

The Aestheticisation of Politics: The Presentation of Self in Finnish Political Advertising

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ABSTRACT

Today, it is natural to think that political advertising is thoroughly aesthetic and that advertisements are only about rhetorically framing issues and candidates; hence, it is very easy to dismiss the issue of political aesthetics as trivial. In this article, I will show that the indifferent attitude towards political aesthetics misses two related issues, first, its own historical constitution, and second, the level of sophistication reached by ad makers who capitalise on general political disillusionment. The latter point is fundamental for understanding the public display of politics. We can detect increased reflexivity in advertising, revealing the ads' artificial nature, which, according to some ad makers, is just what people expect to see. Politicians and advertising designers are aware of this and they do their best to accommodate it. My argument is inspired by Wolfgang Iser's distinction between surface and deep aestheticisation, in which the latter refers to the postmodern sensibility from which representations are seen as profoundly arbitrary and their reference function as a social fiction. According to Iser, in our time, vision, as our pathway to reality, has become suspect. In today's political advertising, aesthetics is increasingly used for questioning visual representations. To illustrate this development, I compare Finnish campaign spots from recent presidential elections. In these, we can detect two different aesthetic styles, one characterised by its claim of authority over the meanings the ads signify, the other appealing to audiences in the opposite way, by highlighting the artificial nature of the advertising signs. In both styles, the advertising signs evoke a sense of aesthetic delight but only in the latter has the aesthetic function replaced the reference function.

Introduction

Anyone who pays the least bit of attention to advertising cannot avoid noticing the recent tendency towards ambiguity. Generally speaking, advertisements no longer educate consumers by claiming how well products work, nor do they aim to create new desires by offering immaculate images with which products can be associated (see Falk 1997; Leiss et al. 1990). Martin Morris (2005, 713) describes the change

as a move into the art of ambiguity that increasingly becomes “an explicit form of the content” of advertising messages. Ads are permeated with ambiguity, begging for explanation as they seem to defy a traditional sense-making device: the critique of false promises. We are left confused when ad makers simultaneously assume the role of salesperson and cultural critic. What do we do with an ad that does our critical interpretation for us?

Morris is describing product advertising, but to some extent, the same can be said of political advertising. It seems that an increasing number of politicians are resorting to the strategy of ambiguity in their public representations. These messages are difficult to interpret because, like their commercial counterparts, they defy the standard criticism that almost any culturally competent voter has in his or her political toolbox. That is, we cannot invalidate these messages by simply saying that the candidate is just trying to project a desirable but falsely grounded image. Our interpretive task is compromised by the fact that the candidate’s message is (also) about the making of the image, hence its ambiguity. For the study of political advertising, this is a significant change. Present-day citizens hardly call it news that politics has become a form of artistry and that aesthetics rather than, say, analysis of ideology, informs our reception of ads. As this conception is shared by most politicians today, it is evident that the aesthetic nature of politics is itself becoming the subject of public commentary, including political advertising.

Historically speaking, the aesthetic reading of advertising only slowly gained wide acceptance; advertising did not suddenly become the object of aesthetic judgment. For much of the period after the 1950s, advertising relied on aesthetic means only in the sense of providing consumers with pleasing images or “the look of perfection” (Goldman and Papson 1994, 23). Political advertising has lagged somewhat behind, but has roughly followed the same path. Aesthetics was first meant to remain implicit, a kind of unnoticed theory, spin at best. A natural scholarly counterpart was, of course, exposure by means of cultural critique (e.g., Goldman 1992; Williamson 1978). Only recently have political ads turned to the public with an open call for an aesthetic reading that pre-empt a straightforward critique. Ambiguous ads are, in fact, telling people that what they perceive is not real, but rather something which follows a plot and uses manipulative techniques. In this era of mediated politics, this results in a thorough aestheticisation of politics, in the same way that product advertising has lost its aura of a perfect world.

Let me be clear on this: what is at stake here is not the civic education provided by politicians and their staffs. People have always been skeptical about political ads, and exposing the aesthetic nature of advertising will not change this dominant attitude. However, people’s attitudes towards reality as a whole, or political reality, may indeed change as they get used to thinking that representations will always be replaced by other representations, and there is no hope to reach a privileged position beyond them. Thus, today’s aestheticisation means giving up the task of the original critical theorists, whose main concern revolved around the question of how to preserve realism without succumbing to the forces of the consciousness industry (e.g. Adorno et al. 1977). Although it seems typical of the logic of consumer society to turn social criticism into a commodity, as the Frankfurt thinkers indeed argued, it would be a mistake to stop there in the study of ambiguous ads, since these ads seem

to appropriate this critical understanding of ads themselves for their own advertising purposes.

