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REVIEW ESSAY

Politics and Entertainment: Civic Catastrophe or Democratic Possibility?

Jeffrey P. Jones & , *Entertaining Politics: New Political Television and Civic Culture*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, xiv +243 pp.
Liesbet van Zoonen, *Entertaining the Citizen: When Politics and Popular Culture Converge,* New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005, viii +181 pp.

Received academic opinion suggests that civic culture is in terrible decline in America. We barely vote in this country, let alone join political parties, attend political rallies, or engage in rational, informative discussions. For many who study these phenomena, the primary threat is not any particular administration or political platform. The most serious threat, insidious because of its banality, comes from the modern media, with special opprobrium reserved for television. Many books on the subject—Neil Postman's 1985 *Amusing Ourselves to Death* probably being the most cited, but also Douglas Kellner's *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (1990), Robert McChesney's *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (1999), Todd Gitlin's *Media Unlimited* (2002) and Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000), to name just a few—decry, from varying angles, the impact of the fast-paced, profit-driven, content-scarce media on civic culture and the public sphere.[1] These authors collectively argue, again from very different perspectives, that we are becoming an increasingly impoverished democracy because of the entangling of politics and entertainment. Instead of engaging in rational argumentation on substantive political issues in the public sphere, citizens now sit at home alone (rather than going, say, bowling), nursing our carefully cultivated attention deficit disorders with a steady stream of sound bites, innuendo, partisan hackery, patriotic graphics, inspirational theme music, and, when we need a change of pace, home shopping. As a country we have been transformed from an active, engaged, informed citizenry into a nation of television addicts, quickly bored, increasingly cynical, progressively more unwilling and unable to separate fact from fiction (even *with* the right background music).

Jeffrey Jones and Liesbet van Zoonen, however, take the entertainment aspect of civic culture as an empirical given in our postmodern world rather than a crisis

[1] Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985); Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990); Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Todd Gitlin, *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002); Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

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to be lamented. Instead of lambasting television and other modern media, critiquing conservatives' ingenious use of them, or bemoaning media consolidation, both authors look for possible democratic moments within political entertainment. No self-respecting academic would argue that the speed and shallowness of the modern media, especially television, is inherently good for democracy. We are, after all, part of the heavily footnoted, often boring, and scrupulously rational elite, and neither Jones nor van Zoonen argues that it would be better for America to watch *The West Wing* or *The Daily Show* than to attend a political rally or read the Lincoln-Douglas debates. Nevertheless, new political media is here. It is ubiquitous. And it is not likely to die a natural death any time soon.[2] Therefore, these two authors argue, we need to study and exploit all the democratic moments we can find. Perhaps, just perhaps, things are not quite as bad as they seem.

What's a left academic to do in situations such as these? It seems to me that we have at least three options. First, we could show a little spine, stick to our guns, stay pure, and take the moral high ground (or at least the theoretical high ground), pointing our finger and shouting "*J'accuse!*" at those who prefer Fox News's Hannity and Colmes or even *The West Wing* to the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*? Or should we, instead, choose a more practical type of resistance. Rather than throw the TV out the window and pledge our allegiance to our own hard won rationality and print literacy, we choose (or at least drift into) a compromise, in the hopes we can make the best of a bad situation. We begrudgingly cave in to popular tastes and technologies and buy the cell phone (but only for emergencies), and an iPod (but only to listen to jazz and classical music), get a cable modem (for email and research), and, if a cable modem means that one also must have cable TV, well then, that's the price one has to pay for one's research. There's always Jim Lehrer, HBO, and the Food Network. We know that new media, and television in particular, is problematic, even potentially dangerous. The question becomes: what do we do about it? Do we revolt against the onslaught or just try to (passively) resist?

Liesbet van Zoonen and Jeffrey Jones argue for a third approach: if we look hard enough, they argue, we can find positive, active, thoughtful, democratic moments in contemporary media. A critic like Neil Postman would unequivocally disagree. The very medium of television, he argues, is epistemologically compromised: "Television does not extend or amplify literate culture. It attacks it".[3] Van Zoonen's project in *Entertaining the Citizen* is written in overt opposition to such a view. Her research agenda, in her words, is to answer the following questions: "Does entertainment provide a context to contemplate the concept of citizenship, does it provide the environment in which citizenship can flourish, and does it make citizenship pleasurable?" (p. 4). Her answer to all three questions, not surprisingly given the introductory paragraph above, is yes. I, however, am not so sure, at least based on the argument put forward in this book. Actually, this book is

[2] A telling illustration: recently, as I was ordering at a Starbucks counter, a young countercultural-looking young man (as countercultural as one can look while working at a Starbucks) remarked to two of his fellow baristas that he didn't have a TV. One of his colleagues' mouths dropped open. The other looked shocked. "What?" was all she could manage. It was as if he had said that he chewed off his big toe last night for kicks or that he reads Adorno for fun. It was incomprehensible. No TV?

