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Title

Political campaigns are the core of American democracy. Citizens are provided with the opportunity to choose a candidate who has their best interest in mind and represents their values; one of the many freedoms afforded to American's. An election is essential because it allows citizens to discover which candidates' thinking aligns best with their own. In addition, an election allows potential candidates to inform voters on their policies, character and beliefs otherwise known as a political campaign. One of the most important elements of a campaign is advertising. As technology and media has progressed so has political advertising. Reaching voters has become easier in the sense that there are so many more mediums to do so. However, candidates are still confronted with the challenge of effectively communicating and influencing voters in a certain direction. Therefore, candidates have to be creative in the methods they use to advertise. Despite having to adapt to new communication mediums, candidates have been using the same persuasion tactics for years. One in particular that has a popular history is the use of elements from the horror genre. Borrowing characteristics from horror films and literature allows candidates to elicit fear in voters by painting an image of a monster in reference to their opponent. This strategy especially gained popularity in the most recent elections. However, fear is a powerful persuasion tactic and the

question has been raised whether or not it is an ethical means to influence voters. Similar to an analysis performed by Fielding Montgomery, this paper will examine the television advertisements published during the 2020 presidential election for utilization of horror and its effectiveness.

Background

According to Glenn W. Richardson Jr., pulp culture has a powerful effect on political advertising. In his article, *Pulp Politics: Popular Culture and Political Advertising*, Richardson discusses by what means familiar genres of pop culture allow politicians to effectively convey a message to viewers. Specifically mentioned in his article, horror is a long-established genre of popular culture often used in political advertising. Similarly, Fielding Montgomery performed an analysis of the 2016 presidential election, specifically evaluating television advertisements for conventions of horror. His article, *The Monstrous Election: Horror Framing in Televised Campaign Advertisements during the 2016 Presidential Election* (2019) utilizes the findings from *Frames of Evil* by Picart and Frank (2016) to emphasize the deep roots of horror in political campaigns.

As previously stated, Montgomery references the work of Picart and Frank who conceptualized two frames of horror, the classic and conflicted frames; these frames are essential to understanding the analysis performed by Montgomery. The classic horror frame is associated with films such as *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. There are two qualities attributed to this frame which include: a monster and spatial and temporal brackets. Both exemplify an otherness, or something apart from normal. For example, the temporal bracket means that the “monster” emerges but eventually is defeated and

times go back to normal; it is a bracket of time. Next, Montgomery discusses the conflicted horror frame described by Picart and Frank. This frame differs from the classic frame because the “monster” becomes a part of normality. He provides the example of a serial killer being a normal person, living a normal life ((Montgomery, 2019) . Montgomery utilizes these two frames in order to analyze the campaign ads of the 2016 presidential election. In conclusion, Montgomery was unable to determine whether these tactics were effective or not; however, because fear appeals are such a significant part of politics, it is essential that advertisements are analyzed through a horror lens (Montgomery, 2019).

In addition, it is important to consider the effects of negative political advertisements on voters. Any ad that utilizes conventions of horror most likely has negative undertones. According to Kaid and Boydston, not only are voters from the opposite party affected but negative advertisements also affected individuals from the candidates own party. Therefore, the effectiveness of negative advertising may be stronger than initially presumed. In addition, Kaid and Boydston point out that television ads have an especially strong effect on “...political attitudes, cognitions, and behaviors.” Considering that Montgomery was studying both negative and television advertisements, it can be assumed that these ads were effective but maybe not in the way candidates intended.

Analysis

Since Montgomery’s analysis, another presidential election has passed. In addition to being one of the most historic presidential elections in American history, the 2020 election also offers new television advertisements to analyze through a horror

lens. Two television advertisements from each candidate, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, will be analyzed for traditional conventions of horror film and literature.

