‘I am the Donald.’ On the Sound Symbolism and Symbolic Power of Powerful Names

Marco Deseriis

Performance Research, Vol. 22, no. 5. On Names. Issue editors: Janez Jansa and K. G. Georgelou. Publication Date: September 2017.

Abstract
This article draws from George Lakoff’s provocative proposal to rename Donald J. Trump to discuss the sound symbolism, social recognition, and symbolic power of proper names. It focuses in particular on the relationship between the sociolinguistic and political function of proper names to advance a three-part argument. First, I argue that in denoting without connoting proper names fix the identity of a referent regardless of its changing properties—a linguistic function that is particularly useful to the governmental techniques of the modern nation state. Such rigidity is also essential to the performative capacity of political leaders to act upon the social world through the institutions that are constituted in them and by them. Second, I examine the case of collective pseudonyms such as Ned Ludd, Luther Blissett, and Anonymomus, which have been introduced at different historical turns to pursue a variety of objectives. Although they retain the formal features of a proper name, in denoting without identifying, and representing that which eludes representation, these improper names allow different social groups to exert a form of symbolic power outside the boundary of an institutional practice. Third, the article suggests a way to bring together the symbolic power of proper and improper names through a campaign to replicate and disseminate the Trump name. Besides reversing the unconscious sound symbolism of the Trump name, such campaign would reveal the tautological nature of institutional symbolic power.

Renaming Trump

During the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, renowned American linguist George Lakoff offered an acute and entertaining analysis of the sound symbolism of the Trump name. After noting that the sound pattern *tr-* appears in words commonly associated with the exertion of force (as in *tr*y, *tr*im, *tr*igger, *tr*uncate, *tr*ample, *tr*actor, *tr*uck, and *tr*iumph), and *-ump* is a sound associated with a fall, deflation or weakness of a person or an object (as in b*ump*, l*ump*, h*ump*, r*ump*, pl*ump*, st*ump*, d*ump*, ch*ump*, and th*ump*), Lakoff concludes that ‘as a person’s name, *tr-* followed by *-ump* symbolizes a person who acts with force on existing chumps or creates them by his exertion of force’ (Lakoff 2016a).

Rather than simply unveiling the nomen omen (i.e. the destiny that seems to be inscribed in the Trump name), Lakoff suggests a strategy to reverse such symbolism. After all, if Trump has renamed his opponents Crooked Hillary, Lyin’ Ted and Little Marco to impress certain disparaging features on them, why shouldn’t Trump’s opponents do the same with him? Thus, Lakoff invites progressives to rename Trump (via social media) with ‘a weak childish name’ such as Twimp or Twimpie, whose sound symbolism would evoke smallness and cuteness, ultimately undermining the forceful image of the strict authoritarian father associated with his figure. Leading by example, Lakoff himself has posted a Twimp Tower sign on his Twitter account, a photoshopped

image of the Trump Tower's main entrance on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan (Lakoff 2016b).

As clever and amusing as it may sound, it is very unlikely that this initiative will succeed in changing the way the American people call the 45th president of the United States. For Lakoff is a celebrity only in some academic circles, his Twitter followers are only a fraction of those of Donald J. Trump, and, above all, changing a proper name is not as simple as attaching a disparaging qualifier to it. This is because, as Ferdinand de Saussure has taught us, the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign—i.e. the lack of a natural and necessary connection between the signifier and the signified—protects language from sudden changes. Since there is no apparent reason, other than existing conventions, to prefer tree to *arbre*, or house to *maison*, argues Saussure, it is very difficult to convince a community of speakers to change its habits and replace one signifier with another (Saussure 1966: 67-74). This is particularly true of proper names, whose indexical function makes their semantic value irrelevant for practical purposes. In other words, if the sound symbolism of the Trump name may unconsciously trigger certain connotations, the purely denotative function of the proper name insulates it from any attempt to change its formal properties.

