

The “Celeb” Series: A Close Analysis of Audio-Visual Elements in 2008 U.S. Presidential Campaign Ads

ZIZI LI Carleton College

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POLITICAL ADVERTISING IS A MAJOR FORM OF COMMUNICATION for candidates pursuing political office and is an important symbol of democratic society in the United States and around the world. For the past five decades, the study of political advertising in the United States has focused on how various political actors (i.e. candidates, parties, and interest groups) employ ads to persuade voters that a particular candidate's values, character traits, and stances on issues outshine those of an opponent. Though the combined use of audio and visual elements distinguishes television from other technologies and means of delivering a message (e.g., radio, debate, speech making, pins and bumper stickers), the majority of the scholarly literature focuses on the effects of messages based solely on the verbal content, written or spoken texts, of political ads.

Lynda Lee Kaid and colleagues highlighted the significance of looking beyond mere verbal content analysis around forty years ago, noting that “videostyle” such as verbal content, nonverbal content, and video production components of political ads influence voters' perception of candidates (Kaid and Davidson 1986; Kaid and Johnston 1991; Kaid and Noggle 1998; Kaid 1998; Kaid, Lin, and Noggle 1999; Noggle and Kaid 2000; Kaid and Johnston 2001; Kaid 2002; Kaid 2005; Kaid 2008). More specifically, the verbal components may include language style, reference to specific issues, and type of appeals made; nonverbal components may include style of dress, setting, surroundings; and television production techniques encompass staging, sound effects, and more. Kaid and Johnston (2001) suggest that these three components together contribute to the delivery of message and the narration of political ads.

In-depth explorations of ad negativity and studies concerning ad accuracy have grown significantly in recent years. Since 1990, studies have advanced our understanding of ad tone and perceptions of fairness. Research on audio-visual narration of political ads, however, has not seen significant advancement within the last four decades. No studies have further considered how elements of videostyle are associated with voters' perception of ad accuracy; close analysis of the nonverbal content or *mise-en-scène* (i.e. the candidates' style of dress, the décor of the set, and surroundings) and production techniques (i.e. staging, graphic editing, and sound effects) of political ads has remained largely unexplored.

In the past decade, there has been discussion of audiovisual elements serving as stimuli that affect voters' perception. For example, Ted Brader (2005) studies visual-aural stimuli and finds that music and visuals appealing to fear may inspire the politically initiated to act, though fear may also contribute to the possibility of increased withdrawal from political participation by the political tyro. Brader suggests the effective influence of music and visual ad styles on the stimulation of fear leads to increased persuasion. Killmeier and Christianson (2011), moreover, tell us a fear motif may be accepted, and their extensive analysis of one single political ad (the Bush- Cheney ad “Wolves”) unveils the audio and visual tropes within the ad, as well as their cross references. Recently, Barbara Allen and colleagues learned that the exploration of non-verbal aspects provides further understanding of campaign ads by using the 2008 presidential election as a case study to examine numerous visual and audio factors, including various practices of visual techniques, gender of voice over, ad accuracy, and difference between media platforms (Allen, Berg, and Stevens 2015). The lack of scholarly literature concerning the determining role that image and sound may play in affective states suggests the need for further study on the weight of visual and aural narration

in broadcasting political ads. This paper, therefore, aims foremost to investigate how narrative and persuasive tactics unfold in audio-visual styles of political ads. Moreover, it aims to discuss how various elements come together and affect voters' perception. I wish to suggest that detailed visual-audio analysis can be successfully applied to a set of ads by systematically studying their courses of narrative and tactics of persuasion. This paper will present my close audiovisual reading of John McCain's 2008 presidential campaign ad "Celeb" and content analysis of its sister series. Before getting into the specific analysis of these ads, I will first explicate the reason for analyzing political ads as moving images by mapping out the relevance of aesthetics to politics, and then review the scholarship on political ads and videostyle.

Aesthetics, Images, and the Politics Within

Politics and aesthetics are the two cores of political advertisements. Aesthetics refers to the specific distribution of the sensible being of art objects, according to Jacques Rancière (2004), and the practice of art refers to the ways of making and doing that intervene in the general arrangement of the sensible. The fundamental concept of Rancière's theory is "the partition of the sensible," meaning both aesthetics and politics can shake the original arrangement of the sensible and redistribute it (Rancière 2004). It raises the relation to the level of demarcating what is common to the community and who can have a share of this. The aesthetic and the political share is, therefore, the delimitation of the (in)visible and the (un)sayable. Arts and politics, by forming new artistic or political subjects, enable an ongoing process of challenging the given order or distribution of the sensible and (re)distributing the new order within social, political, and artistic fields.

Since politics "depends on the possibility to imagine commonalities" (Bottici 2009) and "aesthetic-affective dimension" (White 2009) plays an important role in the construction of individual and social identities, the connection between politics and imagination is crucial to our understanding of the relevance of politics to the aesthetic image. Chiara Bottici (2014) proposes the concept of "the imaginal," which can be "both the product of an individual faculty and of a social context as well as the result of a complex, yet-to-be-determined between the two." Politics cannot exist without the imaginal because it is social imagery and the imagination of a public that frames political structures and provides legitimacy to existing political institutions.

On one hand, imaginal beings are the product of individual actions, for "communities cannot exist except as imaginal beings" (Bottici 2014). It is only by imagining intangible beings via some sort of unified pictorial (re)presentations that one can rationalize inhabiting a single territory with individuals they do not know. In a more restricted sense, the imaginal is central to politics because a political power needs to make sense within its imaginal state for it to be perceived as legitimate. On the other hand, imaginal beings also nurture individual imagination. Individuals learn the presence of surrounding things and events through encountering representations of them. Exposures to these imaginal beings help individuals to identify commonalities and become aware of differences. Hannah Arendt (1968) contends that "political thought is representative" and emphasizes the crucial role of images, suggesting that pictorial (re)presentations allow our imagination to be trained by representing the conditions of others and thus create a sense of community. Understanding the aesthetics of political ads, I argue, is crucial to understand the power of political ads.

Audiovisual Aspects of Political Ads

Barbara Allen and colleagues highlight how categorical differences in visual elements of political ads have been adopted as a division between "manifest content" and "latent content" and have come to be included in media analysis (Allen, Berg, and Stevens 2015). Manifest content, like video production techniques, includes, for example, the use of graphics, on-screen text, animation

(Kaid and Johnston 2001), moving versus still imagery, presence versus absence of the candidate on screen (Kaid and Davidson 1986, Kaid and Johnston 1991, Kaid and Johnston 2001, Banwart 2002), speaking candidate versus voice-over (Kaid and Johnston 2001, Banwart 2002), direct versus indirect gaze (Kaid 2002, Kaid 2005, Kaid 2008), and so on. Latent content, like nonverbal content, encompasses elements of *mise-en-scène*, camera angle, overall film styles, special effects and more. A better recognition of all above-mentioned classifications of visual elements has been gradually achieved as the length of this catalog keeps increasing.

There seems to be a nascent trend of advancing from recognition of differences in categories to instead understanding of various effects as the complexities of visual and audio materials have been underlined in a number of current studies that focus on editing-related production values and techniques. Throughout the development of film, stories have been consistently told through a relationship among visual, aural, verbal, and textual elements. Editing, both in-camera and in-software, has been an effective way to guide the eyes of the viewers, as well as to direct and maintain their attention. Geiger and Reeves find that ads with more dynamic film structures (those with active cuts, camera movement, sound cues, etc.) elicited significantly more affirmative candidate assessments in issue ads (Geiger and Reeves 1991, 1993). Likewise, Lang and colleagues discovered that informational processing can be increased through fast pace and arousing content, yet this type of content also has the tendency of overburdening processing, which eventually produces less detection and memory of message content (Lang et al. 1999).

Diegetic sound of events on screen, non-diegetic effects, voiceover, text spoken by characters on screen, music, and more contribute to the complexity, ambiguity, and hybridity of audio elements. Attention to aspects of sound, especially the strategic choice of gender of the individual speaking in the voice-over, has increasingly developed into a major focus of analysis in the past decade. Patricia Strach and colleagues investigate if gender is a factor in influencing strategic choices of voice-overs in political ads, finding that gender of the voice-over is strategically taken into consideration, though men voice the vast majority of political ads. In line with gender stereotypes, they note that female voice-overs were more likely to be used when the particular issue discussed in the ad is “feminine,” the type of the ad is negative or contrast, and the ad focuses on “personal” rather than policy issues (Strach et al. 2015). Findings that challenge the conventional campaign strategy indicate that male candidates were more likely to use female voice-over, Republicans were more likely to use women to voice their ads, and the use of female voice-over was more common when the state or district is increasingly Democratic (Strach et al. 2015).

Besides voice-over, scholars have also recently studied the significance of other aspects of sound in tandem with visual elements. A decade ago, Ted Brader examined the influence of visual-audio stimulants via their effect on emotions and designed a test in which there were three sets of visual-aural stimuli—enthusiasm cue, fear cue, and neutral cue. The experiment included a relatively negative verbal script in the company of fear manipulation, a relatively positive script accompanied with enthusiasm manipulation, and a neutral script partnered with non-evocative image without music in order to mimic the reality of political ad crafting. Brader finds that a positive ad message with designed sound and sights to elicit enthusiasm is palpably more capable of stimulating interest and willingness to vote and reinforce existing loyalties. Although enthusiasm benefits the potential voter turnout, it does not increase voters’ active information search, nor does it affect their hesitancy. Audiovisuals that appeal to fear, on the other hand, increase vigilance and persuasion, while the neutral ad produced evaluations based nearly equally on trait evaluations, issue evaluations, and prior preferences. Overall, “fear ads elicited the highest level of anxiety,” and “menacing music and imagery strengthened reactions of fear and anxiety to the negative message” (Brader 2005). Brader, therefore, suggests the effective influence of music and visual ad styles on the stimulation of fear that leads to increasing persuasion. Furthermore, Allen and colleagues have studied Barack Obama’s and John McCain’s 2008 presidential campaign ads. They note relatively increased presence of visual distortion in ads sponsored by the McCain campaign compared to

those of the Obama campaign. Even though Allen et al. do not posit a relationship between the gender of voice-over and the accuracy of issues discussed, there were some findings concerning the study of perceived accuracy: increasing levels of perceived accuracy corresponds with decreasing probabilities of visual distortion. Measure of perceived accuracy, therefore, has sufficient association with the presence of visual distortion (Allen, Berg, and Stevens 2015).

