

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - The Power And Perceived Truthfulness Of Visual Arguments In U.S. Political Campaign Biofilms



A relatively new, and certainly significant, controversy about the nature of argument revolves around whether it is possible to argue visually or whether argumentation is solely a linguistic phenomenon. Fleming (1996) offers a succinct review of advocates both for and against the extension of argument to visual images. Scholars who reject the extension of argument to visual messages assume a priority of verbal over non-verbal means of communication. Language, they argue, offers reasons for belief; linguistic reason-giving is the necessary characteristic of argument and, without language, argument cannot exist (van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1984, Balthrop 1980, Toulmin, Rieke, & Janik 1979, Kneupper 1978). Fleming explains the rejection of non-linguistic forms of argument by contending that argument must both assert and prove, which in the case of pictures is impossible because one cannot differentiate between these two necessary elements. Fleming writes, "To say that a picture can be an argument is to leave individuals with the impression that they have argued for something when they have merely placed it in someone else's field of vision" (1996: 13).

Although Fleming writes that "argument requires a structure in which conceptually-distinct ideas can be sequentially linked" (14), which verbal arguments are capable of achieving, the characterization of arguments as linear (Hintikka & Bachman 1991, Andrews, Costello & Clark 1993, Postman 1985) is limiting and short-sighted. We contend, as others who support the extension of argument to visual images, that neither verbal nor visual arguments are always linear and that pictures can be visual messages that argue enthymematically when they evoke a shared cultural claim and offer proof of that claim (Willard 1989, Hesse 1992, Fisher 1988, Fisher & Filloy 1982, Medhurst & DeSousa 1981).

Like verbal messages, visual messages are not absolute, but they nonetheless

make the proposition that what is depicted is real or truthful. In political persuasion, anything that leads an audience to say “this is real,” or “this is truth,” is a powerful component of the rhetorical process meriting further attention. As Shelley (1996) writes, “in the case of rhetorical visual arguments, the individual elements of a picture evoke a pattern of verbal and emotional associations in the mind of the viewer” (67). The message is not just placed in someone’s field of vision; by careful association an enthymematic appeal is made. Of course, the visual message can reinforce a linguistic message, but we contend that even without the verbal claim, the argument can be completed by the viewer. There is no guarantee that all viewers will interpret the visual message in the same manner, but there is similarly no guarantee that an audience will interpret a verbal message in the same manner.

What needs to be perceived as real or truth by the voting public about a candidate running for the President of the United States is that the candidate is the embodiment of the national story: his or her roots must intertwine with the nation’s idealized past; the vision for the future must capture the hopes of the nation; his or her experience must reflect the values, patterns of behavior, or iconic acts that the national story identifies as constitutive of the ideal American president. Presidential campaign biographical films (biofilms) that air at U.S. nominating conventions right before the nominee’s acceptance speech are one rhetorical device for accomplishing this end. These films define American cultural political identity as they argue the appropriateness of a candidate. The visual as well as verbal narratives of the biofilm must achieve the above stated goals, but as Hayden White argues, visual images serve as a - principal medium of discursive representation. . . to direct attention to, specify, and emphasize a meaning conveyable by visual means alone” (1988: 1194). What cannot be said may be effectively argued through visual representations accompanying or substituting for the verbal narrative described.

1. Visual Argument in Presidential Biofilms

In this paper we contend that visual argument has the potential for making premises more real to the viewer by evoking emotions more powerfully than a verbal message alone. Blair argues that they “can bring us as close to actual experiential knowledge as it is possible to get, short of living the experience” (1996: 37). We will refer to this as a phenomenal experience. Barbatsis (1996) identifies an additional advantage, contending that visual arguments are not only

perceived as more real and hence convincing, but they are also accepted as more truthful because they include both direct address and narrative structure in pictorial terms. When the viewer forgets the “as if” feature of the argument, he or she loses “sight of the authoring voice” and is “deluded into thinking that the textual discourse is” one’s “own” (Barbatsis 1996: 79). Visual argument, then may be perceived as more truthful than verbal argument. As such, visual argument has the potential of being more powerful in involving the audience in the interpretive process of political discourse and overcoming the audience’s skepticism. This paper explores how images in biofilms lead the viewer to experience carefully authored messages as if they were the phenomenal experience of the viewer. It focuses on the context for visual arguments and the representative function they provide and contends that visual images argue enthymematically to link the candidate with the viewer’s conception of an ideal president.

