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“Toying with Disaster”. American Crisis and the Reality Television President

ABSTRACT

This article examines Donald Trump’s television, presidential, and post-presidential identities, drawing on key research in reality television studies and American politics. Specifically, it locates the early 2000s reality show *The Apprentice* as the key textual construct which precedes and informs the “crises” associated with Trump’s political career. I argue that the show exhibits a range of highly effective and original dramatic tropes and rhetorical devices which continue to shape Trump’s identity as a politician. He has gone on to creatively adapt shibboleths such as “you’re fired!” and other feck combative postures of the show in response to the calamities and major flashpoints of his presidential and post-presidential career. As Trump successfully transferred the hyperbole, motifs, and para-social relationships of the series *The Apprentice* to US national politics, he advanced a potent blend of performative power and popular culture cues never seen before in American history. I show how these theatrical cues and show constructs have helped him dominate a complex media landscape and exploit the fractures of a nation in crisis.

KEYWORDS

crisis; Donald Trump; reality TV; neoliberalism; discourse

Introduction

As Ruth Ben-Ghiat wrote in late 2020, when a divided America watched former United States President Donald Trump leave office, it was clear that while Trump might have “failed to wreck American democracy”, he had “succeeded magnificently at building a personality cult”. A “strong-man” leader and master at monopolizing national attention, Ben-Ghiat writes, Trump’s unparalleled negotiation of the digital media landscape (Morales et. al., 2021) had enabled him to keep “elite and grass-roots followers loyal” (Ben-Ghiat, 2020). At that time, America was beset by a number of crises (Bacevich, 2022; Solana, 2020), ranging from the impact of COVID-19, to economic inequality, to the culture wars and crises of migration, terrorism, and gun violence, to even greater existential threats of climate change, anxiety over “post-truth” (Harsin, 2019, 2021), and waning

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faith in democracy after the 2016 election. As President, Trump had been caught up in all these issues, but none of them neatly characterizes his legacy. Rather, from the beginning of his campaign he ran the media according to “‘reality’ television rules” (Hearn, 2016, p. 657) and has continued to do so ever since. I argue that Trump’s political persona, which remains intoxicating for many supporters in early 2024 for its “entertaining” (Harsin, 2021, p. 12; Venizelos, 2023, p. 9) and “rapturous political performativity” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 9 and p. 5), can be traced to enduring dramatic tropes and game structures of the textual construct *The Apprentice* (2004–2015). From the time of his “down-the-escalator” [candidacy] announcement in 2015, through the “aggressive” (Harsin, 2021) and precedent-shattering presidency, to the storming of Capitol Hill in 2021, and “insurgent” (Barbaro, 2024) comeback rhetoric in the leadup to the 2024 election, Trump has remained remarkably faithful to the charismatic villain he developed on television in 2004.

This article builds on existing literature, which examines the crossover of “The Trump Show” (Ouellette, 2016, p. 15) with Trump’s election campaign (including the “parasocial” bonds viewers formed with Trump (Gabriel et al., 2018, p. 2; Trump’s embodiment of the “hustle and shill” of promotional culture (Hearn, 2016, p. 658); “the strange populism that aligns itself with a celebrity real estate mogul” (Smith, 2019, p. 216); “hyperbolic, bombastic language, contradictions, and denials” (Hanke, 2019, p. 10); “demagoguery and resurgent forms of political violence associated with Trump’s campaign” (Andrejevic, 2016, p. 651); the “euphoric identification” of Trump’s supporters (Venizelos, 2023, p. 11); and the ways in which “aggressive emotions” performed in Trump’s politics operate within frameworks of “authenticity” similar to those in reality television (Harsin, 2021, p. 13). The following argument offers a range of evidence from *The Apprentice* to demonstrate important parallels between the rhetoric of the show, the presidency, and Trump’s renewed status as presidential candidate in 2024.