The fact that a proper name is an arbitrary label does not mean that it is devoid of power. Such power can rest with its sound symbolism, as Lakoff and other scholars have argued.[{note}]1 It can also rest with exceptional biographies, illustrious family trees, or, in places like India, with caste names that set the boundaries of what entire social groups can do (Das and Copeman 2015). Thus, whether it is inherited or acquired, inhibitive or enabling, the power of a name is ultimately determined by its place and function within a network of linguistic conventions, social customs, norms, mores, laws, and institutions that Jacques Lacan has holistically defined as the symbolic order. It is therefore very difficult, if not impossible, to change the names of others, and especially the names of powerful others, without changing in some way such order. It is no accident that extensive renaming operations usually follow upheavals such as civil wars and political revolutions. This is because society has to shake widely held beliefs and coin a new lexicon before someone, usually a political leader or an institution, can claim the power to enforce such lexicon.

In sum, if the conventional nature of the linguistic sign protects language from sudden and arbitrary modifications, the social and institutional codification of names endows them with a certain amount of power (or lack thereof). This means that a successful strategy of contestation of such power cannot begin with an artificial change in the signifier, in the hope that such change will be eventually recognized as socially necessary. For a renaming act to be widely perceived as incontestable and thus objective it has to fully invest the symbolic order. In modern nation states, such order comprises two distinct but partially overlapping spheres, which include a set of social conventions and a set of legal conventions. For example, if it is customary for a natural family to name a child, such name will acquire legal status only after it has been transcribed in a birth register.

Thus, between the social sphere and the institutional sphere there is always a gap. To return to our initial example, it is perfectly possible for Donald Trump's opponents to refer to him as President Twimp. Yet, notwithstanding the unlikely case that Trump will choose to legally change his name in Twimp, state officials, the media, and other institutional actors will continue to refer to him as Trump. This is because the institutional sphere puts pressure on the polysemic, constructed and conflictual nature of social signification by recognizing the name on record as the only legitimate name. Because of this pressure a campaign that aims at renaming Trump as Twimp cannot be successful without ultimately contesting his birth certificate. This is precisely what

Donald Trump did with Barack Obama as he kept questioning his birthplace even after the State of Hawaii had released his official birth certificate. Such move was possible because the so-called birther movement—of which Trump became the figurehead—successfully opened a gap in the symbolic order by relentlessly questioning not only Obama's word, but the very authenticity of his birth certificate (and thus implicitly the very institution that had issued it). Let us call this contestational strategy of the symbolic order of proper names the 'institutional route'.

An alternative way of opening a gap in the symbolic order would be more strictly social. Instead of pursuing a renaming strategy, Trump's opponents could appropriate and disseminate his name on a large scale. This would destabilize the name's indexical function, pushing it towards impropriety, that is, towards an unstable relationship between the signifier and the signified. In the beginning, such campaign would increase the visibility and power of the Trump name. But at the same time a parallel sphere of unauthorized users of the name would emerge. Such users, qua temporary bearers of the name, could determine how to exploit the symbolic power of the shared alias, that is, its performative capacity to engender a variety of actions through words (Austin 1962). As I have argued elsewhere, history is rife with examples of people who have shared the same pseudonym for a variety of purposes (Deseriis 2015). I will discuss these "improper names" in the second part of this article.

For now, let me just call this contestational strategy of the symbolic order the 'social route'. Before discussing it more in detail, I should first pause on the linguistic properties of the proper name and its functional alignment with the governmental needs of the modern state. This will allow me to contrast the notion of a symbolic power that emanates from the workings of an institution to the notion of a symbolic power that emerges from the social sphere. Finally, I will suggest a strategy to conflate these two modalities through a campaign for the widespread adoption and dissemination of the Trump name.

Fixing a Reference: The Proper Name as a Political Technology of the State

There is a specific strand in the philosophy of language that has discussed for a long time whether proper names either designate or describe a referent. The origins of this strand date back at least to the time of the disputes among the Sophists, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on language's ability to convey or obfuscate the truth.

In the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle discusses Antisthenes' paradoxical claim that if we admit that each state of affairs can be described in its singularity by one and only one proposition ('one formula, one referent') then contradiction is no longer possible. Although Aristotle at first dismisses Antisthenes' claim as "foolish," he then concedes that designation precedes signification in that the primary elements of a proposition cannot be defined, but only postulated—in the same way as the bricks, stones, and timbers of a house cannot be derived from this composite entity of matter and form inasmuch as they provide its basic components (Aristotle 1991: 1043a12-1043b32).

Drawing from Aristotle, Jean-François Lyotard notes (1988: 38) that both the distinction between designation and signification and the isomorphism between names and objects, propositions and state of affairs, resurfaces, mutatis mutandis, in Wittgenstein's "theory of simples." In the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the German philosopher seeks to construct a logically perfect language by positing a fundamental correspondence between the structure of a proposition (or picture) and a state of affairs. The *Tractatus*' project is to design an ideal language that can accurately reflect the world by relying on logical structures that cannot be said, but only shown insofar as propositions must share the same logical structures "with reality in order to represent it" (Wittgenstein, 1922: 4.12). Like Aristotle, Wittgenstein maintains that propositions are

composed of simple signs (called names) that "cannot be dissected any further" in the same way as states of affairs are complexes which result from a combination of objects that are irreducible to smaller parts. As Bertrand Russell notes in the introduction to the *Tractatus*, this ideal language is based on the fundamental requisite "that there should be one name for every simple, and never the same name for two different simples" (Russell in Wittgenstein 1922: IX). If the same sign is employed to designate two different objects, it must be disambiguated by showing that it belongs to two different modes of signification or that it is part of two propositions whose senses are different (3.322, 3.323).

Here Wittgenstein follows Gottlob Frege's famous distinction between the sense (*Sinn*) and reference (*Bedeutung*) of a proper name. In order to refute John Stuart Mill's thesis that proper names denote without connoting, in 1892 Frege (1993) had argued that since multiple names can be used to designate the same object (e.g., the morning star Phosphorus and the evening star Hesperus both refer to the same planet, Venus) different names correspond to different modes of presenting the same referent, and thereby convey a plurality of senses. Along with Russell's theory of descriptions (1905), Frege's distinction between sense and reference came to form the so-called descriptivist theory of names. Based on the assumption that a proper name is nothing other than an abbreviated or disguised description, the Frege-Russell view dominated the philosophy of language for most of the twentieth century, until Saul Kripke struck several blows to it.

In three lectures given at Princeton in 1970, Kripke returned to Mill's theory of direct reference to argue that whereas the properties and sense of an object may vary across time and space, and depend upon social conventions, once its existence has been established it can no longer be refuted. It follows that the different names used for describing the changing properties of the same object refer to it only under certain circumstances, and are therefore non-rigid designators. In contrast, the names that designate an object throughout its existence function as rigid designators. Kripke argues that the function of a rigid designator (or proper name) is to fix a referent *in all its possible universes*, that is, independent of whether or not its properties may change over time. He adds that the reference is fixed through an initial baptism, that is to say, by an obstension or a description, or, alternatively is "determined by a chain, passing the name from link to link" (Kripke 1980: 135).

These acts are social in character—i.e., the name is successfully assigned to a referent insofar as there is a community of speakers that recognizes this referential relationship. Even though, being a logician, Kripke is not interested in exploring these acts, his theory of rigid designation allows us to leave behind the dualism between denotation and signification, which Wittgenstein had tried to solve by assuming that the former precedes the latter and positing, in line with a longstanding logocentric tradition in Western thought, a fundamental isomorphism between logical structures and worldly structures. Once we recognize that the reference of a proper name does not satisfy certain properties described by the name, but rather that the referential relationship is socially constructed, we can focus on the actual communities of speakers, institutions, and practices that enable or bar the societal adoption of a proper name.

