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# **Unauthorized Fictions: Political Conflict as Spectacle and the Question of Trust in the Age of Trump**

Vinzenz Hediger and Felix M. Simon

**Why do supporters of former US president Donald Trump make short tribute videos which resemble mainstream action film trailers with their idol as the protagonist? And why does the Trump campaign use a similar trailer template for video of rallies and campaign spots? This contribution traces the increasing use of cinematic storytelling templates in the digital media environment, particularly for Trump's right-wing authoritarian politics. We focus on tribute and campaign videos which appeal to the viewer's tacit knowledge of the trailer format to make political conflicts legible as dramatic confrontations. We argue that their stylization of political conflict as spectacle**

242 **should be understood as an example of “ocular democracy” (Green 2011), in which the gaze, rather than the voice, is the source of popular empowerment. To the extent that these films signal a threat to liberal democracy, it lies not in the narrativization of conflict in cinematic terms, but in the propagation of generalized distrust in combination with particularized trust in the figure of the demagogue.**

### **Ocular Democracy and the Rise of the Trump Tribute Trailer**

In the run up to the 2016 US presidential election, short video tributes to Donald Trump appeared on YouTube, attracting thousands and sometimes hundreds of thousands of views (Montreux 2017a; 2017b; Chapman 2019; Guardian News 2018). Made by supporters, these films emulate the style and tone of contemporary action film trailers. They use news footage to build a narrative of Trump as the strident outsider who takes on the dark forces of the establishment in the name of the people and ends up winning against all odds. The model was taken up by the Trump campaign itself, which used the trailer template for warm-up videos at rallies and in the all-important “closing argument” final spot of the campaign (The Telegraph 2022; Trump White House Archived 2020). In the 2020 election cycle, supporter-made tribute trailers appeared again (MateyProductions 2019; 2020a; 2020b). A trailer video whipped up the crowd on the mall on January 6, 2021, and a trailer-style video announced Trump’s 2024 presidential bid on “Truth Social” (Liberty South Media 2022).

These videos appeal to a “knowledge the viewers don’t realize they have,” a tacit knowledge of the trailer as a generic form, acquired in passing through their exposure to contemporary

audiovisual culture (Gregersen and Lankjær 2017, 76).<sup>1</sup> Contemporary trailers simulate a film by providing a condensed summary which ends in a cliffhanger, but suggests that the protagonist will prevail. In a seeming paradox, trailers anticipate the coming attraction by creating an incomplete sense of something that has already happened, and leaving one desiring to fill in the gaps (Hediger 2011, especially chapter 7). If “horse-race coverage” casts politics in terms of sports, trailer videos cast political conflict in terms of immersive fiction with as-yet-open but largely pre-ordained outcomes.

Julian Sanchez, a conservative pundit who made a name for himself decrying the “epistemic closure” on the right, has criticized the encroachment of cinematic templates on politics as a “cinematic epistemology”: voters see themselves as actors in quasi-fictional plots and crowd out rational argument (Sanchez 2022). If we define democracy with Adam Przeworski (2019) as a system of governance in which parties lose elections and accept defeat, and consider that the Trump tribute trailers express allegiance to a movement which led to the attempted overthrow of the duly elected government of the US on January 6, 2021, Sanchez would seem to have a point. Democratic deliberation usually requires propositional knowledge and openness.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, a framing of politics anchored in tacit knowledge of immersive fiction with seemingly preordained outcomes undermines this standard, which could explain the delusions of power which drove the insurgency of January 6.

- 1 The concept of “tacit knowledge,” which stipulates that “we can know more than we can tell,” was introduced by Michael Polanyi (2009; 2015). For a discussion of tacit knowledge and corporeality in film experience see Christiane Voss’ article “Film Experience and the Formation of Illusion: The Spectator as ‘Surrogate Body’ for the Cinema” (2011).
- 2 “Our knowledge has propositional structure; beliefs can be represented in the form of statements,” is the opening statement of Jürgen Habermas’ “Theory of Communicative Action,” which provides a framework for his theory of democratic deliberation (Habermas 1984, 8).

