Final Essay- Politicians as Monsters in Political Advertisements

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Introduction

As was the case in many prior presidential elections, advertisements were a large part of the 2020 presidential election. Joe Biden and Donald Trump's campaigns put out numerous ads to convince voters why they were more fit for office than their opponent. These advertisements ranged from having very positive information to very negative information, but perhaps the most interesting ads were the ones that portrayed the opposing candidate as a monster. These negative ads are so interesting because of the effects they have on voters' emotions and subsequent decision-making processes. Through the use of horror film conventions and elements, these advertisements work to make viewers fear the other candidate. Of course, these ads do not portray the candidates as ugly physical monsters, like Frankenstein, but with the combination of music, lighting, word choice, and imagery, the advertisements certainly portray the candidates as people to be feared. This paper will give a brief background on horror frames in political advertisements and their effects. Then, two advertisements from the 2020 presidential election will be analyzed, one made by Donald Trump's campaign and one made by Joe Biden's campaign. Finally, the ads will be evaluated based on how effective and ethical they are.

Background

Political ads that depict political candidates as monsters do not usually have a positive message attached to them. Interestingly enough, Richardson Jr. (2000) suggests that negative information in political ads carries "more weight in evaluative thinking than positive information" (p. 608), better alters existing impressions than positive information, and is easier to recall than positive information; additionally, "negatively aroused voters are more likely than their satisfied peers to turn out on election day" (p. 608). Given past research, it can be said that political ads that utilize horror frames do so intentionally and with a specific purpose. While

traditional negative attack ads conjure up feelings of disgust or disdain, the emotion of fear is much stronger and can drive evaluation of a candidate further than negativity. According to Montgomery (2019), there are two different types of horror frames utilized in political advertisements: classic and conflicted (p. 284). In short, the monsters of classic horror frames share nothing in common with the audience; they are otherized and represent very little of what our idea of "human" is. On the other hand, Montgomery (2019) explains that conflicted horror frames weave evil into reality and do not separate the monster from the other humans (p. 284-285).

Ads that utilize these horror frames are notable for their decaying settings and imagery, connecting an opposing candidate to this decay. What this does is create a cause and effect between the candidate and destruction; namely, that the opposing candidate's policies will create decay and decline in our country. As Montgomery (2019) says, "these representations do not even have to make sound logical sense" for the advertisement to have an effect on voters' attitudes because they will allow fear to guide them in their decision-making processes. (p. 286). As Richardson Jr. (2002) points out, this is partly because the utilization of horror frames is more likely to draw emotional and narrative linkages consistent with horror stories, like fear and anxiety (p. 5). This idea can be explained through schema theory. Schemata serve two important functions: "first, they guide the processing and storage of information; second, they guide recall and interpretation of information in memory" (Richardson, Jr., 2000, p. 613). Using a popular genre like horror in political advertising works to shape the way a viewer recalls the ad in their memory. They will remember the horror aspects of the ad because it is what they are familiar with. It is important to note that there are a number of different elements to these horror-framed advertisements that work together to produce these effects. Richardson, Jr. (2001) explains the

importance of viewing the elements in tandem (p. 780). For example, black-and-white images can be used in negative ads to convey a sinister impression; however, black-and-white images can also be in positive ads without negative implications. The key to analyzing ads that use horror frames is the combination of imagery, soundtrack, narrative, and voiceover.

<center>**Analysis**</center>

The Trump campaign ad titled "Don't Let Them Ruin America" utilizes horror frames to paint Joe Biden and other democrats as monsters. This happens in a few different ways throughout the 45 second ad. One of the biggest ways this ad incites fear into viewers is through the use of violent imagery in the background of the ad. The ad is about the protests that took place over the summer after the murder of George Floyd, and the viewer is supposed to connect the violent clips in the ad to those protests. The clips include images of buildings burning down, cars on fire, people burning American flags, and physical violence between people on the streets. While there is no proof that these videos are actually from riots or protests over the summer, they still create a level of fear, as they look like something straight out of *The Purge*. Clips of different democratic politicians and news reporters are laid over these violent videos, such that their cut-out silhouettes are on top but the violent videos are still visible in the background. Joe Biden (labeled specifically as "Sleepy Joe Biden" in the ad) and Kamala Harris (labeled specifically as "Phony Kamala Harris" in the ad) are two examples of politicians in the ad. The beginning shot of the ad show the words, "Joe and Kamala lie to protect the radical leftist mob" (Donald J. Trump). The words "radical leftist mob" are in all caps and bolded to show emphasis. A clip Kamala Harris is shown next, violent videos still playing in the background, and she says, "Their force at peaceful protestors," potentially referring to police's force at peaceful protestors (Donald J. Trump). Next, Joe Biden says, "The vast majority of the protestors have been

