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The Real Politicians of America: A New Reality Show

by STEPHEN R. GREENWALD

Campaigning began in earnest this week for New York's primary, just as season eight of "The Real Housewives of New York" debuted as well, one of television's top ranked reality shows. The episodes are sure to be full of brawling, fighting, back-stabbing, name calling, Twitter wars, gossip mongering, and "I'm better than the others." Do these plots sound familiar?

While it is likely that much of Donald Trump's support is an angry response by disaffected citizens, I believe there is a further important and powerful reason for bringing America to the brink of the possible elevation of a dangerously incompetent, amoral, xenophobic and delusional demagogue to the presidency; the dominance of entertainment modes of discourse in our politics, culture and society today; a dominance that has driven out, for much of the populace, traditional modes of civic and political discourse. This phenomenon, exemplified by the enormous crowds drawn to Trump's rallies; drawn, in their own words, not to hear reasoned dialogue on policies and issues, but by the entertainment value of Trump's extension of his reality television persona, grounded in insult, dismissal, belittling and one-man, strongman, decision making, into the political arena. The audiences are there to experience politics as a form of entertainment and to be part of the show. In supporting Trump his audiences are suspending disbelief, as we all do when immersed in viewing a performance.

Compounding this phenomenon is the shameless shilling of Trump by television broadcasters. The reason for this pandering is not difficult to discern; Trump draws "eyeballs", the only metric that counts for broadcasters. And even a cursory scan of Trump's appearances on news programs and talk shows demonstrates how his interviewers and commentators stoke Trump's provocative rhetoric of attack and insult. And why not? These broadcasters are also selling entertainment, and Trump, in the raw, is a proven entertainment commodity.

To better understand the Trump phenomenon and what it portends, we can turn to three cultural works: "Amusing Ourselves To Death", written by Neal Postman; the film, "A Face In The Crowd", directed by Elia Kazan, and the book "Life: The Movie-How Entertainment Conquered Reality", by Neal Gabler.

In "Amusing Ourselves To Death", published in 1982, Postman, a sociologist at NYU, predicted the eventual takeover of modes of discourse in sectors of public life, including politics, by the rising popularity, influence and power of television and other entertainment formats, with the consequent dumbing down of those modes of discourse.

Observing the rise of Trump, one must conclude that there is now really no line between the worlds of politics and entertainment. As predicted by Postman, politics has become an entertainment modality, and winning political discourse has been dumbed down to the level of a reality television show; simplistic, emotional and melodramatic speech, empty of ideas but replete with the crowd pleasing rhetoric of insults, boasts and race-baiting, fueled by constant conflicts and feuds between the characters. Surveys have shown that the most popular characters on reality shows are those who are the most contentious and nasty.

The 1956 film, "A Face In The Crowd," directed by Elia Kazan, deserves credit as one of the first artistic representations of the potential impact of the then growing popularity and power of television on shaping public opinion, and how such power could overwhelm traditional political discourse. It is a powerful and excoriating prophecy of how television could corrupt

democratic processes and elevate Lonesome Rhodes, a television star of limited intelligence and bad character, but in possession of a cunning understanding of how to manipulate the public through simplistic and demagogic speech, to the highest levels of political power. It's foreshadowing of Trump is uncanny.

Lonesome Rhodes, like Trump, captivates his working class audiences by pretending to be one of them, mocking and demeaning any and all establishment figures. His favorite epithet is "college boy," hurled with contempt at political and business establishment figures, who he constantly outwits. But his contempt is not limited to the establishment; he also betrays contempt for his audiences, gloating that "this country is like my flock of sheep. They are mine! I own them." In an eerie echo of that dialogue, and with precisely the same contemptuous connotation directed at his supporters, Trump recently boasted that he could shoot and kill someone in the middle of Fifth Avenue and not lose any of those supporters. In another speech Trump stated that he could commit murder and still be elected. In his victory speech in Nevada he stated that he loves the poorly educated.

In the film, the crowds at Lonesome's rallies emulate his behavior, lustily denouncing the "establishment" and turning on anyone who expresses less than rabid enthusiasm for Lonesome's nostrums. We have seen the venom and physical attacks directed at protestors at Trump rallies. Referring to a protestor who was being thrown out of a rally, Trump shouted, "I'd like to punch him in his face". And, at another rally, he inveighed, "In the old days we would have seen someone like him taken out on a stretcher". All to raucous cheering.

Perhaps the most prescient and relevant dialogue in 'A Face In The Crowd' is spoken by Rhodes' major backer, a wealthy business mogul. In urging Rhodes to expand his horizons from entertainment to politics, the mogul expresses his view of the need for rule by a strongman and the potential of the new medium to achieve it: "My study of history has convinced me that in every strong society, from the Egyptians on, the mass had to be guided by a strong hand and by a responsible elite. Let us not forget that in television we have the greatest instrument for mass persuasion in the history of the world".

Neal Gabler, in "Life-The Movie", posits that entertainment media, and particularly films, have so permeated the consciousness of Americans that many of us perceive and process real life events as if we were watching a film or television program. The book includes a history of the rise and evolution of film from "low entertainment", as it was perceived in its earliest days, to a respected art form that became the most powerful of the arts in terms of the ability to shape opinions and behavior. Few would dispute that film is a highly persuasive medium; dictators from Hitler to Stalin have harnessed the power of films as propaganda

In Gabler's view many of us are like the title character in the film "The Truman Show"; a player in the "24 hours a day 365 days a year" movie that life has become. The notion of people thinking of themselves as characters in a film or television show has gained even more resonance since the advent of the internet, and platforms that allow users to record and distribute their everyday activities; a phenomenon that is widespread, particularly among young people. Seeing oneself as a participant in an ongoing film or television show is, I believe, a critical element of the Trump phenomenon. Those who are processing Trump's campaign as a reality television show also see themselves as active participants in the show, and to turn against Trump would be to leave the show, a depressing concept.

I am not claiming that a majority of Americans have come to view and process politics as entertainment, but I believe that enough have to make the difference in an otherwise close

contest. And for those who do, Trump is their man. There is no way to pry them from him, as their support is based on a hunger to be part of the show and a suspension of disbelief.

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