

Politics of Celebrity: The Case of Donald Trump

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As the G.O.P. National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, is under way, people keep asking: How in the world was Donald Trump able to win the Republican presidential nomination? What is *wrong* with Americans that opinion polls show him not far behind an experienced professional politician like Hillary Clinton? Why would Americans support an obviously unqualified candidate whose major campaign strategy has consisted of bullying his competitors as well as slandering Latinos, Muslims, and some women?

Throughout the previous talks of our lecture series, we have already heard some explanations for the rise of Donald Trump. Many commentators explain Trump’s success in the context of a broader rise of Western populism that channels grievances over economic deprivation and the effects of globalization. As evidence they cite parties as diverse as Syriza in Greece, the AfD in Germany, the Front National in France or UKIP in Great Britain, as well as the recent Brexit vote. Similarly to the Brexit campaign’s promise of less immigration and higher health care spending, we have learned from Andreas Falke’s talk in May that Trump combines nods to left-leaning social policies (i.e., on social security, trade) with right-wing positions dabbling in xenophobia and nativism. Yet, we also agree with Christopher Newfield who emphasized last week that we need to take the working-class and middle-class anxieties very seriously and not simply dismiss as populist everything that runs counter to the neoliberal consensus. But if we retain the label of populism for Trump, this has as much to do with his apparent disinterest in and ignorance of policy details as well as his use of his own celebrity persona in his election campaign. It is this latter aspect on which we focus today and which, we argue, explains much of his electoral success. Reminiscent of *Playboy* magazine’s tagline and keeping in mind that Trump adorned the magazine’s cover in 1990, it is not too far-fetched to call him a political “playboy” who provides excellent “entertainment,” particularly

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“for men.” In short, we claim that although Trump’s popularity may thrive on his nativist populism, it is his mastery of celebrity politics and his own reformulation of politics as reality TV entertainment that made his rise possible in the first place. Trump’s message and persona undoubtedly fit much better with new forms of communication in a fundamentally changed media environment.

Let’s begin by taking a brief look at Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again.” It clearly appeals to the white male anxieties we have pointed to, insofar as the slogan nostalgically projects a time of economic stability and uncontested superpower status before America lost its way. As we have already learned from Torben Lütjen’s talk a few weeks ago, Trump’s slogan is also an appropriation of Ronald Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign motto. It therefore also recalls a model of a politician Trump aspires to: a former celebrity whose rise in US politics changed the course of conservatism and whose tough talk, at least in conservative accounts, brought America’s enemies down to their knees.

That a former movie star like Ronald Reagan could ascend to the presidency similarly baffled many observers at the time. But at least Reagan had long been active in California politics and served as governor. Certainly, Trump draws on Reagan’s realization that “politics is just like show business” (Reagan qtd. in Postman 128), but his complete inexperience in traditional party politics takes Reagan’s insight to its extreme conclusion. In order to understand Trump’s success, we are therefore going to delineate, first, the rise and function of celebrity culture in US society, and second, its interrelation with and impact on politics. Following that we will, third, explain how concepts of performance and performativity come to bear on Trump’s media appearances and his appropriation of reality TV formats for his election campaign. Last but not least, we will tell you who is going to win the election, and will provide a brief outlook on what Trump’s campaign might mean for the future of US politics.

The rise of celebrity culture in the US and the politics of celebrity

When we call Trump a celebrity, we don’t use this term pejoratively as is often done, but rather in the way it has come to be used by scholars working on stardom and celebrity culture. The film industry, television, sports, the business world, politics, or even academia all create their own variety of fame. Yet it is important to note that, as Graeme Turner explains, “the celebrity’s fame does not necessarily depend on the position or achievements that gave them their prominence in the first place” (3). Their celebrity status may rather consist in public

attention to their private than their professional lives (3). Celebrities are well-known for their well-knownness (cf. Boorstin 58), and Trump is a prime example. Taking over and expanding his father's real estate development company, Trump was never solely interested in building a highly profitable business. Instead, he sought notoriety and managed to turn his name into a gold-plated brand that adorns everything from casinos to universities, from steaks to skyscrapers. And he took to associating with a particular set of society. Settling in Manhattan after college, Trump "watched orgies in the celebrity quarters at Studio 54," as his biographer Michael D'Antonio writes (xviii), and learned that those "who were willing to violate old-fashioned notions of decency benefited" (xix). Home stories featuring opulent displays of luxury alternated with scandals voraciously followed by the yellow press throughout the years.

