THE EVOLUTION OF THE AUDIENCE

> *In making a speech one must study three points: first, the means of producing persuasion; second, the language; third, the proper arrangement of the various parts of the speech.*
>
> —ARISTOTLE

On March 5, 2012, a San Diego–based charity uploaded a thirty-minute video created by its founder and "grand storyteller and dreamer," a handsome and charismatic evangelical Christian named Jason Russell. The video was the latest in a string of media that began with the production of a 2003 documentary by Russell and two of his classmates, Bobby Bailey and Laren Poole, that bore the name of the nonprofit it ultimately brought to life: *Invisible Children*.

That film was first screened for family and friends at a San Diego community center, but then quickly found traction with the high school and college set. Shot on a small video camera, it followed three young white filmmakers as they traveled through Uganda exploring the plight of child soldiers and the scourge of the rebel leader of the Lord's Resistance Army, