Electoral Campaign Still Visuals: Making Politics Entertaining

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Abstract. This article examines British and American still visuals as elements of political advertising in the context of 2000–2020 election campaigns. To reach voters, still visuals, that include posters, buttons, banners among others, should be original and entertaining. In this case they impact the viewers on the emotional level affecting their political choices. The purpose of this empirical research is to establish linguistic and pictorial means that make political adds unconventional and expressive, attributing some elements of entertainment to visual political communication. To this end, a contrastive study of 112 American and 96 British political still visuals was carried out. The study is novel as it treats campaign still visuals from the intrasemiotic and interdiscursive perspectives elucidating the elements of play and revealing the techniques used in two respective cultures to make political multimodal texts entertaining. The research shows that British posters contain illustrated idioms, playing on literal and metaphorical meanings, while American still visuals reveal some carnivalesque features. The bisociation theory is employed to establish degrees of creativity of the sample campaign still visuals. The findings can be relevant for the investigation of elements of play in various types of multimodal texts functioning in visual communication.

Keywords: visual political communication, multimodality, campaign posters, semiotic modes, bisociation, creativity, politainment.

Research area: theoretical, applied, comparative and contrastive linguistics.

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Тексты предвыборной визуальной рекламы: игровой аспект политической коммуникации

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Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются британские и американские тексты статической политической рекламы, которые использовались в предвыборных кампаниях 2000–2020 годов. Содержащийся в них игровой компонент позволяет привлечь и удержать внимание избирателей. Необычная по форме политическая реклама воздействует на адресата на эмоциональном уровне, формируя заданные автором электоральные предпочтения. Цель исследования – выявление лингвистических и изобразительных средств, которые делают тексты предвыборной рекламы нестандартными и экспрессивными, добавляя визуальной политической коммуникации элемент развлекательного. Для этого был проведен сопоставительный анализ 112 американских и 96 британских текстов статической предвыборной рекламы. Новизна исследования заключается в том, что данные тексты рассматриваются в интрасемиотическом и интердискурсивном ракурсах. Выявляются элементы игрового, реализуемые в вербальном и изобразительном компонентах поликодовых рекламных текстов, описываются приемы создания комического, а также устанавливается их корреляция с британским и американским социокультурными контекстами. Установлено, что британские тексты политической рекламы характеризуются применением интерсемиотического перевода, поскольку они содержат иллюстрации идиом, в которых обыгрывается прямое и метафорическое значения. В американских политических рекламных текстах выявляются черты гротеска и фарса, что свидетельствует о карнавальных свойствах визуальной политической коммуникации. Применение теории бисоциации позволяет провести классификацию текстов выборки на основе степени их креативности. Использованная методика и полученные результаты могут найти применение при анализе средств создания экспрессивности в различных видах полимодальных текстов, функционирующих в рамках визуальной коммуникации.

Ключевые слова: визуальная политическая коммуникация, полимодальность, предвыборный плакат, семиотический код, бисоциация, креативность, политейнмент.

Научная специальность: 5.9.8 – теоретическая, прикладная и сравнительно-сопоставительная лингвистика.

Introduction

Visual political communication can be viewed through the prism of propaganda as well as from the creative culture perspective. It relies on images which are particularly potent when they not only depict, but also shape attitudes and behavior. Their strategic construction and manipulation aim to create a certain impression,

to stir emotions, to impact the viewers and mobilize them. Political parties and leaders use visual communication to build their public image, and subtle shifts in their visual representation can have a considerable impact on their public perceptions.

Campaign posters and buttons are the most ubiquitous visual political communication media. These still visuals became an important part of British and American political landscapes more than a century ago. Now their repertoire is extended to include billboards, bumper stickers, leaflets, yard-signs, banners and broadsides. Digitalization added a new dimension to political communication, enabling the parties to connect with their supporters through online networks and establish their virtual presence (Lee & Campbell, 2016). However, still visuals retain their salience in electoral campaign settings, effectively projecting party presence in public places. They serve as the pedestrian visual language which will be in demand in "the foreseeable future, not only because Internet access is not available to everyone, but because people cannot raise up their computer monitors in a convention, carry them in a demonstration, plant them on their lawn, or paste them onto walls. As long as people have political opinions, printed posters and their unique forms of art are a fundamental tool to express them" (Wells, 2021).