The following four questions are addressed as we explore presidential biofilms from 1984 (Reagan), 1988 (Bush and Dukakis), 1992 (Bush and Clinton), and 1996 (Clinton and Dole): 1) Is the visual message independent or does it merely reinforce the verbal message?

2) Do the visuals make the verbal message more truthful by masking the intentionality of visual manipulation? We address this question by utilizing Messaris’ (1994) three principles of visual manipulation - the paraproxemic principle, false continuity, and associational juxtaposition, and through an additional technique that we have labeled blurring genres.

3) Do the visual messages make the argument more vivid and compelling? In part, this question is addressed through three elements of visual arguments - color, scale, and movement.

4) What can we discover theoretically about the nature of visual argument?

2. Visual images as independent arguments

Throughout the presidential biofilms, visual images are used to reinforce the verbal arguments but they also serve as the primary mode of argument. Independent visual arguments are prevalent in Reagan’s 1984 film and less successfully employed in other biofilms where the candidate is associated with symbolic icons of the American success story: the walk on the moon, Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the Berlin Wall coming down, the Statue of Liberty, the Iwo Jima monument, Ellis Island, 4th of July fireworks, farmers plowing the fields, soldiers welcomed home from war, small children saluting the

American flag, etc. A different montage that functions similarly is one that includes images of past presidents and symbolic sites in Washington, D.C.: the capitol, oval office, Washington monument, Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, and the White House. In both cases the images have emotional resonances and evoke the American story and the central place of the president in that story. The visual images do not require verbal explanation as they are symbolic of the national monomyth. The voting public knows the story, participates in its telling, and, if the visual argument is compelling, enthymematically places the candidate as the dominant character. If the film fails to make this visual argument, i.e. Dukakis 1988 and Dole 1996, the viewer is not likely to understand how this contender is necessary to the continuation of the nation's story. Biofilms and campaign rhetoric in general must argue that the candidate will do something to continue the national success story. Visual images argue much as a shared cultural narrative argues.

3. Visual Arguments: Enhancing the perception of truthfulness

Visual images encourage us to participate in message making as they simplify, set the mood, are more emotional, and urge the viewers to think that what they are feeling is their own experience, rather than someone's crafted emotional appeal; in essence, the visual message becomes phenomenal for each viewer by masking intentionality (Langsdorf 1996). This phenomenal experience can be used as confirmation or refutation of a claim. Consider Clinton's 1996 biofilm that refutes the accusations that he was a womanizer and thus lacked presidential character. He is visually depicted as a family man and loving husband. Clinton's strategists chose twelve photographs - both color and black and white - in which the viewer sees the couple gazing at one another, embracing, dancing, and laughing. The overwhelming consistency of the photographs invite the viewer to believe what he or she sees is a harmonious relationship and stand as proof of Hillary's belief in her husband and thus refutation of the claims of infidelity. The audience is urged to see the visuals as a truthful rendering of their marital relationship and forget that the image montage is crafted carefully. A visual argument is, despite appearances of spontaneity, in fact being made - by an unacknowledged argument partner, for less than evident purposes, and culminating in other than obvious conclusions" (Langsdorf 1996: 50).

The images are emotionally loaded proof of a harmonious marriage precisely because the audience believes that these emotions are difficult to manufacture. Obviously, if the viewer is strongly anti-Clinton, the visuals may be read as

contrived. Messaris (1994) suggests three means of visual manipulation that further explain why visual images become phenomenal for the viewer; these include paraproxemics, false continuity, and associational juxtaposition. We have added a fourth form of visual manipulation, which we label blurring narrative genres, that creates an illusion of objectivity and truthfulness.

