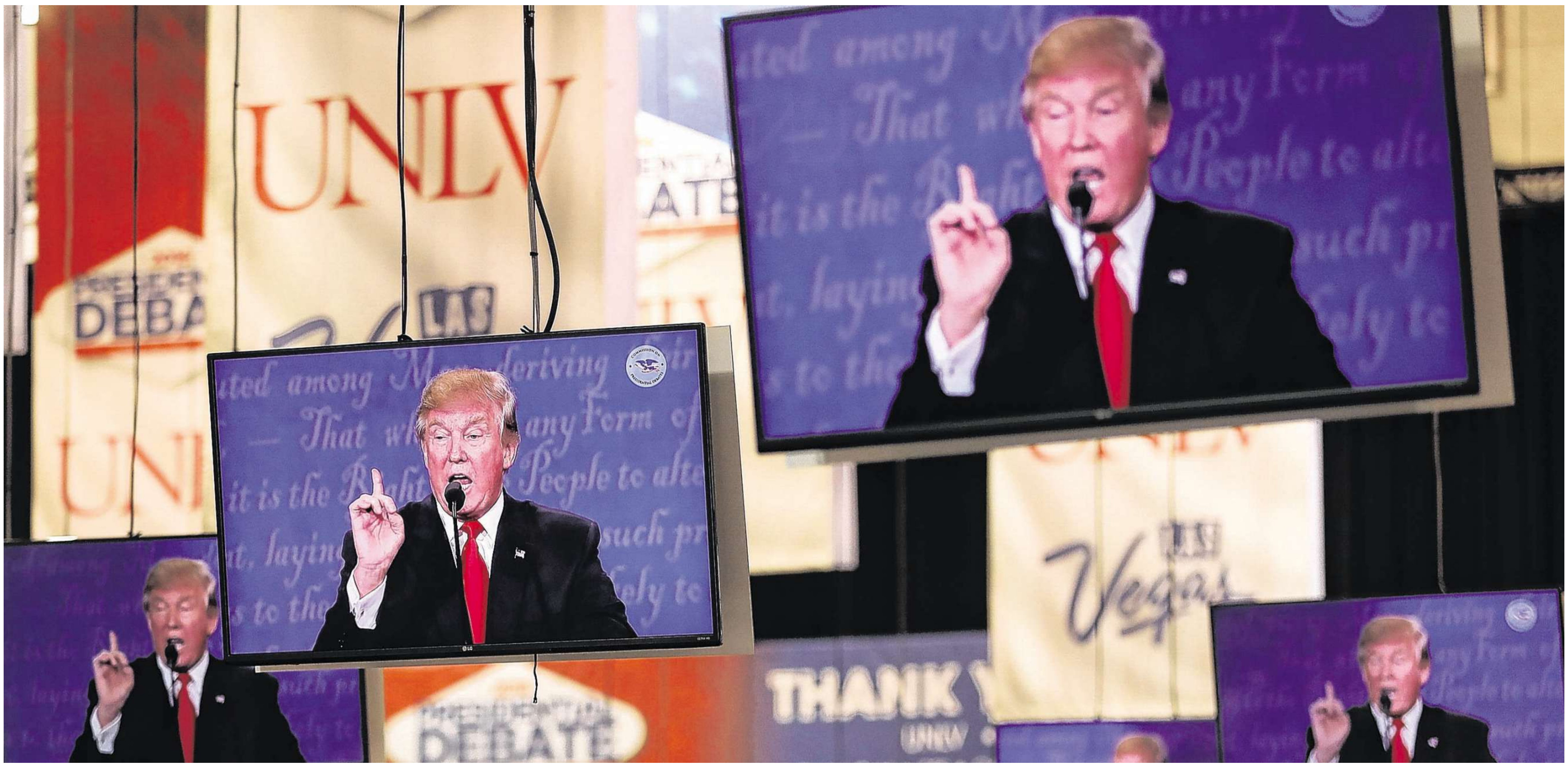


■ Centre of attention: Donald Trump on screens in Las Vegas during this week's debate. PHOTOGRAPH: JUSTIN SULLIVAN/GETTY

IT'S NOT AN ELECTION. IT'S REALITY TV

The world thinks it's watching a conventional political race, but all along Donald Trump has been participating in 'America's Next Top Politician'

Davin O'Dwyer

Wednesday's presidential debate in Las Vegas between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump contained an unprecedented moment in modern US politics. When the moderator, Chris Wallace, pressed Trump on whether he would accept the result of the election, on November 8th, the Republican nominee replied, "I'll keep you in suspense."