Despite their extensive use in every election political still visuals have been largely unconsidered by scholars aiming at electoral advertising analysis. The study of these multimodal texts can reveal modern tendences in visual political communication, since campaign posters are finetuned to address modern issues, mirroring the evolution of social and cultural environment (Ball, 2011, *Krogstad*, 2017, Seidman, 2008). A good example is the 2020 presidential campaign, which is marked by the usage of a new type of visual advertising – facial masks with campaign slogans. The present research aims at contextualizing still visuals within the broader narratives of British and American election culture of the 21st century.

The expanding body of research on political discourse demonstrates that it is endowed

with some theatrical features as electoral campaigns involve competition and drama (Rai et al., 2021; van Zoonen, 2005). Political events become a sort of entertainment which attracts heavy emotional investment from spectators (Nieland, 2008). To reach the electors, political still visuals should be expressive, the element of entertainment is required to hold the attention of the viewers and shape their opinion. The way this ever-changing segment of pre-electoral discourse employs play, surprise and entertainment to impact the viewers requires further consideration.

Political still visuals are viewed as texts deploying multiple semiotic systems as they incorporate pictures or photographs as well as verbal components, which allows for a certain degree of variability. To reach the voters the authors of graphical texts should make them expressive shaping their message by aptly fusing visual and verbal elements and employing linguocreativity in combination with nonstandard pictorial and graphical arrangements. It calls for intrasemiotic treatment of creativity which implies the interconnection of different semiotic modes employed to make political still visuals attractive and entertaining.

Theoretical framework

The present study is located at the intersection of political communication and visual semiotics research. The importance of visuals for politicians aiming to reach their voters has been emphasized by many scholars (Veneti et al., 2019). However, Barnhurst and Quinn stipulate that researchers tackle the crossroads of visuals and politics in passing (Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012). Modern studies conducted in the field of visual political communication explore viewers' perception of political images, whereas communication through visuals should also receive attention from rhetorical and semiotic perspectives (Barnhurst & Quinn, 2012). The scholars underline the importance of social setting shared by the authors of political advertising and the viewers; they argue that the knowledge of context is vital for the understanding of social issues reflected in political images. It follows that the study of political visuals requires one more frame of reference: social semiotics.

Building on the Hallidayan tradition, Gunter Kress postulates that visuals provide a powerful mode of communication and serve as a social mirror establishing ties with elements of the socio-cultural environment (Kress, 2011). In the framework of social semiotics texts are considered as constructs embedded in a specific social setting. To unravel the way socially defined meanings find their semiotic manifestation in the texts the multimodal discourse analysis is employed. It serves as a tool to uncover the use of different modes employed in meaning making, the linguistic element being just one of them (O'Halloran, 2011). Kress argues that "The meanings of the maker of a text as a whole reside in the meanings made jointly by all modes of the text" (Kress, 2011: 37). Projecting it to campaign still visuals, it is possible to say that to enhance visibility and impact, the graphic texts rely on cohesion of various semiotic resources that include verbal and pictorial elements, layout and colour (Knox, 2007, Kress & van Leeuwen, 2002).

Building on the critical discourse analysis, Kim and Jang assume a functional perspective on political still visuals to reveal the way the synergy of modes is used to construe messages (Kim & Jang, 2022). The scholars argue that political placards perform directive and expressive functions, the former presupposes the employment of explicitly shaped political demands, the latter is based on implicit means. It goes in line with the idea that expressive resources of visual political communication help to impact the recipients emotionally, involving them in a sort of play which enables the viewers to decode the author's message, to retain it and then make the intended political choice (Grinberg, 2002; Way, 2021).

The ways to make political communication expressive and appealing to voters are explored within the framework of politainment, which is understood as the fusion of politics and entertainment (Riegert & Collins, 2016). Exploring the merger of entertainment and politics van Zoonen argues that popular culture shapes citizen interpretation of the political landscape (van Zoonen, 2005). The political relevance of entertainment stems from the fact that it stimulates interest in politics and information seeking. The study of political humour conducted by Coronel et al. reveals that if politically relevant information is presented in an entertaining way, it increases the likelihood that it will be shared with others. Moreover, the findings show that blending humour and politics enhances the people's memory for information (Coronel et al., 2021). Modern research on the intersection of politics and play includes multiple disciplinary perspectives and mediated formats that encompass soft news, talk shows, films, computer games to name a few. In an attempt to categorise political humour D. Young analyses parody, satire and irony used in various settings. The scholar observes that humour originates from structural elements within the text that invite some audience participation (Young, 2017). The question about the elements of campaign still visuals that make them entertaining constitutes a gap in modern scholarship that should be filled.