As Trump always understood, celebrity is a result of media representation, particularly the kind that crosses the boundary between the celebrity's public role and the details of their private lives. Celebrity status rests less on personal achievement or great character and more on a particular personality (Boorstin, cf. Turner 5), a supposedly unique set of character traits and notorious life stories. There has always been a complaint that the whole business is ruled by inauthenticity, pure image construction, and simulation rather than substance. It's more productive, however, to understand celebrities as "texts" and try to understand their production and consumption, their social functions and meanings. As Graeme Turner puts it,

celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function ...

Increasingly, ... it is implicated in debates about how identities are constructed in contemporary cultures, and about how the individual self is culturally defined. (10)

In the figure of the celebrity, cultural meanings are negotiated and organized. One of the most important functions of the contemporary celebrity is that they become a substitute for more direct social relations; the "parasocial interaction" between fan and celebrity allows for a new, mediated community revolving around the celebrity's actions and views. Celebrities even take on a religious function when they provide models for a spiritual experience of unity, ecstasy, even transcendence (Rojek 121). But because the audience's desires for celebrities are contradictory, celebrity remains an inherently unstable category. Turner names a few options: "celebrities are extraordinary or they are 'just like us'; they deserve their success or they 'just got lucky'; they are objects of desire and emulation, or they are provocations for derision and

contempt; they are genuine down-to-earth people or they are complete phonies” (Turner 9). And, very importantly, according to Karen Sternheimer, celebrity is a “unique manifestation of our sense of American social mobility: they provide the illusion that material wealth is possible for anyone.” Consequently, “the fluctuating nature of celebrity culture reflects and reveals the so-called American Dream itself” (xiii).

Celebrities do indeed have a crucial social function, and the real estate mogul Trump has long fulfilled the role of demonstrating that the rise to wealth does not need to be preconditioned by good taste or manners. Despite his privileged background, Trump has always styled himself as the brutish *nouveau riche*, a Gatsby figure of the late 20th century with parties that are always too big and loud, with an appearance that appears to be too shrill. Trump’s anti-intellectualism and peddling of conspiracy theories has long served for him to cultivate a mediated fan community deeply distrustful of the elite he has always been a part of. Since the 1990s, Trump has tried to turn his celebrity status into political capital. He has repeatedly and publicly weighed a run for political office, fully cognizant of its risks and potential. In 2000, he begins an article in *Gear* magazine as follows:

I have been amazed by the way the media has handled the possibility of a Trump candidacy. Many people find it outlandish that someone from outside professional politics should seek the American presidency. [...] There is much wailing among pundits that we have become a celebrity culture in which athletes, movie stars, and businessmen are considered for public office. (Trump, “Send a billionaire to the White House?”)

In 2000 as well as in 2016, Trump presents himself as a successful businessman and dealmaker who is going to break the gridlock in Washington, a straight talker and renegotiator of trade agreements that have “ripped off” America. “An outsider can shine some light into the smoke-filled back rooms of conventional politics,” Trump writes, and he promises to bring “original thinking” to the White House, and even an “intellectual and spiritual wildness.” He concludes, “A straight-talking citizen-politician – like me – can have a huge impact” (ibid.).

