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The Role of Cultural Production in Celebrity Politics: comparing the campaigns of Jesse ‘The Body’ Ventura (1999) and Donald Trump (2016)

Abstract:

This article draws out the significant similarities between the political insurgencies of Jesse Ventura in 1999 and Donald Trump in 2016, charting their own premillennial political collaborations as members of the Reform Party, before identifying wider lessons for studies of contemporary celebrity politicians through a comparison of their individual campaigns. Its analysis is based upon the concept of the ‘politainer’, introduced by Conley and Shultz (2000), into which it incorporates Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the carnival fool. The heterodox nature of both Ventura and Trump’s political campaign styles, it argues, is in part explained by the nature of the cultural spheres within which their public personas were produced; specifically, the fact that these personas, which they carried over from the entertainment to political spheres, were produced within genres of popular culture generally positioned as having ‘low’ cultural value. This, it argues, furnished both with an anti-establishment ethos as ‘no bullshit’ straight-talkers, marking them as outsider candidates able to act as conduits for political protest by an electorate alienated from mainstream political elites. It concludes by emphasising the potential importance that political celebrities’ specific cultural production can play in shaping a subsequent political campaign in general.

Key Words: Donald Trump, Jesse Ventura, Celebrity Politics, Mikhail Bakhtin, politainer

Introduction

In April 2004, Donald Trump attended WrestleMania XX, the largest annual pay-per-view event of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) calendar,¹ held that year at Madison Square Garden, New York. Trump sat ringside, where he was interviewed by retired professional wrestler and former politician Jesse ‘The Body’ Ventura. Ventura, whose recent tenure as the 38th Governor of Minnesota had run from 1999 to 2003, asked Trump whether he could expect his “moral and financial support” were he to “get back into politics”. When Trump promised Ventura that he would – “one hundred percent” – Ventura triumphantly declared: “You know what? I think that we may need a wrestler in the White House in 2008!” Ultimately, Ventura did not run for White House; this article argues, however, that, as a political campaigner, his example nevertheless lay a groundwork for Donald Trump – his friend, interviewee, and fellow member of the WWE Hall of Fame – in his successful 2016 campaign for the Presidency of the United States.

This article draws out the similarities between the political insurgencies of Jesse Ventura in 1999 and Donald Trump in 2016, using this comparison as the basis through which wider lessons for the study of contemporary political campaigning can be identified. In doing so, it utilises two interrelated concepts, both previously applied separately to Ventura’s political career, illustrating their combined value as explanatory tools for the Trump campaign also. To this end, the article first introduces the concept of the ‘politainer’, developed by Conley and Schultz (2000) as a label for celebrity politicians who, rather than shedding the persona they initially developed within the entertainment world, carry it with them, unabated, from the cultural into the political

¹ The World Wrestling Federation (WWF) changed its name to World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE) in 2001. For simplicity’s sake, the acronym WWE is used throughout.

field. Second, it supplements this conceptualisation through the incorporation of Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984a) concept of Carnival.

Examining Ventura first, followed by a comparison with the 2016 Trump campaign, the article ultimately contends that both can be understood as politainers, each of whom were furnished with an anti-establishment ethos by the specific nature of their cultural production within 'low culture' forms of entertainment – including, but not confined to, their shared involvement within pro-wrestling. This ethos granted both Ventura and Trump significant communicatory freedoms and opportunities as political campaigners that were unavailable to mainstream politicians, marking them as outsider candidates and as such viable conduits for carnivalesque political protest against mainstream politics as a whole. At the same time, these cultural personas delimited their available political possibilities, rendering more 'serious' campaigning styles inauthentic, making the carnivalesque the most natural 'fit'.

In making this case, the article emphasises the need for political analysts to pay attention to the important role played by the specific cultural production of celebrity politicians themselves before they enter the political arena – that is, the context within which they are moulded, formed and presented – in directing the subsequent nature of their political campaign styles.

The Ventura-Trump Connection

Born James Janos, Jesse 'The Body' Ventura worked in pro-wrestling between 1975 and 1994, originally as an in-ring performer, then, following his in-ring retirement, as a 'colour commentator'. A former Navy Seal, during his time in the pro-wrestling industry, 'The Body' was a flamboyant, charismatic presence with a penchant for wearing feather boas, who performed as a 'heel' (bad guy), both in the ring and later in the

commentary booth, insulting the 'baby-faces' (good guys) and favouring the 'heels'. Starting in the late eighties, Ventura transitioned out of pro-wrestling into acting, playing secondary roles in major action movies such as *Predator* (1987), *The Running Man* (1987) and *Demolition Man* (1993). Coming from this background, his campaign for and subsequent election as Governor of Minnesota in 1998 was, at the time, 'one of the most surprising events to occur in the modern era of American politics' (Lentz, 2002: 1); running on a Reform Party ticket, Ventura secured 773,713 votes, 37% of those cast. His victory remains the most successful third-party result in modern US politics (see: Hausser, 2002).