Joe Biden

The first advertisement from Joe Biden's campaign that utilizes characteristics from horror is called "It is what it is". Donald Trump starts the commercial by saying, "I think it's under control" in reference to the coronavirus. Following, the interviewer asks him, "How? A thousand Americans are dying today." Trump answers by saying, "They're dying. It's true. And you...it is what it is," which is the origin of the commercial's name. This quote echoes continuously in the background along with emergency vehicle sirens and ominous music. While these sounds play, black and white images fade in and out of view. Photos of dead bodies, ill people in hospital beds, families separated, and overworked doctors are included alluding to Trump's lack of action in regards to the coronavirus. Overall, the advertisement aims to illustrate that Trump simply does not care that Americans are suffering and dying due to his poor leadership.

Joe Biden's team employs the conflicted frame in order to persuade voters that Donald Trump is a dangerous candidate. First, Trump's own words are used against him. The fact that he is so calm and unaffected by thousands of American's dying may provoke fear in some voters. Then, traditional horror conventions of creepy sounding music are used to further persuade the audience that Trump is a candidate they should fear. This is further instilled through the use of black and white photos which is traditionally used in horror to enhance the appearance of darkness. However, this advertisement does not turn Donald Trump into a monster or an "other". Rather, the

commercial plays off of his normalcy to make him appear unsympathetic towards suffering and death. This ad could be compared to that of a serial killer; someone who appears normal on the outside but is sinister within. Because they do not attempt to make Donald look like a monster, Biden's team is utilizing the conflicted frame along with traditional conventions of horror to instill fear into voters.

Similarly, the conflicted frame is utilized in another advertisement from Joe Biden's team known as "Mourning in America." Inspired by a political ad from the Ronald Reagan administration, this ad employs a negative twist to pinpoint Trump as evil. The commercial begins with a very deep voice narrator; he speaks in a very serious tone while sad violin music plays behind him. Immediately an image of a desolate and decaying city pans across the screen and the narrator says, "Today more than 175,000 Americans have died from a deadly virus Donald Trump ignored..." At this point, a distorted clip of Donald Trump appears. The image is much darker in color and also has streaks across the screen as if there was poor connection on a television screen. Donald Trump's America is described as, "the economy in shambles, more than 30 million Americans are out of work, the worst economy in decades." As the narrator continues to point out the many failures of Donald Trump's presidency, images of people on gurneys, abandoned homes, people lined up for unemployment and an upside down American flag are shown. Next, an image of the White House appears similar to that of a mansion in a horror film. The narrator ends by saying, "And now Americans are asking, if we have another four years like this, will there even be an America?"

Again, this commercial does not make Donald Trump out to be a monster but rather a normal, everyday person who is causing destruction of America. The ad utilizes the traditional conventions of a dead and decaying city to invoke fear of what America could be if Trump is reelected. In addition, the use of a deep voice sets a serious tone that catches the audience's attention. In combination with sad violin music, the audience may feel a sense of despair; even if this is not what America looks like, they may begin to believe it. Another traditional convention utilizes the image of the White House. Often in horror films or novels, the setting will take place in an old mansion. The images utilized an attempt to persuade viewers that while the "White House", or more specifically Trump, remain untouched, the rest of America is suffering. The closing statement of the narrator is the final touch to scare voters. As citizens of the United States viewers are meant to be frightened at the fact that there will be no more America.

Donald Trump

The President Donald Trump, elected in 2016, is especially known for his attacks on other politicians. It is not surprising then that his team uses the fear appeal to draw his opponents as the "monster". The first ad, "The Joe Biden they are hiding from you", almost appears to be a trailer for a horror film. It begins with a black screen with the words "Joe Biden, in his own words" written across. There is no narrator in this commercial rather, it simply plays a variety of comments Joe Biden said himself. After each comment, the date when Joe said it is displayed and a camera flashes. Faint music plays in the background with sudden loud bursts of what seems to be an old camera taking a photo. The photos of Biden are extremely distorted. First the photos

are extremely zoomed in to the point that only a portion of Biden's face can be seen at a time. In addition, the colorization of the photos is very dark. Despite not seeing the entire photo, it appears that the pictures chosen of Biden are ones where he is making an odd facial expression. The commercial also flashes words across the screen; this produces a strobe light effect. At the end, Joe Biden can be heard saying "Apologize for what?" while a photo of him with a crooked and almost deviant smile.

