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Political Communication

12/7/22

Monstrous Political Advertisements on both sides

Introduction:

This paper will examine three political advertisements from the 2020 presidential campaign for how they paint the opposing candidate utilizing monstrous horror framing. First I will examine “It is What It is”, produced by the Biden campaign and found on The Living Room Candidate website, which features Donald Trump in a monstrous way dismissing those who lost their lives to Covid-19. Second I will analyze “Same Old” also found on the Living Room Candidate which focuses on Donald Trump's constriction of rights to vote via mail-in ballot. Finally, in order to examine both sides of the political spectrum, I observed a political advertisement from the Republican side on The Living Room Candidate called “Biden, Sanders Release Progressive Unity Platform...” which paints Biden as a monster who raises taxes and allows fellow monsters or illegal immigrants into the country. Each of these political advertisements successfully uses horror techniques to paint both Joe Biden and Donald Trump as monsters for their intended audience.

Lens Description:

When examining these three political advertisements it becomes abundantly clear that they successfully follow the concepts of horror that had been successful from past political advertisements and are meticulously studied by individuals in the field. To begin, Fielding Montgomery examines two primary ways in which political campaigns have utilized the concept

of horror. The primary being classic horror where the issue at hand is to conquer the “monster” --also known as the opposing candidate-- and the ultimate goal is to highlight the destructive or negative effects of the candidate’s policies (284). This can be observed in the “It is What It is” political advertisement targeting Donald Trump. In it, the Biden campaign uses straight-forward horror tactics primarily through painting Trump as a monster and suggesting the effect of individuals dying from Covid-19. The second concept that Fielding Montgomery explains is the conflicted horror technique when identifying monsters which focuses around making the candidate seem almost normal which adds an extra effect of horror. This technique is utilized in the negative political advertisement aimed at Joe Biden by painting illegal immigrants, who are just normal individuals, as these monstrous criminals who are coming into our country (285).

These two forms of horror –classic and conflicted– that were identified in Montgomery’s article exemplified in the ads; these tactics are also researched and identifiable through a study performed by Brooke Phipps and Fielding Montgomery as well as by Lisa A. Kort-Butler. In the article by Phipps and Montgomery they identify a commonly used horror tactic that spans across many political advertisements, in which the camera zooms in on uncomfortably close shots of the candidate’s face, closer than regular face to face interaction, causing the viewer to feel antagonistic feelings towards the candidate (323). When examining the 2020 presidential campaign, these horror tactics are utilized on both sides of the political spectrum and can be seen even in two of the three political advertisements chosen for this paper. Starting with the Republican side: in the negative political advertisement of Joe Biden supporting a tax hike and allowing illegal immigrants into the country, the advertisement features sudden hyper-close-ups shots that then zoom away. Through simple camera-work, the production first scares the viewer with the exaggerated “monster” and then minimizes him to show that he is defeatable. Similarly

Biden's "It is what It is" political advertisement uses quite the same technique, with the close up of Trump's profile at the very start of the advertisement in an attempt to startle and therefore frighten the viewer into believing he is a monster. Additionally, the article that Kort-Butler wrote explores this manipulation of images, particularly those related to crime, as a way to create the monstrous characteristic identified as the "other"(628-629). The "Biden, Sanders Release Progressive Unity Platform..." political advertisement represents this idea of the "other" when referring to undocumented immigrants that entered the country during the Biden administration. This was done was through the usage of the language – saying "illegal immigrants" rather than "undocumented immigrants" employing such horror tactics, as using grainy, splotches on the camera lenses, and black and white shots of many individuals perceived to be immigrants debarking a boat. These tactics pose the undocumented immigrants as coming in large numbers, committing crimes, being the "other", and ultimately therefore becoming the monster to slay.

Analysis:

"It is What It is"(D): Upon further examination of the "It is What It is" political advertisement, there are evident signs of both horror techniques through the usage of effective audio and explicit depictions and edits to convince the viewer that Donald Trump is indeed a monster. Beginning with the effective usage of audio, the video employs a strikingly minimal amount of actual dialogue. Quoted as such: Interviewer: "How? 1000 Americans are dying a day." Donald Trump: "They are dying. That's true. And it is what it is". The utilization of this singular quote uttered during this interview was used to fuel the idea that Trump does not care whether or not people die from Covid-19 and therefore is a heartless monster. Additional audio techniques that add to the characteristics of horror in the ad come with the sirens ringing in the background and the usage of the echoing repetition of Trumps voice saying "It is what it is",

culminating with ominous music while showing both dead and deathly ill Covid-19 patients. The visuals of the political advertisement also exhibit forms of horror through the usage of black and white coloring, and the close up of Trump's profile in the beginning which relates back to Phipps and Fieldings research causing the antagonization of the candidate (323). Finally, the video provides somewhat graphic imagery of the individuals suffering or dying from Covid-19 accompanied with strategic cuts from scene to scene to add an even more dramatic effect in the hope to appeal to pathos.