Jesse Ventura makes a useful point of comparison with Donald Trump for a number of reasons, not least their real-life interactions and linkages. Trump and Ventura have known each other a long time and collaborated closely, politically, during their time together in the Reform Party. They first met at WrestleMania IV in 1988 and became 'casual friends'; it was in July 1999, however, when paleo-conservative Pat Buchanan signalled he would leave the Republican Party to join the Reform Party, that their political relationship truly developed, as Ventura and his allies sought to draft Trump as a proxy candidate to defeat Buchanan (Kelly & Wetherbee, 2016: loc.1045). Trump went so far as to quit the Republican party (stating, "I really believe the Republicans are just too crazy right") and form a presidential exploratory committee that October. During this period, Trump travelled to Minnesota to attend a fundraiser for Ventura's campaign for governor, speaking at a Reform Party rally alongside 'The Body' (Margolin, 2017: 66). Ultimately, despite their work together, Ventura and Trump would both leave the Reform Party – mere days apart – when, by February 2000, it became clear that Ross Perot's faction of the party had won control (Kelly &

Wetherbee, 2016: loc.1082). The two kept in touch, however, speaking frequently during Ventura's term in office (Kessler, 2016).

Trump saw Ventura's 1999 campaign for governor up-close, sharing platforms and addressing rallies with him; more than this, however, according to Dean Barkley, Ventura's campaign chairman, following the latter's shock victory Trump again visited Minnesota with the express purpose of learning how he did it. Barkley describes a private two-hour meeting in which he and the newly elected Governor Ventura broke down their winning campaign strategy for Trump, 'month by month' (ibid.). The notion that Trump may have learnt something from Ventura's successful campaigning experiences does not, therefore, seem too far-fetched; indeed Barkley, the man behind that campaign, believes this to be the case, claiming in 2016 that "he [Trump] obviously studied what we did" (ibid.). Whether or not Trump *did* draw upon these experiences in 2016, Ventura declared himself impressed by his campaign, initially professing his support to Trump's candidacy for President² and offering himself up as a potential running mate: 'this country needs to be shaken to its very core, and Donald Trump is doing that', he stated (Kelly & Wetherbee, 2016: loc 1101).

The notion that the two figures share some sort of campaigning DNA is not itself new; Hall, *et al.* (2016: 77), for example, have identified Ventura and *another* WWE Hall of Famer, Arnold Schwarzenegger, as 'precursors to Trump', albeit on a different scale. Hitherto, however, there have been no substantial analyses to back-up this claim. In what manners were the campaigns of Ventura and Trump similar to one another? What differentiates them from 'normal' campaigns? And what lessons do

² Before Hillary Clinton's nomination as Democratic candidate, Ventura had declared himself torn between supporting Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump (Hensch, 2016). He ultimately endorsed Libertarian candidate Gary Johnson before actually voting for The Green Party's Jill Stein (Margolin, 2017: 159).

their similarities offer political analysts seeking to understand politics in the ‘Age of Trump’? The remainder of this article aims to address these questions, outlining the case for the development of an approach framed around the concepts of ‘the politainer’ and ‘carnival fool’.

‘Celebrity Politics’ and the Concept of the ‘Politainer’

Arguments that late modernity has seen the roles of celebrity and politician merge are already supported by a vast literature (e.g. Lempert & Silverstein, 2012; Street, 2003; West & Orman, 2003; Wheeler, 2013; Wood, et al. 2016) with the emergence of the phenomenon known as ‘celebrity politics’ – an emergence that is itself tied into a series of epochal shifts in the media landscape, which have driven subsequent changes in political communication (Maddalena, 2016).

In the post-war period, politicians’ communication with the electorate was largely defined by speechifying at rallies, with the content of these speeches either transcribed in newspapers or carried over the radio, thereby placing an emphasis upon the politician’s words. The advent of television, however, combining image with sound, saw the transition to a new epoch, wherein physical appearance, body language and tempers became the major focus of political communication, widely viewed as imparting insights into the individual personality of a politician. It was in this era, as the importance of personality and media presence became accentuated by television, that ‘celebrity politicians’ emerged (Kanihan & Rim, 2018: 251) – individuals who become famous as entertainers but subsequently run for public office.

Major changes in the media landscape driven by Web 2.0 and the growth of social network campaigning has in turn seen the transition into the present era of political communication. This era is defined by a shift from one-way media of

communication (e.g. television and movies) between politicians and public to two-way media (e.g. reality television and social media platforms), in so doing narrowing the perceived proximity between individuals within these groups by introducing the possibility, for both, of immediate interactions, responses and sharing. With these changes has come a further shift in political communication, with primary focus upon the emotional and personal authenticity/sincerity of our politicians (Maddalena, 2016), and an apparent inversion of previous epoch's distinction between entertainment and politics (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), seemingly offering further opportunities for merging between celebrity and politician.