In this article, I will use pairs of television commercials taken from the recent Finnish presidential elections to illustrate how the strategy of ambiguity works in political advertising. Purposefully ambiguous ads will be contrasted with conventional ads that intend to maintain the illusion of the image. Moreover, I will show that these two strategies of presenting politicians in public exist side-by-side, addressing different audiences with different levels of sophistication. Before analysing these ads, however, I will first discuss the concept of aesthetic politics from the point of view of the presentation of self in political campaigns.

The Aesthetic Self and Political Advertising

Erving Goffman (1959) took it as fundamental that the human self is constituted in coordinated interaction with others. More specifically, because coordinated interaction is in many ways dramatised, it is precisely these dramatic aspects that help to define the self. Although this article is not about interaction between persons, Goffman's ideas about how people manage their demeanor and control their appearance to produce desired effects in others are very useful. Of course, I have no way of knowing the 'true' self of the presidential candidates. But I can show what kind of projected self is needed in order to produce a certain kind of image. I am here concerned with a politician's public image, mediated by television and hence beyond repair, which is contrary to person-to-person interaction. Thus, candidates have to be very careful that the presentation of their selves is optimally controlled. I say 'optimally' because it would be quite misleading and even wrong to say that the candidates' public images could ever be fully controlled (Forceville 1996). What the candidates aim at is inference guided by appropriate cues (see Sperber and Wilson 1995). They can never fully control the viewers' inferences, but rather direct them towards some associative field with ideas, concepts, memories, impressions, etc. of a desirable kind. Thus, what is interesting from this point of view is what kind of dramatic elements are foregrounded in the ads to achieve the impression in the viewer that what they are seeing is a fabrication.

On Aesthetics

What do I mean when I say the 'aesthetic self'? First, we need a notion of the aesthetic which includes the composition of intrinsically non-aesthetic elements of whatever kind that in combination produce an evaluative sensation in the mind of a perceiver, who is able, on the basis of the combination, to judge the beauty of the representation so constructed (see Sibley 1965). Here, beauty is taken as a form of sensation that is elevated and set apart from what can be called ordinary categories of perception. As such, the theory of aesthetics is not limited to artistic expression but can be extended to any area of life whatsoever (Welsch 1997, 35). Indeed, as will soon be made clear, it can even be extended to the constitution of reality itself. For aesthetics, then, the first principle of analysis is form, as form underlies our understanding of reality as aesthetic creation.

This view of the aesthetic, with its emphasis on the composition or structural form of the representation, is not without problems (Sheppard 1987), but for the present argument, it provides enough solid ground to continue. Thus, an aesthetic self is a projection of an image of the self that has been constructed by putting together non-aesthetic elements in order to create an image of the self that is in some sense pleasing to the perceiver. If successful, this image of the self becomes aesthetic by virtue of its public and premeditated nature, whose function is to appeal to the public's emotive faculties. This formalist conception of aesthetics, however, only provides a starting point, for we also need to consider the basic types of aesthetic effects which can be achieved by structural variation of the elements that make up the representation.

The kind of aesthetics we face depends on the degree of the public's awareness of an image's aesthetic nature. The image may either avoid making itself a subject of aesthetic reflection or, indeed, try to make its own constitution the main content. Here I will rely on Wolfgang Iser (1977), who argues that modernity has, since its inception, been geared toward the latter, the increasing aestheticisation of everything, including science and truth. Theoretically, this is a result of the ever-increasing generation of structures of representation, whose sheer surplus disturbs the elevatory sensation. Before going deeper into the significance of this development for the aesthetic self, let me briefly summarise Iser's main argument.

First, Iser discusses what he calls surface aestheticisation, which means more than just the sort of embellishments that we find in public places such as shopping malls and bus stops. Iser argues that this increasing aesthetic coating of our environment, which he sees more and more of, signals an increase in a designed "domain of experience" (1977, 2), connected to the superficial values of "pleasure, amusement, [and] enjoyment without consequence" (1977, 3). Since this surface aestheticisation easily turns into a private matter of continuous self-fashioning, it has enormous economic consequences, because the aesthetic manipulation of personal appearance and life-style is mainly achieved by purchasing commercially available products.