Paul Christiansen and Matthew Killmeier's close reading of "Wolves" is perhaps the most extensive analysis of a single political ad up until today. They disclose the meaning of symbols, cross references, and audio and visual tropes that construct the ad by showing how the ad ties everything together through visual, aural, and narrative realms. Instead of taking the ad's actual influence on voters into consideration, Christiansen and Killmeier (2001) emphasize the making of the ad and provide scholars a foundational structure to understand the influence of film genre conventions, which could potentially affect viewers' understanding of implied messages filtering through audiovisual elements. They consider music not only a key element, but also a "determinative" in comprising an ad. In other words, music is the foundation and principal of the ad construction; the rest of audiovisual elements (i.e. images, voice-overs, sound effects, written texts, and so on) are all confined by the music and can only be interpreted in relation to music.

In summary, experimental evidence and previous research suggest that the nonverbal aspects of ads, as well as production techniques, are essential to the production of political advertising, for they establish a relationship with accuracy that is independent of their tone and, at the same time, evoke discrete emotional responses (Brader 2005). Although the vast majority of those studies privilege verbal content over other aspects of audio and visuals, there is existing research that has verified importance of these nonverbal content and production techniques. Sound and sights no longer serve only as the afterthought to reinforce ad tone. The ad-making process is an intentional, arduous activity that necessitates mapping the separate influences of each element (i.e. sound, music, visual compositing, and so on) and integrating parts into a total synthesis of visual, aural, and verbal messages. Although Allen, Berg, and Stevens (2015) provide a wonderful systematic analysis of the audiovisual usage and effects in 2008 campaign and Christiansen and Killmeier's (2001) offer an illuminative analysis of the determinative role of music with the company of other nonverbal content elements, there is still a need for a thorough, systematic analysis in combination with comprehensive image-sound-text analysis that may offer insight into an entire political campaign and the campaign ad's potential effects on viewers. My paper attempts to close this gap with a more thorough and methodical audiovisual critique and analysis of the ads themselves. I seek to expand Christiansen and Killmeier's measure of music to lay out a systematic structure and foundation for in-depth analysis of the relationship among visual, aural, and textual elements.

Theoretical Framework and Methodologies

This paper adopts its theoretical framework from the formalist theory in the film studies discipline, which focuses primarily on internal evidence (e.g. the structure and form of the film itself) instead of using external evidence as support. Sergei Eisenstein is a principal formalist figure and designates filmmaking as the process of (re)organizing raw materials. Eisenstein's earlier theory, exemplified in *The Dramaturgy of Film Form*, features the dialectical, dynamic, and conflictual nature of assembling. Rejecting Kuleshov's additive editing style in which montage is composed of "successive" shots, Eisenstein proposes an alternative concept of montage as "antithesis" in which montage derives from the collision between two components at each level, starting from between two frames within a single shot (or unit), between two shots, within the chains of psychological association, and among the sequences with no space-time connection that are independent of one other (Eisenstein 1957). David Bordwell (1974) maps out Eisenstein's epistemological shift from dialectical to vertical montage in the early 1930s.

Eisenstein's theory moved from dialectical materialism to empiricism; his aesthetic moved from

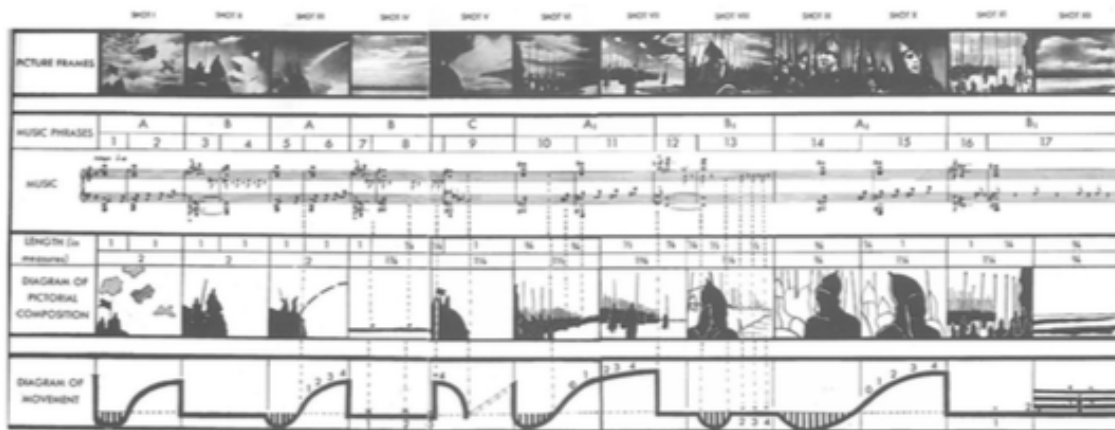


Figure 1: Diagram of audiovisual correspondences in Sergei Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). Content of each row, from top: Picture frames, music phrases, musical score, duration (in measures), diagram of pictorial composition, and diagram of [eye] movement. Reprinted from *Film Form and The Film Sense* (Eisenstein 1957).

art for stimulating intellectual understanding to make art isomorphic with inner speech; his measure of the basic unit of film altered from shot to lines; his definition of montage transformed from conflict and collision to synesthesia and fusion; his expectation of spectator reaction changed from actively intellectual engagement to overwhelming pathos and ecstasy; and his use of sound evolved from contrapuntal to synchronization (Eisenstein 1957). In his later theory, Eisenstein (1957) brings up the notion of “vertical montage” and sees sounds together with visuals as “lines” (on a timeline and at the same time vertically in space) that will eventually be woven into the synchronized structure. Every single category forms its own line, and all of them are built in together to strive for synthesis of emotions, specifically pathos and ecstasy. Thus, in order to target the persons instead of an intellectual community of audiences, Eisenstein (1957) switched his strategy to montage as “harmony and unity” with the embracing of the synchronization of senses tied together by interwoven lines (i.e. acting, lighting, décor, composition, camera distance and angle, sound, etc.). Since the targeted audience of vertical montage framework matches with that of political ads, this paper adopts Eisenstein’s model of vertical montage as its theoretical framework.

Content analysis, which is used to study a broad range of texts on a variety of media platforms, has been the most commonly used and well-established research methodology. A widely accepted definition of content analysis views it as a “research technique for the objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication” (Berelson 1952). Another often used definition of content analysis suggests that it is a technique to gather and analyze “the content of text” in which content refers to “words, meanings, pictures, symbols, ideas, themes, or any message that can be communicated” (Neuman 1997). Kaid and Johnston (2000), for instance, investigate videostyle through the analysis of the verbal, nonverbal, and production characteristics of political advertisements using content analysis.

In this paper, I first apply Eisenstein’s vertical montage in my close reading of each ad I selected. For the whole selection of ads, I then use content analysis to identify broad patterns to assist in a comparative examination of this larger body of political ads. As the diagram of audiovisual correspondences in Eisenstein’s film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938) shows in figure 1, elements in the film are organized from chaotic raw materials and arranged into their respective lines (i.e. picture frames, music phrases, music, length in measures, diagram of pictorial composition, and diagram of [eye] movement). I adapt Eisenstein’s diagram into a line of picture frames, a line of graphic

composition of shots, a line of music, a line voice-over, and a line of text so that visual, aural, and textual elements are all represented and can be descriptively analyzed. I will use previously completed content analysis from both Carleton College and the Wisconsin Advertising Project to detect greater replication and generalization of the findings. With a mixture of descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative evaluations, the combination of vertical montage model as well as content analysis research methodology serves my purpose of laying out a systematic structure for in-depth analysis of the relationship among visual, aural, and textual elements.

Reading Ads

Tara Zepel (2011) notes that in the 2008 US Presidential Campaign, John McCain uses more visually dynamic and aggressive language in his TV ads than Barack Obama. Similarly, Allen and colleagues (Allen, Berg, and Stevens 2015) find that more visual distortions are presented in ads sponsored by the McCain campaign than those sponsored by the Obama campaign. In this paper, I use John McCain's 2008 campaign ads for audiovisual analysis. More specifically, I choose "Celeb" as the main subject because of its popular presence on major news platforms (e.g. CNN, ABC, USA Today, WSJ, etc.) and among the public. I evaluate McCain's "Celeb" ad based on its graphic and acoustic elements as a specific case study. Furthermore, I look at the content and analyzed data collected by Carleton College and Wisconsin Advertising Project for the "Celeb" ad and its sister series "Family," "Dangerous," and "Ambition" to gain a clearer view of the frequency of using each type of visual distortion. These ads were accessed on March 02, 2016 from the Political Communication Lab at Stanford University.

For the "Celeb" ad, I describe what is happening in each shot with regards to four elements—graphic, text, sound, and voiceover—as shown in Appendix 1. This ad, sponsored by McCain Palin 2008, is thirty seconds long and has nine hundred and fifty-five frames. When necessary, each shot is separated into different groups of frame, each exemplified by a snapshot of the representative frame. The "Graphic" column describes what is occurring graphically on the screen (i.e. shot type, directionality, visual effect, and distortion). The "Sound" column describes the ongoing music and sound effects in respond to the visual effects. The "Text" column lists out the on-screen text while the "VO" column writes out the voiceover text.

1. Descriptive interpretation of the "Celeb" ad

As Appendix 1 shows, the ad begins with several frames of black screen then fades into a birdseye view of what appears as a mall—imagery like the DC Mall—in which thousands of people are gathering. A deep percussion sound in the background begins and then cues the music. The camera is slowly zooming in, creating a directionality of forward movement, which aligns with the forward and inward directionality of the graphical lines within this birdseye view shot and that of the crowd. The chanting of "O-BA-MA" together with the birdview shot of this huge crowd shows the popularity of Barack Obama. Even though the imagery itself is altered, there is visual distortion in the compositing because this massive crowd is not gathering in the US for Obama, though the ad maker removes it from its original context and uses it in the setting of the US presidential election. The shot cuts to a close up of hands reaching up to the blue sky in which the upward direction of the crowd's hands aligns with that of the flagpole. Throughout this shot there is obvious visual distortion in morphing on top of the close up shot of hands in which white simulating flashbulbs effects are added. There is one beat of flashbulb sound accompanying each add-on visual flashbulb effect. The chanting of "O-BA-MA" is still in the background, at the same rhythm as the flashbulb sound. The shot then cuts into an extremely unclear image with the application of graininess, a type of visual distortion in morphing, where one could not tell what is exactly going on, though one would have the impression that it could be a crowded and chaotic gathering. Unceasingly, we

can note the add-on visual effects of the white simulating flashbulb spots that are not originally in the image.