As Trump notes in this article, there is indeed much resistance to what has been called “celebrity politics.” According to the political scientist John Street, the celebrity politician comes in different forms: The first kind capitalizes on his or her background in entertainment or the sports industry to get elected. Another form of celebrity politics is the use of popular

culture to promote a politician's agenda – think of Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on the Arsenio Hall show, Guido Westerwelle visiting the Big Brother container, or countless politicians attending comedy shows. Yet another kind is the celebrity who promotes a political agenda without actually seeking office – think of Bob Geldof's Band Aid project against the Ethiopian famine in the 1980s or Lady Gaga campaigning for transgender rights. Moving from the latter kind to the first one, Trump checks all boxes of celebrity politics – and he seems to confirm all the reasons why critics abhor celebrity politics: they fear a trivialization of politics and the ignorance of the celebrity. The assumption is that to mix politics with popular culture is a degraded form of populism, where packaging substitutes for serious policy; cosmetics replace ideology; style replaces the argument; media management replaces political skill. Street summarizes that for their critics, celebrity politicians “threaten the principles of representative democracy either because they privilege style and appearance over substance, or because they marginalize relevant expertise” (440).

Yet, Street presents powerful arguments that this view is far too simplistic. First, popular artists have always interfered in political matters, and politicians have always made use of popular culture to promote their image and market their agenda – only the forms of political communication and genres of popular culture keep changing. Second, and more importantly, the critique of celebrity politics often depends on a narrow understanding of political representation: in these accounts, political representation means that a skilled representative “acts for” and “acts out” the will of the people. Street, however, suggests a concept of representation that includes the politician's creative performance to “resemble or mirror” the represented (442). Arguing that representation “has to be understood as both a political process and a cultural performance” (443), Street stresses the aesthetic and performative dimensions of representation. Just as representation in the arts and literature does not simply reproduce reality but organizes knowledge about it, political representation recreates political reality in ever new and original ways. Political power is hence a product of style and creativity. According to Frank Ankersmit, to find the most suitable political style for the electorate is an essentially creative endeavor, “in the sense that there exists no style in the electorate that is quietly waiting to be copied” (Ankersmit 54). John Street then argues that celebrity politics is not so much “a betrayal of the proper principles of democratic representation, but ... an extension of them.” Just like performers in general, politicians embody the sentiments of their audience and establish an affective relationship. Street concludes that because performance lies at the heart of political representation, all politicians

are celebrity politicians, “only some are more convincing, more ‘authentic’ performers than others” (447).

Hence, Hillary Clinton’s image of a hard-working, competent and caring political pro is as much a finely modulated “appearance” as Trump’s combative, straight-talking bully persona. The two candidates have simply adopted very different styles they think suits the political moment and its media environment. Trump has repeatedly drawn attention to the record number of votes he has received in the Republican primaries. He therefore has a pretty good case when he claims to bring back people to the polls who have long shunned the political process. And he thus exemplifies Street’s argument that celebrity politics can indeed be used to stimulate political participation and to represent the interests of those who have formerly felt unrepresented.

Trump’s celebrity and reality TV campaigning

Whatever you may think of him politically, in the 2016 Republican primaries and the presidential election campaign, Donald Trump has emerged as one of the more convincing, more ‘authentic’ performers. This impression of authenticity is, of course, only an effect that ironically has all to do with Trump’s long experience in entertainment, show business and reality TV. In 1970, he started out by producing a Broadway show. In 1983, he bought a professional American football team, the New Jersey Generals. At his Atlantic City casinos, he staged championship boxing matches and hosted the World Wrestling Entertainment’s annual *WrestleMania* events. In one particularly striking episode in 2007, Trump challenged WWE’s chief executive Vince McMahon to a match in *WrestleMania*. Though it was only their representatives that ended up fighting against each other, the audience was also treated to Trump apparently tackling and punching McMahon in the head. With Team Trump winning, Trump received the agreed prize of the fight: to humiliate his opponent by publicly shaving McMahon’s head. Through his various business ownerships, he also came to own the Miss Universe and Miss USA beauty pageants, which he remodeled to include “contestants in smaller bathing suits and higher heels, as he was to put it later” (Silverman and Bond).

