

Aesthetics and Politics in Television Studies Panel Response by Jeffrey P. Jones

The relationship between politics, communication, and aesthetics is ancient, though perhaps never more powerfully demonstrated in modern times than Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. But examining and understanding that relationship in democratic society may never have been more pressing than it is today. With the demise of the informed citizen model of normative citizenship (Schudson, 1998), the collapse of rigid entertainment-versus-information dichotomies and conceptions of genres (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011), the recognition of the citizenship potentials for engagement with fictional and entertainment-centered programming (Graber, 2011; Jones, 2010), and the transformation of cable news into branded political entertainment television (Jones, 2012a), a new environment for mediated citizenship is at hand. In this new environment, I would contend, visual rhetoric and aesthetic appeal are now central to mediated political communication, thus all the more important for television studies—of all fields of study—to take it seriously.

The application of theories of Spectacle (Compton, 2006) and Hyperreality (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2012) are often helpful in assessing change at a meta-level, but too often fail to provide specific means of analyzing aesthetics and their role in constructing political reality, or in explaining the specifics of message appeal. Performativity Theory (Jones, 2012b) has proven useful in interrogating how reality is crafted through specific performances of ideology, of which aesthetics are central. Theoretical extensions can and should include Narratology and Dramaturgy, or the examination of the role aesthetics play as fundamental building blocks in the construction of political narratives in this new media environment, including within news.

Indeed, Fox News serves as a useful example for why our TV Studies' greater focus on aesthetics is a pressing issue. For cable news in general, and Fox in particular, new appeals of the old format are now central to the reconfiguration of the genre, its relationship to audiences, and the formulation of brand identity in a highly competitive marketplace. Visuals are not only central to Fox's brand appeal (blonde haired, shiny-legged female anchors; ESPN-styled graphics and pacing; patriotic colored sets and flag-adorned screens), but central to the ideological realities it seeks to create. The media watchdog group Media Matters details the enumerable instances of Fox's misleading and flat-out untruthful graphics to support its ideological arguments. The network also typically employs split screen renderings of guests for ideological effect. [Examples within presentation of using the Fox-created "Ground Zero Mosque" counterposed with 9/11 imagery and actors]. And, of course, Fox has proven masterful in utilizing an array of dog whistle aesthetics as means of connecting Obama to socialism, black radicalism, and the anti-Christ.

By invoking Riefenstahl, we must also remember the power of populist and Fascist aesthetics, older performative tropes that have successfully employ such dog

whistle politics. As historian Michael Kazin argues, populism is more impulse than ideology, a language that offers a “persistent yet mutable style of political rhetoric” that employs “traditional kinds of expressions, tropes, themes, and images” (Kazin, 1998, pp. 4-5). For example, given that the populist Tea Party and its formation is very much a product of television—with its generative beginnings on Glenn Beck’s program, followed by “success” in the “Town Hall Uprisings” of 2010—we should closely examine such its relationship to populist expressions, tropes, themes, and images, all of which are grounded in aesthetic display. In sum, the imagery, visuals, and graphics strategically deployed constitute these performances, and are highly affecting to viewing audiences.

Finally, if Television Studies is experiencing or should experience an aesthetic turn in its relationship to the study of TV and politics, it will not suffice for our efforts to be only textually based. Which is to say, questions of reception are paramount (Kennedy, 2011). We must focus on how aesthetics structure and prime viewer engagement. Questions of visual literacy seem imperative as well. And if TV Studies rightfully extends to analyses of social media, user responses to and engagement with aesthetics have a prime role in such on-line performances. In short, given the connection to democracy and civic engagement, it is not sufficient simply to declare a direct relationship between aesthetics as texts and politics. We must also engage directly with audiences who, in what seems like a post-fact culture, are invited to make meaning through the aesthetic displays that shape such engagements.

Works Cited

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