Next, the video cuts to a wide shot of Obama walking toward the left from the lower right corner with the crowd in the background. This gradually crossfades into the medium close up shot of pop-star Britney Spears, where Spears and Obama are facing one other. These frames in which presidential candidate Barack Obama walks toward Spears and eventually merges with her bridge a visually distorted connection between these two popular characters that is artificial. After three dozen medium close up frames of Spears, her face crossfades into a medium close up of Paris Hilton. Not surprisingly, the imagery continues to crossfade back into the wide shot of Obama, which then crossfades into a medium close up of Obama. This series suggests that Obama is a celebrity, similar to the often-scandalous Spears and Hilton. Continuously, the chanting of “O-BA- MA” plays in the background, simulating how fans would chant for celebrities. In addition to the chanting, the attack voiceover also kicks off its entry during this shot. A trustful female voice reads, “He’s the biggest celebrity in the world,” like an individual gossiping about the world of celebrities.

Subsequently, the camera cuts to a medium close up of Obama greeting a crowd where he is standing on the right-hand side and facing left; and as usual, there is visual distortion with added on white simulating flashbulb effects that are not originally present. Thereafter, we see another medium close up of Obama greeting a crowd; this time he is standing slightly to the left of the center and facing right. These two shots imply Obama is greeting his fans, just as a celebrity does. Following this, the medium close up shot of Obama crossfades into a wide shot of him giving a talk while standing underneath a tilted tower. During the transition phase, the bigger image of Obama in the center fades into the leaning tower while he himself reemerges into a tiny figure on the lower right hand side. I interpret this as the ad maker suggesting that there are two sides to Obama: his packaged celebrity side that is bright and big, and his other (real) side that is the powerless and tiny Obama. By putting images of Obama with such drastic visual differences side by side in crossfade, this ad calls for viewers to doubt Obama’s personal traits as a leader. Both the intelligible background sound and a female voiced “but” further support the story being told by the graphic. Later in this shot, there is a tall tower in the center, Obama giving a talk on the lower right hand side, and an image to the left of the tower with people giving suspicious looks in the direction of Obama. Still doubting his ability to lead, the ad features both the on-screen text “Obama: IS HE READY TO LEAD” and voiceover content “Is he ready to lead?” The imagery again crossfades into the birdview shot from the opening of the ad in which the masses are listening to Obama’s speech with the chanting of “O-BA-MA” still ringing the background. Obama is a celebrity who is fine under flashbulb and handshake with fans—but can he really lead the public? The ad maker insinuates that viewers doubt Obama’s credibility of leading the public. Moreover, there is a change of saturation since the color of the trees in this shot is far more vibrant than in the opening shot. As the on-screen text fades, the ad features another female voiceover saying “with gas prices soaring. . .” Next, there is a wide shot of the crowd cheering for Obama with him giving a speech on the lower right hand side, the continuous chanting of “O-BA-MA,” “Obama: NO OFFSHORE DRILLING” as on-screen text, and “Barack Obama says no to offshore drilling” as voiceover. Following this, a medium close up of Obama who is facing the camera superimposes on the left-hand side of the last frame where the crowds are. The on-screen text changes into “Obama: NEW TAXES” and the female voiceover is making the transition “and says he’ll. . .” Then, the imagery cuts back to the birdview shot of the masses listening to Obama’s speech with the on-screen text unchanged, and the voiceover continues questioning Obama whether Obama will “raise taxes on electricity?”

Thereafter, the camera cuts to a close up of Obama’s face with his skin tone darkened, which counts as a visual distortion in color shift. The chanting of “O-BA-MA” is still occurring at the same time. Then there comes a visual distortion, and the screen dips into black frames. A deep percussion sound comes hand in hand with the black screen; they together raise the anxiety level of viewers. Finally, the black screen fades into a close up of Obama’s face that looks younger than he

actually is with the use of morphing, which changes his facial features by the use of lens distortion or perspective shift. In addition to intentionally making Obama appear young, which implies a lack of experience, the on-screen text “HIGHER TAXES” and “MORE FOREIGN OIL,” as well as the corresponding female voiceover “higher taxes, more foreign oil, that’s the real Obama,” continue to falsify and reinforce this idea. In the end, the video ends with the standardized logo of McCain’s campaign and the picture of John McCain with his own voiceover of “I’m John McCain and I approve this message.”