3a. Enhancing truthfulness through the paraproxemic principle

The paraproxemic principle encourages sympathy, identification, and involvement by helping the audience to adopt the candidate's or camera's point of view. The Dukakis biofilm uses this principle in a very technical sense. Verbally, the film adopts a first person narrative stance with Olympia Dukakis inviting the viewer into the life of Michael Dukakis. Visually, the paraproxemic principle places the viewer in the front seat of the car looking over at Olympia and through her window at the important landmarks in Dukakis's life. The hand-held camera wavers as if it is the viewer, himself or herself, who can feel the car turning, slowing down or speeding up. At times, Olympia invites the viewer to step out of the car and take a closer look at the Dukakis's backyard or the inside of the high school gymnasium. This visual manipulation does not allow the viewer to remain objective or witness the candidate or his campaign from a broader perspective. The interaction is one-on-one and immediate - the viewer becomes like a close personal friend of Olympia and, therefore, Michael, himself.

When the paraproxemic principle is used it should result in a strong visual narrative - a more truthful and real account of the personal life of the candidate. In the Dukakis film, however, the technique fails because what Olympia shows the audience is not compelling; the images do little to establish Dukakis's character or values, nor are they representative of significant cultural places, values, or occasions. Because the scenes are all personal to Dukakis, it is difficult for the viewer to reflect on Dukakis's life as representative of the life of the nation. For example, when we see a picture of a farmer plowing his field in the Reagan film we do not feel that it is just the farmer's field, through the use of color, light, and rapid pace, this becomes a snapshot of America's agrarian experience. What was effective in Reagan's biofilm and should have been effective in the Dukakis film, becomes, instead, boring and incapable of inviting the viewer into Dukakis's life or the symbolic life of the nation. If the paraproxemic principle evokes truthfulness, the truth of Dukakis's life is that he is not mythic enough to become president.

3b. Enhancing truthfulness through false continuity

False continuity occurs when “two shots joined together in the context of a broader narrative are ‘read’ by the viewer as being part of a coherent stream of space, time, and action, even if the shots were in fact taken at widely separate times and places or if the actions within them were completely unrelated in reality” (Messaris 1994:35). Presented with edited visuals, the viewer makes connections between events or individuals that may not have existed. The films try to make the audience believe that the presidential contender is responsible for some historical event, is more admired and respected than he might be, or that America’s history is accurately represented by the selection of only those events that make the nation appear successful and righteous.

Bush’s 1988 film provides an example of how false continuity creates the illusion of truthfulness. Those familiar with the American political process know that vice presidents are primarily relegated to participating in symbolic actions, greeting foreign dignitaries, attending lesser state funerals, and appearing at fund raising events. The biofilm argues visually and verbally that Bush, as Vice President, played a significant role in securing peace in the Middle East and bringing democracy to Poland. This argument is visually made through film clips of Bush meeting with Lech Walesa, visiting the Middle East, and conferring with other world leaders. Verbally the link is reinforced with Reagan’s contention that Bush is capable of leading the nation into the next century. In his second biofilm, Bush is attributed with ending the cold war through visual images of Bush and Yeltsin standing together and Eastern Europeans celebrating peace. The accompanying verbal message proclaims, “. . . because of America’s leadership more of the world enjoys the sweet taste of peace than ever before.”

Another example is found toward the end of Clinton’s 1992 biofilm where he creates the impression that he was raised in Hope, Arkansas - the prototypic rural American small town. He begins the section by arguing that he is the product of a place and time that epitomizes American values. The audience is shown video clips of Hope’s main street, children coming out of a school, and a boy swimming at the local watering hole. This last image fades to Chelsea fishing at a similar spot and dancing in an old house that the audience also assumes is in Hope. The film shifts to the present with images of Clinton surrounded by supporters or dancing with Hillary. The final images are of the infamous footage of Clinton shaking hands with Kennedy during Clinton’s Boys’ Nation trip to Washington, D.C, and then a slow fade to the Hope train station. Together, these images argue

that Clinton is a product of Hope and the values that this small town represents. The false continuity here is that Clinton did not grow up in Hope; his mother moved him to Hot Springs, Arkansas, when he was a toddler. Hot Springs' image is captured by the locals' reference to it as "Sin City". The illusion that he spent his formative years in Hope becomes an important argument for Clinton's qualifications to become president.