The most notable trope of both the television and presidential personas is the catch phrase “you’re fired!” Several White House staff were spectacularly expelled during Trump’s term¹. However, the aim of this research is to chart a clear continuation of show motifs of loyalty, elimination, diversity, power, struggle, and belonging, in his political discourse centered around Trump’s chameleon-like character of “king, CEO, and self-made entrepreneur” (Ouellette, 2019, p. 20). In the now dated series, Trump amasses a faithful fanbase of “hardworking Americans” through specific neoliberal operational structures – structures

¹ Three and a half years into his presidency, twenty high-profile White House staff, including former National Security Advisor John Bolton, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, Attorney General Jeff Sessions, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, and FBI Director James Comey, are casualties of his theatrical and highly unpredictable dismissals (Diehm et al., 2019).

which normalize themes of tyranny and survival in the context of "maximizing profitability" (Telford & Briggs, 2022, p. 60). The parallels discussed here provide new insight into Trump's evolution as a public figure, as well as his record-breaking capacity to set media agendas² (he is "the first President to use Twitter to insert his statements into live TV news coverage, to drive and disrupt the news cycle and narrative, and to troll people") (Hanke, 2019, p. 6; see also Bloomberg, 2018), and rebrand "truth" in his own image.

Since the 1980s, Trump has been described as "funny and demeaning... arrogant and somehow in touch with the common man" (NBC News, 2016a). With the White House long in view³, his polarizing commentary on, for example, the "stupidity" of American leaders who are "laugh[ed] at" over matters of foreign policy (Laderman, 2017), underscores a distinct consistency in political rhetoric which precedes his high-profile role in television. Trump had also published books (most notably *The Art of the Deal*, 1987), run beauty pageants, and enjoyed the limelight afforded by heavily mediatized marriages and divorces prior to *The Apprentice*. However, as Laurie Ouellette observes, it is the "decade-plus [television] role as wealthy entrepreneur, pedagogue, ringmaster, and stern judge rolled into one" which establishes his presidential universe, providing "hands-on training in self-performance and 'real life' melodrama" (Ouellette, 2016, p. 2). While, as Jayson Harsin (2021) points out, ratings were as low as 5 million in later years of the show's run, Trump does successfully export the "cultural logic" of reality television's constructed "authenticity/truthfulness" (p. 16) to politics. As the below analysis demonstrates, Trump uses a range of pop culture triggers to connect with fans and oscillates effectively between contradictory postures, both "authoritative and personal" (King, 2018, p. 2). In a variety of nuanced, provocative, and subtly empowering ways, he exploits the deep fears and fantasies (Bacevich, 2022) of an America in crisis.

2. Creating the Character and the President

The US version of *The Apprentice*, at its height, achieved close to 21 million viewers per episode (Bradley, 2017). A fusion of the reality TV genres gamedoc and docusoap, players in the show compete to become Trump's corporate apprentice in "the concrete metropolis" of New York (also described as the "meanest city in the world" in the opening episode 2005 titled "Toying with Disaster"). Every episode of the reality show opens with a voice-to-camera by Trump, shots of the

² As Kalb (2022) reports citing Monroe et. al. (2020), Trump received fifteen percent more coverage than Hillary Clinton in 2016. Fox News "questioned the results of the [2020] election or pushed conspiracy theories about it at least 774 times" according to Monroe et. al. (2020).

³ In the 1990s, Trump attempted political ascension through the failed Reform party (NBC News, 2016b; NBC News, 2016c).

Statue of Liberty, and Trump's grandiose buildings and objects, amplified by theme music "For the Love of Money" by the O'Jays⁴. Adhering to the "cutthroat values of corporate capitalism" (Hearn, 2016, p. 657) contestants participate in a team play-off format, attempting to survive⁵ and avoid expulsion by completing a range of made-up challenges administered by Trump. From the first episode Trump establishes his signature theatrical cues, including the stern facial close-up and catch phrases "shut up!" and "sit down!" As Ouellette observes, "camerawork, editing, concept, and narration [are] strategically deployed to downplay a string of [Trump's real-world] bankruptcies, failures and ethical violations" (Ouellette, 2019, p. 20; see also Roth et. al., 2017). In this space of "heightened dramatic intensity" (Sgroi, 2007, p. 233) set in Trump's real-world tower, he begins to negotiate the imagined and the real.