How then, to understand this phenomenon? In his recent review of existing definitions of 'celebrity politics', Street (2018) notes that the majority of such analyses focus attention upon the *political*, rather than *celebrity* dimension of this phenomenon; yet, as Thimsen (2010: 46) warns in her analysis of the campaign successes of Ventura and Schwarzenegger, if close attention is not paid to the specific 'cultural production' of celebrities themselves – that is, the context within which they are moulded, formed and presented – then such analyses of celebrity politics risk becoming either simplistic narratives outlining how pre-existing fame leads to political success, *or* polemical attacks upon the threat of mass culture to politics (cf. Babcock & Whitehouse 2005). Viewed from this perspective, what Ventura and now Trump lead us to question is the 'presumption of separation' between entertainment and politics as separate spheres, already called into question by the political communication literature (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011), and thus how their different 'texts' should be analysed (Thimsen, 2010: 45).

It was with the blurring of this separation in mind that Conley and Schultz (2000; cf. Schultz, 2001) introduced the concept of the 'politainer', a label meant to distinguish

a figure such as Jesse Ventura from examples of previous celebrities turned politicians – such as Ronald Reagan, Sonny Bono, and Jack Kemp – or indeed contemporary ones – such as Al Franken and Cynthia Fox – who simply traded in celebrity fame for political power, ‘rebranding’ themselves when they ran for public office (Lawrence & Boydston, 2017). In contrast, Conley and Schultz argued, Ventura took ‘the trend of entertainer turned politician one step further because he is more than just a celebrity turned politician; he is simultaneously an entertainer *and* a politician; he is, in other words, a politainer’ (ibid, 49).

Ventura’s celebrity status afforded him more than simply a boost in terms of pre-existing ‘name brand recognition’ as he moved from one world into the other. Rather, as a ‘politainer’, his cultural persona, which was produced within the entertainment field of pro-wrestling, carried through into action movies, and ultimately solidified in a late career as a ‘shock jock’ radio host, *continued unabated into his political campaign*. This persona was that of a ‘no-bullshit’ ‘straight talking’ maverick and man of action defined by strength, hard work and grit – and it was the continuation of this persona from the cultural into the political arena that makes Ventura not just a celebrity politician, but specifically a politainer. In short, there was no ‘rebranding’ or ‘breaking character’ when running for office; for both Ventura and it will be argued Trump, to understand their political personas therefore involves first and foremost recognition of the place held by the particular entertainment forms wherein their personas were produced within the field of popular culture.

High and Low Culture

Culture, as Fiske (1996: 121) describes, ‘is used to distinguish among classes and fractions of classes’. Simply stated, an implicit cultural hierarchy exists in which certain

genres are coded as ‘high culture’ (e.g. opera, expressionist theatre) and others ‘low culture’ (e.g. action movies, superhero comics). Conceptualised in these terms, whilst supportive cultural analysts may emphasise its potential as ‘a *transgressive* form of low art’ (Sehmy, 2002: 12, emphasis added), the fact that pro-wrestling – the cultural arena from whence Ventura emerged and within which Trump has been immersed (Kelly & Wetherbee, 2016; Margolin, 2017) – is *low art/culture* is fairly uncontested. The case can and has been made for pro-wrestling as a ‘global art’ form (MacFarlane, 2012), however, whilst other cultural genres once seen as ‘trash culture’ have experienced differing degrees of gentrification – science fiction and horror movies are nominated for Academy Awards, hip-hop albums win Grammys, ‘Graphic Novels’ are considered for literary prizes, and computer games are discussed in the arts and culture sections of broadsheet newspapers – wrestling has yet to achieve such critical acceptance.³

In her analysis of Ventura and Schwarzenegger, Thimsen (2010: 46) notes that both had made their names in ‘genres of popular culture that are themselves often positioned against more elite or “cultured” popular forms’ – pro-wrestling and action movies specifically. These are entertainment forms that can be understood in terms of what McGuigan (1992) calls – with no evaluative judgement implied – ‘cultural populism’, a label denoting cultural forms developed and enjoyed by ‘ordinary people’, which are defined in part against the ‘culture with a large C’ enjoyed by ‘intellectuals’ (ibid: 4).

³ Although the ‘Wrestling Resurgence’ art-house wrestling company, may signal a change developing here. Run by academics Claire Warden, Ben Litherland and Tom Phillips, alongside arts curators Sam West and John Kirby, and performance artist Andrew Westerside, the project aims ‘to explore wrestling as an art form’ and has secured Arts Council funding and university awards (Warden, 2018).

For example, recent independent analysis of the WWE's audience – for whom, as noted, both Ventura and Trump have performed – has identified it demographically as relatively uneducated (65.6% having obtained only a high school education or less compared to a 44.2% national average, and just 34.4% having 'any college' education, compared to a 55.8% national average) and on lower income (Sports Business Journal, 2013). These are the sort of statistics that mean pro-wrestling – despite a higher than average ethnic minority fanbase (ibid.) with evidence of generally liberal politics (Montopoli, 2010) – has developed a widespread reputation as 'white trash' (Rabin, 2016: 669), or at the very least, certainly 'dēclassé' (Di Benedetto, 2017: 29).