Through this line of reasoning we can return to our previous reflection on the institutionalization of naming. If within familial and tribal structures proper names are transmitted orally from link to link, through a communication chain, as Kripke argues, with the emergence of the first civilizations and the great empires of antiquity names begin to be transcribed in birth registers. Further, with modern nation-states, birth record becomes a primary political technology that enables the scientific and statistical management of a population. Beginning in the eighteenth century, statistics, writes Foucault, "discovers and gradually reveals that the population possesses its own

regularities: its death rate, its incidence of disease, its regularities of accidents" (Foucault 2007: 104). And also—and perhaps pre-conditionally—its birth rate, for which the birth record is the elementary unit. By becoming legal, the proper name enters a whole network of apparatuses (demographic records, criminal records, fiscal records, voting records, immunization and health records) through which the state can both identify an individual and effect calculations and operations whose domain is the population.

From the state's standpoint, fixing a reference—i.e., ensuring that a legal name identifies one and only subject—is thus an essential precondition of modern politics. It is through the legal codification of the initial baptism that a government gets to know its people and can target either specific individuals through the security apparatus or segments of the population through the leverage of political economy. Paraphrasing Wittgenstein, we may say that this double operation—which is both selective and extensive, individuating and massifying—is predicated upon the notion that there should be one name and only one name for every subject, and never the same name for two different subjects.

In sum, this excursus on the linguistic function of proper names allows us to grasp, via Kripke, an important distinction between non-rigid designators (i.e. names that denote the changing properties of an object and thus refer to it only under certain circumstances) and rigid designators, which refer to an object throughout the course of its existence, regardless of its changing properties. We have also noted that the state relies on the transcription of birth names into birth records to exert its governmental functions. In this sense we may say that a double layer made of sociolinguistic conventions and institutional protocols protects the proper name from sudden changes and third-party modifications. Such double layer makes the renaming of a birth name, and especially the renaming of a widely recognized name—what I have called the institutional route—extremely difficult to pursue. Even admitting that a large number of people would begin using the Twimp name to refer to the 45th President of the United States, such name would be inevitably relegated to the status of a nonrigid designator that is used and usable only under certain circumstances. In contrast, Trump is a signifier that designates the 45th President of the United States in all its possible universes—including the universes wherein Trump is criticized. This means that whereas the designating function of the Twimp name would be understood only within certain social networks, the Trump name is understood both within those networks and outside of them. Using a monetary metaphor, we could say that if the Trump name is a global currency the Twimp name would be recognized and accepted only in certain markets.

The Symbolic Power of Improper Names

As we have seen, once a proper name has been introduced, it remains fundamentally indifferent to any change in the status of the referent. In this sense, as Lyotard argues, the proper name is a "pure mark of the designative function," which invariably refers to a subject x independently of the position it occupies in a sentence (as x can be found in the position of addressor, addressee, or referent) at different time intervals (as x designates the same referent at t and at t+1), and on different levels of reality (as x can stand both for a referent endowed with material reality as well as for a purely fictional one). "This is because to name the referent is not the same as to show its 'presence'," writes Lyotard. "To signify is one thing, to name another, and to show still another" (Lyotard 1988: 42).

Lyotard's observation is significant because it reminds us that proper names do not necessarily endow an object with material reality. As Slavoj Žižek points out, it is "the retroactive effect of naming itself… which supports the identity of the object," whether

this object has a material or fictional existence (Žižek 1989: 95). But if a proper name is merely an index that constitutes an object in the act of naming it, regardless of its changing properties or material existence, then it can be used to denote not only a discrete object but any collection or assemblage of objects. Because a name is not a simple, that is, it does not stand, as Wittgenstein had speculated, in an isomorphic relationship with a pre-existing state of affairs, but only with itself, it can index as many objects as it is conventionally associated with. The many cases of homonymy that exist within family trees, castes, tribes, or simply by accident would be sufficient to verify such assertion.