The first character to speak at length in Trump's series, Tammy Lee, foreshadows the tyranny of the future president, accentuating themes of loyalty and elimination in episode one: "The only person I need to be concerned with liking me, ostracizing me, is Donald Trump" (Burnett, 2004a). Omarosa Manigault Newman, who would go on to play a critical communications role in the Trump presidency, suggests the women in the first episode (who are competing against the men's team) call themselves "Donald's Darlings" (Burnett, 2004a). While Trump, with his trademark "Queens" accent ("tough" and "authoritative", but also "almost working class") (as cited in Guo, 2016) also occasionally takes pity on contestants, or calls them "a lovely guy" after expelling them, *The Apprentice* "frequently disintegrates into reality show theatrics, replete with name-calling, backbiting, finger pointing, and lingering camera shots on the evicted loser's despondent face" (Miles, 2012, p. 4). As Alison Hearn (2016) argues, the series fetishizes the Trump brand, Trump's assets, and the promise of "mini celebrity". These are "symptoms of and alibis for a failing political economic system marked by perpetual crisis" (p. 3). Many episodes between 2004 and 2015 exploit anxieties around wealth and security (one evokes the punishment of being sent to a tent city) in a climate "where traditional jobs are disappearing and employment is ever more precarious" (p. 3).

The "jouissance" (Andrejevic, 2016, p. 652) of this radical reality entertainment, in which Trump is given free reign "slamming hapless contestants" and "hawking products" (Edwards, 2013, 59), is a precursor to later "insult politics" (Winberg, 2017, p. 3). In his 2015 candidacy speech, for example, he derides fellow Republicans and claims the US is being "laughed at" and beaten by China, Japan, and Mexico (Time Staff, 2015). Once elected, he calls reporters

⁴ Today he often strides on to the rally platform to Lee Greenwood's *God Bless the USA*.

⁵ This is done in a very similar fashion to that exhibited in the reality show *Survivor* (2001-present), which Burnett also produces.

and key diplomatic staff alike “rude, terrible”⁶ and “very stupid” (Nugent, 2019). Late in the presidency, he even suggests a group of congresswomen go back to the “crime-infested” countries they came from (Rogers & Fandos, 2019). These dictatorial blows, viewed by audiences in “mediated” “episodes” (Harsin, 2021, p. 13), compound earlier descriptions of immigrants as animals, rapists, and criminals (Korte & Gomez, 2018), “mobilizing [as he did in the show] the specter of ‘excessive’ enjoyment of vilified Others” (Andrejevic, 2016, p. 653). In 2018, Trump calls White House employee Manigault Newman (who appeared in two separate seasons of *The Apprentice*) “a crazed, crying, lowlife” and a “dog” (Dopp, 2018)⁷.

From 2004 viewers had begun to form “parasocial” bonds (Horton & Wohl, 1956) with Trump. These bonds led fans to “believe his promises, disregard unpopular statements that he made, and have generally more positive evaluations of him” (Gabriel et al., 2018, pp. 4–5). Researchers accurately predicted that people who did not identify as Republicans were “especially influenced by parasocial bonds with Trump” (p. 6). Trump’s time in office was plagued by criticism over military threats, trade wars, deportation orders, nation-wide migrant raids⁸ ambivalence toward white supremacist movements (Hanke, 2019, p. 22), and repeated allegations of sexual assault. Yet, his “cascading moral lapses”, as David N. Smith (2019) writes “have not alienated his base ... in fact, the more he transgresses, the more his fans cheer him on” (p. 216).

To this day Trump maintains strong female support despite evidence of sexism on the *Apprentice* set (Fox, 2016), the Access Hollywood tape scandal, his 2016 joust with *Fox* presenter Megyn Kelly⁹, and his proven liability for sexual abuse and defamation of E Jean Carroll in 2023. Having gotten away with sexually harassing *Celebrity Apprentice* contestant Brande Roderick in the show¹⁰, when Trump insinuated that Kelly’s attack on him was due to her menstruation, “support in opinion polls climbed” (Winberg, 2017, p. 2). Smith and Womick et al., locate psychologically distinct characteristics of Trump supporters, who gravitate toward

⁶ Trump infamously attacked reporters at a 2017 conference calling them the “Enemy of the People” (a phrase with a potent history and ties to fascism).