244 Going one step further, and following a pattern of “Weimar analogies” which cast Trumpism as the second coming of fascism (Bessner 2017), philosopher Jason Stanley (2021) marshalled an impressive visual lexicon to read the rally video/trailer shown on January 6, 2021 as a reiteration of 1930s propaganda. However, fascism can be defined as the defense of the state against perceived internal enemies—in the case of Nazi Germany, Jews, Sinti, Roma, homosexuals, communists, etc. (Nolte 2008). Trump videos tell the opposite story: that of the state, in the guise of the current government, as the enemy. A line from one of Trump’s speeches, often used in the trailer videos, summarizes the plot: “Our movement is about replacing a failed and corrupt political establishment with a new government controlled by you, the American People”(Montreux 2017a). Far from a harbinger of imminent fascism, systematic distrust of government and the state is a key marker of a functioning modern democracy (Rosanvallon 2008). As a matter of fact, the story of the leader who reclaims democratic rule from a corrupt elite in the name of the people is as old as democracy itself. The figure of the *demagogos* installed by the masses to challenge the nobility is central to Aristotle’s—deeply skeptical—assessment of democracy in his “Politics” (Canfora 2008, 9). What is more, left-wing versions of this story also exist (Mouffe 2018).

The tribute trailers should thus not be relegated to a fringe area outside of democratic politics, nor should they be too quickly read as a devious misappropriation of democratic tropes, as Stanley warns in his earlier work on propaganda (2016). Rather, the story they tell is part and parcel of the “democratic political imaginary” (Trautmann 2020), and their form and mode of production are inherently democratic. In his classic study on the emergence of popular sovereignty, Edmund S. Morgan speaks of the “necessary fictions” which are required for governance:

Make believe that the king is divine, make believe that he can do no wrong or make believe that the voice of the people is the voice of god. Make believe that the people *have* a voice or

make believe that the representatives of the people *are* the people. (1988, 13f.)

The tools of make-believe in both modern representative systems of governance and totalitarian ones include a set of authorized stories and symbols that legitimate claims to power and define a space of governance (Frank 2021). The Trump tribute trailers emerge in a more equitable and democratic media ecology. As fan art and user-generated content, they are unauthorized fictions of popular sovereignty. They exemplify what Philipp Manow (2020) calls “the (de)democratization of democracy”, a surplus of popular democracy which poses a challenge to established, liberal democracy. In the fiction of the tribute trailers, distrust is warranted by the people’s sense of dispossession, and trust is restored through the capture of democratic processes by the populist insurgency under the leadership of the *demagogos*, who serves as the conduit of popular sovereignty. As such, the tribute trailers propose a solution, however imaginary, for a core problem of democratic governance: namely, how trust in government can be maintained and, if necessary, restored in complex societies ridden by conflicts which threaten to erode that trust.

In this contribution, we focus on how the Trump videos dramatize the dynamics of trust and conflict using the trailer template, and what that dramatization entails. The trailer videos warrant an empirical study concerning their reach and impact, but our focus in the current essay is theoretical. By framing insurgent democratic politics as a spectacular drama, the videos participate in what Jeffrey Edward Green has called “ocular democracy,” a configuration of popular sovereignty in which not the voice, but the eyes of the people function “as a site ... of popular empowerment,” and in which power over politicians is exerted through the “disciplinary force of the People’s gaze” (Green 2011, 3 and 107). Distrust and the emergence of trust in ocular democracy, then, is a matter of spectatorial affect, and of the power of the spectatorial gaze, trained on both the protagonist

246 and their antagonists in the drama of political conflict. This also means that spectatorial affect and the tacit knowledge of cinematic templates are inherent to democratic deliberation, and not just noise to be filtered out on the way to a rational theory of deliberation focused on propositional knowledge (Chambers 2012).

## **Trump Tribute Videos as Trailers and Political Cinema**

The term “trailer” initially designated a black strip attached to a film print for protection. In serials from the 1910s, this strip was used to announce the week’s episode. With the advent of the feature film, the term “trailer” carried over to short films consisting of clips which advertised the coming attractions. Cinematic trailers are still considered to be the most effective advertising for films, because they address a captive audience of moviegoers.

For a century now, the industry has been counting on the audience’s tacit knowledge of the trailer’s form to facilitate communication. Based on an extensive empirical study, Ed Tan and Valentijn Visch argue that viewers recognize film genres not through story events but by processing of what they call “filmic realization cues” (Tan and Visch 2008, 301). These cues include what David Bordwell (1985) in his neo-formalist theory of film narration calls “style,” i.e. filmic surface parameters such as color, light, sound, music, or editing, which he opposes to “deep” features such as “syuzhet” (or plot) and “fabula” (or story world). “Filmic realization cues” can also be described as elements of style which the viewer has learned to classify as typical for, and thus indicative of, specific genres of film. In Hollywood’s classical sound era, trailers used voice-overs, roll-on titles, and a wide variety of wipes (i.e., image transitions), regardless of the genre of the advertised film. Audiences would instantly know that they were watching a trailer and process the information accordingly.

Wipes and titles vanished around 1960, and since the mid-1980s North American mainstream movie trailers have been built from the soundtrack up. Now, the beginning of a trailer is marked by an element of sound—usually a fragment of dialogue—paired with a segment of black film. Continuity is established through dialogue and music, and visuals are added in an editing pattern which is unique to trailers and which trailer makers describe as “the grid.” In this pattern images from a scene with dialogue are interspersed with other images which add information and perspective. This editing technique allows trailers to condense the narrative of a two-hour feature film into a two-minute summary.

Viewers often complain that trailers give away too much of the film, but this is done by design. In a saturated media market with highly specific target groups, moviegoers rely on trailers for information first, but they trust word of mouth the most. Trailers are designed to reach the intended core audience of the film, but they are also designed to keep everyone for whom the film is not intended away from the cinemas, to minimize negative impressions spread by word of mouth (Hediger 2001). Trump tribute trailers, TV spots, and campaign videos carefully emulate this stylistic template. However, they are not advertisements for films, but tools of affective mobilization. They tell the story of the Trump movement as a popular insurgency to help the viewer justify and feel good about their voting preference. They address viewers not simply as citizens and voters, but as members of a protest movement and participants in a conflict of historical proportions, and just as contemporary trailers do, they deliberately exclude part of the audience as well.

However, if the Trump tribute videos are trailers in form, but not function, and if they are also not simply campaign spots, then what, exactly, are they?

From a media studies point of view, the tribute trailers are UGC or “user-generated content” (Cunningham and Craig 2019). Trump tribute trailers, some of which were made by film-industry



[Figure 1] A screenshot of Donna Gail's commentary and the responses it generated (Source: Montreux 2017a).

professionals, may also be described as a semi-professional form of fan art (Barnes 2022; Hediger 2020). For the fan, political allegiance is not primarily a matter of rational calculation and material interest, like union or party membership. In fact, and despite the many suggestions to the contrary, the driving force of the Trump movement is not the often-quoted "economic anxiety." In 2016, Trump voters on average had twice the income of voters for Hillary Clinton (Silver 2017), and they typically were among the wealthiest in poor districts (Blum 2017). Trump voters eat cake every day, and the solace which MAGA-supporter Donna Gail finds in Brandos Montreux' tribute video may well be described as a form of political wellness for the relatively affluent.<sup>3</sup> Much in that spirit, in the comments section of Montreux' "Trump: The Great Victory" (2017a) tribute video, Donna Gail writes: "Whenever I feel a little down in the dumps, I watch this video. It always makes me feel good! MAGA!" (see fig. 1).

From a film studies point of view, the tribute trailers can be seen as amateur films. The TV spots are advertising, and the rally videos are non-artistic utility films. They are also found-footage

3 A recent study in experimental economics shows that partisan group identity was a better predictor of political positioning and polarization than assumptions about rational choice and material interests (Bauer et al. 2022).



films composed of documentary and stock footage. Incidentally, this classificatory fuzziness proves an important point: like other types of tacit knowledge, cinematic knowledge has “a sweeping presence in the world” but “cannot be easily formalized and put into exact words” (Sen 2009, x). This can explain why even in the new digital media environment, which is sometimes called the “post-cinema condition” (De Rosa and Hediger 2017), “cinema” has proven to be remarkable resilient as an umbrella term for audiovisual formats. The persistence of the term “cinema” can be seen as an indicator that “cinema” circumscribes a distinctive realm of knowledge, rather than a specific medium, technology, or art form. It is, perhaps first and foremost, a name for what we know about, and through, cinema, but cannot say.

So, if Trump tribute trailers are “cinema,” can we also treat Trump videos as “political cinema”?