[3] Postman, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

somewhat perplexing to me. The content is very interesting and has a lot of potential, but the narrative of the argument, as well as the evidence presented, tends to muddy rather than strengthen her claims.

After a (too) brief and somewhat polemical discussion in the first chapter of the "television malaise" thesis, which I also described too briefly and somewhat polemically above, van Zoonen starts with two chapters that argue against her own thesis. The second chapter begins with a discussion of the metaphor of a "soap opera," arguing that journalists and politicians alike use this moniker when they want to describe a political situation of which they do not approve, specifically scandal, personal conflict, and incompetence. Van Zoonen sees a gendered subtext here, arguing that the traditional modernist (read "masculine") discourse emphasizes either rational argumentation or sports and war metaphors. Calling a political event a "soap," therefore, downgrades it to something silly, superficial, emotional, and inconsequential. However, using sparse examples, she also argues that politicians use or try to use soap operas to dispense policy positions or to make themselves look good. Thus, according to van Zoonen, soaps, like the women who watch them, only play a supportive, background role within the current modernist discourse of politicians and journalists.

In the third chapter, van Zoonen leaves the realm of televised popular culture to argue that popular music's relationship with politics follows a similar trajectory. Ignoring the research on protest music and its importance to social movements, van Zoonen concludes that popular music cannot "enable the consideration of what citizenship means" nor "provide a hospitable surrounding for citizenship" (p. 50). Politicians exploit popular music for their own gain while still framing "real" politics in the modernist way, which excludes serious consideration of popular music on its own terms. Thus far, using the standard modernist framework for the discussion of politics and entertainment, we are zero for two.

All is not lost, however. What, van Zoonen wants to know, would happen if we started not from the assumption that politics and popular culture are and *should* be separate and distinct spheres but from the assumption that there are important connections and analogous behaviors between various manifestations of politics and popular culture. Without mentioning Habermas once, the rest of the book attempts to make this case—with the fourth chapter being the most clear and persuasive chapter in the book. Here she argues that the behavior of fans closely mirrors the behavior of today's engaged citizens. In contrast to the modernist model of the passive fan and the active citizen, fans and citizens share much in common. First, both communities come into existence in reaction to performances, that of celebrities or that of parties and candidate personalities and positions. Second, fans and model citizens are similarly invested emotionally in their respective activities. Emotions have historically been theorized as dangerous by those invested in rationalized print discourses, but anyone who has observed one of the American political party conventions, for example, knows that there is not much difference between that type of political theater and a purely pop culture phenomenon like a movie premier or rock concert. Finally, model fans, like model citizens, don't just cheer on their "teams." Fans talk about their favorite shows, stars, and bands with their friends and family, in internet chat groups, blogs and listserves, perhaps even when they bowl. Far from being only passive, unthinking watchers, being a fan means that you actively learn, debate, argue, and discuss

seemingly banal and arcane details of the object of your affection, as anyone who has been around *Seinfeld* fans, *Lord of the Rings* fans, even, perhaps especially, sports fans, knows very well. Van Zoonen does not want to argue, as she suggests Putnam insinuates, that these types of non-political activities seamlessly translate into political activities, but she does claim an "equivalence of fan practices and political practices, an equality that facilitates an exchange between the domains of entertainment and politics that is commonly thought to be impossible" (p. 63).

After establishing this interesting and thought-provoking connection between fans and citizens, the rest of the text focuses on specific, overtly political narratives found in popular culture, specifically the personalization of politics through celebrity, the difficult position of female politicians, and specific plots in popular culture, such as "the quest," "bureaucracy," "conspiracy," and the "soap opera" metaphor discussed earlier. Van Zoonen's examples are predominantly television programs like *The West Wing* and the British series *Yes, Prime Minister* and various news programs in Britain, the Netherlands and the United States, as well as films like *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, Primary Colors*, and *Dave*. This is where the text becomes more difficult to follow in terms of her overarching argument. I would have appreciated more overt markers as to exactly which narrative works to answer which one of her three original questions: "Does entertainment provide a context to contemplate the concept of citizenship, does it provide the environment in which citizenship can flourish, and does it make citizenship pleasurable?" (p. 4). Van Zoonen's empirical "evidence" of an affirmative answer to these three questions—comments posted on the Internet Movie Database and a limited number of internet discussion groups—is, by her own admission, "exploratory" and does "not produce a representative picture of how the different reactions are distributed among audiences" (p. 124). The data are reported as "representative for kinds of civic performance rather than for kinds of people" (p. 124). While these data are interesting and do indeed point to an answer of "yes" to her three research questions, much more empirical study is needed before such sweeping and broad ranging claims can be legitimately substantiated. However, all in all, this book does challenge the prevailing opinion in a thought-provoking way.