Second, Iser talks about deep-seated aestheticisation that is connected to surface aestheticisation but is more fundamental and general. As a theoretical notion, deep-seated aestheticisation seems to be related to ideas of postmodernism in that it too concerns the perceived nature of reality itself and just like postmodernism implies that all foundational knowledge of the world has become suspect. According to Iser, "this immaterial aestheticization reaches deeper than that literal, material aestheticization. It affects not just singular constituents of reality, but reality's mode of being and our conception of it as a whole" (1977, 6). By "material" and "singular constituents of reality", Iser is, of course, referring to the tangible decoration introduced above as part of surface aestheticisation. With the rise of digital technologies, the intensified presence of the media in our lives and the deterioration of common moral standards, reality appears malleable and fluid, subject to our modifying actions to such an extent that reality itself is put into question. Reality becomes multiple and relative to the position and interests of the person who perceives it.

Deep-seated aestheticisation also includes general aestheticisation, which “basically means that the unaesthetic is made, or understood to be, aesthetic” (Welsch 1997, 7). These processes advance at various paces, with various consequences in different areas of life. Welsch cites “virtualization” as the main consequence of the increased mediation of social reality through the media, which follows its own aesthetic. In this condition, the public learns to interpret media content as expressing multiple, artificial realities and, further, to make this assessment part of its own self-fashioning, so that reality is matched to one’s lifestyle. If this is our cultural condition, then the criteria of reality are the same as those used in artistic judgment.

Finally, Welsch draws the unavoidable conclusion that aestheticisation has serious epistemological consequences, since it questions the foundations of truth and knowledge that are presumed to have an aesthetic constitution rather than being objective and permanent. He draws a line between Kantian aesthetics and modern physical science, concluding that since Kant, the modern understanding of reality has approached the condition in which “reality is not a fixed given quantity, independent of cognition, but the object of construction.” He continues:

Categories for the understanding of the production of reality were actually being developed on the quiet. Since it has become clear to us that not only art, but other forms of our conduct too, through cognition, exhibit the character of production, these aesthetic categories – categories such as appearance, manoeuvrability, diversity, groundlessness or suspension – have become fundamental categories of reality. (1997, 23)

Welsch calls this epistemological aestheticisation and says this is as far as aestheticisation can go. However, epistemological aestheticisation will not survive without surface activities through which people can enact more fundamental aesthetics. Welsch seems to suggest somewhat paradoxically that the more we emphasise aesthetically framed experience, the more we acquire our knowledge of the world through electronic media, and the more we feel comfortable in fashioning our lives according to shifting fashions or quite idiosyncratic ideals, then the more we will be engaged in questioning truth and knowledge.

Aesthetics in (Political) Advertising

Earlier, I described post-1950s advertising as having been overly concerned with creating perfect images. In the Welschian system, advertising has been a forerunner of surface aestheticisation. Its forerunner status has created, perhaps sooner than anywhere else, a saturation effect or a crisis of representation within the advertising industry. In many ways, as Goldman and Papson (1994, 47) claim, people are finding it increasingly irritating that ads are trying to offer ready-made positions with images crafted to perfection. The result is a widespread disavowal of their role as audience and the corollary effect of deep aestheticisation.

Here I depart from Welsch’s account, because he does not discuss how advertising images contribute to deep aestheticisation. It seems as if he were saying that advertising images are appropriated by lifestyle-oriented consumers in their attempt to fashion their increasingly individuated being. This surface aesthetics, because it is profuse, manifold and suggests multiple realities, will then be translated into deep-

seated aesthetics. I do not think, however, that mere consumption of multiple and mutually competing images results in epistemological distrust, as Welsch claims in his theory of deep-seated aesthetics. Rather, the general refusal to accept advertising images can be described as a two-way aesthetic learning process. First, the audience grows tired of these immaculate images, and ad makers are quick to adjust to the changed reception of their work. The audience might already have been tuned into viewing advertising images with aesthetically minded skepticism, but only with the arrival of advertising that makes its own structure a key message have we reached the threshold of Welschian deep-seated aesthetics in advertising.

The reason for this argument is simple: we need to show that the ‘grammar’ of advertising has changed; otherwise it would be impossible to make the distinction between surface and deep-seated aesthetics. The surface would just be replaced by another surface, accompanied by criticism of false representations. We need to find the point where this criticism and the response to it can be given up as unnecessary. After this corrective move, we can return to Welsch’s theory and make a further point regarding the presentation of the self in political advertising. If Welsch is right, in our cultural condition, a deep-seated aesthetic is more legitimate as a representation of self because it reveals itself as a representation; it conforms to our aesthetised culture more than a representation that fails to comment on its own constitution. The latter would merely continue the line of surface aesthetics.