2. Content analysis of the sister series

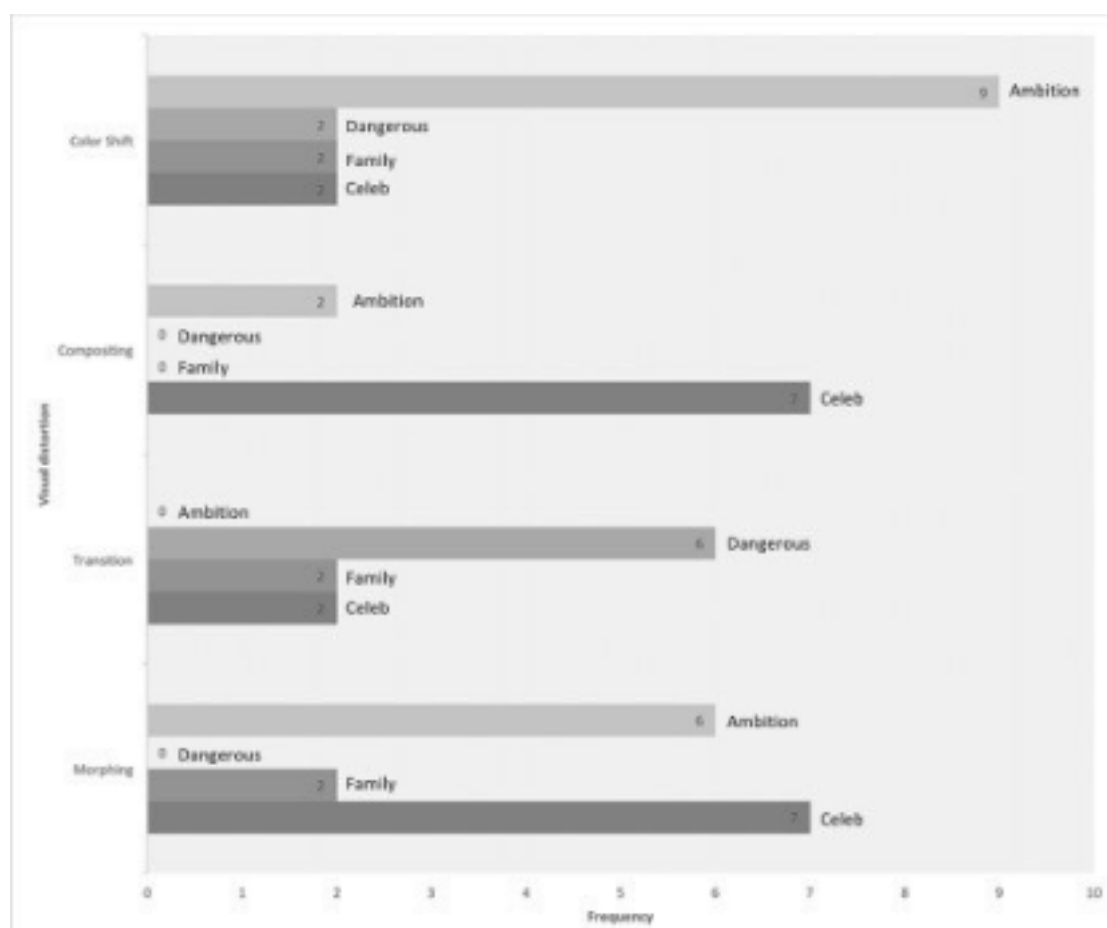


Figure 2: Frequency of the Use of Visual Distortion

In addition to the qualitative data above, I use Carleton College’s 2008 content coding data for a list of visual and auditory effects, and then return to “Celeb” and its sister series “Family,” “Dangerous,” and “Ambition” for a numerical picture of how frequently each audiovisual strategy is employed. “Celeb,” sponsored by McCain Palin 2008 and aired on July 30, 2008, is an attack ad targeted at Obama. “Family,” sponsored by McCain for President and aired on August 03, 2008, is a contrast ad that criticized Obama and advocated for McCain. “Dangerous,” sponsored by McCain Palin 2008 and aired on October 6, 2008, is an attack ad which criticized both Obama and liberals in Congress. “Ambition,” sponsored by McCain Palin 2008 as well as Republican

National Committee and aired on October 10, 2008, is an attack ad directed at Obama. As Figure 2 shows, I look at four types of commonly used visual distortions (i.e. color shift, compositing, transition, and morphing) for each selected ad. I do not include the specific type of strategy under each category of visual distortion in Figure 2, but it is important to acknowledge the nuances among various visual strategies within the same general group. Visual distortion in color shift, for example, includes desaturation, the darkening of a candidate's image, and the lightening of a candidate's image. Visual distortion in transitions contains flash frame, black frame, and other types of transition. Compositing with persons, places, or events out of context are all integrated in visual distortion. As for visual distortion in morphing, it includes perspective shift or lens distortion, candidate face/body changes into another person's face, candidate face/body changes into an animal or another object, and special add-on visual effects (e.g. graininess, flash bulbs, scratch, and more).

As Figure 2 shows, color shift has been used fifteen times in all four of these highly negative and visually aggressive ads that employ female voiceover. Distortion in compositing has been used nine times in all by two out of four selected ads. Three out of four ads apply transition-related distortions for ten times altogether. Lastly, morphing has been added on in three out of four ads for fifteen times in total. Even though not all political advertisements are as artistically bold and dynamic, ad makers make full use of the strategy of syncing all the elements together to achieve the goal of hitting viewers' hearts with pathos and emotions on all levels.