Statement of the problem

Proceeding from the assumption that to affect the electorate the multimodal text should contain some element of play, the present paper addresses the following research questions:

1. What expressive linguistic means are used in the multimodal texts of still visuals?

2. What pictorial elements do they play on?

3. Do the elements aimed at riveting the viewers' attention vary in different socio-cultural settings or do they reveal uniformity?

The contrastive analysis of entertaining properties of British and American campaign still visuals offers a new perspective on visual political communication in respective cultures elucidating the expressive means used in modern political advertising to reach voters.

Methodology and material

To evaluate the theoretical expectations presented above, this paper focuses on the analysis of British and American poster, buttons, bumper stickers, yard signs, billboards used in pre-election campaigns in 2000–2020. The sample incorporates 112 American and 96 British political still visuals. So far, no archive contains a comprehensive collection of posters,

buttons, yard signs etc. used in political communication. The material for this research is based on the collection published in the book 'Words to Win By: The Slogans, Logos, and Designs of America's Presidential Elections' (Kaplan, 2020). It is augmented by British electoral posters from the Conservative party archive and the digital images found on the internet (Ball, 2011). Apart from official political posters, the sample contains posters and yard-signs designed by volunteers, which manifest American political activism.

The qualitative research of American and British campaign still visuals focuses on the items that contain some element of surprise, novelty and originality, which makes them entertaining. To this end the sample is limited to the posters, buttons, billboards and yard signs, comprising verbal and nonverbal expressive means such as play on words, some creative application of prior texts, visual metaphors, etc.

To establish the way the element of play is created in campaign still visuals the systemic functional approach to multimodal discourse analysis (SF-MDA) was employed (O'Halloran, 2011). It aims at revealing the meaning of different semiotic modes that accounts for the entertaining property of the whole text. This also involves the investigation of linguistic and pictorial elements semiosis and the messages it helps to create in a specific cultural and political setting. Proceeding from the assumption that in British and American political visual communication they tend to use different techniques to make still visuals impressive and appealing to the voters, the contrastive analysis of these tools is carried out.

Results and discussion

The examination of expressive means used in British and American visual political communication revealed that in the respective cultures the entertaining property of campaign still visuals stems from the creative use of intertextuality.

Campaign still visuals amalgamate various symbols which are taken from existing sources. Julia Kristeva called this process 'intertextuality' (Kristeva, 1986). Designers of political advertisements use this 'mosaic of quotations'

to create new impressive multimodal texts. Each mode can be symbolic, which allows for establishing some links with different sources belonging to social and cultural contexts. It is the play on prior texts that accounts for the entertaining property of political still visuals.

In the 2020 presidential campaign yard-sign "Grab him by the ballot" they employ the war-time American symbol of Rosy the Riveter that acquired a new meaning with the emergence of the Me-Too movement. This iconic element aims to visualize women empowerment in the context of anti-harassment activism. The old cultural symbol is augmented semantically which mashes with the stance of the verbal mode. The line *Grab him by the ballot* bears reference to Trump's taped comments about women. The transformed phrase supported by the pictorial component sends a clear message not to vote for the misogynistic president. Set in a specific political context, the old visual symbol is enhanced due to the creative modification of the verbal prior text. The apt combination of intertextual elements belonging to different semiotic modes is bound to have persuasive and mobilizing effect on voters.

The common prior texts used in American visual political communication are images of pop culture as well as commercial adds. As Seidman pointed out, "Political poster designers have employed many of the techniques that seem to have worked in the advertising world to draw attention to and sell products" (Seidman, 2008:20). Apart from using techniques developed for commercial advertising political still visuals designers borrowed some images, colour, layout initially created to sell goods. Examples include the anti-Trump poster *Border King* that incorporates Burger King logo. Its verbal element is changed to allude to Trump's decision to build a wall at the Mexican border. The poster also contains the pictorial representation of Donald Trump, whose smile and the thumbs-up gesture signal approval and satisfaction.