If cinema were political by default, we would not need a category like “political cinema” to designate when and where cinema is, in fact, political. But if cinema were apolitical by default it would not be the quintessential modern art it has often been hailed to be, let alone a “democratic emblem” (Badiou 2009). Jacques Rancière (2013) has argued that in the transition to modernity a “regime of representation” makes way for an “aesthetic regime” of art. In the first, art is directly subservient to power and serves to represent and legitimate the established order. In the second, art acquires the freedom to concern itself with the play of form, while the privilege of artistic representation is accorded not just to the king, but to anyone. This also means that in the “aesthetic regime,” art has to negotiate its relationship with power, which is why modern art incessantly oscillates between the poles of autonomy and engagement, i.e. between setting its own rules apart from politics, and taking a stance by shaping political causes into an aesthetic experience.

By virtue of its popular resonance and its strong purchase on social reality (which is usually theorized under the rubric of

250 “realism”) cinema is perhaps more strongly entangled with power than any other art. Narrative films translate complex social issues into accessible and memorable emotional experiences, shaping what audiences perceive as relevant, representable, and socially feasible. Cinematic representation, in other words, is also a form of political representation. Political representation is the approximate procedural solution for the problem of self-governance in modern societies (Möllers 2021; Stasavage 2020). Through elections, the governed consent to be governed by delegates for a limited period of time. For cinematic representation, the ballot box is the box office. Stars express and represent the desires and aspirations of their fans, ruling by charisma, but they serve at the mercy of the audience (Dyer 2019). Struggles about cinematic representation, like the recent award show controversies (e.g. #OscarsSoWhite, addressing the non-nomination of Greta Gerwig for Barbie), are actually political struggles about who belongs to a polity and who does not.

In Hollywood, the standard response to cinema’s entanglement with politics has been to avoid overt political statements whenever possible. Studios operate with an ethos of neutrality not unlike that of a professional bureaucracy in the Weberian sense. Until the 1960s, Hollywood studios used the Motion Picture Production Code to make films inoffensive and palatable to the broadest possible audience on a global scale (Black 1996). More recently, Hollywood has engaged in what Thomas Elsaesser (2011, 247) calls “structured ambiguity,” offering narratives which accommodate multiple perspectives and ideological positions, rather than endorsing a rigid ideology. However, even an innocuous format like the trailer is embedded in politics. The Trump tribute trailers make this inherent connection explicit by taking a clear side. They break with Hollywood’s cardinal rule of neutrality and enlist one of cinema’s most recognizable formats, the trailer, for a partisan cause. These trailers project a particular view and partisan notion of the democratic polity not as the inclusive unity of “we, the people” but as a community bound

by a systematic distrust in government and the particularized trust in a single leader. In this dynamic, as we will see, structured ambiguity remains in play.

## **Cinematic Epistemology, Ocular Democracy, and the Question of Trust**

In his Twitter thread from January 2022, Sanchez observes that QAnon followers and other conspiracy theorists on the right were increasingly using cinema as a frame of reference (Sanchez 2022). Conspiracy theories have, of course, been a constant element of democratic politics since the French revolution, with a decisive uptick since the 1950s, particularly in the US (Hofstadter 2016). Yet the “mistake” embedded in what Sanchez calls “cinematic epistemology” is to believe that outsiders are right simply because they are outsiders. As a defender of the Enlightenment, Sanchez sets out to undermine the epistemic authority which the conspiracy theorists accord to such cinematic templates. In the Enlightenment tradition, the democratic subject is a rational actor. As Jason Frank writes, quoting John Locke, “If the king’s passive subjects were an ‘image doting rabble,’ democracy’s active citizens were a ratio-critical public” (Frank 2021, 2). In order to become rational, the members of this public have to first become iconoclasts and emancipate themselves from the thrall of images, a task which is never fully completed. In Sanchez’ *Kulturkritik* view, though, the adherents of cinematic epistemology fall prey to the “movie logic” and regress to the state of “image doting rabble.”

However, the Trump tribute trailer creators are not so much part of an “image-doting rabble” as they are of an “image-making rabble.” Rather than dismissing them as “low-information voters,” defenders of liberal democracy would be well advised to assume that the image-making rabble know what they are doing. Empowered by easy-to-access and easy-to-use digital resources—including online repositories, recording devices, and editing software—they use the trailer template to make a

252 spectacle of politics, but it is a spectacle of their own making. It is the gaze of the filmmaker and their implied audience, starting with themselves in the imagined position of the spectator, which casts the protagonist in a quasi-fictional conflict and endows him with the power to resolve it.