⁷ Notably, Manigault Newman is the three-time *Apprentice* contestant and former star of Trump’s own version of *The Bachelorette*, who only two years before had promoted Trump (in her role as Director of Communication for the Office of Public Liaison): “every critic, every detractor will have to bow down to President Trump... It is the ultimate revenge to become the most powerful man in the universe” (Breslow, 2016).

⁸ Dickerson et al., (2019). <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/14/us/ice-immigration-raids.html> (retrieved on 20 May, 2024).

⁹ Kelly reminded audiences that Trump had called women “fat pigs, dogs, slob, and disgusting animals”.

¹⁰ In 2013, footage went to air including his comments: “it must be a pretty picture” seeing *Celebrity Apprentice* contestant Brande Roderick “on her knees”.

his character, and display a “willingness to endorse aggression and violence as means of promoting in-group superiority” (Smith, 2019, p. 213; Womick et al., 2018, p. 6). At rallies as president, Trump’s crowds have echoed the vitriol of *The Apprentice*, shouting slogans such as “build the wall!” and obscenities such as “f--- Muslims” (Parker et al., 2016). The “the culture wars [that turned] America into two warring camps” (Hanke, 2019, p. 11) are arguably reflected in the warring teams on the show, which routinely featured infantilized begging¹¹, humiliating boardroom trials, and brazen firings¹². Harsins’s (2021) research on the Trump’s “aggro-truth” politics underlines this point, explaining how “rage, disgust, hate – were touchstones of authenticity/honesty/truth in ... RTV [reality television] interpretive logic” (p. 11).

3. Diverse Fans under Trump

Trump has maintained political appeal across racial and religious lines, between groups as logically opposed (for example) as white supremacists and African American televangelist Pastor Mark Burns. During his candidacy and presidency, frenzied, diverse groups have shouted similar slogans about Hillary Clinton such as “lock her up” (ABC15 Arizona, 2016) and “send her back” in reference to Democrat Representative Ilhan Omar (Flynn, 2019). Looking specifically at cruelty, Smith’s 2019 analysis reveals that “Different groups voted for Trump at varying rates... men and women in every segment of the population who wanted a domineering and intolerant president voted for Trump in disproportionate numbers” (p. 212). Musa al-Gharbi (2018) explicates this diversity further, questioning “the thesis Trump spearheaded an ethnic nationalist uprising” (p. 5). Citing his 2017 study which explains that “Trump won a smaller share of the white vote than Mitt Romney did in 2012” (p. 5) al-Gharbi shows that Trump was especially successful with Hispanic, Asian and Black voters (p. 5).

While Trump at one point reportedly proposed “a White-Versus-Black-Contestant season” of *The Apprentice* (Hanbury, 2019), one of the key conceptual strengths of the reality show was to engender subtle and meaningful identification with a broad range of contestants, from varying social classes. Young men and women from rural Wisconsin and Idaho, an African American Harvard Business School graduate, and an Asian American stockbroker, among other self-starters such as business owners, salesmen, real estate developers, make up the season one cast. They aspire to work with Trump from geographies as diverse as Austin

¹¹ Two African American female contestants Vivicia Vox and Kenya Moore in Season Fourteen, for example, show the effects of this in a scene that lasts more than ten minutes. Both implore “Mr Trump” to believe their respective stories about a stolen phone and a tweet about menopause, among other topics of dispute.

¹² When Stacy Rotner requests the opportunity to lead a team in Season Two, for example, Trump calously fires her.

(Texas), Philadelphia, Santa Monica, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit. Troy McClain from Idaho for example sacrificed his higher education to take care of his mother and disabled little sister. Nick Warnock, from Los Angeles, a full-commission copier salesman states, "If I don't sell, I don't eat" (Burnett, 2004a).