Intertextuality employed in British still visuals help to capture attention and entertain the viewers. An allusion can be made to some pictorial prior texts, as in the 2001 British campaign poster, issued by Labourists, depicting

Tory leader William Hague with Thatcher's hair at No 10. This image produces the surprise effect due to the incongruity of the things the recipients expect to see and the picture that they ultimately get. The slogan *Be afraid. Be very afraid* makes the whole multimodal text even funnier. The combination of the pictorial and verbal parts made people smile, so it enabled Labourists to lampoon their political rivals using very laconic resources. This pattern is duplicated in the 2017 Liberal Democrats' poster featuring Nigel Farage, the leader of the UK Independence Party, dressed in women's clothes and wearing a pearl necklace. The usage of Theresa May's hair in Farage's image serves as a cue to the verbal text: *Vote Her, Get Him* (Fig. 1).

The blending of pictorial representations of two politicians is also employed in US presidential campaigns. Unlike in British political posters, this method aims at supporting and acclaiming the candidate rather than lampooning him. In Ron English's poster, produced to promote the Democratic candidate in the 2008 presidential campaign, Obama's facial features are fused with those of Abraham Lincoln. According to Steven Seidman, this blended image proved to be appealing for young voters, which helped to build excitement for Obama's campaign (Seidman, 2008).

The seminal Conservatives' 1979 poster *Labour isn't Working,* that features a dole queue snaking into the distance, served as a template for the British 2012 anti-austerity poster *Austerity isn't Working.* In the new multimodal text, the layout, colour palette and iconic elements are preserved, the only change being the substitution of *Labour* for *Austerity.* This element modifies the ideology of the poster: the original text produced by Conservatives is augmented several decades later to target the Tory's austerity programme. Another play on the *Labour isn't Working* is found in the 2012 Conservatives' poster *Labour isn't Learning* presenting senior Labour figures as goofy schoolboys. The verbal pattern serves as a link to the 1979 poster, conjuring up a powerful image of a dole queue, which explains what lesson the Labour leaders haven't learned.

The most duplicated poster in American political setting is Shepard Fairey's Obama Hope which is a transformation of a news photograph of Obama into a stenciled portrait. The poster's design accounts for its popularity: it is simple and highly visual, which makes the image easily recognizable. Its colour mode is based on the combination of red and blue, the candidate's face is depicted with some touches of white with two different shades of blue on the edges. According to Seidman, the pictorial element "captured the essence of Obama campaign and the public attention, because it was inspirational and revolutionary in a non-threatening style" (Seidman, 2010: 15). The design is recognizable in 2016 and 2020 Democratic campaign posters acclaiming B. Sand-

Fig. 1. LibDems' 2017 campaign poster

ers, E. Warren, H. Clinton to name a few. The seminal Fairey's still visual has been used not only to acclaim, but also to attack as is the case with anti-Trump posters in which the linguistic component *Hope* was changed into *Nope* or *Dope* turning the multimodal text into a parody.

The analysis shows that still visuals draw on various prior texts which are verbal or visual by nature. The prior text tends to be augmented, either slightly or dramatically, which introduces some element of play creating a chain of associations in the viewer's mind. The voices, discourses, and genres on which multimodal texts draw are countless. It is their creative application that adds some twist to campaign still visuals arresting the electorate's attention and enhancing their persuasive power.

Another means to make campaign still visuals entertaining is purely linguistic. The texts of campaign buttons, posters and stickers functioning in American and British pre-electoral discourses are marked by the extensive use of **rhyme**. Consider the following examples of British pre-electoral posters: *Never a frown with Gordon Brown*; *Can't barrage the Farrage*. They are based on the candidates' names fit into some rhythmically arranged pattern that serves as a tagline and sticks in the recipients' memory enhancing the politician's presence in the electoral landscape.

The same means is used in American campaign advertising. Button pins and posters in support of Michael Bloomberg, one of the candidates running for presidency in 2020, reveal the following text based on rhyme: *I Like Mike*. Another political poster of the 2020 presidential campaign employed the slogan *Ridin' with Biden*. Pro-Trump political advertising is also marked by the usage of rhyme, as is the case with the posters incorporating the phrase *Can't Stump the Trump*.

