

TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

American Nightmare

**Donald Trump, Media Spectacle,
and Authoritarian Populism**

Douglas Kellner



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TRANSGRESSIONS: CULTURAL STUDIES AND EDUCATION

Cultural studies provides an analytical toolbox for both making sense of educational practice and extending the insights of educational professionals into their labors. In this context *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* provides a collection of books in the domain that specify this assertion. Crafted for an audience of teachers, teacher educators, scholars and students of cultural studies and others interested in cultural studies and pedagogy, the series documents both the possibilities of and the controversies surrounding the intersection of cultural studies and education. The editors and the authors of this series do not assume that the interaction of cultural studies and education devalues other types of knowledge and analytical forms. Rather the intersection of these knowledge disciplines offers a rejuvenating, optimistic, and positive perspective on education and educational institutions. Some might describe its contribution as democratic, emancipatory, and transformative. The editors and authors maintain that cultural studies helps free educators from sterile, monolithic analyses that have for too long undermined efforts to think of educational practices by providing other words, new languages, and fresh metaphors. Operating in an interdisciplinary cosmos, *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* is dedicated to exploring the ways cultural studies enhances the study and practice of education. With this in mind the series focuses in a non-exclusive way on popular culture as well as other dimensions of cultural studies including social theory, social justice and positionality, cultural dimensions of technological innovation, new media and media literacy, new forms of oppression emerging in an electronic hyperreality, and postcolonial global concerns. With these concerns in mind cultural studies scholars often argue that the realm of popular culture is the most powerful educational force in contemporary culture. Indeed, in the twenty-first century this pedagogical dynamic is sweeping through the entire world. Educators, they believe, must understand these emerging realities in order to gain an important voice in the pedagogical conversation.

Without an understanding of cultural pedagogy's (education that takes place outside of formal schooling) role in the shaping of individual identity – youth identity in particular – the role educators play in the lives of their students will continue to fade. Why do so many of our students feel that life is incomprehensible and devoid of meaning? What does it mean, teachers wonder, when young people are unable to describe their moods, their affective affiliation to the society around them. Meanings provided young people by mainstream institutions often do little to help them deal with their affective complexity, their difficulty negotiating the rift between meaning and affect. School knowledge and educational expectations seem as anachronistic as a ditto machine, not that learning ways of rational thought and making sense of the world are unimportant.

But school knowledge and educational expectations often have little to offer students about making sense of the way they feel, the way their affective lives are shaped. In no way do we argue that analysis of the production of youth in an electronic mediated world demands some “touchy-feely” educational superficiality. What is needed in this context is a rigorous analysis of the interrelationship between pedagogy, popular culture, meaning making, and youth subjectivity. In an era marked by youth depression, violence, and suicide such insights become extremely important, even life saving. Pessimism about the future is the common sense of many contemporary youth with its concomitant feeling that no one can make a difference.

If affective production can be shaped to reflect these perspectives, then it can be reshaped to lay the groundwork for optimism, passionate commitment, and transformative educational and political activity. In these ways cultural studies adds a dimension to the work of education unfilled by any other sub-discipline. This is what *Transgressions: Cultural Studies and Education* seeks to produce – literature on these issues that makes a difference. It seeks to publish studies that help those who work with young people, those individuals involved in the disciplines that study children and youth, and young people themselves improve their lives in these bizarre times.

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INTRODUCTION

Explaining the Donald Trump phenomenon is a challenge that will occupy critical theorists of U.S. politics for years to come. My first take on the Trump phenomenon is that Donald Trump won the Republican primary contest and is now a contender in the U.S. Presidential Election because he is the *master of media spectacle*, a concept that I've been developing and applying to U.S. politics and media since the mid-1990s.¹ In this study, I will first discuss Trump's use of media spectacle in his business career, in his effort to become a celebrity and reality-TV superstar, and his political campaign. Then I shall examine how Trump embodies Authoritarian Populism and has used racism, nationalism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the disturbing underside of American politics to mobilize his supporters in his successful Republican primary campaign and in the hotly contested 2016 general election.