Even more interesting, at least from the perspective of what a proper name can do, is the case of social groups, collectives, and networks of individuals who deliberately choose to adopt the same name to shield their individual identities while exercising a shared form of symbolic power. These include, to mention a few notable cases, Ned Ludd, the eponymous leader of the English machine-breakers of the 1810s known as the Luddites; Captain Swing, the pseudonym adopted by thousands of impoverished farmworkers in the riots that swept the South-East of England in 1830; Allen Smithee, a fictitious signature shared by Hollywood film directors to disown movies recut by their production company; Monty Cantsin, an alias shared by dozens of European and North-American mail artists to trouble bourgeois notions of originality and novelty in modern art; Luther Blissett, a pseudonym introduced by Italian activists to stage a series of sophisticated media pranks and organize cultural workers; and Anonymous, a moniker adopted by thousands of Internet users around the world to organize against governments and corporations that restrict access to information and information technologies. These shared pseudonyms fulfil the twofold function of providing their users with a medium for identification and mutual recognition while allowing them to build a form of symbolic power (Deseriis 2015).

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic power as the magic power of acting upon the social world through words. Drawing from the work of J. L. Austin (1962) on the conditions of felicity of a performative utterance, Bourdieu argues that such power is usually exercised by 'an individual—king, priest or spokesperson—[who] is mandated to speak and act on behalf of the group, thus constituted in him and by him' (Bourdieu 1991: 75). In modern societies, institutions such as the state and the church typically grant this power to an appointed minister, so that only a governor can declare the state of emergency, or a priest can pronounce someone husband and wife and expect such words to have the force of action. My wager is that the collective pseudonyms mentioned above are also a form of symbolic power. But rather than being managed through an institution, which endows the words of a recognized leader with the force of action, such power is directly managed by the communities of their users. This does not mean that the power is equally distributed among the users of the alias. Rather, the adopters of such pseudonyms determine their mode of disposition and usage within varying authorizing contexts. These may include art and political collectives, social movements, unions, and Internet-based communities.

Whereas an authorizing context can try and limit access to the pseudonym to its creators, the members of an organization, or an affinity group, as soon as these names are released in the public domain they lend themselves to unforeseen appropriations and third-party usages. It is through their encoding in a variety of media and their circulation in the public sphere that these aliases take on a life of their own and become improper. For example, Ned Ludd was originally meant to designate the mythic leader of the framework knitters' organized resistance to industrial machinery in Nottinghamshire. Yet, through its circulation across different regions of England, the alias lent itself to heterogeneous uses in conjunction with a variety of struggles and demands—including

demands for higher wages, lower food prices, and even the abolition of the monarchy. Similarly, over the past decade, Anonymous has been utilized to author online apolitical pranks and "raids" against powerless individuals as well as to coordinate political campaigns against public and private institutions that restrict access to information and information technologies.

In this sense, these aliases have the function of bridging a variety of actions and practices—some of which are collectively planned and executed and some of which are more spontaneous and idiosyncratic. This bridging function of an improper name raises questions about its actual capacity—or lack thereof—to operate a synthesis among multiple subject positions and modes of participation. Should these shared aliases be considered non-rigid designators (or ambiguous signifiers), which shuttle between a variety of contexts, uses, and demands without unifying them? Or does the bridging function of an improper name entail a transformation of its particular uses into something more than a sum of the parts?

One way of answering this question is to analyze the individual case studies. Indeed, some shared pseudonyms are more ambiguous, undecidable, and unruly than others. For example, Monty Cantsin, an alias introduced by a group of mail artists in Portland, Oregon, in the late 1970s, was released in the public domain for anyone to use, with virtually no guidelines attached. And so were subsequent multiple-use names such as Luther Blissett, a pseudonym introduced by Italian activists in the mid-1990s to organize cultural workers, and Anonymous. Obviously, the fact that there are no explicit guidelines on how the alias is to be used and by whom does not mean that its users do not share an ethos, and thus an implicit set of dos and don'ts. Yet because a multiple-use name is immediately open to the unforeseen it cannot operate in advance a synthesis of its heterogeneous uses.

