with some balls who actually got stuff done would have been, in the long run of the country, much better (Matt Damon quoted in Bullock 2011).

Matt Damon, once an avid supporter of the Obama campaign, expressed deep disappointment with Obama during an interview with *Elle* magazine in December 2011 (Bullock 2011). According to Damon, Obama misinterpreted his mandate and he believes that Obama has

¹² The title of a song by the hip-hop group Public Enemy.

rolled over to Wall Street completely (The Huffington Post 2011). Obama has been criticized for his performance in office but he has also been criticized for his celebrity persona. This line of criticism is similar to that of Tony Blair, as shown in chapter 3. However, it can be argued that the attack on Obama's celebrity persona has been much greater than the attacks Blair received in this regard.

Obama's celebrity persona has come under attack on numerous occasions. The most prominent one was an advertisement released by John McCain's campaign during the presidential elections. The advertisement, released on July 29, 2008 portrayed Obama as a celebrity in a negative way. The advertisement began with a shot of an enormous crowd that chanted in unison: "O-ba-ma! O-ba-ma! O-ba-ma!" Suddenly paparazzi lights pop brightly and the audience can see glimpses of the controversial celebrities Britney Spears and Paris Hilton. Subsequently the audience see a smiling Barack Obama in front of an adoring crowd and over the advertisement an ominous voice read: "He's the biggest celebrity in the world but he is ready to lead?" (Alexander 2010, 413). The advert had a powerful effect on Obama's campaign and forced him to downplay his celebrity status for a while and it proved to have one of the most damaging effects on the Obama campaign (Alexander 2010, 415). In a similar vein opponents of Obama have labeled him as a brand, nothing more than a consumer product. This claim was given a substantial ground when the Obama campaign was named *Advertising Age's* marketer of the year for 2008 where it won the vote of hundreds of marketers, agency heads and marketing services who were gathered at the Association of National Advertisers annual conference. There the Obama campaign beat famous brands such as *Apple* and *Zappos.com* (Hedges 2010, 35).

His opponents have often called him an 'elitist' or a 'snob'. For example a quote he made during the presidential campaign in San Francisco about working class Americans clinging to their guns and religion was perceived as an elitist remark (Baker 2010). Obama has received a great deal of criticism from his opponents and one need only turn on Fox News to witness some of the criticism being thrown his way. Not long after Obama was elected, a growing dissent was apparent among his supporters. Not only were his opponents dissatisfied with Obama's performance, but also his supporters. Many believed that Obama was constantly not pressing the agenda that he promised to those who elected him. The 'cool liberal' that was elected has now been accused of behaving like a conservative in Congress, failing to take a stand on important issues that many people believed he would (Fasenfest 2010, 365-367). This is similar to the criticism Blair received from his supporters as previously illustrated.

Loud criticism has been felt from celebrities. Hollywood supporters have been disappointed with Obama's stand on the environment, as many believe that he has taken pro-business moves regarding the environment. As for unemployment, many believe that he has been inexplicably slow to address persistent unemployment. He has been criticized by gay and lesbian activists in Hollywood, who believed that Obama would support marriage equality, which he has yet to do. Obama has also been criticized for being too slow in bringing the troops home from Iraq and Afghanistan (Daunt 2011; Foreman 2011). This is similar to the criticism of Britpop artists, such as Noel Gallagher and Jarvis Cocker, who criticized Blair for not addressing issues he promised to do.

Ari Herstand, a singer-songwriter, catches the feelings of the young voters perfectly as many felt that the 'change' they had voted for was not what they were getting. Many believed that the transformational leader was becoming just another out of touch politician. Herstand describes his initial infatuation with Obama: "That time we felt that Obama was more or less this outsider, this new young proponent for change, and he really engaged the younger, 20-something crowd, and we felt that this was someone very different, someone that was kind of an intelligent, amicable leader that we could get behind." However the initial excitement that captivated the young voters seems to have faded and Herstand continues: "It's hard to get everyone to rally back around him this time. We see mild victories here and there, but it's not the complete overhaul we were expecting" (Ari Herstand quoted in Freeland 2011). Will.i.am who was, as has been stated before, an avid supporter criticized President Obama and changed the lyrics to the Black Eyed Peas hit 'Where Is The Love?' when performing at the Super Bowl in 2011. There he rapped: "In America we need to get things straight. Obama, let's get these kids educated. Create jobs so the country stays stimulated" (will.i.am. quoted in Hornick 2011).