Yet Ventura's campaign adverts drew upon his pro-wrestling past, featuring a Jesse Ventura action figure battling 'Special Interests'. Of the \$300,000 the campaign raised in private donations, at least half came from that perennial pro-wrestling money-maker, the sale of t-shirts (Lentz, 2002: 29), which featuring such pro-wrestling-redolent slogans such as "Man of Action" and "My Governor JESSE can kick your governor's ass" (Isaacson, 2000). Ventura himself was happy to reference his former employment on the stump; in one example, having climbed onto the back of a pick-up truck to speak, he told the crowd: "It's kind of like going up to that top rope again. It's been a while since I did that" (Bryss, 2010: 51). In another example, having announced he was no longer going by his old wrestling name 'The Body', but was now Jesse 'The Mind' Ventura (complete with a television advert that featured him sat naked in the pose of Rodin's *The Thinker*), he rejected the idea that some fans might be disappointed, "cause I still got eighteen-inch pipes" (ibid: 30).

Being culturally signified as lower-class – a 'low-brow diversion' (Walker, 2012: 13), literally 'the bottom of the cultural barrel' (Thimsen, 2012: 53) – any attachment within the political field to the specific tropes and associations of pro-wrestling (which

are widely recognised and easily interpreted within mass culture) automatically signifies a certain rebelliousness. A politician comfortably clothed in the symbolic garb of pro-wrestling (and indeed, action movies) automatically communicates an anti-establishment vibe to the voting public that furnishes them with an outsider status when counterpoised to the 'staid' habitat of 'elite' career politicians (Thimsen, 2010: 46-47), making them, as such, a potential conduit for political protest (cf. Busch, 1997: 2). The fact is, Ventura's policy platform, like Trump's seventeen years later, differed little from many other conservative and neo-libertarian politicians, offering little that would actually undermine the position of the privileged classes (Janack, 2006:200); however, for better or worse, what he offered at the turn of the Millennium was 'a politics that negotiated with representations *that are truly popular* (i.e. pro-wrestling and action movies) – with all the problematic connotations of the term' (ibid, 56, emphasis added).

Distilled to its essence, analyses of Ventura through the lens of cultural production emphasise two key points: First, his persona as a politician was not a break from his persona as an entertainer (specifically as a pro-wrestler and later, an action movie star), but rather a continuation into a new field. Second, the cultural positioning of pro-wrestling and action movies (as lower-class entertainment forms popular amongst the masses rather than the classes) afforded the persona that Ventura produced within it a particular *ethos* that subsequently allowed him to articulate his message in a subversive manner unavailable to politicians within the 'political mainstream'. This persona and the communicative freedoms it afforded Ventura marked him apart from his political opponents, providing him with a rebellious image that was attractive to disaffected voters.

For Ventura, this involved behaviour and rhetoric that to many commentators appeared ‘outrageous and absurd’, flouting ‘many of the unwritten rules of politics’ (Janack, 2006: 200). Like many politicians, for example, he published a book as part of his campaign; unlike many politicians, however, this autobiography, entitled *I Ain’t Got Time to Bleed* (Ventura, 1999) after an iconic line by his character in the action film *Predator* (1987), was filled with stories of excess – of vomiting, underage drinking, sleeping with prostitutes, and even an anecdote involving men eating live ducklings. By leaning into his history of excess rather than running from it, Ventura burnished his image as a ‘no bullshit’ straight-talker.

Ventura has a major advantage in this regard. As a celebrity, he was a product of the media and communication epoch established with the onset of television, defined by one-directional media platforms and a focus upon physical appearance, charisma and personality. Indeed, his election in 1998, taking place amidst the first dot-com bubble, before the move to Web 2.0, to some extent marked the closing of this era. Yet, whilst his campaign took place before the epoch of instantaneous interactions and mass inter-personal communication offered by two-way social media platforms, Ventura’s status as a ‘shock jock’ radio host blurred the lines between these epochs. Able to speak live and directly with callers into his show, Ventura had a platform for real time, interactive communication through which he could develop and demonstrate an emotional connection and the authenticity/sincerity of his straight-talking persona; an attribute he further emphasised through his speaking style on the campaign trail.

Kristine Bruss (2010: 47-9), Ventura’s speechwriter, described her client as a ‘larger-than-life personality’ with a ‘flamboyant persona’ and ‘love of off-the-cuff speaking’. This latter aspect was emphasised by Ventura himself who declared himself to be “very proud of the fact that throughout all the debates I never used a single note.