Trump’s real breakthrough with a mass audience, however, came when he accepted to host NBC’s reality TV show *The Apprentice* in 2003 – a run-away success, which regularly drew up to 30 million viewers. At the heart of the “Trump aesthetic” across all these entertainment endeavors, Gary Silverman and Shannon Bond write in the *Financial Times*, lies ruthless

conflict: “between beauty queens, fighters, business rivals and whoever happens to offend Mr. Trump. His is a dog-eat-dog world where men are distinguished by their strength and women by their beauty.”

Finally, Trump has successfully channeled this world view, his reality TV aesthetics to his political campaign: Think of his infamous Tweets and name-calling with which he degrades and humiliates his opponents; think of the free-associating, rambling campaign speeches with bad grammar and very limited vocabulary worthy of any poorly educated Big Brother inhabitant; think of his performance that politics is indeed a beauty contest – think of his comment on Carly Fiorina: “Look at that *face*, would anyone vote for that?” or his comments about Marco Rubio’s sweating; his insistence that he has “beautiful” and “strong” and “big” hands and whatnot; think of how just last Wednesday, while he was campaigning with Mike Pence in Indiana, he had let two other running mate finalists fly in, Newt Gingrich and Senator Jeff Sessions, as if it was the last episode of a television dating show, in which a final test prompts the bachelor’s decision (cf. Burns and Haberman, “Donald Trump”). To be sure, nothing about reality TV is authentic; it creates an artificially dramatic form of reality. But apart from its entertainment factor, the question remains what kind of effects Trump’s words and his brand of reality and entertainment politics may have.

Performance and the effects of words

On July 12, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg said that Donald Trump was “a faker,” that he had “an ego,” that he was treated too gently by the press, and that he said “whatever comes into his mind at the moment” (Shear and Haberman). As was to be expected, Trump quickly retaliated and claimed that this was a “disgrace to the court” and that Ginsburg should “apologize to the court.” And for once, the Donald had a case in point. Ginsburg, generally known as straightforward and tough, did apologize and “admitted that she had made a mistake” (Shear). The weight of words and the work words do, this incident demonstrates, are situated. What words can do depends on a broad spectrum of factors, among them the setting: public or private, specific forms of mediation, and the time frame in which a statement is made. It is, of course, extremely ironical that it was the grand master of inappropriateness, Donald J. Trump, who successfully reminded Ginsburg that her comments collide with her public position.

Five weeks ago, Sabine Sielke told us in her talk about the emergence of gender through repeated performance. In the following we will join this focus on performance and performativity, and, like Sabine, will draw on Judith Butler – without any doubt, a celebrity in her own right. Language, words, Butler has argued for quite some time now, have various forms of agency. Words act in different ways, in ways that may have little to do with the actual intention of the speaker. Roughly, in her work on gender and later in her work on the effects of public speech, Butler distinguishes between two kinds of speech acts – and speech acts, we should add here, are utterances that want to have a specific function and are thus not simply descriptive statements. The first kind of speech acts are those that “in saying do what they say, and do it in the moment of that saying” (*Excitable Speech* 3) and the second kind are those that do not at the same time do what they say, but still have effects, albeit more diffuse ones. In the terminology of J. L. Austin, on whom Butler relies, the first kind of speech acts, the ones that simultaneously do what they say, would be “illocutionary” speech acts. Such acts are public. They are highly ritualized, tend to be ceremonial and rely on institutionalized authority. A famous example, and we’re going back to gender here, would be the doctor or the midwife saying of a newborn child “It’s a girl,” thereby literally “girling” the newborn (cf., e.g., *Bodies that Matter* 7, 232). Most speech acts, most words that are being uttered in a functional context, however, do not do exactly what they say. Yet, as pointed out above, they still have effects. And these effects depend on a multitude of factors. It is the effects of words in a context of celebrity politics that we’ll reflect on in the following part of our presentation.