Even though Obama has received a great deal of criticism it seems that he still has a lot of support. It has to be considered that Obama came into power at a time when the economy was in ruins and the US were fighting two expensive wars. Obama responds to his critics: "I came in and had to prevent a Great Depression, restore the financial system so that it functions, and manage two wars, at least in terms of combat operators. We passed historic health care legislation, historic financial regulatory reform and a huge number of legislative victories that people don't even notice." (Barack Obama quoted in Wenner 2010, 39).

Obama is getting ready for re-election this year. It seems that although the hype, that surrounded him during his first elections has gone down, he still has a considerable amount of

support from celebrities such as Oprah, Jay-Z, Diddy and Beyoncé who have declared their support for Obama (CNN Wire Staff 2012; Kaufman 2012). It would seem that Obama still has some of his 'cool' around him although it has faded substantially. For his re-election campaign Obama has compiled a wish list including 190 notable names that his campaign wishes to see as surrogates and activists for the President. Amongst these names are a number of stars that were very vocal supporters in the 2008 election, such as actors Tom Hanks, Sarah Jessica Parker, Eva Longoria and of course Jay-Z and Oprah. Although not all of them have signed off, they are likely to support Obama in the 2012 elections (The Huffington Post 2012). Obama's connection to the celebrities listed above demonstrate that Obama can arguably be called a celebrity politician and though the hype around Obama has gone down, it can be argued that he is still a celebrity politician as will be discussed in the subsequent chapter. Only time will tell if Obama will go down the same path as Blair, slowly transforming into a regular politician.

5 Discussion: Blair and Obama – Celebrities or Politicians?

According to postmodern thinking the two separate spheres of politics and entertainment are merging and the difference between them is becoming indistinguishable to a certain extent. It can be argued that it is vital for politicians to develop creative strategies of media engagement to gain political success in contemporary politics. It has been stated that the media requires news to be entertaining and has therefore, in many ways, transformed the nature and shape of contemporary politics. This has produced a demand for politicians to perform in short sound bites, participate in photo-opportunities and design media events. In this way politicians maximize their media exposure and also minimize scrutiny on their policies and action (Muir 2005, 56). It is possible to argue that the changing element of contemporary media has created the concept ‘celebrity politician’.

As was previously discussed, John Street splits celebrity politicians into two categories. The first category is established celebrities that enter into the world of politics, such as Arnold Schwarzenegger. The latter category, and the one that has been the main focus of this dissertation, is politicians who enter into the world of celebrity, such as Tony Blair and Barack Obama. As stated in the introduction, the purpose of this dissertation was to explore the increasingly prominent role of popular culture and celebrity politicians in contemporary politics, focusing on the examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama. As the analysis in this dissertation has demonstrated the celebrity politician is a real phenomenon and comparing the examples of Blair and Obama, it would seem that celebrity politicians are becoming increasingly prominent.

As was previously illustrated, John Street’s latter categorization of a celebrity politician is an elected politician or a nominated candidate who uses his connection to celebrities to enhance his image and help him get his message across (Street 2004, 437). Street lists a variety of techniques that politicians use to associate themselves with celebrities. It can be contended that both Blair and Obama have utilized these techniques as was illustrated in chapters 3 and 4. The first technique is an association with celebrities through various photo-opportunities where a link is staged between the celebrity and politician. Blair used this technique often and an example of this is the photograph of Blair and Noel Gallagher toasting

in champagne in Downing Street. There are also countless examples of Obama's use of photo opportunities such as his high profile meeting with Ludacris in 2006. The second technique is the use of non-traditional platforms to promote the politician and this has been a popular mechanism for both Blair and Obama. Examples of this would be Blair showing up at the *Q Awards* or Obama dancing the 'cool dance' on *The Ellen Show*. The third and final technique is the adoption of the techniques and expertise of those who market celebrities. It can be argued that Blair and Obama have both relied heavily on consultants or 'spin doctors'. Alistair Campbell, who was Blair's Chief Press Secretary, can be largely credited for the creation of Blair's common man appeal. The same can be said for Reggie Love, Obama's personal aide, who made sure that Obama was 'in touch', loading his iPod with Jay-Z and teaching him the 'fist bump'.