The use of false continuity can be extremely powerful as it adds an element of truthfulness to events and situations that are rhetorically constructed. It might seem that this particular technique can backfire; however, as Messaris points out, "Visual manipulation of this sort is very hard to detect on first viewing" (1994: 36). False continuity forefronts the narrative while obscuring the construction of that narrative. "The tendency to succumb to the illusion of false continuity appears to be very strong" because "the devices in question are anchored in the principles of human perception and are not simply arbitrary conventions. In fact, the tendency to see separate images as a continuous event may even operate in cases in which we know that the images have been put together to make a certain editorial point" (Messaris 1994: 36). False continuity is a powerful means of arguing the truthfulness of a candidate's claim that he or she could be the textbook president.

3c. Enhancing truthfulness through associational juxtaposition

The truthfulness of visual images can be created through associational juxtaposition. Messaris argues that "this kind of visual device aims. . . to transfer the viewer's (presumably positive) response from the background image to the image of the product [candidate]. The goal of the ad [film] is to create an association in the viewer's mind between the product [candidate] and the image it is paired with" (1994: 36-37). In this case, the product is the presidential contender and the image can be anything from the statue of liberty that equates with freedom, or the oval office that equates with power.

In both of Clinton's biofilms there is a clear effort to link Clinton with John Kennedy's legacy. Both films show the Kennedy-Clinton handshake. In the second, the scene is condensed and modified to symbolically represent the transfer of position and ideological ground from Kennedy to Clinton and implicitly from Clinton to future generations, specifically as he shakes the hand of a black youth. In both films, Clinton becomes Kennedy through visual rather than verbal argument.

The same kind of link between the candidate and America's future is frequently

made by positioning the candidate with children, either his own, his grandchildren, or possibly with America's most challenged youth (the physically impaired or minorities). This important link is successfully argued in Bush and Clinton's biofilms through both the sheer volume of these associational images and the interaction of the candidates with children. Bush plays with his grandchildren and in one repeated scene holds his granddaughter above his head so that she is bathed in sunlight while the narrator talks about Bush's hopes for the future. In the two Clinton films, we witness Chelsea's maturation through her father's eyes and see the linking of the dreams for his child to all children. In contrast, the association between the candidate and future generations is not well constructed in Dole's 1996 film. The few images of children, one of children in an integrated swimming pool and two others of children on sports teams, are not well linked with Dole and he does not appear in the pictures nor is his link with them made explicit in verbal commentary.

3d. Enhancing truthfulness by blurring narrative genres

Viewers associate truthfulness with some genres of narratives over others. For example, viewers may assume that a news report or a documentary is more truthful than a fictionalized or personalized account. What the candidates have discovered is that by blurring genres - moving between the documentary or news account, personal testimony, and the created image - the audience is less aware of the manipulation and, hence, less critical of the judgment that is being privileged.

In Reagan's 1984 biofilm, the audience sees newspaper headlines, what appears to be television news footage, and dramatic scenes that are carefully crafted to appear to be documentary images. Specifically, a Reagan supporter is interviewed saying that the economy is better now than it has ever been, newspaper headlines that read, "A Break In Interest Rates" and "Here Comes the Recovery," and video of construction workers and a family moving out of a house with a "sold" sign out front, are all interwoven.

These images are selected to create the impression that the economy is on the upturn. Morreale (1991) argues that "by merging forms and genres of televisual discourse, messages conventionally interpreted to be real or true (such as news. . .), along with more explicitly symbolic representations, together become framed as 'authentic' simulations of reality" (25). Newspaper headlines about the state of the economy are a more factual or objective form of proof than the candidate assuring the audience that the economy is better.