Trump, like anybody running for office, does need his words to have an effect on his audience. After all, he wants to gain the support of voters. And clearly, his celebrity status creates high visibility for his appearances and generates impact. At the same time, Trump’s infamous habit of taking back what he just said or of saying something that fully contradicts earlier ‘statements’ tends to complicate possible effects. A paradoxical situation emerges. Voters’ support is wanted qua effect of announcements, yet accountability for one’s speech is circumvented or denied. However, even if the effects of utterances may be destabilized, it is not up to the speaker to fully undo them. They may remain ‘effective’ in diffuse ways. We are all aware of the highly racialized aggression against protesters during and after Trump’s speeches. And while we do *not* suggest a linear cause-and-effect relation, Trump’s rhetoric does insert itself in brutally exclusionary narratives that circulate. It affirms them, provides impulses, and seems to be willing to deal with concrete physical effects. If people get beaten up, so be it. Should anybody get sued, money for lawyers will be provided.

There is another aspect affecting and complicating the agency of words that is highly relevant for our case. Butler argues that it may be the “act-like character” of certain utterances (*Excitable Speech* 72) and the very theatricality, the hyperbolic *stagedness* of some speech acts that interferes with their effects, that may weaken these effects or that makes them even more unpredictable. Undoubtedly, many of Trump’s performances are hyperbolically staged, are highly theatrical. And unlike liberal opponents and commentators who argue that he got the facts all wrong, or that he lies, many of his fans are not only aware of but seem to savor his hyperbolism. With the two examples we’ve chosen, we’ll try to negotiate interrelations of setting, theatricality, and performative effects.

Our first example is taken from Trump’s appearance at *The Tonight Show* on September 11, 2015, starring Jimmy Fallon as Donald Trump and Donald Trump as Donald Trump.

“Donald Trump Interviews Himself In the Mirror”:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c2DgwPG7mAA>

Quite evidently, this is a feast for cultural and media studies. Our reading will need to be highly eclectic. Much more can and should be said. The entire *mise-en-scène* clearly puns on the accusation of extreme narcissism, which Trump, public diagnosis has it, is truly suffering from. (Hair is of course also of utmost importance, but won’t be our concern today.) Now, the mirror Trump’s impersonator is looking at is not an actual mirror, but instead the figure of the impersonated himself. This also means that the actual Trump is looking at his doubled self, at his slightly modified likeness so to speak. We do have a double mirroring, and the two Trumps not only get to look at, but they also get to talk to each other. After a while it is no longer quite clear who is mimicking whom. (Actually, we have multiple mirrorings: There are several oil Trumps hanging on the wall, projecting a stern gaze at the two talking Trumps below.)

The clip, we suggest, has two climaxes: The first one is the theatrical claim that the jobs our candidate keeps promising to create will just happen. They will be brought forth, it is insinuated, by the grand master’s magic touch. The second climax is the answer to the question of how he, the impersonated, wants to build the much-promised wall between the US and Mexico. Clearly, the impersonator’s facial expression and body language suggest that this promise is an utter, a dangerous absurdity. And here it is Donald Trump, the entertainer, who fully captures the complex layers of reversal the scene enacts. He does not speak of a *we* – which Fallon uses and puns on as *pluralis majestatis* – instead Trump opts for the following:

Since *I* and *you* have blended into each other, and a quasi-identity has emerged, the *you* who asks the question is actually directing it at himself, and should be ready to provide the answer. Donald Trump the candidate has, he himself seems to unabashedly suggest, no answer to that question. The promise to build a wall and make Mexico pay was (perhaps) not to be read literally in the first place. Arguably, this scene demonstrates that staging and hyperbolic theatricality and, especially, comedy do complicated things to the effects of words. We suggest that the utterances here only function in the specific generic setting and have rather few if any consequences beyond the show. Undoubtedly, Trump's campaign lends itself particularly well to mirroring through comedy. At the same time, it enacts an institutionalized political ritual that qua setting *is* not comedy. If the weight of words uttered on the campaign trail very much depends on practices and strategies of reading and identification, their effects, we want to argue, may easily escape control.