Just as the aesthetic was defined by means of (basically non-aesthetic) structural elements and their arrangements in a representation, my method of analysis consists of what could be called a formalist reading of campaign spots. I specifically focus on the way the spots were put together by ordering the flow of filmic scenes and the accompanying aural effects (speech, music or other sounds). The resulting compositions of visual and aural elements were then subjected to reflection as to their effect of making the aesthetic nature of the representation explicit.

The Reflexive President

In Finnish politics, no other elections are so highly personalised as presidential elections, which take place every six years. Beginning with the 1994 election, the president has been chosen by a direct popular vote, while before that, an electoral college made the choice with a secret vote.¹ The direct popular vote and television advertising, combined with the importance Finns attach to the office and person of the president, offer us perfect cases for observing deep-seated aestheticisation. Party affiliation plays a small role in Finnish presidential elections (in an otherwise multi-party system, the presidential election usually comes down to a traditional left-right dichotomy), so much more rests on the candidate’s self and the way it is presented.

¹ In fact, 1988 was already a transitional year, as people voted both directly for a presidential candidate and a candidate for the electoral council. The direct vote would have counted had any of the candidates received more than 50 percent of the vote, but this did not happen. Thus, the history of direct popular vote in presidential elections starts from 1994. By that time, political advertising had also been allowed on national commercial television channels.

In the following, I will present three case studies that include all the television commercials from Finnish presidential elections that can be seen to represent the deep-seated aesthetic style. There are three such commercials, and I will put each commercial side by side with one that belongs to the more shallow style of surface aesthetics. I do this lest we get the idea that the political self is thoroughly aestheticised. The opposite is true. In most cases, the self is presented in a very traditional manner that underlines seamlessness and coherence in audiovisual narration. There is very little of the kinds of interruption that would make interpreting the commercial's message more difficult. The Welschian approach is useful in providing a general framework for a cultural analysis, but we should not take its central argument as a description of single cultural products. Like the commercials analysed here, all cultural artifacts dwell in a world that is always potentially aestheticised in the deepest sense. Ad makers and politicians carefully weigh which way the ads should go.

Contrasting Front and Back

The first case compares two spots from the 1994 campaign of Raimo Ilaskivi, the candidate of the National Coalition Party. In the party caucus, Ilaskivi, a retired mayor of the city of Helsinki, defeated the party leader Pertti Salolainen. In the actual election, Ilaskivi received 15.2 percent of the vote and did not make it to the second round. Ilaskivi was known for his conservative values and was widely thought of as a competent yet distant leader. His campaign team made an effort to soften his popular image and, besides the 'official' spot, also ran a longer video in which viewers were let into the scene of production. I will first describe the official spot.

The spot is a typical up-beat marshalling of the esteemed social values of nature and work, coated with a sentimental and patriotic song. There are no spoken lines. In the first scene, we see a glimpse of a man in a rowboat pulling up his fishing net from a lake. From there, we move on to a construction site where presumably a father shovels sand into his small daughter's plastic wheelbarrow. Next, we see an ambulance crew giving first aid to an elderly lady in a park, from where we are taken into a daycare center where preschool children are engaged in their tasks. The camera focuses on a girl's face. Next, a young couple is seen fixing a ceiling lamp, perhaps an indication of their first home. Then, a series of images of work follows. We see a man with a computer that fades into an industrial scene of welding followed by business men having lunch. A well-known shipyard owner is seen as well as a cruising ship under construction. An evening view of a city is seen next. A smiling couple is walking past window displays. The last scene shows Ilaskivi and another man talking by a campfire. They are drinking coffee and preparing salmon. The spot closes with a shot of Ilaskivi talking to the other man in a relaxed manner.



Figure 1. Commercial for Raimo Ilaskivi, 1994.

In her analysis of Ronald Reagan's 1984 campaign film, Joanne Morreale (1991) describes Reagan's style as poetic. In this style, the conventional narrative sequence is replaced by visual metaphors, associations and juxtapositions. The stream of apparently unconnected images is tied together by a song. The lyric provides cues for interpreting the images and the melody attunes the viewer's emotional register. Ilaskivi's spot follows the Reaganite recipe. Even the thematic structure is close to the Reagan film. They both celebrate nature and work. Both are also perfect examples of surface aesthetics. They take good care that the viewer's attention stays on the message. Not even a fraction of a second is devoted to reflection on the production of the film itself. It gives us a perfect world resisting the exposure of its nature as an artifact.