The Trump phenomenon is a *teachable moment* that helps us understand the changes and contour of U.S. politics in the contemporary moment and the role of broadcast media, new media and social networking, and the politics of the spectacle. Trump reveals the threat of authoritarian populism, a phenomenon that is now global in scope, and the dangers of the rise to power of an individual who is highly destructive, who represents the worst of the 1 percent billionaire business class. Trump masquerades as a "voice of the forgotten man," as he advances a political agenda that largely benefits the rich and the military, and is a clear and present danger to U.S. democracy and global peace, constituting an American Nightmare for the world. Trump's rise to global celebrity and now political power is bound up with his use of media spectacle so, I begin my study with analysis of Trump and the politics of the spectacle.

DONALD TRUMP AND THE POLITICS OF THE SPECTACLE

I first came up with the concept of media spectacle to describe the key phenomenon of US media and politics in the mid-1990s. This was the era of the O.J. Simpson murder case and trial, the Clinton sex scandals, and the rise of cable news networks like Fox, CNN, and media MSNBC and the 24/7 news cycle that has dominated US politics and media since then.² The 1990s was also the period when the Internet and New Media took off so that anyone could be a political commentator, player, and participant in the spectacle, a phenomenon that accelerated as New Media morphed into Social Media and teenagers, celebrities, politicians, and others wanting to become part of the networked virtual world joined in.

The scope of the spectacle has thus increased in the past decades with the proliferation of new media and social networking like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, and the like that increases the breadth and participation of the spectacle. By “media spectacles” I am referring to media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information, and which become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public, and circulate through broadcasting networks, the Internet, social networking, smart phones, and other new media and communication technologies. In a global networked society, media spectacles proliferate instantaneously, become virtual and viral, and in some cases becomes tools of socio-political transformation, while other media spectacles become mere moments of media hype and tabloidized sensationalism.

Dramatic news and events are presented as media spectacles and dominate certain news cycles. Stories like the 9/11 terror attacks, mass shooting, Hurricane Katrina, Barack Obama and the 2008 U.S. presidential election, and in 2011 the Arab Uprisings, the Libyan revolution, the UK Riots, the Occupy movements and other major media spectacles of the era, cascaded through broadcasting, print, and digital media, seizing people’s attention and emotions, and generating

complex and multiple effects that may make 2011 as memorable a year in the history of social upheaval as 1968.³

In today's highly competitive media environment, "*Breaking News!*" of various sorts play out as media spectacle, including mega-events like wars, other spectacular terrorist attacks, extreme weather disasters, or, political insurrections and upheavals. These spectacles assume a narrative form and become focuses of attention during a specific temporal and historical period, that may only last a few days, but may come to dominate news and information for extended periods of time. Examples include the O.J. Simpson Trial and the Clinton sex/impeachment scandal in the mid-1990s, the stolen election of 2000 in the Bush/Gore presidential campaign, and natural and other disasters that have significant destructive effects and political implications, such as Hurricane Katrina, the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, or the Fukushima-Daiichi nuclear catastrophe. Media spectacles can even become signature events of an entire epoch as were, arguably, the 9/11 terrorist attacks which inaugurated a historical period that I describe as Terror War (Kellner, 2003).

I've argued since 2008 that the key to Barack Obama's success in two presidential elections is because he became a master of media spectacle, blending politics and performance in carefully orchestrated media spectacles (Kellner, 2009, 2012). Previously, the model of the mastery of presidential spectacle was Ronald Reagan who everyday performed his presidency in a well-scripted and orchestrated daily spectacle. Reagan was trained as an actor and every night Ron and Nancy reportedly practiced his lines for the next day performance like they had done in their Hollywood days. Reagan breezed through the day scripted with a teleprompter and well-orchestrated media events, smiling frequently, and pausing to sound-bite the line of the day.