Rather than a victim of “cinematic epistemology,” the bearer of this gaze resembles the inaugural figure of “ocular democracy.” Since antiquity, spectatorship has been associated with ignorance and dependence: looking, viewing an illusion (on stage, or on screen) is the opposite of knowing, and of action. By contrast, the “emancipated spectator” (in the words of Jacques Rancière) has been freed from the restrictions of a hierarchical social order: free to see what they see, know what to think of it, and to do what they think needs to be done about it (Rancière 2021). The spectator of the tribute trailer assumes the position of an emancipated spectator and endows it with the “disciplinary force of the People’s Gaze” (Green 2011, 107): they know they cannot trust government, and they act accordingly.

As a form of holding the governing to account, distrust is indispensable for democratic governance. But so is trust—“for the simple reason that trust expands the domain of democratic self-rule,” as Mark Warren (2010, 310–45) argues. For Warren, distrust in liberal democracy needs to be confined to a narrow section of government. In the US voters channel their systematic distrust towards the legislative branch and, to a lesser extent, to the executive, which explains the constantly low approval ratings of both Congress and the President, while the judicial branch of government and the electoral process have traditionally been a source and object of generalized trust, i.e. trust which generalizes “from family, clan, or congregation to extensive relationships among compatriots” (Warren 2018, 77). To this procedural optimism Claude Lefort (1981) opposes a more skeptical view when he argues that by making politics a separate domain of thought, modern democracies are predisposed to totalitarianism. Striking the right balance between distrust of certain parts of the

system and generalized trust in the institutional arrangements and representatives of government is thus key to democratic governance.

A trusting relationship is established, as Warren writes, “when trust judgments are met with *trustworthy* responses by those who are trusted” (Warren 2018, 75). But in mass democracy, those responses are almost always mediated, and very few people know or have met their elected representatives. To build trust in such a mediated environment, politicians and other figures purporting to govern with the consent of the governed must be responsive to their constituents’ expectations of trustworthiness and regularly display responses which are public, generalized, and verifiable. Mass democracy requires “infrastructures of political address,” as Ravi Vasudevan (2022, 360) calls them, which project an image of leadership that enables and sustains systems of governance. Long and grueling electoral campaigns are one of the most important trust-building exercises in liberal democracy. To build trust, politicians must subject themselves to public scrutiny and pass a series of character tests which are largely unrelated to their policies, with journalists acting as the steward of the public’s interest (Albalat-Mascarell and Carrió-Pastor 2019). The personalization of politics, then, is a feature, not a bug: not a sign of decay of the public sphere and of democratic governance, but indispensable to a mediated, ocular mass democracy (McAllister 2007). This also means that the governed are, ineluctably, spectators of the self-presentations of the governing, and as such, their primary role is to be judges of character.

In a mediated, ocular democracy the governed are in a spectatorial relationship (Smith 2022) to a public figure appearing by virtue of the “infrastructures of political address,” and the trust judgment is primarily one of allegiance or non-allegiance. Images of voters interacting with the candidate in political advertisements dramatize this trust relationship. In film studies terms, such images show a diegetic audience, much like the audience reaction shots in “backstage” musicals from the

254 classical Hollywood period, which serve as indicators of the artistic success (or failure) of the protagonist-performers. Trump differed from traditional candidates in that he failed every character test in every way, but nevertheless persevered. Studies show allegiance is subject to confirmation bias, and that constituents will tend to stay loyal to a leader they trust for longer than is warranted by the available information (Brader and Ryan 2017). One could argue that character judgments in ocular democracy constitute a kind of tacit knowledge, and that tacit knowledge is slower to change than explicit, propositional knowledge. But we argue that a key to understanding Trump's resilience is that the "disciplinary force of the People's gaze" (Green 2011, 107) lies not just in the power to pass judgments, but also in the power to redeem. The emancipated spectators of the Trump tribute trailers wield their power as fans to judge. Granting forgiveness for the transgressions of their idols is one of the many pleasures of fandom. It gives fans a sense of agency and power, as their act of forgiveness mimetically replicates the act of transgression by defying the existing normative order. In this mimetic transgression, the emancipated spectators affirm themselves as the unbound subject of popular sovereignty. The "People's gaze" is always potentially an insurgent gaze, and the sense of lawlessness is part of Trump's appeal.