The second film made by Ilaskivi's campaign team is the total opposite, as it takes the viewer into the backstage area of presidential image making. The film is several minutes long and only the first minute will be used here. The film begins with a scene in a production room where Ilaskivi's son and another man are viewing footage for the official campaign spot. The son then introduces himself to the camera and says that they are campaigning for his father's presidency. The camera turns to the other man who says that they are trying to make a campaign spot for Ilaskivi. "You know what a campaign spot is, don't you?", says the man and adds that their intention is to make a different spot, one that would not bore people with pomp and self-praising. Ilaskivi's son then describes his father as committed to public service. The son thinks that his father has done good work but his style of presentation should be adjusted. A clip of a very stiff Ilaskivi is then shown. Back in the production room the two men deplore their candidate's style and show a different clip in which Ilaskivi is much more relaxed and accessible. Then the son turns to the camera and says that they cannot really change Ilaskivi, only his wife can do that.



Figure 2. *Raimo's Spot*, Campaign Film for Raimo Ilaskivi, 1994.

This long campaign film turns the very form of the official spot into its content, by exposing how the front stage of the campaign is produced. The film producers openly invite the viewers into the production room in which alternative takes of Ilaskivi are shown. They also show the viewers that Ilaskivi's public presentation of self is composed of bits and pieces that have been selected from among various alternatives and can be recycled in various contexts. Furthermore, they show that the presentation of self is also a technical accomplishment, not just the candidate rehearsing his lines. In this, the producers make use of the fundamental separation in social interaction popularized by Goffman: the front and back areas. The back area is where the illusion of a performance is prepared and where the performers can "knowingly contradict" their roles as performers (Goffman 1959, 112). Many social performances require preparation and production in order to be successful. Court lawyers, for example, need the back area to discuss their cases informally without regard to the consequences these discussions would have in the courtroom, and to avoid destroying the trust their clients have in their professionalism. Also, political advertising has traditionally made use of the separation of front and back as part of maintaining the façade of the spontaneous realism of politics.

Ilaskivi's campaign team shows this back area by making it known that Ilaskivi's image is partly contrived. However, their exposure of image making is not complete, because they soften it by stating clearly that they cannot really change the way Ilaskivi talks in public. It is instructive to see the two films together, because in the official spot, Ilaskivi does not talk at all. Thus, the reflexive film is a sort of commentary on the official spot. It explains the choice of music instead of the candidate's own voice in a manner that appears apologetic. It cannot be considered very sophisticated, but in its self-critical way it offers an ambiguous interpretation of reality. In the world of the campaign film, reality is at least partly a construction. It is thus at least partially advising viewers that they should take the longer film as a

guide for interpreting the official spot as an aesthetic product. In this sense, we are dealing with deep-seated aestheticisation.

Self-Aware Irony

The second case consists of two commercials made for the National Coalition candidate Riitta Uosukainen in 2000. Uosukainen became the party's candidate after the party leader Sauli Niinistö refused his candidacy. Uosukainen was well supported in some early polls but in the end, she only received 12.8 percent of the vote. It was generally felt that Uosukainen was behind the top candidates in expertise and that her views were not particularly convincing. Besides, her image as the outspoken and dignified Speaker of the Parliament posed further problems for the campaign team. However, the team decided to capitalise on her high political status as Speaker, as well as to soften her image.

The first spot, which takes her prior political career as the starting point, is a good example of surface aestheticisation that can be opened to criticism. The spot begins with an inside shot of parliament, Uosukainen walking in the high hallway and entering her formal place at the head of the table in the Speaker's office. In the background, we see portraits of past Speakers. The narrator makes the point that Uosukainen is the highest-ever ranking woman in Finnish politics. Symphony music plays quietly in the background, adding to the solemn atmosphere. Next, a close-up of Uosukainen is shown, where she is reading documents. The narrator praises her international contacts. After that, Uosukainen is seen taking her seat in the podium of the parliament's great assembly hall. We are told that her task as the Speaker requires political neutrality, which, as the narrator says, is natural for her because of her nonpolitical background. We see a close-up of Uosukainen again immersed in her papers. The spot ends with a side view of Uosukainen reading documents. The narrator urges the voters to select a president with whom everyone can feel unity.