In another example, Bush makes a compelling argument that as Vice President he was a heartbeat away from the presidency when he uses footage of the assassination attempt on President Reagan. The scene begins with Reagan telling the viewer that he chose Bush as his Vice President because he was confident that Bush would be a great leader should anything happen to him. This comment cuts to Bush taking the vice-presidential oath of office and fades to the news video of the assassination attempt. The news footage, Reagan's comments, and Bush's inauguration, become blurred in the viewer's mind thereby making the entire scenario of Bush as presidential material more real to the viewer. Once the film establishes the cinema verte' feeling, the reality of that footage can be transferred to all other footage, real or not. Mixing the real with the artificially created images makes it more difficult for the viewer to question the truthfulness of the event they have just witnessed.

4. Visual Arguments: Vivid and compelling

The veracity of visual argument is not constructed in the same way it is in verbal argument. Color, movement, and scale - what one scholar terms the dispreferred structures of visual images - influence the way viewers process visual messages. These visual structures add vivacity to a message, making it more compelling than a verbal message alone. For example, in the Dukakis biofilm the verbal message had the potential for making a compelling case for his embodiment of the immigrant success story. To do so, the narrative needed to be reinforced with powerful visual images which it was not. The verbal narrative alone would have been more compelling; heard, the verbal message would have evoked mental images of Ellis Island, and of families struggling to become the American success story. In this instance, a poorly conceived visual component weakened the verbal arguments. Color and light, movement, and scale structure visual images; in the Dukakis film, they needed to be to be more effectively managed.

4a. Color and light

Dondis (1989) argues that: "Color is, in fact, loaded with information and is one of the most pervasive visual experiences we all have in common. It is, therefore, an unvaluable source for visual communicators" (50). Reagan's 1984 biofilm is a masterpiece in the use of color and light to add vivacity to a verbal message. The film is bathed in sunlight - numerous sunrises over the farmland and the Capitol, sunlight shines not only on Reagan, but on all types of Americans from cowboys to blue-collar workers to students and business executives. It is not just the sunlight

but the saturation of color throughout the film that creates warmth and a sense that all is right with the nation. The film clearly reaffirms Reagan's assertion that Americans are better off in 1984 than they were a few short years before.

In a similar way, the use of color and light had a significant impact on the audience's perception of Hillary in Clinton's 1992 film. Hillary was often viewed as hard, opinionated, and an ardent feminist; in the film, she comes across as gracious, friendly, and supportive of her husband. While this was achieved through her personal testimony, it was also achieved through the filming of this testimony. Hillary was shown bathed in a soft light, and the dark green foliage in the background contrasted nicely with her pink sweater and bobbed blond hair. At a most basic level, the soft-focus of the camera contributed to a softening of Hillary's personality.

An audience's preference for color does not preclude the use of black and white photography/video, which can be very powerful when juxtaposed with color. But when a film consistently uses black and white visuals over color without a compelling strategic reason (e.g. to give the illusion of historic documentary film), the film loses the emotional appeal that color evokes. Surprisingly, many of the biofilms employ a large number of black and white photos or video. One would expect old family snapshots to play a role in a biographical film, but Dole's 1996 film, for example, illustrates an over-reliance on a colorless montage. Students viewing the visual track alone responded to Dole's age and lack of a contemporary perspective. The visual message of Reagan's 1984 biofilm, drenched in color, evoked the opposite response even though both candidates were old from the student's perspective. Reagan's candidacy was seen as active, forward-thinking, and Dole's as passive, tied too closely to the past. Color and light, then, create emotional tones for the viewer that can shape the way a candidate is perceived.

Finally, in its most basic form, colors are associated with feelings. In the American political arena, the use of red, white and blue traditionally evokes feelings of patriotism. The use of the flag is the most obvious, but the colors can also be utilized in backdrops, balloons, banners, etc. It should be intuitive that a political biofilm would use color symbolism to enhance its message, and many do, most notably Reagan's 1984, Bush's 1988, and Clinton's 1996. Those films that do not use this type of color symbolism stand in stark contrast, most notably Dukakis and Dole's.