Celebrity Apprentice contestants, similarly complicit with "neoliberal norms" that are "reified as 'rules of the game'" (Couldry & Littler, 2011, p. 275), include bikies, country music singers, comedians, basketball stars (such as Dennis Rodman), poker players, and established comedians such as Joan Rivers, Arseneo Hall, and Tom Green. Eager to impress Trump with their business acumen, stars of these later seasons participate in some of the most acrimonious squabbles recorded,¹³ and yet treat Trump with unreserved reverence.¹⁴ The celebrities are significant, because as Trump gets closer to leadership of the country, he evolves from towering property developer - intolerant of weakness and failure (earlier episodes are titled "Ethics Schmethics", "Dupe-lex", "Tit for Tat", and "Shut Your SmartMouth") - to philanthropic leader. Not unlike other long-running television characters whose personalities soften over time (see the evolution of the "snarling" villain Dr Zachary Smith from *Lost in Space*)¹⁵ Trump shows an ironically inclusive and charitable side in the season thirteen finale when he awards Lil Jon \$100,000 to support diabetes.

4. Power, Belonging, and Mythmaking

In 2019 at a rally in Michigan, Trump compared himself to liberal elites: "I'm smarter than they are, I went to better schools than they did, I have better apartments than they have, I'm better educated all around" (Cole, 2019). Much of Trump's success, as the "blue-collar billionaire" (Winberg, 2017, p. 3) has been to embrace contradiction, shifting between postures, at times employing "self-disclosure as a means of drawing the reader or listener into closer relationship with his 'authentic' self" (King, 2018, p. 4), at other times advancing a "elite agenda" and "blatant expressions of ruling-class interest" (King, 2018, p. 7), and at others focusing his populist rhetoric on a common enemy. He is "tough" but also a family man (Time Staff, 2015); a "bratty" child and a grandad with bad hair (AmericanShows, 2013); a Christian and a sexual predator; a philanthropist and a military hothead; a racist and friend of Kanye West (Bryant, 2016); a sometimes-

¹³ Joan Rivers's "Hitler" rant in 2011.

¹⁴ Clint Black, for example, gave an interview in 2015 about Trump's approach to governing and hospitality on his golf course (CBS News, 2021). Kenya Moore said in 2015 "I'm not done learning from you, and I don't want to go home. I admire you and your family. You guys really are the first family of America".

¹⁵ See Jonathan Harris' own account of how the Dr. Zachary Smith character evolved over several years (Pescovitz, 2018). Harris notes "there's no longevity in deep, dark, snarling villainy... my most successful villains have been comedic villains".

bankrupt billionaire; and a friend of Vladimir Putin and defender of democracy. In early 2024, Trump pledged to defend America against “crooked Joe Biden” (a reworking of his slogan “crooked Hillary” in 2016, see also Collinson, 2023). Capitalizing on “combined political, social and economic crises” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 4) Trump’s populist fusion of dictator and maligned underdog works, as Giorgios Venizelos argues, on “affective identification” (p. 2). Protecting his fans from predatorial elites, whom he positions as a “threat to democracy” (Barbaro, 2024), he promises “the return of ‘the sovereign people’ to power” (Venizelos, 2023, p. 4).

The Apprentice subtly sets up this juxtaposition in relation to power, bringing viewers (and voters) in and pushing contestants (or elites) out. In episode one, season one of *The Apprentice*, Trump brings audiences with him into the New York Stock Exchange. In this setting, there are no complex discussions of dividends or algorithmic trading, but rather, at “the center of the world for big business”, Trump announces a male-versus-female lemonade-selling challenge (a potent symbol of capitalism). Contestants in later episodes design toys, run an ice-cream parlor, renovate a building, attempt to put a world map on an oddly shaped Pepsi bottle, and run a bridal boutique, among other examples. In the 2005 episode “Runaway Pride”, Trump reminds viewers of the importance of the “\$30 billion dollar a year” wedding industry (Burnett, 2005), demonstrating his inherent approval of hardworking, profit-making Americans. Cleverly, the high-stakes drama always centers on elite candidates (such Harvard MBA graduates and comedians such as Tom Green, in *Celebrity Apprentice*) struggling to adequately deliver on tasks in fans’ own fields of work. When contestants fail, audiences “enjoy it with one another. Their shared laughter at the suffering of others is an adhesive that binds them to one another, and to Trump” (Serwer, 2019). Trump would later again encourage schadenfreude through POTUS tweets. In 2020, for example, (perhaps in subtle reference to a Clint Eastwood film *Dirty Harry*) he stated: “DIRTY COP JAMES COMEY GOT CAUGHT” (2020a). The tweet attracted hundreds of thousands of responses. One supporter @real_defender retweeted “ARREST AND PROSECUTE DIRTY JAMES COMEY FOR TREASON” (2020).