Figure 3. *The Career Woman*, Commercial for Riitta Uosukainen, 2000.

This spot is different from Ilaskivi's official one, because it relies much less on discreet visual elements that would only be connected by mental associations. It is more coherent and tries to stay on one message, Uosukainen's status as the Speaker and everything that comes with it. However, it too lacks a real narrative. The spot relies on a number of flash scenes that attempt to depict the Speaker's life in parliament. Like Ilaskivi's official spot, this spot never reveals its back area or the fact that it is only a version of reality. Rather, it tries to provide viewers with a clean and continuous image that, in a critical vein, could be discredited for its aesthetic coating. This aesthetic aspect concerns the embellishment of reality only, not the very conception of reality. The fact that the spot is black and white merely accentuates surface aestheticisation by marking a distinct style.

Uosukainen's second spot is harder to discredit because it makes fun of her colorful person. The spot is extremely simple in structure. At the beginning, Uosukainen sits motionless alone in the middle of the great State Hall of the parliament building. The narrator speaks his lines in a slightly amused tone: a good politician says nothing, does not smile or wave her hands. At the end, however, we see Uosukainen putting on a smile and cautiously waving her hand. The narration pokes fun at the image of Uosukainen as a talkative person who often smiles and waves her hands in the air to accentuate a point. These two spots are opposites not only substantially (the one a serious evocation of her competence, the other a frivolous play with her character), but also in their relation to advertising messages as representations.



Figure 4. *The Good Politician*, Commercial for Riitta Uosukainen, 2000.

The second of these spots lets viewers peek into the backstage of how images are performed. This is accomplished not by a direct move of showing footage of ad making, as the campaign team did for Ilaskivi in 1994, but rather by telling viewers that the candidate is aware of the fact that she is being made fun of. In fact, she is an active participant in the fun making. While Ilaskivi was not depicted as an agent of the exposure of his image, Uosukainen does exactly this, making the present commercial a better and more sophisticated example of deep-seated aesthetic style. It is as if she was saying: 'You know that I know that you know that this is only an ad and that public images are like ads.' But what kind of an ad is it? It is not merely an ad with some disarming humor (see Smith and Voth 2002; Paletz 1990), but it also

credits the candidate with being in control of her image. The issue of control is important (Adatto 1993), because in the world of deep aesthetics a competent person cannot take representations for more than what they are, namely constructions and artifice. Showing the audience that you know this fact is also a way to say that you are in control of your image, that you cannot be fooled by professional image makers. A competent person must demonstrate that she takes the initiative in making images and the best way to accomplish this task is to deprive potential critics of their means to undermine these images.

In this commercial, Uosukainen engages in what could be called self-aware irony. Traditionally, irony has been defined as a stylistic figure that intends to produce a message that is the opposite of its manifest form, thus revealing the ironist's critical attitude towards the manifest message. Irony is always reflexive because it is a commentary on an existing attitude. Self-aware irony is more strongly reflexive because the object of reflexive thinking is the ironist herself. Self-aware irony is particularly well suited for the condition of deep-seated aesthetics, because by treating yourself in an ironical fashion, you can most vividly show your audience that you're aware that advertising is highly artificial and that your image is also artificial. Finally, it is not too hard in this case to conclude that all reality, at least political reality, is mediated and that the selves we see in mediated form are performed selves.

Interrupting Audiovisual Flow

The third case is taken from the most recent presidential election, held in January, 2006. Unlike the two previous cases, I will here present examples from two different campaigns to show that aesthetic style also varies between and not just within campaigns. The first example is taken from Tarja Halonen's campaign. A social democrat, Halonen was running for re-election, and prevailed with 52 percent of the vote in a tight competition against the National Coalition candidate Sauli Niinistö. In polls, Halonen was a constant favorite, but Niinistö, with the help of his very successful campaign, almost managed to catch up with her. Some commentators noted ironically that Halonen won despite her campaign.

The commercial of Halonen studied here was used in the second round of voting, where voters were choosing between only Halonen and Niinistö. In the spot, the camera pans across a collage of photographs arranged against a white background, first zooming in and then zooming out. In the photographs we see Halonen in various surroundings and often performing presidential duties. Ethereal violins play in the background. The narration is minimalist. When the narrator describes Halonen as cosmopolitan, the camera pauses on a photograph of her addressing the U.N. General Assembly. The camera zooms into a picture of Halonen with her husband and daughter at the very moment when the narrator says "safe," being the second of the two attributes given to Halonen. Singing birds are heard in the background. The spot ends with an encouragement to vote.