I never read from a pre-written speech. I spoke from the heart” (Ventura, 1999: 166). More than merely unscripted, Lentz (2002: 2) describes Ventura ‘quickly reveal[ing] himself as unwilling to keep nearly anything floating through his head from leaving through his mouth’. This included insults; indeed, as Gray and Spano (2000: 236) describe, Ventura ‘seem[ed] to go out of his way to attack other political actors’, with a long list of people insulted:

‘He has called legislators “gutless cowards”; called one Christian Coalition lobbyist a “fat loser”; and termed local-government officials from non-metro areas “stupid” and “thick as a brick” ... he has insulted the Irish (they were so drunk they laid out crooked streets in St. Paul), callers on his radio show (one person was termed a “puke”, another was called ignorant), fat people (they have no willpower), single mothers (they should have thought about how to raise a child before they hopped into bed), women (sexual harassment is not a big deal, he wants to be reincarnated as a 38DD bra), religious adherents (organised religion is a crutch for weak-minded people), and most cruelly, suicide victims (also weak-minded people whom he doesn’t respect).’ (ibid, 237)

These are the ‘trash-talking’ cadences of pro-wrestling – emanating from a world of jabronies, suckers, and slap-nuts (all pro-wrestling insults) – and action movie ‘tough guys’ (In *Predator*, Ventura’s character jokily describes fellow unit members as “a bunch of slack jawed faggots”). They marked Ventura out rhetorically from the other candidates and from mainstream politics in general, positioning him as an insurgent against the existing political system. The similarities between Jesse Ventura and Donald Trump, drawn out in detail below, are immediately obvious here.

For almost any other political hopeful, rhetoric such as this would have destroyed their campaign; however, far from damaging him, Ventura’s profanity was seen as marking him out in contrast to established politicians afraid to risk offending voters – a narrative supported in the Minnesota media. In the *Pioneer Press*, for

example, an editorial titled 'Ventura's Straight Talk Merits Respect', lauded him for "dar[ing] to think out loud ... He pillories the boring, unthinking styles of [his opponents] ... We could thank Ventura for his open-mouthed candor and tell him ... we are interested in a candidate for governor who is willing to depart from the prepared scripts, speak his mind and take chances" (quoted in Lentz, 2002: 47). Another *Pioneer Press* editorial noted his capacity to "terrorize the careerists with his blunt assessments of their uselessness" (ibid: 52).

The overwhelming consensus amongst observers was that this same 'straight-talking' style saw him win all six of the televised state-wide debates (ibid: 38). His background in pro-wrestling and 'shock jock' radio shows was a strength in this regard, being equated with an 'ability to speak plainly' that polling showed was his major appeal to voters throughout his time in office (Janack, 2006: 201). As one supporter declared, "Jesse alienates a lot of people, but he's got great ideas and he'd get things done. So what if wrestling's just an act – politics is a bigger act than wrestling" (Lentz, 2002: 26). Another supporter expressed similar views, declaring "So what if he's a wrestler? He's worked hard for a living. He's taken his bumps. He's had to get up every morning and go to work like the rest of us." (Janack, 2006: 206). During the campaign voters were quoted complaining that they were "tired of the political stuff" and voted for Ventura because "he wasn't a typical politician" (ibid: 199).

Bakhtin's Concept of the Carnival Fool

When placed across from his professional political opponents, Ventura's message to the electorate was clear throughout: 'I'm not one of them' (Gray & Spano, 2000: 235). Ventura's pro-wrestling background marked him out in opposition to establishment politics; his history within it – and his cultural persona produced within it – carrying

over into his political career and granting him effective communicatory freedoms and opportunities as a political campaigner unavailable to mainstream politicians. This freedom – enjoyed, as argued below, by Donald Trump also – can be further understood when viewed through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of Carnival and the specific character of the carnival fool. It was Ventura’s status as a politainer - a product of low culture – that, as outlined below, allowed him to play the role of the carnival fool, a character-turn that ultimately sealed his victory.

Most clearly elaborated in his works *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Bakhtin, 1984a; 1984b), the origins of carnival in Bakhtin’s writing link back to historical carnivals that characterised the Middle Ages up until the sixteenth century (Vice, 1997: 150). The ‘carnavalesque’ nature of Ventura’s campaign has been identified by Janack (2006), in whose analysis ‘The Body’ is identified as ‘the fool’ – the prototype character who, as described by Bakhtin, enjoys the privilege ‘to be ‘other’ in this world, the right not to make common cause with any single one of the existing categories that life makes available’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 160) and from this position ‘enact carnival on behalf of the larger population’ (ibid: 198). The fool subverts the social order, doing so through acts of parody that poke fun at political rulers’ mystique, stirring rebellion in their audience. The carnival worldview suspends the ‘hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it’ (Bakhtin, 1984b: 122); it provides a space for strange combinations, of ‘the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid’ (ibid); its profanations consist of ‘a whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringing down to earth’ (ibid: 124), to the level of the body – here taking the form of Jessie ‘The Body’ Ventura himself.