But exactly how democratic—or anti-democratic—is the emancipated spectator's gaze in the Trump tribute trailers?

In the Trump storyline, the viewer's (and voter's) distrust extends to the entirety of the government apparatus, including the electoral process, upon which Trump started to cast aspersions even during his successful first campaign for president. These tactics aim to undermine what Warren describes as "second-order trust" in institutions (Warren 2018, 34). This is a case of distrust extending beyond the narrow confines envisioned as productive by Warren and threatening to undermine trust in the system of governance as a whole. During such a conflict, the candidate, much like the hero in an action film fighting a corrupt

bureaucracy or large-scale conspiracy, is the only trustworthy actor—aside, of course, from the viewers themselves. As Rainer Forst writes, “trust in charismatic leaders and in ‘taking back control’ or aggressive demarcations (both internally and externally) are also a response to social and political insecurity and it challenges democratic forms of conflict, compromise, and social pluralism” (Forst 2022). Trump would obviously represent such a challenge. But eventually, in the course of the storyline and the resolution of the conflict, trust in government is restored through the candidate’s success at the ballot box. The storyline, then, would seem to be one of a crisis of trust, in which generalized trust in the institutional arrangements of liberal democracy is drowned out by systematic distrust, and ultimately replaced by what Forst and others describe as “authoritarian trust,” i.e. trust based on exclusionary criteria (us vs. them) or unquestioning allegiance. To authoritarian trust, Forst opposes the normative notion of justified trust, i.e. trust for which reasons are given. Justified trust can be achieved through partial or impartial justification, i.e. idiosyncratic justifications based on personal (and potentially exclusionary) reasons and motivations and justifications which are based on commitments to fairness or moral norms.

In the case of Trump, the partial justification is, at first sight, strongly exclusionary. Much of Trump’s political appeal seems to be based on racial animus (Breunig, De Neve, and Fabian 2020<sup>4</sup>). Trump cut his teeth in right-wing politics by mainstreaming the “birther” conspiracy theory, according to which then-President Barack Obama was ineligible for his office (Carew and Kelley-Romano 2017–8). Trump also put a portrait of Andrew Jackson in the Oval Office, the 7th president and populist champion of racial democracy for whites, at the exclusion of non-whites. There is evidence that racially motivated epistemic overconfidence

4 This study confirms our previous claim that the economic roots of Trump’s success are overstated.

256 affects beliefs in all areas of politics, including trust or distrust in scientific research, and other positions typically held by loyal Trump supporters (Benegal and Motta 2022). Trust in Trump would thus seem to strongly be rooted in racists attitudes. However, in the history of American presidential politics, other candidates have tried, and failed, to win the highest office with campaigns centered around racial animus, from Strom Thurmond in 1948 and George Wallace in 1968 to Pat Buchanan in 1988. To win the presidency, a candidate has to build a coalition. In the case of Trump the coalition included neo-Nazis and white supremacists alongside evangelicals (a non-trivial share of which admittedly, are and have been white supremacists (Hawkins 2021)), right-wing Jews and supporters of Israel (Cavari 2021), as well as a surprising number of Hispanics and even a smattering of conservative African Americans (in particular celebrities like Kanye West or Candace Owens). The tribute trailers and clips always include shots of African Americans and other minorities in the diegetic audience. This may be dismissed as empty rhetoric, but there may be more to Trump's persona and the composition of his audience. "Very fine people on both sides," his statement after the 2017 Neo-Nazi riots in Charlottesville, VA, (Drobnic Holan 2019), points to the core of his public persona: transgressive, but strategically ambiguous.