At the end of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, a very discouraged Postman wonders what we can do to resist the onslaught of television. He offers us two answers. His "desperate" answer is education (p. 162). To battle the dumbing-down of civic culture, we need to smarten our kids up; we need to teach our children to be informed, critical consumers of the omnipresent idiot box. His "nonsensical" answer is more remarkable. Here he argues that perhaps one answer might be "to create television programs whose intent would be, not to get people to stop watching television but to demonstrate how television ought to be viewed, to show how television recreates and degrades our conception of news, political debate, religious thought, etc."(p. 161). He suggests that something along the lives of *Saturday Night Live* or Monty Python skits might arouse our analytical faculties from their flickering stupor. I don't know if Jeffrey Jones was explicitly thinking of Postman's comment when he wrote his book, but nevertheless *Entertaining Politics* takes Postman's "nonsensical" suggestion quite seriously.

In fact, one of the things that makes Jones's argument persuasive is that he concentrates very narrowly on exactly this type of nonsensical programming, although his overarching argument is more closely allied with van Zoonen's than it is with Postman's. Instead of discussing political entertainment and all the

various genres that this entails, Jones focuses in on three examples of what he calls "new political television": television that uses satire, humor, and common sense arguments to analyze current political topics, specifically *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*, *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, and *Dennis Miller Live*. And even within this narrow format, Jones's real case study is Bill Maher. While Stewart and Miller are the subject of analysis in chapters 3 and 5, this is really a book about Maher. Jones provides a meticulous history of Maher's show, a very detailed theoretical discussion of Maher, and Maher's audience provides his data set for his empirical claims.

Jones has a similar complaint and comes to a similar conclusion as van Zoonen, albeit in a more heavily documented, tightly argued, and empirically satisfactory way. Like van Zoonen, Jones wonders if what van Zoonen referred to as the "modernist" ideal of citizenship—one in which citizens read the paper every day, attend Rotary Club on Wednesdays, and vote faithfully in every election—is no longer the norm, if it ever was. Perhaps the problem is not that television and popular culture are turning us into vapid, disengaged pseudo-citizens, but that the model of the rational, engaged, fully informed citizen does not take into consideration *new* ways citizens actually participate in politics. The very same television that has been accused of weakening traditional citizenship, according to Jones, has actually presented us with innovative ways to engage politically.

To counter the television malaise crowd, Jones makes a three-pronged argument about new political television and its new types of political participation. First, he argues that, unlike the political insider viewpoints of traditional political pundits and media elites, these three television shows center on outsider perspectives. While Maher and Stewart may interview political insiders or include insider viewpoints in a discussion, they pride themselves, as does Miller, on having a substantial, and thus critical, distance from Washington. Second, the outsider perspective allows Maher, Stewart, and Miller to humorously critique the political insiders from what Jones, following Clifford Geertz, calls a "common sense" perspective, in opposition to the abstract, jargon-laden, often didactic tone of the political and media elite. At times, according to Jones, the insiders seem to be almost asking for the everyman ridicule of these comedians and thus all three comedians forge a common sense bond with their audiences. Finally, and this is where the more precise and detailed research agenda really pays off for Jones, Jones "tests" his thesis that new political television encourages political activity by analyzing audience engagement for *Politically Incorrect with Bill Maher*. Like van Zoonen, Jones sifts through online discussion groups, but he goes much further, also scrutinizing viewer mail and audience interviews.

Jones concludes, again like van Zoonen, that these fans are very *discursively* active. *Politically Incorrect* functions as an "instigator" of political discussions with friends and colleagues around the kitchen table and water cooler, as well as with strangers in cyberspace, while also functioning as an important "connector" of audience members' private concerns to public concerns (p. 185). In addition, audience members view the show as more representative of their political fears and apprehensions, fears and apprehensions that are not currently being addressed by political and media elites. Thus, according to Jones, new political television provides interesting and relevant reasons to think and talk about politics. While this is not the same as volunteering for a political campaign or

writing to one's representative, its importance cannot be underestimated in today's postmodern political culture.

In conclusion, both books offer provocative responses to the accepted wisdom in the field, but the question still lingers: are these authors simply selling out? Is it easier just to go with the flow of popular culture than it is to resist its hegemony? And what does it mean to resist? Is such resistance simply a means for academics such as myself to reassert *my* ideal of good citizenship? Is it a way to defend the qualities that make me a "good" citizen? I do semi-compulsively read newspapers on a daily basis and I have been thoroughly educated in the art of rational argumentation. Should this be the model for everyone, or am I just a "fan" of politics, rather than of *Star Trek* or *The West Wing* or even the New York Yankees? I must admit I was taken aback when I first read van Zoonen's third research question: does entertainment make citizenship pleasurable? Pleasurable? Being a good citizen is a duty, a sacred trust. Should it also be pleasurable? Upon further consideration, however, I realized that it *is* pleasurable for me and this is exactly what I try to impart when I teach. Yes, the news *is* fun. Marx and Foucault *are* interesting. Our Constitution *is* enjoyable to read, debate, and understand. And they, too, should be fans of democracy—skeptical and critical fans, but fans nonetheless. Shouldn't we all be?

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