3. Further findings in the "Celeb" ad

From Figure 2, we know the "Celeb" ad heavily applies visual distortions in compositing and morphing with some visual distortions in transitions and color shift. As seen in Appendix 1, whenever a visual distortion occurs, an accompanying sound or voiceover takes place as well. In most instances of visual morphing, there are add-on white simulating flashbulbs effects with a flashbulb sound. Similarly, for most visual transitioning cases, there are three frames of flashbulb frames with chanting sounds or deep percussion sounds. I contend that flashbulb images and sounds bring out flashbulb memories, which are "memories for the circumstances in which one first learned of a very surprising and consequential (or emotionally arousing) event" (Brown and Kulik 1997). These flashbulb audiovisuals along with deep percussion sounds, as Brader (2005) points out, usually appeal to ignite the flame of fear and sudden anxiety among audiences, which will lead to an increase in their vigilance to the subject being portrayed on screen. Moreover, there is a trend in which Obama is usually facing or walking left in visual distortion in compositing. This might be an intentional reminder to voters who are right-winged or middle-grounded of Obama's left-winged political stance.

Discussion & Conclusion

In the descriptive and qualitative section of my analysis, I look at how each element (i.e. graphical, textual, aural, and voiceover) works and forms meanings within its own line, as well as how all these lines intertwine with one another to formulate the overall emotion of this very specific ad. In general, more vibrant substances and techniques are taking place in the graphic column compared to other columns. Even though the music and sound effects, voiceover, and on-screen text could not form a persuasive story by themselves, they are undoubtedly key elements given that they have enormous contributions in assisting the visuals to fully express the message and deliver the emotion across audiences. In other words, my analysis rejects what Christiansen and Killmeier (2011) suggest based on their analysis of the "Wolves" ad that "music is determinative." It also suggests that Eisenstein's (1957) "vertical montage," in which each element forms its own meaning and eventually intersect with other lines to evoke pathos, is not the structure upon which ad makers

build the narration. Ad makers do not give each element equal attention in all ads. Music or other elements could be the determinative for some specific ads, though I propose that the graphical visual is determinative in many political ads. In asserting this, I suggest that in most political ads, aural, voiceover, and textual elements are constrained by the graphic content and would be better interpreted in relation to it. In-depth audiovisual analysis with a focus on the study of graphic elements, as well as how auditory and textual elements contribute to the message on top of the visual storytelling, is crucial to better understand how political advertisements engage and affect voters and the public through all aspects of sensations.

For the content analysis part of this paper, I find a mixed use of two or more visual distortion techniques in these four negative ads. Color shift is used in all four, given that desaturation can be easily applied to any political ad to convey pessimistic feelings or reveal dark truths. Moreover, ad makers will perhaps be more likely to employ the strategy of color shift to darken Obama's skin tone because he is mixed African American. The use of compositing, however, depends on what kind of message is being delivered through the specific ad; compositing is mostly used when ad makers want to bridge two different persons/locations/events together and encourage viewers to imagine. Visual distortion techniques in transition, especially flash frame and black frame, are commonly used as ways of catching viewers' attention or fuel their anxiety. Finally, morphing effects are widely applicable as well to either draw connections between two unrelated people/events by crossfading them or to apply add-on effects like graininess or flashbulbs to convey additional messages on top of the original imagery. My content analysis on these four selected ads supports the negative relationship between an ad's accuracy and its frequencies or probabilities of adopting visual distortion as suggested by Allen, Berg, and Stevens (2015). In other words, the more visual distortion strategies an ad has, the less accurate it will be.

In future investigations, I plan to utilize cultural analytics, a relatively new research methodology for visual and interactive media, to analyze online political ads as cultural data. Tara Zepel (2011) tests the basic application of this methodology to analyze both TV and web political ads for 2008 presidential campaign. I wish to further explore the adaptation of cultural analytics as a tool for study political communication from both visual aspects and socio-political points of view in a larger dataset. With all the accessible data from digital tools, many aspects of visual strategy and pattern (e.g. grayscale level, brightness, color, saturation, etc.) of a much larger set of political ads can be analyzed in a more accurate and efficient way. The capability of analyzing a large set of data leads to a more inclusive and applicable results and, eventually, contributes more to our understanding of the world.