As Janack (2006: 204, 210) shows with a multitude of examples, many of the abuses and profanities offered up by Ventura during his political career ‘alluded to the body, particularly its lower stratum and excretory functions’, with corporal references to vomit, urine and copulation (all common themes of carnival) popular examples. Ventura’s lack of notes and planning also lent a carnivalesque atmosphere to any speaking event, with constant examples of ‘billingsgate’, manifest, as discussed previously, through vulgarities, insults and profanities (Bakhtin, 1984a, 15-17). Here was a candidate who, for example, when asked how he would be able to work with opposition legislators, responded by flexing his bicep, and with a scowl replied “this is how” (Janack, 2006: 2020); asked his singular advantage over his opponents, he replied “my physical size” (Lentz, 2002: 60). His opponents’ elite statuses as professional politicians were, in such manners ultimately ‘buried underneath Ventura’s tales of sex, drinking, and his enormous body’ (Janack, 2006: 204), all consistent with the anti-establishment ethos of carnival. It was through such mannerisms that Ventura played his role as carnival fool – a man of the people, who protests the existing political order and its elite on behalf of the same, alienated people from whom he came.

Returning to the previous discussion, however, the fact that Ventura *could* play the fool was entirely due to the popular entertainment form in which the persona that he (as a politainer) brought to the political arena was produced. His persona as a straight-talking, no shit-taking macho man of the people developed initially in the fields of pro-wrestling and action movies and carried through unabated into the political arena. This persona granted him an anti-establishment ethos that facilitated his own positioning as an outsider candidate and subsequent vessel for political protest against the existing order. As the following section demonstrates, when the same conceptual approaches are applied to Ventura’s one-time Reform Party ally Donald Trump –

approaching his political performances through the conceptual lenses of the politainer and carnival fool – the similarities are striking.

Donald Trump: Jesse Ventura 2.0?

If Donald Trump is to be understood as a politainer in the same manner as Jesse Ventura, then the starting point is once again the nature of his cultural production as an entertainment celebrity. Like Ventura, Trump's own cultural persona was produced through his multiple appearances 'in character' on WWE programming (see Margolin, 2017), but also as a denizen of the New York tabloids, adverts for Pizza Hut, and in his role as the owner of the Miss Universe Organization. Above all, however, was his fourteen-year run as host of the hit reality-TV shows *The Apprentice* and *Celebrity Apprentice* (Street, 2018: 4).

Beauty queen pageants and reality-TV are possibly the only forms of popular programming widely deemed 'lower' cultural forms than pro-wrestling. The development of Trump's cultural persona within these entertainment arenas thus immediately offered his candidature the same sort of anti-establishment, 'cultural populist' undertone as Ventura. However, sticking with Conley and Schultz's (2000; cf. Schultz, 2001) distinction between an entertainer who becomes a politician, and a politainer specifically, what matters is cases where the persona produced within the cultural arena continued unabated into the political sphere. An analysis of Trump's campaign for President illustrates that this was indeed the case.

The cultural persona produced by Donald Trump as an entertainer was founded, in large part, upon the denigration of others. This was central to the appeal of his performance on *The Apprentice*, where Trump crafted a persona as a 'winner' who dispatched 'losers' with his signature pistol hand gesture and "You're fired!"

catchphrase (Hearn, 2016: 657); in this role as a ‘tough and aggressive boss character’ (Lee & Lim, 2016: 852), Trump developed a persona as ‘a corporate bully’, whose mockery of contestants, ‘became central to the show’s appeal’ (Hall, Goldstein & Ingram, 2016: 75).

Mockery and denigration was also key to Trump’s performances on WWE television. Like Ventura before him, Trump was no stranger to pro-wrestling ‘trash-talk’. In 2007 Trump took part in a months-long storyline feud with WWE Chairman (and real-life friend) Vince McMahon in which the two selected wrestlers to fight as their proxies in ‘the battle of the billionaires’. During the feud the two verbally spared in the ring, with Trump telling McMahon “I’m taller than you. I’m better looking than you. I think I’m stronger than you. ... You’re a rich guy. I’m a richer guy ... I will kick your ass.” When McMahon later hit back by claiming that he had “the grapefruits” (referencing his testicles) to give Trump a “billionaire bitch slap”, Trump responded that McMahon’s “grapefruits are no match for my Trump Towers” (Margolin, 2017: 95). Even in the world of beauty pageants, denigration was part of the Trump brand; his public mockery of the 1996 Miss Universe (Miss Venezuela, Alicia Machado) as “Miss Piggy” when she gained weight and “Miss Housekeeping” because she was Latino, were raised by opponents during the campaign (Stuart, 2016).

Transitioning to the political arena, nine years later, in 2016, Trump brought the same ‘smack talk’ to his Presidential campaign. He mocked John McCain by declaring “heroes don’t get captured” and ridiculed Scott Walker, telling him “you went down the tubes”. Carly Fiorina was attacked for her appearance (“Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?”) as was Rand Paul (“I never attacked him on his looks, and believe me, there is plenty of subject matter right there”). His major opponents earned their own insulting nicknames: “Iyin’ Ted [Cruz]” (a “pussy”); “low energy Jeb [Bush]”

(“a total disaster”); “little Marco [Rubio]” (a “clown”, “baby” and “lightweight”); and of course, “crooked Hillary [Clinton]” (“lock her up!”). Like the contestants he ‘fired’ on *The Apprentice*, his adversaries were all “losers” (Elmer & Todd, 2016: 661).