Since the media often produces politics as 'boring' it can be argued that it seeks out politicians who present human faces, are younger, cooler, sexier, more colorful or less guarded than the usual politician. This places a value on a politician who signals a visible difference, someone who can be produced or framed in the media as an exceptional candidate that breaks through barriers (Muir 2005, 58-59). It can be argued that both Blair and Obama were the product of this. When Blair came to power, one can state that he attempted to be seen as young, cool and much more colorful than regular politicians. He was less guarded than the usual politician and portrayed as a family man who loved rock music. The same can be argued for the example of Obama. He came on the horizon as a superstar. Like Blair, he attempted to be viewed as cool, young and more interesting personally than the average politician. He was also a family man who often stated his love for music. It can therefore be argued that they were both framed as exceptional candidates. The appeal of Tony Blair and Barack Obama garnered them a celebrity status as previously illustrated. People were interested in their personalities, not just their policies.

Another similarity between Blair and Obama was their popularity among young people. As has been stated before, the role of political culture is generally speaking most apparent in the political behavior of young people and many of them use different forms of popular culture to express and understand their relationship with politics (Scott et al. 2011, 502). Therefore it can be argued that Blair and Obama's use of popular culture allowed them to connect with a younger audience. Popular music can be seen to help young people relate to public issues, which are discussed in popular music, in their own lives (Scott et al. 2011, 509). It can be stated that Blair and Obama used the power of popular music to connect to their voters. Blair

made the arguably politically ‘smart decision’ to align himself with Britpop artists, who were at the time, at the height of their success. Blair sought out the support of these artist and invited Damon Albarn, lead singer of Blur, to discuss how Albarn might assist the Labour Party to appeal to the youth. A similar case can be made for Obama who, although informally, aligned himself with some hip-hop artists. Obama had a similar meeting where he discussed with Ludacris the ways to empower the youth. It can be reasoned that their decision to align with artists of these movements was no coincidence. As was previously discussed, both Britpop and hip-hop address certain issues in the society. Britpop referred to a specific ‘Englishness’ that many felt had been lost in the Thatcher years. Blair attempted to revive that ‘Englishness’ in politics with his alignment with Britpop and ‘Cool Britannia’. Hip-hop artists have often addressed issues of poverty and discrimination in their lyrics and mending these issues were some of Obama’s most prominent campaign promises.

Blair and Obama have received criticism for their celebrity status. As was discussed in chapter 4, Obama has received more criticism for his celebrity status than Blair, such as the McCain advertisement demonstrated. Celebrity politicians have been accused of impoverishing the relationship between the representative and the represented, by marginalizing political issues in favor of irrelevant gestures and superficial appearances. Many have criticized celebrity politicians, such as Blair and Obama, for privileging style over substance stating that they threaten the principles of representative democracy (Street 2004, 440). It can be argued that Blair’s love of rock music and the fact that Obama has Jay-Z on his iPod does not reflect their leadership abilities, but it makes them interesting and intriguing. Many of their critics would argue that they owe their leadership and political success to their personalities rather than policy issues and that undermines one of the core pillars of democracy. Representatives should be selected based on merit, not their personality.