It was a stunning statement, one that Clinton immediately described as horrifying and which generated huge criticism across Twitter and, subsequently, among news-network pundits. "Political suicide" said the right-wing commentator Charles Krauthammer on Fox News.

Coming from a politician, the refusal to accept democratic norms indeed seemed dangerously reckless. But the remark was not the vow of a serious presidential candidate. It was that of a man envisioning himself in the final stages of a reality-TV series, a man used to the manufactured suspense that's designed to keep viewers hooked as they await the winner.

This has been a thoroughly surreal presidential election, but it begins to have a degree of narrative coherence if you view it as a protracted TV series. All along Trump has been participating in *America's Next Top Politician* while the rest of us thought we were watching a conventional political race.

Trump repeatedly says that his business experience qualifies him for the Oval Office; it's actually his decade starring in *The Apprentice* that has got him this far, and not just because it made him a celebrity. Reality-TV competitions tend to be about dominance: the most attention-seeking contestants brush off their rivals. Trump showed his skill as he bulldozed his way through the primary season, belying conventional wisdom to fend off a crowded field of 16 other Republican candidates.

Dwindling cast

Those Republican debates were barely debates in the conventional sense; more accurately they were a succession of reality-TV episodes, with a dwindling cast of contestants: Jeb Bush, the underwhelming favourite running from his own name; John Kasich, working hard to be a recognisably regular guy; Marco Rubio, the telegenic but callow upstart; Chris Christie, a politician straight out of *The Sopranos*; Carly Fiorina, the token woman; Ben Carson, the token African-American; Ted Cruz, the overconfident evangelical.

None could keep up with Trump in the role of maverick outsider, masterfully keeping the cameras on him at all times with outrageous behaviour and deliberately controversial remarks, starving his rivals of attention. Instead of policy proposals we got catchphrases; instead of arguments we got put-downs.

Reality TV as we know it arrived in the summer of 2000, when the island-set *Survivor* captivated audiences in the US and *Big Brother* did so everywhere else. These were zero-sum games, with no prizes for fostering a sense of community among the contestants; there could be only one winner, so everybody else was an enemy.

The early winners of reality-TV shows were therefore among the first people to realise that the normal rules of society didn't apply in these sequestered environments. The first winner of *Survivor*, Richard Hatch, set the template, gleefully double-crossing supposed allies and conniving his way to the title. He became the United States' favourite villain that summer, and dozens followed in his wake; the most memorable figures from reality TV are the irredeemable, shameless jerks. The normal people fade into the background.

Survivor was the first big success for Mark Burnett. For his second the English producer adapted its format for the boardroom. But instead of looking for a Hatch-like contestant to take part in *The Apprentice* when it debuted, in 2004, Burnett effectively cast Trump in the role.

Early episodes now look amateurish, feeling relatively cheap for a supposedly prestige programme – which could be a metaphor for Trump's business empire. The show's fawning over Trump's wealth, wisdom and leadership is as over the top as the golden interiors of his Trump Tower apartment. We learn little or nothing about Trump's business acumen beyond the capitalist platitudes that he relies on.

Trump does seem noticeably calmer, his egocentrism less obviously a character flaw, but the speed of the edits and the obvious overdubbing of his speeches make it hard to know how much of Trump's personality was crafted in postproduction. It is, above all, the most brazen branding exercise ever broadcast, a weekly advert for Trump's properties and products in the guise of a reality-TV show.

The Apprentice and reality TV in general also conditioned us to conflate success in such dominance rituals with real leadership. The differences, particularly in a democracy, are acute.