Now in the 2016 election, obviously Donald Trump has emerged as a major form of media spectacle and has long been a celebrity and master of the spectacle with promotion of his buildings and casinos from the 1980s to the present, his reality-TV shows, self-aggrandizing events, and now his presidential campaign. Hence, Trump is empowered and enabled to run for the presidency in part because media spectacle has

become a major force in US politics, helping to determine elections, government, and, more broadly, the ethos and nature of our culture and political sphere, and Trump is a successful creator and manipulator of the spectacle.

I would also argue that in recent years U.S. wars have been orchestrated as media spectacle, recalling Bush Jr's 2003 Iraq shock and awe campaign for one example. Likewise, terrorism has been orchestrated as media spectacle since the 9/11 attack that was the most spectacular and deadly attack on the US heartland in history. As we know too well, school and mass shootings which can be seen as a form of domestic terrorism, have become media spectacles with one taking place in 2015 in Virginia on live TV, while the stock market, weather, and every other form of life can become part of a media spectacle. Hence, it is no surprise that political campaigns are being run as media spectacles and that Knights of the Spectacle like Donald Trump are playing the spectacle to win the presidency, although it is far from certain that the Donald will become King of the Spectacle.

Trump's biographies reveal that he was driven by a need to compete and win,⁴ and entering the highly competitive real estate business in New York in the 1980s, Trump saw the need to use the media and publicity to promote his celebrity and image. It was a time of tabloid culture and media-driven celebrity and Trump even adopted a pseudonym "John Baron" to give the media gossip items that touted Trump's successes in businesses, with women, and as a rising man about town.⁵

Trump derives his language and behavior from a highly competitive and ruthless New York business culture combined with an appreciation of the importance of media and celebrity to succeed in a media-centric hypercapitalism. Hence, to discover the nature of Trump's "temperament," personality, and use of language, we should recall his reality-TV show *The Apprentice* which popularized him into a supercelebrity and made the Donald a major public figure for a national audience. Indeed, Trump is the first reality-TV candidate who runs his campaign like a reality-TV series, boasting during the most chaotic episodes in his campaign that his rallies are the most entertaining, and

sending outrageous Tweets into the Twitter-sphere which than dominate the news cycle on the ever-proliferating mainstream media and social networking sites. Hence, Trump is the first celebrity candidate whose use of the media and celebrity star power is his most potent weapon in his improbable and highly surreal campaign.⁶

THE APPRENTICE, TWITTER, AND THE SUMMER OF TRUMP

Since Trump's national celebrity derived in part from his role in the reality-TV series *The Apprentice*,⁷ we need to interrogate this popular TV phenomenon to help explain the Trump phenomenon. The opening theme music "For the Love of Money", a 1973 R&B song by The O'Jays, established the capitalist ethos of the competition for the winning contestant to get a job with the Trump organization, and obviously money is the key to Trump's business and celebrity success, although there is much controversy over how rich Trump is, and, so far, he has not released his tax returns to quell rumors that he isn't as rich as he claims, that he does not contribute as much to charity as he has stated, and that many years he pays little or no taxes.

In the original format to *The Apprentice*, several contestants formed teams to carry out a task dictated by Trump, and each "contest" resulted with a winner and Trump barking "you're fired" to the loser. Ironically, some commentators believe that in the 2012 presidential election Barack Obama beat Mitt Romney handily because he early on characterized Romney as a billionaire who liked to fire people, which is ironic since this is Trump's signature personality trait in his business, reality-TV, and now political career, which has seen him fire two campaign managers and more advisors by August 2016.