Now the question whether parodies actually help Trump is an important one. Can you parody a man whose trademark is that he keeps imitating himself? We will not go into this question here, but the many Trump parodies undoubtedly keep feeding into the celebrity status of the candidate.

Before we continue with a second example though, we would like to engage in a short excursus and comment on the immense importance of entertainment shows and of comedy for the US political landscape. In an essay titled "Performing Ordinary," Sue Collins provides an extensive discussion of why this is so. Collins lists three interconnected facets that shape a politician's and a candidate's self-presentation on such shows:

- 1) The specific space of such celebrity formats is supposed to allow for the "real," the authentic self to show itself through what Collins calls "mediated intimacy." (And if this sounds like a paradox, it is one. But it works nonetheless. In the highly choreographed setting of a TV show the real, the authentic self supposedly emerges for all the world to see. While the status of celebrity implies the extra-ordinary, politicians are at the same time expected to perform ordinariness.)
- 2) Politicians position themselves as public servants who represent, that is, speak for, the electorate.
- 3) The performance on entertainment shows acts as an obscuring of class divides; politicians are supposed to come across as being closely affiliated with those for whom they speak or want to speak (112).

Collins' arguments can be fully applied to Hillary Clinton's campaign. The "mediated intimacy" of TV shows where Clinton has made numerous appearances tends to allow a pointedly relaxed self "to come out." For example, in one of her appearances at Fallon's show, Clinton demonstratively tried to prove that **her** hair, unlike the hair on Donald Trump's head, is her own. She tells Fallon to actually pull on it. And he does so, quite resolutely, exclaiming: "It is real" ("Hillary Clinton Impersonates Donald Trump"). Clinton also very much presents herself as a public servant who speaks for the electorate, and, finally, she demonstratively tries to connect to those who are not of her class, but whom she wants to convince that she truly represents them.

Yet Collins's points only apply in very restricted ways to Trump's performances. His "real" self emerges as one that indulges in acting/performing. And by no stretch of the imagination does he present himself as a public servant. No, he is no servant to the public, he is a master of ceremonies and thrives in presenting the persona of the authoritarian, the cutthroat entrepreneur. The desired affiliation across class lines, however, is indeed very much part of Trump's strategies. Always emphasizing his richness, he manages to connect with an entire spectrum of voters that includes a large blue-collar constituency. He does so last not least by his very bluntness, his daring to defy any etiquette. And this he sells as the transgressiveness of the celebrity ruffian who is at the same time an ordinary macho. He performs "ordinary," as Collins puts it, and it also makes him, to speak with John Street, "resemble" the people. Performance as resemblance invites identification. It increases the effects of words.

A point that Collins does not stress so much is that in a US political landscape, succeeding as a candidate also means to at least for the time of the show convincingly handle irony, parody, satire, the hyperbolic. She or he who is not willing to demonstrate that she or he can participate in an act of comedy is at a big disadvantage. Among the many differences between American and German political culture, this strikes us as quite important.

Our second example is a video that was uploaded on Trump's Facebook account on July 8, 2016, and was also released to TV networks:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OD6Kb2S3Exk>

The video was recorded at Trump's office in Trump Tower. The still presumptive candidate responds to the killing of five policemen in Dallas. Undoubtedly, the performance with Fallon and the speech delivered on this video could not be more different. Glued to the teleprompter, with an almost expressionless, but strained face and an immobile body, Trump does not "wing