The other big reality-TV success of the time, *Big Brother*, was named after the omniscient authority in George Orwell's *1984*. The allusion is more revealing than the literal conceit of the programme.

Amusing ourselves to death

In his influential book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* the US theorist Neil Postman contrasts Orwell's dystopian vision with that of Aldous Huxley's in *Brave New World*. "Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information," Postman writes. "Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance."

Postman warns of television's trivialising effect on public discourse and the way it conditions people to expect everything, even politics, to be an entertainment. "Tyrants of all varieties have always known about the value of providing the masses with amusements as a means of pacifying discontent. But most of them could not have even hoped for a situation in which the masses would ignore that which does not amuse."

> Without the sharp editing of 'The Apprentice', which left every digression on the cutting-room floor, Trump struggled to answer questions coherently

Amusing Ourselves to Death was published in 1985, but its prescience is only becoming more evident. Hillary Clinton suggested to the *New York Times* that it explained a lot about the current US election.

Clinton might have had reason to fear such a trivialising effect on the public's expectations, given that her own political skills don't necessarily translate well to the reality-TV-style set pieces that Trump excels at. It has often been said that Clinton's greatest skill is her ability to listen and absorb, but that's a tough attribute to project at a campaign rally, never mind through a television screen.

In the event she need not have worried. The three presidential debates have exposed the limits of Trump's reality-TV shtick.

In the first Trump seemed stifled by the format, his face appearing to rebel against the split screen, where he shared half the frame with Clinton, who maintained a studious countenance. Over 90 minutes he couldn't quite control his gestures, letting out some reflexive grimaces and groans at inopportune moments.

Without the sharp editing of *The Apprentice*, which left every meandering digression on the cutting-room floor, he struggled to answer questions while remaining coherent.

Zero-sum game

It was also clear that for Trump everything is a zero-sum game, as if the world is one large reality-TV show, with all the countries contestants. "We have a country that's doing so badly, that's being ripped off by every single country in the world," he said, falling back on a refrain about jobs and companies moving to Mexico and China while disparaging allies such as Japan and South Korea for not paying enough for US support.

Without rival contestants to denigrate Trump appeared to have no obvious strategy except to introduce new "rivals" to denigrate.

The second debate took the form of a town hall meeting, with Trump and Clinton freed from the tight split screen to wander the stage. Amid ugly scenes Trump engaged in some reality-TV stuntcasting, inviting three women who have accused Bill Clinton of sexual assault to join him as special guests. It failed to faze his rival. And without a director placing him centre stage, and giving him precise marks to stand on, Trump appeared lost, wandering in the background or looming too close to Clinton during her answers.

By that stage, of course, footage of Trump boasting about groping women had been released, gravely damaging his campaign. There was an unmistakable irony in the fact that while Trump's rise as a celebrity came through a carefully stage-managed reality-TV show, his downfall came in candid behind-the-scenes footage; the title *Access Hollywood* never seemed more apt.

Ultimately, Trump appears to have mistaken the electorate for a TV audience, in the process discovering that the manufactured reality of reality TV has only a passing relationship with the real world.

But if reports are to be believed Trump is planning to parlay this brand-building exercise into a further television enterprise, a Trump TV network to monetise his devoted fan base and extend his influence, whether or not he accepts the election result.

In this season of *America's Next Top Politician* the real politician holds what appears to be an unassailable lead heading into the final episode. But expect future seasons to offer more compelling characters, unpredictable twists and, perhaps, some unlikely winners. Stay tuned.

Donald where's your Oscar? Trump's film and TV cameos

Donald Clarke

The presidential candidate has clocked up more than 20 credits – and nearly always got an easy ride from the supposedly liberal entertainment industry

People are saying that Donald Trump is the greatest star of TV and movies. Big star. You'd better believe it. Nobody wants Crooked Hillary on their show. Total loser. Donald J Trump is the king of cameos. But where's his Oscar? Corrupt liberal media fixes the system again.

