

Alexander Harrold
Final Paper
Marc Bousquet
Melodrama, Politics and Culture
05/05/173

Donald Trump: Winning Over a Melodramatic-Conditioned Society

Donald Trump is an American celebrity businessman who rose to arguable the highest position of power in the world as president of the United States. Central to his success was the implementation of melodramatic rhetoric used to persuade and unify a huge number of Americans. The essence of much of what Trump says is fundamentally melodramatic: designed to appeal to people's emotions, unifying them through moral polarization and sensationalism. I am going to identify the presence of melodrama in Trump's ascendance to power, evaluating how he uses melodramatic devices as tools of persuasion in the 2016 Presidential Election.

Donald Trump fulfill's societies desire for thrill and sensation. Trump understands the importance of sensationalism as a device for gaining the support of today's voters, who are intrinsically conditioned to the melodramatic media saturated world. Having starred in the reality TV show The Apprentice, Trump knows how to sell himself as an entertaining individual -in public and on screen. He is direct, outspoken and prone to knowingly provoke conflict. These factors however seem to work in his favor. People see Trumps as honest because he says and does so many absurd things in comparison with traditional candidates.

Today's media saturated society is inherently cynical towards politicians -we don't trust a lot of what they say and we expect them to lie to us. Recently Americans have begun to take a liking to political figures that display themselves with a sense of authenticity, not merely as talking heads but real people who let their real views known, for better or worse. I feel that this

shift in public perception towards political figures is due to the merging of official political programming with entertainment media. Today our official political discussions, for example the 2016 campaign debates, revolve around accusations and arguments between politicians more than they are concerned with significant real life issues. In this era of political entertainment we are so accustomed to the institutionalized melodramatic structures constantly dished out by the entertainment industry that when we change the channel from football, to reality television, and then to the official presidential debate, we expect to be conveniently provided the same thrills.

Studies from the University of London Institute of Cognitive research attempt to show a connection between neural biology and political orientation by studying neurological differences between liberals and conservatives. It states that “substantial differences exist in the cognitive styles of liberals and conservatives on psychological measures”. In particular one study displays how conservatives are inclined to react aggressively to threatening situations. This factor brings me on to the second major way in which Donald Trump implements melodrama as a psychological tactic.

Donald Trump deliberately provokes fear and aggression by applying emotionally exaggerated melodramatic structures to more intricate political and worldly affairs. Despite the fact that violence rates have actually declined over the past few decades, Trump leads us to believe that this is not the case. Whether he is mustering support against the shared enemy of Isis or dangerous immigrant rapists, Trump is constantly attempting to instill fear within the American people by implementing melodramatic rhetoric that simplifies situations as binary narrative structures of good versus evil. YouTube creator Charlie Houpert sheds light on the power that fear has in controlling large groups of people.

“Fear is an incredibly powerful emotion. It captures our attention like no other emotion can. We focus intensely on the thing that is giving us that fear. Secondly, it shuts down higher thinking [...] Our critical thinking skills dip as we focus solely on protecting ourselves. Thirdly, it feels crappy, so the fastest way to get out of fear and move toward a powerful emotion is to move into anger.”

Trump utilizes fear in the same way that today’s major news stations portray the world as a consistently threatening place in order to captivate and entertain viewers. The negative implementations of Trump’s oversimplified moral pluralizing are apparent in the way that it gives him a certain power over the authority of liability. During the 2016 campaign Trump was responsible for creating simplified ideas of American minorities. “When Mexico sends it’s people, they’re not sending their best [...] They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” (Presidential Announcement Speech, June 16, 2015). Also in his First Address to Congress Trump announces that, thanks to his deeds, “the bad ones are going out as we speak”.

In these depictions Trump attempts to plainly illustrate an oversimplified villain for Americans to be scared of and unite against in an aggressive response. Trump’s frequent statements about crime and immigrants underscores a common public opinion that crime is correlated with immigration. However, according to a study by the Congressional Research Service this is a misperception that is not supported by statistical evidence. The study found that “non-citizens make up a smaller percentage of the inmate population in state prisons and jails, compared to their percentage to the total U.S. population”. Trump’s outright racial stereotyping through melodramatic character standardization is helping fuel racial conflict in America today.

In his speeches Trump embellishes real world problems with melodramatic narratives that attempt to play to people's emotions as a means of gaining their support. Upon analyzing many of his public appearances a pattern seems to emerge in the structure of Mr. Trump's statements and responses. This format begins with the promotion of fear and anxiety in relation to the given issue, for example in his first address to congress Trump states "we must understand the circumstances we inherited" before he enforces the numerous pressing terrors and evils that threaten America. In this narrative structure Trump labels the American people as the victims, striving to heroically overcome evil and protect America's freedom and values. Trump then usually concludes his poorly formulated arguments with one of his stock catchphrases (such as "make America great again") to convey, in simple narrative form, a unified, free (yet victimized) America overcoming the evils that threaten the nation.

In my research I hope I provide the reader with an insight into how Donald Trump applies various melodramatic instruments to manage his public image, to persuade people by toying with their emotional response, and to unify large groups of Americans around binary character types and oversimplified narrative frameworks. Trump is responsible for utilizing sensationalism, stereotyping, strategic enemy identification and the victimization of the American people in an effort to muster public support and ultimately gain an incredible amount of power. It is vital that we educate the population of how these manipulative tactics can so easily influence today's melodrama-conditioned society, so that we can be weary of those who enforce such strategies and make better decisions in the future.

References:

Melodrama and modernity: early sensational cinema and its contexts - Ben Singer - Columbia University Press - 2001

The Melodramatization of Public Culture - Marc Bousquet

Donald Trump - First Address to Congress - Feb 18th, 2017 <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/28/politics/donald-trump-speech-transcript-full-text/>

Donald Trump's false comments connecting Mexican immigrants and crime - https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/?utm_term=.34eb59c1c8c9

12 Psychological Tactics Donald Trump Uses to Manipulate the Masses <http://highexistence.com/12-psychological-tactics-donald-trump-uses-to-manipulate-the-masses/>

Donald Trump's Incredible Powers Of Persuasion - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvVfj0ov8k8>