As Hanke writes, Trump’s “face-work has produced chaos and given the US a reputation for being erratic, unreliable, and hostile on the global geopolitical economic stage” (2019, p. 14). Yet, his vertiginous leadership (Hearn, 2017, p. 86) engenders a strong sense of belonging to his team. On the issue of Mexico, he has said “They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems” (Time Staff). In Philadelphia in 2019 he applauded energy workers in the fracking industry by stating: “nobody does it better than the hardworking men and women in Marcellus Shale County” (Fox Business, 2019). In Arizona he was “thrilled to be back” with the “incredible, patriotic, hardworking men and women of @Honeywell!” (Trump, 2020b). In 2023 he “preemptively”

(Howe, 2023) told his supporters in South Carolina that he wouldn't let the liberal elites "delete" one of their revered Founding Fathers, Revolutionary War General Andrew Pickens. In 2024, he told supporters, speaking of "far-left lunatics", "in the end, they're not after me. They're after you. I just happen to be standing in the way, and I will always be" (Barbaro, 2024). In each case the divisiveness of "mockingly lashing out... at his political rivals" (Winberg, 2017, p. 10) is consistently balanced with the mythology of struggle and belonging. Indeed, every episode of *The Apprentice* reminds viewers "I fought back, and I won" (Burnett, 2004a) and every campaign speech acknowledges the "good people" who support him.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis explains how Donald Trump skillfully manufactured a political persona through the reality program *The Apprentice*. It demonstrates how the television show, symptomatic of "the aggro-truth" at the "junction of communication styles, entertainment genres, and political performances" (Harsin, 2021, p. 17), operated as the crucial platform for rehearsing his highly nuanced character, signature performance cues, and political themes. Specifically, the show naturalized the cruel and humiliation-themed rhetoric of Trump's politics and helped engender hostility towards elites. It elevated hardworking fans and mythologized his journey as one of struggle and victory. These findings, I hope, add further context to scholarly work which observes that Trump remains almost immune to many of the crises that coincide with his "grotesque sovereignty", including "xenophobia, racism, misogyny, [the] rollback of education, health care and other social programs carried out in [his] name" (Ouellette, 2019, p. 24). As Trump appropriated the lawlessness typical of sequestered reality television spaces (Baudrillard, *Telemorphosis*, 2011, p. 31–32) and the titillating appeal of Hollywood villainy into his politics, for many fans and followers he successfully insulated himself from criticism: "the more they try to knock him down, the more grist they provide for his promotional mill" (Hearn, 2016, p. 657).

It is worth noting that not long after the 2016 election, *The Washington Post* reported that Trump once referred to reality television audiences as "bottom feeders", but nonetheless "great" for his "brand" (Fisher, 2016). Trump, formerly a "known carnival barker", "a punchline on page 6" (Keefe), seems to have understood instinctively how the show would position him for a specific audience, one that responds to "manic speeches" and calls to worship he "alone" (Chotiner, 2016) who can save a country from social and economic degradation (Range, 2021). Television created a theater for Trump's politics, to the extent that *The Apprentice* producer Mark Burnett even staged Trump's inauguration (Ouellette, 2019, p. 26; see also Keefe, 2019). As I have stated elsewhere, eerie similarities can be seen between Burnett's televisual spectacle and Susan Sontag's (1975) description of Leni Riefenstahl's

popular pageant films for and about Hitler, which featured “the turning of people into things... the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure or force”. Reality shows give the impression of sharing power, and Trump, with chameleon cunning, sustains this rhetoric, even post-presidency, with a grateful and faithful base. His “bottom feeders”, in the end, willingly provided him with an apprenticeship, and they may well elect him to center stage again.

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