To be fair, Donald Trump doesn't rate his abilities as an actor all that highly. "I don't think the legendary Clark Gable has anything to fear, I must tell you," he once remarked in an unprecedented outburst of humility. But there is certainly enough of Trump out there on TV and film.

Beginning with an appearance on the sitcom *The Jeffersons*, in 1985, That Donald – not The Donald, please – has clocked up more than 20 credits. The appearances are almost always brief. They almost always involve versions of this public persona.

In 1999 Trump made one of several turns on *Sex and the City*. "Samantha. A Cosmopolitan. And Donald Trump. You don't get more New York than that," Carrie says while the urban orang-utan squats in the corner of a plush bar. There is a partial truth here. *Sex and the City* deserves praise for loosening patriarchal attitudes to female sexuality, but it also promoted a recreational acquisitiveness that sits comfortably with the Trump aesthetic.

"Donald Trump gave me my first Emmy," Cynthia Nixon, who played Miranda on the series, told this writer last week. How did he get where he is now? "It's partly a misogynist thing. People don't like Hillary Clinton for a whole host of reasons, but mainly they don't like her because she's a woman who doesn't work to ingratiate herself."

All true. But it would be naive to ignore the gut-fuelled passion for the semifictional version of Trump we see behind the podium and in his bewilderingly numerous cameos.

Sack of orange diarrhoea

There is, in the TV series particularly, a sickening reverence for this sack of orange diarrhoea. He is nudged on stage, and once the applause has died down the cast begin licking up those bits of Trumpian matter that have oozed through unblocked orifices.

His 1994 turn in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* offers an unlovely example. After a typically moronic misunderstanding the Banks family come to believe that Trump wishes to buy their house.

Trump and Marla Maples – his then wife – enter to the expected sycophantic ovation. His head in a spin, Carlton, the most money hungry of the family, exclaims "The Donald!" before passing out like a Victorian lady who's just encountered Lord Kitchener in the powder room.

There is no hint of satire. Trump is not presented as a figure of fun. The show acquiesces fully with Trump's desire to promote himself as a master of the universe. Indeed, it allows him a rejoinder to his already abundant critics. "Everybody's always blaming me for everything," he says with a woodenness that would not have caused Gable to beware.

Sometimes the TV series go further and present Trump as a fount of munificence. His 1997 turn in an episode of *The Drew Carey Show* is not entirely unamusing. Carey and his Cleveland crew, visiting New York for a baseball game, discover the streets packed with Gotham celebrities. Carol Channing is in the car behind. Trump is idling on the pavement.

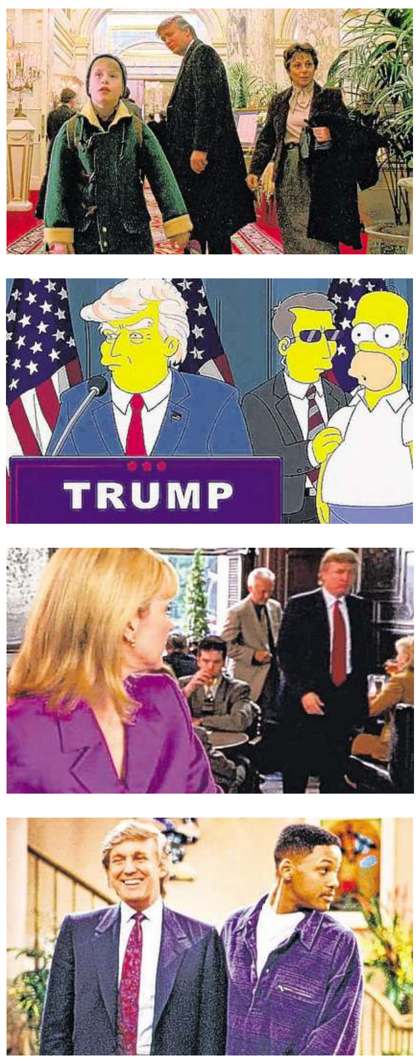
After making a few sarcastic remarks about their home in Ohio – ultimately unwise, given that state's importance in presidential elections – he offers them a seat in his box at Yankee Stadium.