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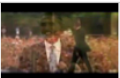
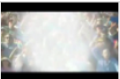
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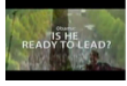
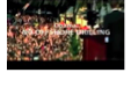
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Appendix I: Representation of McCain 2008 campaign advertisement “Celeb” in graph form

Shot #	Frame #	Still Frame Example	Graphic	Text	Sound	VO
0	1-6		1. Black screen			
1	7-57		1. Fades from black screen to the imagery 2. Movement [created by keep zooming in the image] aligns with the directionality [forward and inward] of the graphical lines of this bird view shot and that of the crowd 3. Composite with places or events not originally in image or out of context		1. A deep percussion sound 2. Chanting “O-BA-MA” (x1)	
2	58-65		1. Close up of hands. The directionality [upward] of those hands of the crowd aligns with that of the flagpole 2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects, that are not actually there, on top of these hands		1. 1st beat of flashbulb sound X Chanting “O-” (x1)	
	66-68		1. 3 frames of white simulating flash bulbs frames that are not actually there			
	69-70		1. The directionality [upward] of those hands of the crowd aligns with that of the flagpole 2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects, that are not actually there, on top of these hands		2. 2nd beat of flashbulb sound X Chanting “-BA-” (x1)	
3	71-79		1. Graininess; couldn’t really tell what’s in the visual, but it seems like a crowded and chaotic gathering		1. 3rd beat of flashbulb sound X Chanting “-MA” (x1)	
			2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects, that are not actually there, on top the already blurry imagery			
4	80-90		1. Wide shot of Obama walking toward the left from the lower right corner			
	91-95		1. Crossfade from the wide shot of Obama into the medium close up shot of Britney Spears 2. Britney and Obama are facing the opposite direction; Obama walks toward her and eventually being merged together with her bridge a visually distorted connection between them two that is not actually there			Female VO: “He is-”
	96-129		1. Medium close up of Britney Spears			Female VO: “-the biggest celeb-”
	130-152		1. Medium close up of Paris Hilton 2. Crossfade from the Hilton into the wide shot of Obama		Chanting “O-BA-MA” (x3)	Female VO: “-ity in the-”
	153-193		1. Medium close up of Obama 2. Crossfade from the wide shot of Obama into the medium close up of Obama			Female VO: “-world”
5	194-201		1. Bird view of a crowd chanting for Obama 2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects, that are not actually there, on top of the crowd		1. 1st beat of flashbulb sound 2. Chanting “O-” (x1)	

6	202-203		1. Medium close up of Obama greeting the crowd 2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects that are not actually there		1. 2nd beat of flashbulb sound	
	204-206		1. 3 frames of white simulating flash bulbs frames that are not actually there		2. Chanting “-BA-” (x1)	
	207-218		1. Medium close up of Obama greeting the crowd (Obama facing left) 2. Add-on white simulating flash bulbs effects that are not actually there		1. 3rd beat of flashbulb sound 2. Chanting “-MA-” (x1)	
7	219-242		1. Medium close up of Obama greeting the crowd (Obama facing right) 2. Crossfade from the medium close up of Obama to the wide shot of him giving a talk. The big Obama in the center will fade into the leaning tower while he himself reemerge into this tiny figure on lower right hand side		1. Subliminal type of sound (intelligible background sound)	Female VO: “But-”
	243-289		1. A tall tower in the center, tiny Obama giving a talk on the lower right hand side, and an image to the left of the tower of people giving suspicious look toward the direction of Obama 2. The image on the left is desaturated and is composite with people/location not originally in the image	“Obama: IS HE READY TO LEAD?”	1. Chanting “O-BA-MA”	Female VO: “-is he ready to lead?”
	290-306		1. Crossfade from the shot of Obama to the birdview of those masses 2. The same place as the opening shot, but there is an obvious visual distortion with the change of saturation	“Obama: IS HE READY TO LEAD?”	1. Chanting “O-BA”	
	307-353		1. Birdview of the masses who were listening to Obama's speech		1. Chanting “-MA-O-BA”	
8	354-419		1. Wide shot of the crowd cheering for Obama with him giving speech on the lower right hand side	1. (frame 351-381) no text 2. (frame 382-419) Obama: NO OFFSHORE DRILLING	1. Chanting “-MA-O-BA”	Female VO: “Barak Obama says no to-”
	420-463		1. Medium Close up of Obama (facing the camera) giving a talk superimposes on the the left hand side of last frame where the crowds are	Obama: NO OFFSHORE DRILLING	1. Chanting “O-BA-MA”	Female VO: “-offshore drilling”
	464-490		1. Medium Close up of Obama (facing the camera) giving a talk superimposes on the left hand side of last frame where the crowds are	Obama: NEW TAXES	1. Chanting “O-BA-MA”	Female VO: “and says he'll raise-”
	491-534		1. Birdview of the masses who were listening to Obama's speech	Obama: NEW TAXES	1. Chanting “O-BA-MA”	Female VO: “raise taxes on electricity?”
	535-561		1. Close up of Obama's face 2. Obama's skin tone is darkened		1. Chanting “O-BA-MA”	
10	562-594		1. Black Screen 2. Black frame		1. A deep percussion sound	

11	595-641		1. Close up of Obama's face 2. Obama's facial features changed due to lens distortion or shift	HIGHER TAXES		Female VO: "Higher taxes"
	642-714		1. Close up of Obama's face 2. Obama's facial features changed due to lens distortion or shift	MORE FOREIGN OIL		Female VO: "More foreign oil, that's the-"
	715-744		1. Close up of Obama's face 2. Obama's facial features changed due to lens distortion or shift			Female VO: "-real Obama"
12	745-787			McCain	Soft music score	McCain VO: "I'm-"
13	788-900		1. Close up of McCain's face		Soft music score	McCain VO: "John McCain and I approve this message"
14	901-955		1. Black Screen			