The Apprentice premiered in January 2004, and after six seasons, a new format was introduced: *The Celebrity Apprentice*. The celebrity apprentice series generally followed the same premise as the original, but with celebrities as contestants participating to win money for their chosen charities, rather than winning a job opportunity with the Trump organization. There have been seven seasons of *The Celebrity Apprentice* since 2008, although NBC announced on June 29, 2015 that it was severing all business ties with Trump due to the latter's comments about Mexican immigrants, but has said its relationship with the producer of the series Mark Burnett and the show will continue.

When NBC started negotiating with Trump concerning the reality TV-series in 2002, according to NBC producer Jeff Gaspin, the network was not sure that the New York-centric real estate mogul would have a national resonance and the initial concept envisaged different billionaires each season hiring an apprentice. The show immediately got good ratings and Trump became a popular TV figure as he brought the contestants into his board room in Trump Tower, appraised their performances, insulted and sometimes humiliated those who did not do well, and fired the loser.⁸

The Apprentice's TV Producer Mark Burnett broke into national consciousness with his hit reality-TV show *The Survivor*, which premiered in 1992 a neo-Darwinian epic of alliances, backstabbing, and nastiness. The series provides an allegory of how one succeeds in the dog-eat-dog business world in which Donald Trump has thrived, and spectacularly failed as many of the books about him document. Both Burnett and Trump share the same neo-Darwinian (a)social ethos of 19th century ultracompetitive capitalism with some of Donald Trump's famous witticisms proclaiming:

- When somebody challenges you unfairly, fight back—be brutal, be tough—don't take it. It is always important to WIN!
- I think everyone's a threat to me.
- Everyone that's hit me so far has gone down. They've gone down big league.
- I want my generals kicking ass.
- I would bomb the shit out of them.
- You bomb the hell out of the oil. Don't worry about the cities. The cities are terrible.⁹

In any case, *The Apprentice* made Trump a national celebrity who became well-known enough to run for president and throughout the campaign Trump has used his celebrity to gain media time. Further, *The Apprentice* provided a Trumpian pedagogy of how to succeed in the cut-throat corporate capitalist business world with the show illustrating what aggressive, highly competitive, and sometimes amoral tactics are needed to win and gain success, and provided for

a generation the message that winning was everything and that losing was devastating.¹⁰

In addition to his campaign's ability to manipulate broadcast media, Trump is also a heavy user of Twitter and tweets obsessively throughout the day and night. Indeed, Trump may be the first major Twitter candidate, and certainly he is the one using it most aggressively and frequently. Twitter was launched in 2006, but I don't recall it being used in a major way in the 2008 election, although Obama used Facebook and his campaign bragged that he had over a million "Friends" and used Facebook as part of his daily campaign apparatus.

Twitter is a perfect vehicle for Trump as you can use its 140 character framework for attack, bragging, and getting out simple messages or posts that engage receivers who feel they are in the know and involved in TrumpWorld when they receive his tweets. When asked at an August 26, 2015, Iowa event as to why he uses Twitter so much, he replied that it was easy, it only took a couple of seconds, and that he could attack his media critics when he "wasn't treated fairly." Trump has also used Instagram – an online mobile photo-sharing, video-sharing and social networking services that enables its users to take pictures and short videos, and share them on a variety of social networking platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr and Flickr.

Twitter is perfect for General Trump who can blast out his opinions and order his followers what to think. It enables Businessman and Politician Trump to define his brand and mobilize those who wish to consume or support it. Trump Twitter gratifies the need of Narcissist Trump to be noticed and recognized as a Master of Communication who can bind his warriors into an on-line community. Twitter enables the Pundit-in-Chief to opine, rant, attack, and proclaim on all and sundry subjects, and to subject TrumpWorld to the indoctrination of their Fearless Leader.

Hence, Trump is mastering new media as well as dominating television and old media through his orchestration of media events as spectacles and daily Twitter Feed. In Trump's presidential campaign kickoff speech on June 16, 2015, when he announced he was running for President, Trump and his wife Melania dramatically ascended down the escalator at Trump Towers, and the Donald strode up to a

gaggle of microphones and dominated media attention with his drama. The opening speech of his campaign made a typically inflammatory remark that held in thrall news cycles for days when he stated: “The U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else’s problems. [Applause] Thank you. It’s true, and these are the best and the finest. When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. 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. And some, I assume, are good people.”