Figure 5. Commercial for Tarja Halonen, 2006.

Halonen's spot is a hybrid documentary-advertisement (Morreale 1993, 15-16) that combines elements of the traditional documentary (photographs) and modern advertising techniques (collage of photographs). Viewers are led into the world of Tarja Halonen that is at the same time documentary and fictional. Her life as the president is shown in the collection of documents, while our attention is directed to the way the documents are physically arranged and how the camera moves through and into these documents. This spot bears some family resemblance to Ilaskivi's and Uosukainen's more serious ones in that they all use elements that are meant to give an impression of moments in real life. The ways these elements are put together differ from one commercial to the other, however. Ilaskivi used the poetic technique while Uosukainen's exposition was more like 'a day in my life'. Halonen used yet another method, as her commercial was held together by its graphic design. It was clearly more abstract than the other two and hence more easily revealed its method of producing the representation. Nevertheless, the commercial did not break away from established advertising style. It remained a seamless presentation that did not invite viewers to peek backstage.

When first examining Niinistö's commercial, it might be easy to draw the same conclusion. On the surface, it looks like so many other biographical campaign ads, again consisting of documentary and advertising elements. The spot begins with an extreme close-up of Niinistö writing a question, "What kind of a man is Sauli Niinistö?" This is followed by a series of documentary photographs. We see pictures of Niinistö as a child, Niinistö as a young father and Niinistö as a single parent. The spot then breaks into the present and we are shown close-ups of Niinistö being interviewed. In the background, we hear Niinistö's own voice recounting the main turning points of his life. Niinistö says that he knows himself after all this. Suddenly, there is a shot of Niinistö just standing against a roughly plastered wall, staring at the camera. After a few seconds, the spot returns to the interview. Niinistö says that he knows his own weaknesses and strengths. Finally we see him crossing out his title and writing "the workers' president" above it.



Figure 6. Commercial for Sauli Niinistö, 2006.

What makes Niinistö's spot unique is that for the first time in the history of Finnish political advertising, an ad uses a somewhat mysterious element without commenting on it. What can we say about the long and silent shot of Niinistö just standing and looking somewhat puzzled into the camera? This shot shows Niinistö as a vulnerable person, in a way humanising him. I believe that this hiatus in the audiovisual flow serves the same purpose as the exposure of Ilaskivi's production room or Uosukainen's self-aware irony. It lets us backstage, but this time in a much more subtle way. We are not specifically called upon to take a peek behind the scenes, but instead are put face to face with something that cannot easily be explained. The cases of Ilaskivi and Uosukainen are quite clear; we know right away what the production room was there for and can make sense of the ironical remarks as ways of undermining mediated reality. Can we say the same thing about Niinistö's spot? In a way yes, but I also think that Niinistö's commercial is a more profound attack against political image making than the commercials of his predecessors.

There is something in Niinistö's self-presentation that strongly weakens the spot's documentary atmosphere. First, there are departures from audiovisual consistency. The peculiar shot deviates from the rhythm of all the other cuts in the spot. The shot is also wider than the close-ups that form the majority of shots. Furthermore, we hear no sounds; suddenly Niinistö simply stops talking. Even his tense posture belongs to a different category compared to the relaxed intimacy of the rest of the spot.

Second, Niinistö is himself the subject of subversion; in previous examples, there were always others helping the candidate: in Ilaskivi's campaign film, his son and another team member provided assistance, while in Uosukainen's spot, the narrator did so. In Niinistö's spot, there is no one else present, not even a narrator. Of course, an alternative shot could have produced a similar effect, for example a shot of Niinistö posing for a camera team. But the presence of the team would have been too obvious a commentary on the otherwise seamless presentation and perhaps

would have been easy to take as part of the biographical story line. Now, the odd shot of Niinistö alone against the wall awakens our interest, first, in the presence of the intimidating camera and, second, in the crafted nature of the whole story of Niinistö's life.

The ingenuity of the spot depends primarily on the use of subtle ambiguity. We cannot easily categorise the technique used. It requires a lot of interpretive ability from the audience and as such is an encouragement to critical reflection. The meaning of the break in Niinistö's spot is not really at stake, but rather the inferential potential it carries with it to critically evaluate the spot as a whole. Ambiguity of meaning is a prerequisite for a deconstructive contradiction of this kind to emerge. Consequently, viewers will more easily refuse the normal interpretation, that is, seeing the spot's audiovisual solutions as aesthetic decisions that serve stylistic and decorative purposes only, and shift their attention to the nature of the ad as a representation.