Fair enough. This isn't *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or *The Larry Sanders Show*. The makers of *Drew Carey* weren't going to ask Trump to play himself as a sexually rapacious, pathetically boastful overgrown frat boy with a dead squirrel on his head.

But it takes some ego to accept a role as the kindliest robber baron on the eastern seaboard. One thinks of North Korean television reports celebrating Kim Jong-il's ability to play a round of golf in 34 shots.

There's more of this in *Spin City*, during which an apparently besotted Michael J Fox feels it necessary to name both of Trump's books before presenting him to the mayor.

In a 1997 episode of *Suddenly Susan*, an ill-remembered Brooke Shields vehicle, That Donald is presented, at a poker game, alongside John McEnroe as a constituent spirit of red-blooded American manhood.



■ Monster within? (from top): Donald Trump, with Macaulay Culkin, in *Home Alone 2*, *The Simpsons*, *Sex and the City* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

Kathy Griffin's character, pitching a magazine to Trump, later displays a mock-up cover that names Trump as America's next president. (Three years later a notably less obsequious episode of *The Simpsons* made a similar prediction.)

You can see more Trump toadying in *The Nanny*, *The Associate* and the short-lived 1994 reinvention of *The Little Rascals*. Oddly, despite being aimed at young kids, it is the last show that comes closest to satirising Trump's conspicuous avarice. "You're the best son money can buy," he says to a young soapbox derby competitor.

> The makers of 'Drew Carey' weren't going to ask Trump to play himself as a boastful, sexually rapacious overgrown frat boy

It is little wonder that Trump has come to the conclusion that angels are fighting to carry him towards the right flank of God. The entertainment industry, despite being run by hated liberals, has rolled over and allowed itself to become a platform for this bozo, this punk, this con, this bullshit artist, this mutt who doesn't know what he's talking about. (That Donald hasn't sued Robert De Niro yet, so I must assume we can use the words the actor uttered in a recent video.)

Trump's appearances on film have done little more to reveal the monster within. You can see him directing Macaulay Culkin towards the lobby of the Plaza Hotel in *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York*. He praises the title character in *Zoolander*. In a forgotten 1995 Imax film, called *Across the Sea of Time*, he plays another bland version of himself. The closest we get to a flash of stiletto is, perhaps, in Woody Allen's *Celebrity*. Listen closely and you'll hear that the mogul is planning to buy St Patrick's Cathedral and knock it down.

If we can't expect film-makers to humiliate Trump on purpose then we can, at least, enjoy an example of them doing so by accident. The most deliciously awful Trump performance is to be found in John Derek's notorious *Ghosts Can't Do It*, from 1989. Bo Derek, the director's wife, plays a widow who moves through world with – in the embarrassed form of Anthony Quinn – her husband's unsettled ghost.

The turn won Trump one of the few gongs he doesn't boast about: that year's Golden Raspberry for worst supporting actor. "From the look of this room it isn't women's work we're doing today," Derek says to a smirking Trump during a tense negotiation. "Be assured, Mrs Scott, that in this room there are knives sharp enough to cut you to the bone," Trump says. "And hearts cold enough to eat yours as hors d'oeuvres."

Trump is inexcusably ghastly in the role of himself, but you couldn't say he isn't making an effort. He deserves a less snarky award for the straight face he adopts at Derek's rejoinder. "You're too pretty to be bad," she snaps back. They're still cleaning the vomit from the few cinemas where *Ghosts Don't Do It* actually played.

We can safely attest that Trump's movie career is over (or, at least, transformed). It's hard to play the amiable rogue when audiences have boasts about sexual assault playing continuously in their heads.

The remaining oeuvre does little to illuminate a figure whose grotesqueness seems to swell with each passing day. Ivana Trump, his first wife, did, however, get closer to the family strategy when playing her own celebrity cameo in *The First Wives' Club*. "Don't get mad. Get everything," she snapped.

We must hope that her old squeeze will fail to follow through on that advice.