All of this went in opposition to the usual rhetorical and campaigning styles associated with candidates for the US presidency. This ‘use of a derisive form of comedic entertainment’, was, as Hall, Goldstein and Ingram (2016: 75) note, ‘a strategy that previous entertainer candidates such as Ronald Reagan did not pursue’. Ronald Reagan, however, was not a politainer. Trump embraced his past within reality TV, beauty pageants and pro-wrestling and with them the aura of rebellion afforded by their ‘cultural populism’. When the targets of his verbal attacks – and horrified journalistic onlookers – drew analogies with the style of Trump’s rhetoric and pro-wrestling, for example, it arguably helped rather than hindered him. Trump himself was happy to play up the analogy, light-heartedly telling Fox News’s Sean Hannity that a recent debate “was a little like WWE, the great Vince McMahon, who is a terrific guy, the way every question had to do with me” (Kelly & Wetherbee, 2016: loc.1297). During the Democratic Party convention, this connection was further emphasised via the Republican Party’s decision to hold a “counter convention” at the ECW Arena in Pittsburgh, once home to Extreme Championship Wrestling (in its time, the most violent pro-wrestling promotion in America); Trump surrogates spent the convention being interviewed on camera in front of a wrestling ring, below banners for pro-wrestlers in ‘the Hardcore Hall of Fame’ (Dick, 2016).

By aligning himself with the spectre of pro-wrestling, Trump signalled a rejection of political correctness and rhetorical caution, as did his repeated campaign call-backs to the ‘loser’ belittling ethos he embodied on *The Apprentice* (Hall, et al. 2016: 76). This, in turn, earned him the same reputation as Ventura, as a ‘no bullshit’ straight-

talker. This was illustrated perfectly by an unlikely endorsement by Canadian singer Shania Twain, who in 2018 told *The Guardian* that she:

“would have voted for him [Trump] because, even though he was offensive, he seemed honest. Do you want straight or polite? Not that you shouldn’t be able to have both. If I were voting, I just don’t want bullshit. I would have voted for a feeling that it was transparent.” (quoted in Fairyington, 2018)

As in the case of Ventura, the insults and braggadocio – and subsequent ‘no bullshit’ image – were only possible due to the rebellious outsider ethos provided by a persona produced within ‘low brow’ popular culture: reality-TV star, beauty pageant promoter, pizza salesman, pro-wrestling performer.

At one level, conceptualising Trump, like Ventura, through the lens of carnival, faces possible limitations. After all, Trump’s persona on *The Apprentice* is the boss, the man in charge; the strong authority figure modelling success for contestants. Moreover, though his bullying persona on *The Apprentice* may have foreshadowed his mockery of competitors on the campaign trail, said mockery was levelled from a position of authority, wealth, and financial success. Is being a bully, boss, or ‘winner’ part of the figure of the carnival fool? Arguably, Trump’s great success is turning this authoritarian persona into a counterintuitive voice of ‘ordinary people’.

In comparison to the limited opportunities available during Ventura’s Web 1.0 epoch campaign, Trump embraced the communication opportunities offered by Web 2.0. Trump was an avid Twitter user well before declaring his candidacy, which he used as a tool of self-promotion, score-settling and political attacks; channelling his voice through the account, Trump used an inflammatory Tweeting style to build direct, emotional connection between his persona and ‘ordinary’ supporters. As well as offering countless ‘hooks’ for 24 hour news media desperate for stories, repeatedly re-inserting himself into conventional media coverage, it was this persona – and image

of authenticity that came with it – that afforded him the counterintuitive status as a “blue-collar billionaire” (Hall, *et al.* 2016: 71), at once a fabulously wealthy ‘winner’, but also a representative of ‘the ordinary people’.

Here, once again like Ventura, Trump’s campaign took on a carnivalesque form, with Trump in the role of Bakhtin’s carnival fool. As Gaufman (2018: 411) notes, in her own in-depth analysis of ‘the Trump carnival’:

‘Donald Trump, as a white, straight, rich male could hardly be seen as a subaltern voice, he nevertheless managed to galvanize a substantial amount of support among the American population, in marketing himself as an anti-establishment figure, that is, a subaltern voice, by using elements of the carnival culture.’ (ibid: 411)

This voice was that of a man of the people, on whose behalf Trump protested the existing political order and its elite, poking fun at their pretensions and power through acts of parody and mockery. During debates, at rallies and on Twitter, there were the same examples of billingsgate – the swearing, the insults and references to bodily parts (not least the size of his penis). For Bakhtin, the body is a key element within the carnivalesque and Trump’s physical performances upended the norms of presidential mannerisms; he gurned to crowds, pulled faces of mock-shock, disgust or amusement as befit his subject; he used comedic mannerisms to denigrate opponents – in one infamous example making spasmodic gestures with his body and pulling faces as he mocked a disabled journalist.