As was demonstrated in chapters 3 and 4, both Blair and Obama lost a considerable amount of their supporters after they were elected. Britpop artists quickly abandoned Blair after he was elected and some even publicly condemned him such as the singer of Pulp, Jarvis Cocker. Blair’s supporters were increasingly aware of the fact that Blair was not the ‘cool politician’ that they had hoped for. Blair’s implementation of student tuition fees made him extremely unpopular among young people, who had once been some of his most avid supporters. Blair’s unpopular decision to enter the war in Iraq seemed to put the final nail in Blair’s celebrity coffin and after years in office he had become a ‘typical politician’. It can be contended that his unpopular decisions drove his celebrity supporters away, no longer making

him a celebrity politician based on Street's categorization. It can be argued that Obama also lost some of his supporters after he was elected. Many Hollywood stars, which had been prominent supporters of Obama, began to criticize him for his work in office. Hollywood actor Matt Damon, who was once an avid supporter, criticized Obama harshly stating that the president had no balls. It is possible to state that 'the change' Blair and Obama promised did not happen, at least not as fast as people wanted, and that left them open for criticism. The loss of support from the 'cool' celebrities and the young popular culture crowd is perhaps understandable. Elected politicians must sometimes make unpopular decisions and one can argue that it is difficult to be fun and cool when implementing tough policies and going to war.

As has been demonstrated, Obama and Blair have followed a similar path. Both came on the horizon with hope, promising change from the fusty old politics that dominated their countries. It can be reasoned that Blair and Obama were similar characters, cool and young family men who had an understanding of popular culture and that this fact allowed them to transform into celebrity politicians. People were interested in them personally, not just their politics, and the media fed on their celebrity persona. When examining the examples of Blair and Obama it can be argued that celebrity politicians are becoming increasingly prominent. While Blair received support from a few celebrities, noticeably Britpop artists, most celebrities kept out of the politics. However, Obama received an unprecedented amount of celebrity support, ranging from hip-hop artists to talk show hosts.

The connection between Blair and Britpop was a superficial one. It did not run deeper than a handshake here and there and various photo-opportunities and Britpop artists were quick to abandon New Labour when things went sour as was discussed in chapter 3. It can be argued that Obama's connection to hip-hop was a much deeper one. It was not just handshakes and photo-ops. Many hip-hop artists have referenced Obama in their songs such as Common, will.i.am and more. Hip-hop artists have not been as quick to abandon Obama as Britpop artists were with Blair and while some hip-hop artists have criticized Obama, the President still has a great deal of support from the hip-hop community.

It would therefore seem that the celebrity support for Obama was far greater than for Blair. When examining the research for this analysis there was much more information on Obama's celebrity persona than Blair's. This can be contributed to the rising status of the Internet as a medium following Blair's Premiership. Social media was an important part of Obama's popularity and it did not exist during Blair's candidacy. Obama's huge popularity can be in

many ways contributed to his clever use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, which allowed people to connect to him directly around the world. He now has over 26 million followers on Facebook compared to Blair who has just over 26 thousand followers (Facebook, Barack Obama; Facebook, Tony Blair). It can be reasoned that Obama was coming to terms with the contemporary consumer culture by attempting to personalize his leadership and adapting his political communication strategy through the evolving media as was demonstrated in chapter 2 (Marsh et al. 2010, 325).

The analysis of Blair and Obama demonstrates that Obama is much more of a celebrity politician than Blair. It can be argued that Obama can be viewed as a ‘celebrity’ without the traditional political label such as the example of his own category on the celebrity gossip site *perezhilton.com* illustrates. As was discussed in chapter 2, the word ‘celebrity’ refers to those people who, via mass media enjoy a greater presence and wider scope of activity and agency than those who make up the rest of the population (Marshall 1997, ix). It is possible to state that Obama enjoys a greater presence than the general public and most politicians. It can also be contended that Obama’s celebrity status is higher than Blair’s. While Blair’s celebrity persona quickly faded, Obama is still considered a celebrity even though much of the hype around him has gone down. Blair simply became a traditional politician, while Obama is still riding the celebrity wave to a certain extent. When examining these two politicians it is important to keep in mind that Obama is still in power and only time will tell if he will end up like Blair, a regular, ‘boring’ politician.