This comment ignited a firestorm of controversy and provided a preview of Things to Come concerning vile racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and the other hallmarks of Trump’s Cacophony of Hate. Debate over Trump’s assault on undocumented immigrants would come to dominate daily news cycles of the Republican primaries and would continue to play out in the general election in Fall 2016. In the lead up to the first Republican primary debate in Fall 2015, Donald Trump got the majority of media time, and his daily campaign appearances and the Republican primary debates became media spectacles dominated by Trump. Every day that Trump had a campaign event, the cable news networks would hype the event with crawlers on the bottom of the TV screen proclaiming “Waiting for Trump,” with air-time on cable TV dominated by speculation on what he would talk about. Trump’s speeches were usually broadcast live, often in their entirety, a boon of free TV time that no candidate of either party was awarded. After the Trump event, for the rest of the day the pundits would dissect what he had said and his standing vis-à-vis the other Republican candidates. If Trump had no campaign event planned, he would fire off a round of Tweets against his opponents on his highly active Twitter account – which then would be featured on network cable news discussions as well as social media.

Hence, Trump’s orchestration of media spectacle and a compliant mainstream media was a crucial factor in thrusting Trump ever further into the front runner status in the Republican primaries and winning for him the overwhelming amount of media attention and eventually the Republican nomination. The first major quantitative study released

notes that from mid-June 2015 after Trump announced he was running through mid-July, Trump was in 46% of the news media coverage of the Republican field, based on Google news hits; he also got 60% of Google news searches, and I will bet that later academic studies will show how he dominated all media from newspapers to television to Twitter and new media to social networking during the Republican primaries and then during the general election.¹¹

At a press conference on August 26, 2015, before his appearance at a rally in Dubuque Iowa, Trump bragged how all three US cable news networks, as well as the other big three networks and even foreign news networks, were following him around all day, broadcasting all his live campaign appearances, and even his appearance for Jury duty in New York one day (he didn't have to serve and cable news anchors led off that night with ordinary people who had been waiting all day to see if they would be enrolled to serve on a jury who were asked what Trump had been doing all day, if he'd said anything, and so on, clearly a waste of news space and sign that Trump was dominating Republican primary coverage).

The August 26, 2015 Iowa event was the day that a Univision anchor Jorge Ramos tried to interrupt Trump's press conference to challenge Trump on immigration, in which Trump had his operatives throw Ramos out, but then let him back in to create another media spectacle of Trump vs Ramos as they battled it out debating immigration, letting Trump dominate yet another news cycle.

The same day, Trump bragged about how one major media insider told him that it was the "Summer of Trump" and that it was amazing how he was completely dominating news coverage. Trump also explained, correctly I think, why he was getting all the media attention: "RATINGS," he explained, "it's ratings, the people love me, they want to see me, so they watch TV when I'm on." And I do think it is ratings that leads the profit-oriented television networks to almost exclusively follow Trump's events and give him live TV control of the audience. In his 1989 book, *Fast Capitalism*, and *Speeding Up Fast Capitalism*, a sequel to his earlier book, Ben Agger presented a framework for analyzing mutations in society, culture, and politics that have made possible a Donald Trump.¹² Without a media-saturated

“fast capitalism” and media-centric politics, new technologies like Twitter and social networking, and a celebrity culture that has morphed into politics, there could never be a Donald Trump. Trump’s ability to dominate the mediascape of contemporary capitalism and now sectors of the political scene is facilitated by quasi-religious beliefs that the allegedly successful businessman (who may or may not be a billionaire) has the qualifications to lead, and there is no doubt but that his celebrity status attracts devoted followers.