Same Old(D): The second political advertisement that I analyzed also utilizes horror tactics through visual historical context, narrative, and effective verbal choices –in this case, to present Donald Trump as a monster. Beginning with the visual historical context: the narrator walks the viewer through the countless drawbacks that the African American people suffered in regards to their ability to vote – from the inability to vote, to the poll tax, to literacy tests, to racial terrorism, and finally violence. In doing so, the advertisement depicts these events using meaningful and emotion-provoking imagery. This is accompanied by a narrative from Samuel L. Jackson, a well respected figure of society. on the history of African Americans in relation to voting. Jackson's powerful story-telling effectively captures the viewer's attention. The narrative continues with what Trump is doing today to discourage people from voting and being able to vote using mail in ballots. Finally, the usage of particular audio clips from quotations from famous individuals aids the effectiveness of portraying Trump as a monster. Martin Luther King JR. a monumental figure in the civil rights movement, states "People have been denied the right to vote for well now over eighty years" in the beginning of the political advertisement while showing the visual narrative of the process African Americans endured. A final way in which the political advertisement effectively monsterized both Donald Trump and Mitch McConnell is by

cutting to pictures of their faces when Barack Obama's voice was playing "stating "There are those in power doing their darndest to discourage people from voting". This is done intentionally to try to convey to the audience that both Trump and McConnell do not want African Americans voting for racial reasons. This ironically, flips on its head the concept of the "other" that Kort-Butler examined in her article (323). Here, the long-suffering "other" is the disenfranchised black voter and, rather than being a monster, is being suppressed by monsters with ulterior motives.

"Biden, Sanders Release Progressive Unity Platform..."(R): The final political advertisement that was analyzed was on the opposite side of the political spectrum supported by the Republican Trump Campaign. The political advertisement succeeds in depicting Joe Biden as a monster through the usage of horror tactics in the visuals, strategic quotation cutting from Biden's speeches, and finally the usage of over-sized headings. As mentioned earlier, Phipps and Fielding's research is validated here as the several cuts to abnormal close-ups of Joe Biden's face create feelings of antagonist feelings of antagonism or repulsion (323). In addition, the camera seems to have fog and blotches over portions of the picture, accompanied with dull colors and even in certain scenes black and white which contributes to the dehumanizing of Biden and supporters. The advertisement does a wonderful job of using direct quotations from Biden to strategically influence the viewer of his monstrous nature. For example, Biden stating "If you're like me your taxes will be raised and not cut" which presses an issue hot-button, especially among Republicans. A second example of this is him stating "citizenship for eleven million undocumented folks" which invokes the fear of the "other" and sense of crime that are discussed in Kort-Butlers research. A final example of how the political advertisement successfully utilized horror tactics is through the bold headings that used strong wording to invoke emotion in the

viewer. These bolded headings appear when making some of the primary demonizing arguments such as *Trillions in New Taxes* which evokes fear in the audience that their taxes will be raised and *Amnesty* for “illegal immigrants” which suggests the pardoning of crime and therefore again appeals to the feeling of immigrants as the “other”.

Discussion:

Though not universal, many negative political advertisements that intend to portray candidates as monsters do not follow ethical guidelines due to their attempt to make the candidate seem to have extreme beliefs and commit atrocious actions. None of the political advertisements that are reviewed in this paper are very ethical because they make extreme assumptions of the opposing candidate with very minimal evidence. To begin with the “It is What It is” political advertisement that depicts Trump as an emotionless monster who does not care about anyone that was severely affected or lost their lives to Covid-19. When in reality Trump most likely feels empathetic for the deaths of millions across the United States. However, the advertisement proves to be very effective in producing this negative image of Donald Trump being a heartless monstrous candidate. Second, the “Same Old” advertisement delivered by the democratic party suggests that Donald Trump is discouraging African Americans to vote for racial reasons and therefore is classified as racist. The advertisement suggests a very extreme yet effective message to suggest that both McConnell and Trump embody racist monsters through the historical narrative and relevance to present day matters. “Biden, Sanders Release Progressive Unity Platform...”, the final political advertisement examined was also unethical in the sense that it took specific quotes from Joe Biden’s speeches and put them into a negative criminalizing context. When talking about the amnesty given to eleven million undocumented immigrants the advertisement uses the term “illegal” suggesting crime and therefore proposing that Joe Biden is

allowing crime to come into the country by supporting these individuals. Additionally, when making the claim that Biden has plans to defund the police it pulls a quote from an interview that just says “Yes, Absolutely” with no additional context, but in the advertisement implies that he agrees with this claim. This advertisement is very effective in the goal of depicting Joe Biden as a monster through the usage of eerie film tactics, bold headings, and close-ups of Biden's face.

Conclusion:

Over the years there has been an increase in negative political advertisements that paint candidates as monsters in order to try to influence the viewer to have disdain or distrust for the individual. The three political advertisements that were examined from the 2020 presidential campaign utilize several horror tactics successfully in hopes to present either Donald Trump or Joe Biden as a monster. The “It is What It is” advertisement provided the idea that Trump lacks empathy for those who died from Covid-19 and therefore through Fielding's classic approach paints him as a distant or unsimilar being. Second, the “Same Old” advertisement successfully suggests that Trump is a racist monster through the usage of narrative and meaningful depictions of racial disparities in equality throughout history. The final advertisement, “Biden, Sanders Release Progressive Unity Platform...” succeeds in suggesting several ways in which Joe Biden would negatively impact the United States by creating higher taxes, amnesty for immigrants, and defunding of the police through a distorted film lenses as well as utilizing extreme close-ups creating antagonism and therefore monstrosity. In the end, the 2020 presidential monstrous advertisements examined, though unethical, were proven successful in evoking emotion and hatred for the opposing political candidate through appeals to pathos, narratives and horror tactics.

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