Niinistö's spot provides a prime example of the new style emerging in the field of campaign communication. As a visual image, the spot bears resemblance to the absurd. In terms of structure, the manipulative device can be integrated with other structural elements only with some mental effort, and thus, it potentially remains a mystery. Earlier studies on manipulation have shown that the achieved effects are greatly determined by the ad makers' decisions about the structure of commercials, the pairing of audiovisual elements (Nelson & Boynton 1997). The resulting representation will then be interpreted as a whole. The audience tries to see a culturally recognisable story in that whole, and usually is able to fill in some of the details that are needed to produce a conventionally known story (Richardson 2003, 112).

In the examples I have introduced, we have seen structural solutions that aim at two contrasting goals, either uninhibited interpretation or exposure of the structure that constitutes the interpretation. The latter makes manipulation explicit and profoundly aestheticises representations. We have also seen that this can be achieved in two different ways. The ad makers can frame the exposure with the help of a culturally known meta-narrative (Ilaskivi and Uosukainen) or they can resort to techniques that do not accord with widely shared cultural models of exposure. In the latter, manipulation is also evident but its meaning is not readily available. As competition in the field of political advertising reaches the level where mere self-reflection is not enough to catch up with media-conscious voters, the absurd and the inexplicable, as ways of communicating the candidate's sophistication, will become serious alternatives for image making which tries to accommodate the idea of the deeply aestheticised nature of reality.

Conclusion

In this article, I have identified three different ways of making public presentations of the political self deeply aesthetic. Chronologically, the first was the explicit and literal exposure of backstage production. This was followed by a more indirect unveiling of the backstage with the help of irony. Third, a highly sophisticated way of undermining the expected continuity of the audiovisual flow was found. Although these methods differ in sophistication and the degree of deep aesthetics, together,

they mark a departure from what Welsch (1997) calls surface aesthetics, i.e. aesthetic embellishment for the sake of merely pleasing the senses. Deeply aesthetic ads take a stance against over-aestheticisation and the predominance of sleek images by exposing the aesthetic constitution of reality.

Looking at these examples of presidential campaign ads, we can see a cultural change in Finnish politics. This change has to do with a slow movement from philosophical realism towards relativism. For now, the two cultural forces exist side by side, and realist tones still dominate. For realist ads, it is typical to claim authority over the meanings they signify. Surface aestheticisation, or the attempt to create ever more perfect fronts in ads, is doubly realist. For one thing, the front is meant to be a seamless representation of reality, hiding its own production. Second, when we criticise the image-front we try to repair the distortion that was caused by the aestheticised image and hence to return to a more real realism. Deep-seated aestheticisation, on the contrary, claims authority by assuring audiences that the representations reveal their own artificial nature. In both surface and deep-seated aestheticisation representations evoke a sense of aesthetic delight but only in the latter has the aesthetic function replaced the reference function.

It is perhaps still too early to draw any macroscopic conclusions as to the fate of political culture in an era of deep-seated aesthetics. At least in the Finnish context of the past 12 years, during which time we have seen the rise of this new style in political advertising, there does not seem to have been a dramatic change of political culture. What we have seen, however, is a very subtle shift in politicians' understanding of their public selves; indeed, we might say that they have learnt to accept the new style and found enough encouragement to try it out publicly. It is clear that this deep-seated aesthetic style, as it is manifested in reflexive ads, has not become a standard of public political expression. But the mere fact that the style has found its way into the politicians' presentation of their public selves must in some manner express the present condition of political culture.

If this is a response to the public's increased ability to understand media and mediated realities, then we might say that Finnish politics has taken one more step on the road toward what Frank Ankersmit (1996, ch. 2) has called the "evaporation of the political domain". Ankersmit argues that politics will increasingly be difficult to comprehend partly because the difference between politicians and citizens is effaced in the modern public sphere. Politicians, in their haste to be like voters, have paradoxically seriously weakened their chances of true political leadership. An impoverished public sphere, as Ankersmit describes, may well be the result, for there will be little for citizens to discover by means of critical reading of politicians' public representations as politicians give up the pursuit of perfect images that would set them apart from the ordinary. It seems that we are moving towards generalised irony as the attitude that best describes our political existence.

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