peaceful" (Donald J. Trump). Clearly, the purpose of the ad is to contrast what liberal politicians say about the protests and what is actually occurring. The other people in the ad, Kathleen Rice, Ellen Rosenblum, Peter Baker, Kate Brown, Claire McCaskill, Jeh Johnson, and Jenny Durkan, echo similar sentiments about how the protests have been peaceful and that they applaud the protestors. The final image of the ad shows the words, "Democrats have ruined their cities. Don't let them destroy America." The words "don't let them destroy America" are bolded and in all caps, again for emphasis. Words in the ad like "destroy" and "lie" and "ruined" work to create fear and paint the democrats as monsters because of the negative connotation the words have.

As mentioned before, while the words spoken by the people in the ad do not conjure up fear themselves, the juxtaposition of them with the violent videos and the beginning and end shots start to create a horror narrative. To prove this even further, the background music in the beginning shot is very ominous, and the lighting is very dark. As with horror films, these elements create a sense of anxiety, like something bad is about to happen. The background audio for the majority of the ad, while the people are talking, is audio from the violent videos paired with the ominous music played at the beginning. For example, while Claire McCaskill says, "The majority of these protestors are peaceful. They have been peaceful for weeks," you can hear people yelling and screaming from the video in the background (Donald J. Trump). This paints Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, and the other democrats in this ad as monsters because it seems like they are ignoring the violence that is going on in the streets and that they are applauding people for committing those acts of violence. The ad directly connects the democrats with images of decay and destruction, elements mentioned previously; the cause is the democrats, and the effect is violence. The message of the ad is that, by voting for Trump, America will be saved from the monstrous democrats.

The Biden campaign ad titled "Crossroads" uses horror frames to paint Donald Trump as a monster, but it also provides a solution to the problems it says Donald Trump causes. This advertisement uses similar techniques to the Trump ad, but it does so more subtly. The first ten seconds of the ad portray Donald Trump as a monster, and the final twenty seconds are used to show solutions to Trump's actions. The images in the first ten seconds include an empty school hallway, a nurse with a mask over her face looking tired and defeated, a priest with a mask on reading from the bible to a patient in a hospital bed, a Black Lives Matter protest, a short clip of Donald Trump at a rally, and two short clips of Black Lives Matter protests that turned violent. The voiceover is a serious-sounding man with a very deep voice, saying, "Right now, we're at a crossroads. We've seen what can happen when we elect a leader determined to divide us" (Joe Biden). The music in the background is a solo piano playing a sad melody, and the lighting is dark. These elements create a different kind of fear than the Trump ad, one that is maybe rooted in sadness more than anxiety. The effect of showing a clip of Donald Trump and then violent protests right after is to get viewers to associate those violent protests with Donald Trump, and the voiceover suggests that he is the one trying to divide America, turning into a threat to the unity of Americans. The images of the nurse and the priest and the empty school also suggest that Donald Trump has is the reason behind all the troubles we have had due to the coronavirus. The clip of trump at a rally shows him standing at a podium with a crowd of people applauding him. The dark color grading of this shot works to create a horror narrative, but the juxtaposition of people applauding him with the other images and clips solidify the presentation of Trump as a monster.