In contrast, a collective pseudonym indicates the authorizing context's attempt to exert a tight control over the mode of disposition and usage of the name. For example, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) originally introduced the aforementioned Allen Smithee as a collective bargaining tool to bolster film directors' creative rights within Hollywood and to protect their reputation from movies they did not consider their own and did not want to know. As the directors kept borrowing the signature over the course of three decades, however, the signature began to accumulate a negative symbolic capital. [{note}]2 By the late 1990s Smithee had evolved from an alias that was supposed to signal abuse to Hollywood insiders to a contested signature that openly signified violation of a director's creative rights. Because the film producers had expressed concern that a Smithee credit could jeopardize the marketability of a film (especially if understood by the public qua mark of abuse) the DGA decided to discontinue its official use, opening it up to unauthorized usages. Thus, what had begun as a collective pseudonym whose access was strictly reserved to film directors and whose use was normed within formal labor relations, it eventually evolved towards impropriety and mixed usages.

Thus, whereas collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names are attributes that describe an improper name in terms of varying degrees of control (from the centralized to the decentralized), it is only when a shared alias is released in the public domain that it loses its proper intended function. Yet whether or not an authorizing context is able to exert control over the iteration of an improper name, there is no doubt that these aliases perform a syntactical function as they bring disparate set of practices within the same discursive space. To return to our question, does this bridging function entail a transformation of the assemblage's parts? It certainly does, but not to the extent of subjecting the particular uses of a pseudonym to a single definition and purpose.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that in an assemblage

"the whole not only coexists with all the parts; it is contiguous to them, it exists as a product that is produced apart from them and yet at the same time is related to them" (Deleuze and Guattari 1983: 42—43). From this angle, improper names do not unify a set of practices and authorial strategies from a center or from above, that is, they are not totalities, which exist independently of the parts. As previously noted, an assemblage of enunciation has the capacity to act upon the social world insofar as a social group invests a spokesperson—be it a physical person or an artificial construct—with the symbolic power to undertake action on its behalf. Within the sociosymbolic universe of shared pseudonyms this transfer of power is not always planned in advance nor does it necessarily proceed from the many to the one.

Rather the symbolic power of an improper name is always constructed a posteriori, that is, from subsequent iterations, uses, and adaptations of the name to different contexts. In this sense, the performativity of an improper name—i.e. its ability to endow its words with the force of action—is always unpredictable and subject to contestation. Whereas within an institutional context the symbolic power of an authority is directly proportional to the rank of the person in question (e.g. the words of a head of state have more powerful effects than those of low-level officials) within the improper name assemblage words and actions are not necessarily connected through a causal relation. As a collective assemblage of enunciation, an improper name is an articulation of linguistic and nonlinguistic expressions—what Deleuze and Guattari call a semiotic system and a pragmatic system—between which "there is neither a relationship of correspondence nor a cause-effect relationship nor a signifier-signified relation" but only reciprocal presupposition and "piecemeal insertions" (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 502 and 504).

The fact that these relationships are not causal nor isometric does not mean, however, that they do not exist. It only means that they are less predictable and more difficult to map. When brought to an extreme, such unpredictability can undermine the pseudonym's authoritativeness and performative capacity to act upon the social world. But when kept within certain boundaries by an authorizing context unpredictable uses and idiosyncratic appropriations can increase the pseudonym's capacity to express the unexpected, thus challenging established forms of political and aesthetic representation.

Conflating Two Forms of Symbolic Power

When compared to the institutional route, the social route to the contestation of the symbolic order presents several advantages. To begin with, a pseudonymous adoption of the name of the 45th President of the United States requires no social approval nor legal authorization. Although social network sites increasingly function as identity services, and have occasionally deleted "fake accounts," pseudonymity is widely diffused on the Web as well as within social network sites, not to mention traditional print media, the performing arts, and many other aspects of social life. Second, adopting a pseudonymous persona as part of a coordinated strategy sets in motion a distinctive process of subjectivation. What should I do with this name? How should I address other users of the name? Do I need to approve of their words and actions, or should I simply take care of my own persona, my own voice? In other words, is sharing a proper name sufficient to share a common politics?

As we have seen, the authorizing context of a shared pseudonym emerges precisely to answer such questions. Depending on whether the context exercises a strong control or a weak control over the improper name, this will tend towards the collective pseudonym or the multiple-use name. Further, each shared pseudonym poses challenges of its own. A proposal to adopt a high-profile name such as that of a president of the United States is likely to meet widespread skepticism and resistance,

especially among those who oppose him. Additionally, the adopters of the Trump name would inevitably be accused of feeding a new cult of personality.

At the same time, because cults of personality are deemed to be in contrast with the healthy functioning of democracy, such strategy could undermine Trumpism as the ideological discourse of a mythic return to the golden age of manufacturing, the white middle class, the safe border, and the fulfillment of the American Dream—all of which would materialize under the leadership of a strict authoritarian father. As Žižek points out, because official ideology always requires its addressees to be minimally distanced from its explicit rules in order to function, those who take the official doctrine by the letter elude the process of social construction of meaning whereby people make sense and ultimately internalize the otherwise senseless and violent call of the Law. On the contrary, maintaining a detached attitude towards the official ideology allows the members of a social group to become part of a collectivity—and this unifying process is precisely the working of ideology. If this is true, argues Žižek, then subversion would not consist in an attitude of ironic detachment but, on the contrary, in taking the Leader more seriously than he takes himself (Žižek 1993).

A group of performance artists in Slovenia pursued this strategy of "overidentification" in 2007, when they legally changed their name into that of former prime minister of Slovenia and leader of the conservative Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) Janez Janša. Taking all too seriously the party slogan "The more of us there are, the faster we will reach our goal," the three Janšas joined the SDS, attended party meetings, and managed to meet with the prime minister. Even though the artists refused to provide a public explanation for their choice (other than "private reasons") the political implications of their name change were sufficient to upset the conservative media and stir public debate. Further, and perhaps unexpectedly, the name change had unforeseen repercussions on the artists' intimate lives, friendships, and careers (Janša 2012). From this angle, the Janša experiment invests both the legal validation and the social recognition of proper names, allowing us to think the institutional route and the social route to the contestation of the symbolic order as intimately connected rather than alternative to one another. This is particularly true when such contestation invests names that are charged with a high symbolic power of their own.

Because Donald J. Trump is arguably the name with the highest symbolic power in the world—that is, a name whose words have recognizable reality effects because of the power of the institution behind them—a campaign for its widespread adoption is far more likely to have destabilizing effects than a renaming campaign. Indeed the Janša experiment indicates that a collective initiative aimed at taking (over) the legal name of a powerful public figure has the potential of producing a shortcircuit in the discursive apparatuses that make authority discernible and thus obeyable. In shortening the distance between those who have a legitimate right to carry a powerful name and issue orders in such name, and those who do not, an *I am the Donald* campaign would occlude the space between the powerful and the powerless, command and obedience, the strident sound of the exertion of force (*tr-*) and the muffled sound of its absorption (*–ump*). In other words, by putting the input and the output in sync, the sound symbolism of the Trump name would evoke an engine start failure (*ump-tr-ump-tr-ump*) as the name harbors the sound of its own impotence. Jean Baudrillard: "When the system says 'A is A,' or 'two times two equals four,' it approaches absolute power and total absurdity; that is, immediate and probable subversion… We know the potential of tautology when it reinforces the system's claim to perfect sphericity (Ubu Roi's belly)" (Baudrillard: 1994: 4).

Thus, within a tautological symbolic space, a name can only define itself by its own term, revealing its purely indexical function. As previously noted, the fact that proper

names qua rigid designators do not capture the changing properties of a referent nor its material existence means that they can index as many referents as they are conventionally associated with, at different moments in time, and on different levels of reality. Far from settling the ambiguities that characterize social signification, the replication of a proper name that may or may not refer to the same subject multiplies them. If the name in question is endowed with a high symbolic power, its speech acts will overlap with those of an emerging assemblage of enunciation. It is on this level that the symbolic power of a proper name would meet the symbolic power of an improper name. Because the separation between the institutional sphere and the social sphere is a precondition for the capacity of the former to act upon the latter, their convergence would vacate the performative efficacy of institutional symbolic power.