As stated previously, this commercial feels like a trailer to a horror film. The use of flashing lights and loud bursting sounds is very similar to an experience in a haunted house. In addition, the music in the background is very ominous; it begins soft and faint but towards the end it gets louder as if something dangerous is approaching. Unlike Biden, Trump utilizes the classic horror frame because he is painting Biden as the monster. This is especially apparent through the choice of photos. Each photo depicts an abnormal facial expression. They pay special attention to one photo where Biden is staring wide eyed straight at the camera, his smile is crooked and lunatic looking. In this way, the Trump administration is portraying Biden as crazy. However, they also attempt to ruin his reputation by playing controversial comments that Biden has said in his career. Although this element is not used in traditional horror, it is clear that the goal was to portray Biden as an "other" deserving of fear.

On the contrary, Trump utilizes the conflicted frame in his advertisement, "Don't let them ruin America." A unique feature of this ad is that Joe Biden is not the only candidate targeted. The commercial also attacked Kamala Harris, Joe Biden's vice president, along with numerous democratic candidates. It begins with the words "Joe and Kamala lie to protect the leftist mob" on the screen. Videos of riots play in the

background where there are fires, violence, yelling, and smoke. In front of these videos, is an odd cutout of Kamala saying “peaceful protestors”. Following her is Joe Biden and a number of democratic candidates all making a comment generally speaking about “peaceful protestors.” The ad also utilizes a gothic inspired font to write each person's name. For example, while Kamala Harris is speaking it says, “Phony Kamala Harris.” After each person, they show more footage of burning and buildings with the text “Democrats have ruined their cities, don’t let them ruin America.” Finally, the ad finishes with the Trump Pence campaign logo.

In this ad, Trump does not try to portray Joe Biden as a monster. In fact, he is pointing at numerous democratic candidates or rather the democratic party as a whole. Instead of making them appear as evil, he simplifies argues that they are liars who are destroying America. However, he again utilizes traditional conventions of horror through the images and clips. Of course violence and yelling is something that will elicit fear in voters. In addition, voters may be fearful that their city may also experience this type of violence. Because of this, the horror becomes a part of normalcy; this is something that could happen to them now.

Discussion

Persuasion is one of the key elements to a successful campaign. It is not simply about influencing citizens to vote a certain way, it is to persuade them to your side. One great way to persuade them, is to make them fearful if they do not. Fear appeal is an ancient tactic of persuasion. Medieval kings used the fear of death to provoke obedience from their subordinates and the same strategies are used today. Although it

may not be recognized, it is quite obvious and unsurprising that these tactics are also used in politics.

There is no question of whether or not fear is an effective persuasion tactic; it is. However, candidates may not realize its power or effect on voters. Kaid and Boydston discussed the effects of negative advertising on voters and found that viewers often felt more negatively towards a candidate after watching. On the other hand, their study does not take into account the effect of a negative political ad on a voter who is already posed to one side. For example, is a voter influenced negatively when their candidate, democrat or republican, attacks the opposite? Does that make them think differently about their own candidate? There may be additional effects of negative advertising not originally thought out. Overall, yes, the use of horror in political advertising is effective but maybe not always as intended.

Conversely, the question still remains whether the use of fear appeals and horror is ethical. The answer lies in whether voters have access to information and education. If voters are unaware and uneducated on the effects of political propaganda, then it is simply not a fair game. When considering if research is ethically and morally right to perform, the research must ask themselves what will be the harm to the test subject. A similar process should be applied here. If an advertisement creates long-lasting hysteria or anxiety in the American people, it may not be ethical. Citizens should be afforded the ability to deny propaganda but would not be able to without proper understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has utilized the findings of Fielding Montgomery to further investigate the use of classic and conflicted horror frames in political advertising. It has been further

proven that politicians rely heavily on the use of genres from pop culture to effectively communicate with their audiences. Although it is still unclear whether the advertisements from the 2020 campaign had any effect on the results, there was still an effect on voters. Overall, these advertisements successfully employed conventions of horror while simultaneously creating more division between the American people.

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