4b. Movement

Dondis (1989) writes, that “the visual element of movement. . . is more often implied in the visual mode than actually expressed. Yet, movement is probably one of the most dominant visual forces in human experience” (64). Zooming in or out, rapid cuts, use of montages, and the use of video or film instead of still pictures, are examples of how a sense of movement can be achieved. Movement makes the audience member feel more a part of the experience and helps the audience believe that the candidate is able to move in time, meaning he can be both a historical figure and a contemporary figure. These techniques help the audience identify the candidate with those events or people that are iconic for the voting public.

Lacking in color, Dole’s 1996 biofilm also lacks effective movement. It relies on static or artificially posed pictures as opposed to glimpses of people engaged in various activities. As audience members, we are drawn to activity, and a picture can imply activity even though it is but one image of the act. In contrast to early photographs that tried to replicate portraiture paintings where there was no movement, basic photography now asserts that a good picture implies movement. Dole’s biography introduces his family life with 13 photographs intercut with a video interview with Dole. The snapshots are all staged photographs in which none of the family members, Dole included, are active. In contrast, Clinton’s first biofilm is also a scrapbook of his life, but his memories are captured mostly through film, specifically home video, along with a few photographs that are activity oriented, for example, Clinton kissing Chelsea as a baby. When portraits are employed, they are enlivened through camera manipulation; for example, on a photograph of Clinton as a baby, the camera pans out from the twinkle in the baby’s eye to the whole baby. Home video is especially moving as Clinton is shown creating a loving family – dancing and playing baseball with Chelsea and swinging in a hammock with both Hillary and Chelsea.

Another example of the dichotomy between movement and a lack of movement is seen in Bush and Dole’s portrayal of their respective war experiences. Dole’s war is captured through four simple pictures: his unit, the Western Union cable that informed his parents of his war injuries, Dole in the hospital – looking thin, and Dole standing outside by some work-out pulleys. In contrast, Bush’s experience comes to life through a variety of home videos and war footage. Dole’s war heroism could have been the most dynamic, visually compelling argument of his film – much like Bush’s – but it fails to make Dole’s experience real. The audience is told that Dole is a war hero, but they do not feel that. Told rather than shown, Dole’s war experience is unlikely to become a phenomenal experience for the

viewer.

A final example is found in the historical montage at the end of Clinton's 1996 and Reagan's 1984 video. In those sequences the visuals are complex, fragmented, and lacking in balance. The viewer is encouraged to read the American experience as active, energized, moving forward. A series of images of iconic events are implicitly argued as precursors to the exciting future awaiting the nation. Dondis explains, "the visual elements are manipulated with shifting emphasis. . . The most dynamic of the visual techniques is contrast, which exists on a polarity with its opposite technique of harmony. . . . The techniques are the agents in the visual communication process; it is through their energy that the character of a visual solution takes form" (1989: 16). Movement invites the audience to become involved in the candidate's message and demonstrates that the candidate possesses the American cultural value of activity. The audience believes that this candidate will accomplish his goals.

4c. Scale

Visual images are structured by the principles of scale. Dondis explains: "All visual elements have the capacity to modify and define each other. . . there can be no large without small, but even when large is established through small, the entire scale can be changed with the addition of another visual modification. Scale can be established not only through the relative size of visual clues, but also through the relationships to the field or environment" (1989: 56-57). Scale is interestingly employed in Reagan's 1984 biofilm through a series of images of the flag. The first image is a long shot of children and their leader at camp watching an American flag being raised; the second shot is a close-up of the children's faces looking up in awe; the final shot pans out from the flag atop the Capitol to a long shot of the Capitol. The move from long shot to closeup elevates the height of the flag and, in turn, its importance.

Through similar visual logic the flag (as symbolic of our political values) becomes larger and more important as it is seen against the backdrop of the Capitol. A simple symbolic act in which children participate promises the preservation of our political ideals. A second sequence of photographs makes the same basic argument, but links the childhood participation with the agrarian myth. Three shots structure the message: a farmer is plowing his fields in the early morning sunrise; this fades into a close-up of the flag, which cuts to a close-up of a small boy saluting the flag - the flag is larger than the boy or the man on his tractor. The scale of the flag is symbolic of the importance the viewer should place on

political values. This message is, perhaps, best captured in a shot of Reagan with a wall of flags behind him. Pictures of people and flags give the flag an importance that, if explained verbally, might sound trite, but the image of patriotism evokes the emotion without the rational distancing that our verbal norms prefer.