it,” he does not even partially improvise as he is known to do, but instead laboriously reads a fully scripted statement. And suddenly there is a strong emphasis on family, on the dividing line between civilization and chaos that can only be ensured by law enforcement. While safety and security have been salient issues throughout Trump’s campaign, two names are mentioned: Alton Sterling (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 6 July) and Philando Castile (Falcon Heights, Minn., 7 July). Wording the death of those who carried these names creates a weighty presence. And the surprised audience learns that a lot of work needs to be done – implication: to prevent such deaths. For once there is inclusion instead of exclusion. Indeed, the statement which is called “cautionary” by *The New York Times* (Burns and Haberman, “After Outbreaks”) leaves Trump’s usual racialized rhetoric by implicitly suggesting that Black lives are indeed unsafe. Finally, there is mentioning of “terrible poverty and violence” in which “many Americans” live. We get another form of inclusion that connects poverty not to committing violence, a time-proven strategy, but to suffering from violence. Media reactions clearly suggest that it was his advisors who convinced if not quasi-forced Trump to finally appear serious, reliable, accountable, empathetic – qualities he has mocked in many of his earlier performances. Undoubtedly, though, we also have a specific genre here: the candidate who so far refused to act presidential, delivers a quasi-presidential address, framed to provide his words with a lasting effect. He is speaking to **his** nation.

If the candidate manages to create a second persona, one that at least temporarily refrains from inserting words into the flaring talk of anger and aggression, that is, if two kinds of Trumpian rhetoric somehow manage to coexist on the campaign trail, Hillary Clinton will, we would like to argue, face a tough race. Trump’s performances of the last few days, however, suggest that the rambunctious show is going on. Words are catapulted into audiences again, and just how these – literally – speech acts will do their work, challenges explanations more than ever.

Conclusion: Why “The Donald” will prevail, no matter whether he wins

We will now tell you who is going to be elected President of the United States. As cultural studies scholars focusing on the US, we are much better equipped than traditional political scientists to tell you what to expect in an era when politics and TV shows have come to overlap. In her primary fight against Barack Obama in 2008, Hillary Clinton famously said that while you campaign in poetry, you govern in prose. Come 2016, the competition between

literary genres seems such a thing of the past. Or “Boring!,” as the Donald would say. This year’s reference would much rather be the rating success of different TV shows, and what a show we have seen so far. James Poniewozik writes in the *New York Times*, “Mr. Trump’s primary win was like having a niche hit on cable. [...] In programming terms, his campaign is nostalgia-based content — that thing you used to like, I’m gonna bring it back again! — married to a 21st-century distribution platform.” It’s like *WrestleMania* with its shrill but also very conservative staged drama. Although Hillary Clinton is a celebrity politician in her own right, her campaign has so far relied mostly on traditional election campaigning and seeks to remind people of the serious business the presidential election is. Poniewozik asks the billion-dollar question: “Do targeted media, demographic shifts, data and ground games still matter? Or has the celebrity-media complex upset the paradigm, as in 1960 when Richard Nixon sweated away his chances in a televised debate?” Whose style, as Street had argued, will Americans in 2016 see fit to represent them? Improv or scripted? Bullying outsider – with a few somber moments – or experienced insider? Apart from the actual political issues, the race between Trump and Clinton is, to speak with Poniewozik again, “a contest between two theories of the media and narratives of the culture.”

No, we will not tell you who will win. When we said we were going to tell you who was going to win the elections, we simply lied to draw your attention. We’ve tried to learn from Trump. But what we will venture to say is that what matters to voters more than a representation of competent and skillful “activity and acting for” is, to speak with John Street again, a form of representation that successfully performs “resemblance or mirroring” to the electorate (442). And this performance becomes particularly powerful when the celebrity politician claims to “champion the interests of the unrepresented.” Trump may thus aggressively represent what the nation’s elites have long tried to sublimate into a supposedly enlightened, rationality-based political process: not only the desire for success, wealth, and sexual adventures; not only the will to power, the fantasies of crushing a competitor or of dominating an opponent; but also the tendency to dismiss unwelcome facts; the exclusive gaze on the self, and yes, the loud return of racial resentment and xenophobic fears that have long been ruled out in American political rhetoric. Trump is indeed a master performer of these social scripts, his celebrity status *is* (the) text and (the) reflection of these scripts. In other words, even if Trump loses against Hillary Clinton, the issues that drive him and the media environments he thrives in will most probably be with us for the time to come.

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