Even though the examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama would seem to demonstrate that the celebrity politician is a reality and becoming increasingly prominent, it is important not to generalize with regard to this topic. It is necessary to understand that the United Kingdom and the United States have very different cultures. It has been argued that the celebrity concept is a product of American culture and society and has spread to other societies (Hollander 2010, 389). It would therefore be understandable that ‘celebrity worship’ in the United States is much more apparent than elsewhere, thus making Obama a greater celebrity than Blair.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that, while the examples of Blair and Obama point to an increasingly prominent role of the celebrity politician, the evolution is not strictly linear. If that were the case, Gordon Brown, Blair’s successor would have been a celebrity politician as well. However that was not the case as Brown kept most of his personal life private and away from the limelight. It can therefore be argued that the creation of a celebrity politician is

dependent on the personality of the leader and his communication strategies (Helms 2012, 7). As can be observed generally, many politicians tend to go the same way as Brown, keeping their personal life separate from their politics.

It can be stated that although the examples of Blair and Obama point to an increasing prominence of celebrity politicians, it is necessary to examine examples of other politicians in more countries to draw any real conclusion on the issue. There are of course other politicians who have ventured in the world of celebrity. David Cameron, the current Prime Minister of the UK has portrayed a similar 'common persona', whether it is throwing snowballs and joking with a TV presenter or talking to voters while washing up the dishes at his kitchen sink. It can be debated that Cameron works hard in portraying a 'common persona' (Yates 2010, 286). As was discussed, the term celebrity politician is not a new phenomenon, such as the example of Ronald Reagan illustrated. However, it can be argued that even though other politicians have ventured into the world of politics few have been as prominent as Tony Blair and Barack Obama.

6 Conclusion

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine the increasingly prominent role of popular culture and celebrity politicians in contemporary politics, focusing on politicians who use popular culture as a mechanism to gain popularity. As discussed in the dissertation, politicians' use of popular culture is increasing. It can be argued that it is important to examine the concept of the 'celebrity politician' further in order to understand leadership and democracy in the contemporary globalized world. In this dissertation, an original contribution to the academic discussion on celebrity politicians was made by comparing the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and current U.S. President Barack Obama. It has been stated that Blair and Obama's use of popular culture transformed them into celebrity politicians. While they are both celebrity politicians it has been contended here that Obama has surpassed Blair in many aspects, and he has been transformed into an even bigger 'celebrity'.

As illustrated, postmodernism is essential to the analysis of Blair and Obama since celebrity politicians can be viewed as a postmodern phenomenon. By utilizing the postmodern framework it was demonstrated that Tony Blair could be categorized as a celebrity politician as the example of his connection to Britpop exemplified. It was furthermore established that Obama also fits the category of a celebrity politician, as the examples of his connection to hip-hop and other celebrities proved. It was reasoned that the examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama, have confirmed the validity of the concept celebrity politicians. The comparison of the examples of Blair and Obama demonstrated that celebrity politicians have an increasingly prominent role in the contemporary globalized world.

However, it is not possible to reach a final conclusion on the evolution of the celebrity politician simply with the two examples of Tony Blair and Barack Obama. As was stated in the discussions, it is important to realize that most politicians have not followed the celebrity path. It is also important to consider that Blair and Obama are not a part of some linear progression but rather specific examples of celebrity politicians. Gordon Brown, Blair's successor, did for example not follow the celebrity path of his predecessor. In order to construct a plausible theory on the progression of the celebrity politician it is important to examine the examples of more celebrity politicians and consider the ones who are not

celebrities. This was not possible in this dissertation. While a great deal of material has been published about celebrity politicians, empirical evidence has been lacking. For future examinations of the subject of celebrity politicians more empirical evidence is needed.

While the examples of Barack Obama and Tony Blair may not fully cover the status of celebrity politicians in the contemporary globalized world, it can be argued that these examples demonstrate how influential celebrity politicians can become. Blair and Obama have demonstrated that celebrity politicians are relevant in today's political discourse and their influence cannot be ignored. The examples of Blair and Obama have also demonstrated that it is difficult for politicians to maintain their celebrity status once in office. It is difficult to compare a politician who is no longer in office and an incumbent and it would be interesting to compare these two politicians again, once Obama has left office. It will be exciting to examine how Obama will run his re-election campaign this fall, and to see whether his status as a celebrity politician will play as large a role as it did in the 2008 elections.

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