## **Victims of Condescension and a Champion of Fairness**

As indicated previously, Trump is not the candidate of economic anxiety. His voters are on average twice as wealthy as those of Clinton. Rather, Trump is the candidate of status elevation, and more specifically, status elevation through consumption. In Trump's case, name recognition is luxury brand recognition. In a 2013 financial statement he claimed that \$4 billion of his \$9 billion net worth alone were attributable to his brand value, and while that number may be vastly overstated, the excessive nature of





[Figure 2] An image of justified trust: Trump posing in front of Lincoln with fast food for the Clemson Tigers, January 14, 2019 (Source: X and The White House 2019).

the estimate itself is part of the brand (Nguyen 2020, 85). Trump's promise is not so much that of welfare for all, but of self-indulgence for all (including, and starting with, himself).<sup>5</sup>

This is also the political meaning of Trump's performative predilection for fast food. "Practices with food," as Sheila Bock (2021) writes, "send powerful messages". In early 2019, Trump hosted the Clemson Tigers basketball and the North Dakota State Bison football teams in the White House (see fig. 2). "We could have had chefs. But we got fast food," Trump said at the North Dakota State Bison reception, "I know you people very well" (ABC News 2019).

The note of condescension in the (racially coded) remark "you people"—which refers both to the teams and the broader audience—matters. There is a longstanding trope of white people referring to African-Americans as "you people," and the majority of the basketball players are African-Americans. Trump here embodies and performs a core dynamic of Jacksonian racial democracy: The equality of whites implies that even the lowliest

5 For Trump's affinity with the world of home shopping see Hediger (2020).

258 of whites still have non-whites to look down on. At the same time, the remark comes from someone who himself has been, and continues to be, the object of condescension. It may or may not have been a coincidence that Trump posed with fast food in front of a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. But by doing so Trump, in an apparent paradox and departure from Jacksonian racial democracy, aligns himself with those who he himself treats with condescension.

The tribute trailers tell a story of overcoming condescension as a matter of political principle. Trump was treated unfairly by the establishment, the story goes, but he managed to get back at those who despised and mocked him (including Obama, who mercilessly roasted Trump at the 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner). Trump's stated mission throughout his presidential campaign was avenging himself and others like him who have been allegedly treated unfairly, including all of the US, who have been taken advantage of by Europe, China, NATO, and others. Trump the politician and protagonist of tribute trailers is a (self-proclaimed) fighter against the humiliation of unfairness and for the universal principle of fairness. In that sense, trust in Trump is not actually authoritarian, but justified, both partially—through the idiosyncratic motif of a shared interest in self-indulgence—and impartially—by reference to the principle of fairness. The spectatorial subject interpellated by the protagonist of a Trump tribute trailer is thus indeed firmly anchored in the democratic political imaginary, and in ocular democracy. Any threat to democracy Trump might pose comes from within. Or, to put it differently: Trump tribute trailers develop their greatest value as a lesson in democracy if we read them not as fascist action spectacles but as Haunted White House horror films.

## Conclusion: Boring is the New Unfair

According to political scientist Tom Nichols (2021) and geographer Ben Anderson (2021), populism thrives in wealthy societies because citizens are bored. There is, writes Nichols (2021, 31), “no more reliable indicator of a society’s ripeness for a mass movement than unrelieved boredom.” In an interview in 2019, comedian Norm McDonald, who famously parodied presidential candidate Bob Dole on Saturday Night Live and never spared politicians in his work, discussed why he chose not to make jokes about Trump (CTV News 2018): Trump was too easy to laugh at and impossible to laugh with. Most importantly, however, Trump was himself an entertainer: he played a version of himself in wrestling shows (Moon 2022; O’Brien 2020), and his free-flowing presentational style at rallies worked more like a variation of stand-up comedy than like a conventional political speech.<sup>6</sup> Television executives like CBS’ Les Moonves, since retired because of a #metoo scandal and his long history of sexual abuse in the workplace, understood this perfectly. Trump the candidate may not be good for America, Moonves famously stated, but he brought in advertising money and made for good television (Bond 2016). This, rather than an alignment in political convictions, was the reason that Trump was given so much free airtime in live broadcasts of his rallies during the 2016 campaign: His ratings were high. His entertainment value made Trump the perfect protagonist for political conflict as spectacle. Trump “The Entertainer” was the leader that contemporary ocular democracy needed: a leader not of the unemployed, but of the under-employed and restless. Trump thrives in the unauthorized fictions of tribute trailers because he is, after all, the enemy not so much of unfairness but of boredom

6 On the aesthetics of the Trump rally see also Johannes Voelz’s paper “Towards an Aesthetics of Populism, Part I: The Populist Space of Appearance” (2018).

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