These clips and images that paint Trump as a monster transform into a positive message about what Joe Biden will do to thwart the threat of Trump. Interestingly, the transition into this

positive message is colored green as the video of violent protests goes to a video of Joe Biden greeting people at a rally. Green is normally a positive color, one of prosperity and progress. The use of this color suggests that there is something good beyond the monstrous Trump, and because the next clip is of Biden, he is presented as the solution. The clips that follow are of workers in a factory, a small business, and a hospital. Additionally, the music has changed to a fuller orchestral sound that can be described as patriotic sounding and brighter than the previous music. The lighting, too, is much brighter than the previous section of the ad. The narrator's voice has more inflection and also sounds more hopeful. He says, "As president, Joe Biden will forge a new path" (Joe Biden). Then, he goes on to talk about Biden helping the economy, small businesses, and health care. All of these elements in this section of the ad suggest that this new path Biden is forging will be more beneficial to America than Trump's. In this ad, viewers will feel fear initially, but will then have those fears quelled with the hope that help is on the way.

Discussion

The ad produced by Donald Trump's campaign, "Don't Let Them Ruin America," is effective in using horror frames to create fear in viewers' minds, but it is not the most ethical ad out there. As mentioned in the Background section, ads that use horror frames are most effective when they combine multiple elements like frightening imagery, ominous music, and a dark lighting. Donald Trump's ad has all of those; the frightening imagery comes from the clips of violence played in the background, ominous music is heard at the beginning and end of the ad, and the lighting is very dark. This ad otherizes the democrats by presenting them saying exactly the opposite of what the ad presents as reality, the violent riots. However, the ad is not necessarily ethical in the way it goes about creating fear. As mentioned in the Background, this might not matter because sound logic does not need to be present for ads like this to have an

impact. Still, there is something to be said for an ad that can make monstrous a political candidate and do so ethically. All of the soundbites from democrats in the ad come without context; some clips do not even contain full sentences, just buzzwords like "peaceful protestors." It is impossible to tell from this ad what question the democrats were asked to produce their response or whether they continued on to denounce the violence shown in the background videos. Additionally, using words in front of Kamala Harris and Joe Biden's names like "phony" and "sleepy," respectively, reduces the credibility of the ad and makes Donald Trump, or the creators of the ad, seem like schoolyard bullies. Ultimately, while the ad does a good job using horror frames to create a level of fear, it is not completely ethical.

On the other hand, the ad produced by Joe Biden's campaign, "Crossroads," does not do as good of a job as Trump's ad in inciting fear, but it is more effective in a different way in addition to being more ethical. According to Montgomery (2019), "a successful political advertising strategy requires positive messages from the candidate as a viable alternative to the monstrous opposition candidate. This gives the audience a sense of efficacy in stopping the threat" (p. 287). What Joe Biden's ad does that Donald Trump's does not is offer this positive message after stating the problem. Biden uses more subtle methods of inciting fear which could be less effective than Trump's because he uses elements of sadness more than anxiety. The music played in the background of the first part of the ad is more sad than ominous, but horror frames are still utilized through the narrator's voice, the imagery, and the lighting. While Biden might be less effective in creating fear, the ad is overall more effective because he presents solutions to the problems that he suggests Trump enables. Additionally, Biden's ad is more ethical than Trump's ad. There are no soundbites used from Trump, so nothing is taken out of context. However, the suggestion, albeit subtle, that Trump is the reason for problems with the

coronavirus and violent riots could be misleading. One other element that could be misleading is the lack of specificity on what exactly Biden will do to help the economy, small businesses, and health care. In a thirty second ad, however, it is difficult to have enough time to get to that level of specificity. Overall, Biden's ad is more ethical than Trump's ad and is similarly, if not more, effective.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the background on horror frame use in political advertisements. Horror frames are used to make monsters out of political opponents, relying on the fear of the viewer. Key elements to these ads are dark lighting, ominous music, frightening imagery, and serious narration. Two ads from the 2020 presidential campaign were analyzed, one produced by Donald Trump's campaign and one produced by Joe Biden's campaign. Horror elements in these ads were identified and their effects were explored. In the Discussion section, Donald Trump's ad was seen as effective in terms of making Joe Biden and other democrats out to be threats to America. However, the ad went about achieving this goal in a somewhat unethical way. Joe Biden's ad was more subtle in using horror frames but identified a solution to the problems Trump enables; namely, Joe Biden and his policies. Biden's commercial was overall more ethical, too, as there were only a few small misleading moments. The discussion and research about the utilization of horror frames, or other known genres, in political advertising is important and should continue, considering the importance of political ads as a form of communication.

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