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## Why Trump is Velcro, Not Teflon (and How That Helps Him in the Age of Reality TV)



By Marty Kaplan



ALEX WONG VIA GETTY IMAGES

If there were a Pulitzer Prize for getting the best quote from a random person at a political event, it would have to go to Yamiche Alcindor, the *New York Times* reporter on the Bernie Sanders beat.

The winning quote comes from Victor Vizcarra, 45, of Los Angeles. At a Sanders rally in Anaheim last week, he said that if Sanders doesn't get the nomination, his second choice would be Donald Trump, not Hillary Clinton. Why? Not for Trump's policies. Vizcarra, who watched *The Apprentice*, said that a Clinton Administration would be "boring," but a Trump presidency would be exciting.

There it is: a vote for the candidate who promises to put on the best show. Not, as political polls inquire about, the candidate who cares about people like me; or who aligns with my views on the issues; or who'll get America back on track. No - it's a vote for the one who won't make me want to change the channel. Gallup, meet Nielsen.

What he said next made my blood run cold:

*A dark side of me wants to see what happens if Trump is in. There is going to be some kind of change, and even if it's like a Nazi-type change, people are so drama-filled. They want to see stuff like that happen. It's like reality TV. You don't want to just see everybody be happy with each other. You want to see someone fighting somebody.*

Neil Postman, who tracked showbiz's ominous conquest of news, politics, education, religion and more in his 1985 classic, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, could not have written a better epitaph for American democracy.

I don't think Vizcarra is an outlier. Many people vote to send a message of rage and to shake things up, but I suspect just as many vote to maximize the fun of watching all that tumultuousness play out in the media. I include myself; I feel that undertow. We're not just voting for a candidate, we're voting for an experience — the rush of crisis, the thrill of combat, the high of “breaking news,” the squirt of dopamine when something crazy could happen next. The electorate has become the audience, and the audience has become addicted to entertainment.

The root of “entertain” is “to hold,” and what is held is our attention. When there's a glut of information — like now, and forevermore — there's a premium on capturing attention. News that captivates can be monetized: eyeballs and clicks can be sold to advertisers. Candidates who capture attention can monetize that, too. Campaigns call the news coverage they get “free media,” but it could just as well be called “free attention.” The ads they buy, for which they spend most of the money they raise, is called “paid media,” but what it really purchases is attention.

No less than media owners and candidates, audiences measure experiences by their entertainment value. The gold standard: does it hold my attention? The primal dread of modern life is unoccupied attention; that's what boredom means. We're all endowed with the inalienable right to declare something boring; it's the dystopian flip side of the right to pursue happiness. Sure, some people may champion standards other than entertainment value, like: Is it important? Does it make me a better person? Does it make us a better society? But those people can't get arrested unless they can first command attention.

A surefire way to occupy our attention is to tell us a story. Stories require conflict; without conflict, no change, no drama, no plot. Trump is a walking attention magnet. He's the never-ending story, the prince of plot, the king of conflict, the drama queen of TV and Twitter. A Trump presidency guarantees change. “Even if it's like a Nazi-type change,” in Vizcarra's words, it will never, ever be boring.

No wonder attacks on Trump aren't working. Voting for president feels like making a casting choice for a reality show. The people in those shows may not be called actors, but they've been chosen to fit the genre's types. They're as formulaic as the characters in kabuki, *commedia dell'arte* and Punch and Judy shows. The players are fixed. There's always a bad boy. That's the part Trump is auditioning for.

Call him a bully, a liar, a xenophobe, a narcissist, a racist, a misogynist, an ignoramus, a big baby. He's all those things. But those aren't liabilities for the character he wants to play; *they're qualifications*. The more you say it, the more equity you add to his brand. He's not Teflon; he's Velcro. What sticks to him just makes him a stronger candidate for the bad-boy role.

Hillary Clinton has a presidential temperament. Her script promises stability. If the choice in November is between *The Apprentice Goes to Washington* and *The Progressive-Who-Gets-Things-Done Show*, which one will the audience vote to watch? Trump says, Let me entertain you. Vizcarra says, “A dark side of me wants to see what happens if Trump is in.” He's not alone. But what happens in a reality show only has “stakes”; what happens in reality actually has consequences. Clinton's challenge is to persuade America's Vizcarras that their lives, not just their amusement, depend on the difference.

*This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me at [martyk@jewishjournal.com](mailto:martyk@jewishjournal.com).*

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