We have argued then, that the characteristics of visual images - color, scale, and movement - all make the visual argument more vivid and compelling for the viewer and that visual argument privileges a particular reading of the candidate's qualifications for office. The audience wants a president who is active, charismatic, and larger than life.

5. Visual Arguments: Theoretical Implications

Political biofilms clearly illustrate the conclusion of previous research that visual messages reinforce verbal messages. However, we have shown that visual messages can stand alone as an argumentative form. Specifically, our research has demonstrated that the visual messages in biofilms argue for the acceptability or liability of a particular candidate for the presidency by evoking culturally ingrained narratives. Once evoked, the audience is able to enthymematically complete the argument that the candidate meets the role expectations within a particular cultural narrative. Having established that visual arguments can be independent of verbal arguments, we further explored why visual messages appear to represent truth, and how the vivid and compelling nature of visual arguments can make this form of argument so powerful. We demonstrated how a perception of truth is achieved through the manipulation of images, specifically through techniques like paraproxemics, false continuity, associational juxtaposition, and blurring of genres. These techniques invite the viewer to participate in the creation of meaning, but that meaning is not as open to audience interpretation as one might assume. Through the images that are presented, the viewer begins to think about the candidate as the filmmaker desires. Visual manipulation privileges a certain reading of the candidate and his role in the future of America. The ability to create a phenomenal experience for the viewer is more pronounced with visual rather than verbal messages because the viewer does not question its validity.

Once a link has been established, e.g. between Bush and war, visual arguments are often difficult to refute or resist. Breaking the link between the visual image and the audience is what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca call dissociation. They make a distinction between dissociation and a simple breaking of argumentative

links; the latter “consists in affirming that elements which should remain separate and independent have been improperly associated. Dissociation, on the other hand, assumes the original unity of elements comprised within a single conception and designated by a single notion” (1969: 411-412). Because visual arguments can privilege a misconception in the audience that the linkage is properly constructed, attempts to refute visual arguments demand dissociational efforts and are, therefore, harder to refute than verbal arguments. Resisting dissociational visual argument is more difficult because audiences are less adept at analyzing this form and, because as Olbrechts-Tyteca argue, this is a more difficult argumentative link to break. When an argument, whether verbal or visual, rests on what the audience views as an essential link, e.g. war heroes make good presidents, the linkage is difficult to break.

What has not been explored is what happens when visual and verbal messages are in conflict and both have essential links, compete. Consider Clinton’s reoccurring problems regarding infidelity. These charges call into question his qualifications for president because culturally there is an essential link between morality and the presidency. The preponderance of verbal messages forged a link between Clinton and infidelity that was seemingly impossible to break. The 1996 biofilm, however, utilized visual arguments with an essential link – Clinton as loving husband – that is similarly a prerequisite for the presidency. These two arguments represent a clear case of irreconcilable essential links and the competition between visual and verbal proof. What is at stake is the power of these two forms of argument and the necessary strategies for breaking essential links. Resolution of this conflict demands dissociational refutation. In Clinton’s case, the producers of his biofilm recognized the power of the visual over the verbal and were hoping that the visual link between Clinton and Hillary would be stronger than the verbal link between Clinton and other women. More research needs to be conducted on the competition between visual and verbal arguments when both contain essential links.

In conclusion, we believe argumentation scholars must further attend to the role of visual messages. Our focus has been on one aspect of political discourse, but our observations lead us to believe that similar visual argumentation occurs in other realms of public discourse. We have discovered that visual arguments employ many of the same principles as verbal arguments. For example, both can manipulate as they select and organize proof, both can reason fallaciously as they forge links, and both can evoke powerful cultural narratives as they argue

enthymematically. Due to years of scholarship, audience's have become more skillful in assessing and responding to verbal arguments and, because this is a visual age, the same kind of attention and training must be given to visual argumentation.

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