Threats of violence, a theme in Ventura’s campaign, also made a return; while he avoided the physical confrontations that were part of his pro-wrestling performances (during their aforementioned feud, McMahon was shoved, slapped, clotheslined and peppered with punches by *The Apprentice* host), the theme was nevertheless central to Trump’s rally performances. Addressing a Davenport Iowa

crowd, for example, he declared that while watching the Democratic Party National Convention he had “wanted to hit a couple of those speakers so hard”, singling out Michael Bloomberg who he wanted to hit “so hard his head would spin and he wouldn’t know what the Hell happened” (Kelly & Wetherbee, 2016: loc.1927). Trump encouraged crowds to beat up protestors, telling a rally in Las Vegas he’d “like to punch [a protestor] in the face” and musing that “maybe” a Black Lives Matters demonstrator ejected from a rally “should have been roughed up” (MacGuille, 2016). During rallies, alongside his signature pistol gesture from *The Apprentice*, Trump mimed firing rifles as part of a firing squad (“In the old days, it would have been...”) (Hall, et al., 2016: 83). All of this was in keeping with the persona produced during his years in reality-TV and pro-wrestling.

Complementing existing analyses conceptualising Trump through Bakhtin’s carnival fool (Gaufman, 2018; Hall, et al. 2016), this article emphasises that this *role* was only available to him due to his status as a politainer whose persona was produced within ‘low culture’ entertainment forms. It was through this cultural persona carrying over unabated into the political arena that Donald Trump enjoyed the outsider, anti-establishment ethos that in turn made possible the sort of rhetorical ‘smack talk’, which positioned him in sections of the popular imagination as a straight-talking man of the people, in contrast to his career politician opponents – both those within the GOP and ultimately Hillary Clinton.

Conclusion

This article has drawn out the similarities between the political insurgencies of Jesse Ventura in 1999 and Donald Trump in 2016, charting their own political collaborations in 1999 as members of the Reform Party and identifying the wider lessons a

comparison of their individual campaigns offers for the study of contemporary celebrity politics. In doing so, it goes beyond analyses of celebrity politics that emphasise how celebrities' fame is traded for political power. Instead, it draws upon the concept of the 'politainer', introduced by Conley and Shultz (2000), a concept that identifies a particular type of celebrity politician who, rather than shedding the persona they developed within the entertainment world, carries this persona with them from the cultural into the political sphere – and supplemented it with an incorporation of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of Carnival and in particular the role of the carnival fool.

By operationalising these analytical concepts, the article argues that Trump, like Ventura before him, can be understood as a politainer, whose persona as an entertainer crossed, unabated, into the political sphere. This is an important point to recognise since the heterodox nature of both Ventura and Trump's political campaign styles can in part be explained by the nature of the cultural spheres within which their personas were produced; specifically, the fact that their personas were produced within genres of popular culture generally positioned as having 'low' cultural value (i.e. pro-wrestling, action movies, reality-TV and beauty pageants) in comparison to 'higher', more elite forms of culture. These personas, and the cultural attachments that came with them, furnished Ventura and Trump with an anti-establishment ethos. This in turn granted them an ability to employ carnivalesque forms of rhetoric and performance, such as billingsgate, normally unavailable to political campaigners, providing them with popular images as 'no bullshit' straight-talkers. Operating in different media epochs, to the different degrees that they were available Ventura and Trump each took advantage of two-way media of communication ('shock jock' radio phone-ins for Ventura, Twitter for Trump) to deliver 'shocking' statements that drew attention and coverage from conventional media and build direct emotional

connections with the public and authenticate their straight-talking personas – personas that marked them as outsider candidates. This outsider status made each of them viable conduits for political protest – a role they played in the manner of Bakhtin’s carnival fool – for an electorate alienated by mainstream career politicians.

In addition, however, the same productive process meant this was also the only role available to both figures. As Street (2018) describes, ‘[c]elebrity performances are shaped by the conventions of the genre from which they emerge’ (ibid: 8); both Ventura and Trump’s personas were developed within low cultural ‘genres’ and any attempt to shed the trappings of that past would have appeared as inauthentic as a ‘mainstream’ politician seeking to ape them. The cringe-inducing attempts of Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John McCain to appeal to WWE fans by spouting catch-phrases during the 2008 campaign offer a prime illustration of this fact (Campuzano, 2016).

Taken together, this analysis thus identifies the importance of the specific ‘cultural production’ of celebrities themselves – that is, the context within which they are moulded, formed and presented before entering the political arena – to understanding the development of subsequent campaigning styles following a transition into a celebrity politician. More than a case of ‘name recognition’ offering paths to political power, it illustrates how celebrity politicians who enjoy an attachment to truly popular forms of cultural representation, can be afforded serious advantages over career politician opponents, should they choose to embrace (assuming they can even abandon) a cultural persona produced within such ‘low culture’ genre forms.

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