To be sure, such conflation would also raise the question of whether the authorizing context has any autonomy beyond *registering* a shift in power's modality from that which exerts force over something to a *force that is pure exertion* and request of obedience. This is, after all, the risk implicit in any strategy of overidentification, namely, that after turning signal into noise, and hearing the (amplified) sound of failure, we may simply get used to it. In this respect, there is no guarantee that a campaign to multiply the Trump name would be more successful than a renaming campaign, at least in strictly political terms. But on an aesthetic level, the redoubling of the Trump name would bring to light the order of the discourse that undergirds the discourse of order *as a function of state power*, that is, beyond and apart from the more or less agreeable, more or less competent, humans who are called to exert such power. If the aesthetic can reveal something about the inherently violent nature of state power that political activism often can not (concerned as it is with denouncing *specific* forms of violence), the question remains as to whether these two types of critique can be connected and how. The relation between the aesthetic sphere and the political sphere, however, is the subject of a different debate—one that is usually more fruitful when it begins from the recognition that the politics of aesthetics is never just an aesthetics in the service of politics.

References

Aristotle (1991) *Metaphysics,* in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation. Vol. 2,* ed. by Jonathan Barnes, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Austin, John L. (1962) *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Baudrillard, Jean (1994) *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Ian Hamilton Grant, London: Sage.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1991) *Language & Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Anderson, Camrbidge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Das, Veena and Jacob Copeman (2015) Introduction. On Names in South Asia: Iteration, (Im)propriety and Dissimulation. *SouthAsia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* [Online] 12: 1-24.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1983) *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980.

Deseriis, Marco (2015) *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Dolar, Mladen (2014) *What's in a Name?*, Ljubljana: Askioma Institute of Contemporary Art.
Foucault, Michel (2007) *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Frege, Gottlob (1993) 'On Sense and Reference,' in Alan W. Moore (ed.) *Meaning and Reference,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 23—42.
Janša, Janez (2012) *My Name Is Janez Janša,* Documentary film, Ljubljana: Aksioma - Institute for Contemporary Art.
Kripke, Saul (1980) *Naming and Necessity*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
Lakoff, George (2016a) 'Understanding Trump's Name: A Voyage into Sound Symbolism,' https://georgelakoff.com/2016/10/07/understanding-trumps-name, 7 October, accessed 17 January 2017.
Lakoff, George (2016b) 'Don't think of a Twimp,' Twitter text and image, https://twitter.com/GeorgeLakoff/status/809115639734378496, 14 December, accessed January 2017.
Lyotard, Jean-François (1988) *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Russell, Bertrand (1905) 'On Denoting,' *Mind* 14(56): 479—493.
Saussure, Ferdinand de (1966) *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, New York: McGraw-Hill.
Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1922) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.
Žižek, Slavoj (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso.
Žižek, Slavoj (1993) 'Why are Laibach and NSK not Fascists?' in *M'ARS 3-4*, Ljubljana: Moderna Galerija.

Notes

1 Slovenian philosopher Mladen Dolar has noted that Adolf Hitler's father was born a Alois Schickelgruber and that his last name was changed into Hitler before his son's birth: "The biggest stroke of luck in Hitler's entire career thus happened a dozen years before he was born, through the choice made not by him but by his father, concerning precisely 'the Name of the Father' – can one imagine masses chanting 'Heil Schickelgruber'?" (Dolar 2014: 55). As noted, however, the arbitrary and conventional nature of the linguistic sign, combined with the indexical nature of proper names, makes it difficult to manipulate the sound symbolism of a proper name in the hope that this will change its sociosymbolic function.

2 For Bourdieu, the possession of symbolic capital—understood as the possession of a socially recognized competence—is a precondition for the magic of words to act performatively on the social world. The difference between symbolic capital and symbolic power is that the former is a competence that has been accumulated over time, whereas the latter is the actual exercise of this competence. See Bourdieu (1991: 72). In the case of Smithee negative symbolic capital means that the alias had come to denote a socially recognized *incompetence*.