One more thing that accounts for entertaining and appealing quality of campaign still visuals is **the employment of bisociation.** The term bisociation was coined by Arthur Koestler and first used in his book *The Act of Creation* (1964). Koestler introduced a model of creative thinking which is opposed to a more conventional, associative style of perception. The

scholar argues that the associative thinking is based on the set of routine acts that have been practiced for a long period of time. Such processes combine items from the same plane or in Koestler's terms *matrix* of thought.

Unlike the associative mode, that relies on habitual connections, bisociation results in a creative act. The bisociative mode is at work when unrelated, often conflicting things are joined in a new way. It presupposes thinking simultaneously on more than one matrix or plane. The interaction of two independent matrixes of thought or reasoning generates some fusion in a new intellectual synthesis (Koestler, 1964). Thus, the essence of creativity lies in the perception of a situation or idea "in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference." (Koestler, 1964: 38). Countless examples of this act are given in humourous, scientific and artistic creativity.

The difference between habitual, unimaginative and truly entertaining is that traditional thinking refers to a single 'plane,' while the creative act always operates on more than one plane. The former can be called single-minded, the latter double-minded, transitory state of unstable equilibrium where the balance of both emotion and thought is disturbed. In everyday life we normally operate habitual patterns of thinking. However, sometimes it is disrupted by spontaneous sparks of insight, which helps to look at a familiar concept from an absolutely different angle. At this point previously disconnected matrixes of perception interact in a creative act of bisociation. Their collision accounts for the shift of attention to aspects previously ignored. Koestler assumes that it creates a sort of explosion from which some comic effect originates. He applies this observation to various types of humor, introducing three main criteria of comic techniques: originality, emphasis and economy. Originality correlates with the surprise effect; economy means implication, while emphasis is about exaggeration, placing stress on certain elements, which underpins caricatures (*Koestler*, 1964).

When applied to campaign still visuals Koestler's theory has certain explanatory power. Considering the political still visuals from the standpoint of association/bisociation it is

possible to place them on the scale of creativity: non-creative – partially creative – truly creative.

The majority of still visuals produced by the parties and candidates are non-creative as they rely on the association within the confines of a given matrix. They contain the candidate's name supported by some pictorial image. It makes political actors recognizable and helps parties to maintain their virtual presence but adds little to the electors' understanding of the candidate's personality or the pursued cause. However, to become memorable and effective still visuals should appeal to the viewer's imagination offering some element of novelty and fun. The analysis of still visuals reveals some gradation of creativity involved in their production. The 2020 campaign poster *45 squared* is pro-Trump, since it alludes to his second presidential term, calling to vote for Trump's reelection (Fig. 2).

In the framework of Koestler's bisociation theory this multimodal text should be rendered partially creative. It lacks the explosion effect that sparks amusement, because the first digit 45, executed in stripes and stars, unequivocally belongs to the presidency plane and the second sign "squared" does not produce the effect of the unexpected. The two planes – digits and presidency – are not set far apart. On the contrary, they seem to be overlapping as 2 refers to the next term of presidency that Trump aspires

to serve. Koestler suggests that one measure of originality is its surprise effect (Koestler, 1964). In the *45 squared* poster the link to the second presidential term can hardly be seen as truly unexpected, surprising and original.

Meanwhile, genuine originality can be found with the 2015 Liberal Democrats' poster "Look right, look left then cross" (Fig. 3). It has two planes set in contrast to each other: the one of elections and the other of road regulations. The right and the left sides of the road and the right-wing and the left-wing parties intersect at the point which is expressed by way of verbal and iconic modes – THEN CROSS and ×. At this point "the road plane" clashes with "the election plane". So, the ultimate call of the semiotically complex text is not to cross the road but to cross the box on the ballot sheet, choosing LibDems. In this example bisociation is shaped as the pun which is not just a single phonic form with two meanings. The entertaining property relies heavily on the pictorial components, the sign of a crossed box on a ballot sheet being the key to understanding the whole intricate combination of semiotically heterogeneous signs.

In Koestler's seminal work the pun is metaphorically described as two strings of thought tied together by an acoustic knot (Koestler, 1964). However, in still visuals the knot can be of a more complicated nature, when the verbal item is interwoven with the pictorial one as in

Fig. 2. The 2020 American pro-Trump poster

Fig. 3. The 2015 Liberal Democrats' poster

the poster THE TORIES ARE LYING. It features a man lying on the word LYING, which serves as a focal point bisociated with two mental planes. Such configurations are also described as textual and visual blending (Anisimova et al., 2022). They can be interpreted as a chain of metaphors interwoven into the fabric of a multimodal text (Zverev, 2014).

The scale of creativity wouldn't be complete without multimodal texts that contain visual representations of idioms. It can be exemplified by the Conservative party poster attacking Labourists. It features the Leader of the Labour Party Ed Milliband in the leader of Scottish national party's pocket. This electoral multimodal text plays on the literal and figurative meanings of the idiom *To be in one's pocket* (Fig. 4).

The poster contains a visual metaphor that expresses the idea of being under control and alludes to political weakness of the Leader of the Labour Party. The technique used in this poster can be described as intersemiotic translation since images created in the verbal mode are converted into pictorial ones.

The same method works in another British poster produced by Conservatives to attack their political opponents in 2015. It depicts Nicola Sturgeon, the Scottish national Party leader, as the puppet-master of the Labourist
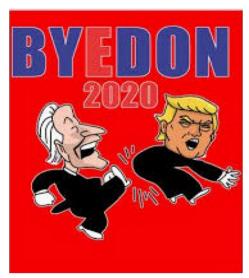

Fig. 4. The 2015 Conservatives' poster

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Fig. 5. The 2020 anti-Trump poster

leader Ed Milliband. The illustration of the idiom *to pull the strings* conveys the idea of political manipulation. The satirical context in these anti-Labourist posters playing on idioms is created solely by pictorial means as the verbal element is reduced to the almost inconspicuous line *Vote Conservative*.

The pun is also used in American still visuals, mostly in those produced by volunteer designers who support a particular candidate. The element of entertainment in American campaign texts is similar to the humor which Mikhail Bakhtin called the culture of popular laughter (Bakhtin, 1984). It is the laughter of a marketplace defying any social norms and restrictions. The carnivalesque elements that are viewed as an inherent property of political communication find their manifestation in campaign still visuals (Mikhaleva, 2009). The pun used in the poster BYEDON 2020 plays on phonetic similarity of Joe Biden's and Donald Trump's names: Bye Don serves as a homophone for Biden (Fig. 5).

The iconic element, featuring one candidate giving the other a kick, reveals an element of slapstick humor. It is a manifestation of the popular laughter, liberating and devoid of restrictions. The creation of political message in campaign posters can employ both verbal and pictorial elements that belong to informal

registers, which goes in line with the tendency to merge political and humorous discourses in order to ensure that political communication has some popular appeal (Alexeev, 2020). The research shows that a play on word employed in political still visuals takes various shapes, which works as a puzzle that the viewers are expected to solve.

Conclusions

To reach voters modern visual political communication relies on some elements of play, which blurs the line between politics and entertainment. Campaign posters, buttons, billboards perform their mobilizing function if they arrest and retain the viewers' attention presenting some serious matters in an original, humorous way. It is possible to assume that such texts present the intersection of political, advertising, and humorous discourses.

The study revealed the techniques that make campaign adds expressive and funny. Since visual political communication is set in certain social and cultural environment, both British and American posters, buttons, billboards etc. incorporate iconic and verbal intertextual elements relevant for specific electoral campaigns. The prior texts are augmented creatively to rivet the electors' attention and shape their views. The sources of intertextuality for

British campaign still visuals mainly include prior political texts, while the specific feature of American posters is the incorporation of elements based on some popular commercials. If the images to which a new text refers are easily recognizable, they become appealing to a broad spectrum of electors, which makes commercial adds a ubiquitous element to play on.

Another expressive means found in British as well as American political advertising is the employment of rhyme. When the politician's name is used as a part of some rhythmical pattern, it sticks in the recipient's memory, forming a tagline. Thus, the employment of rhyme tends to enhance the politician's presence in the electoral landscape.

To make still visuals entertaining both British and American designers resort to bisociation, which accounts for the originality of political advertising. The application of the bisociation mode developed by Koestler makes it possible to place political still visuals on the scale of creativity: non-creative – partially creative – truly creative. True creativity is at work when unrelated, often conflicting things are joined in visual texts in a new, original way. In the sample texts this clash of planes is achieved both in verbal and pictorial elements. The study shows that British posters incorporate illustrated idioms, playing on literal and metaphorical meanings, which can be viewed as intersemiotic translation, while American still visuals are

characterized by some slapstick humour, so their pictorial as well as linguistic components reveal some carnivalesque features.

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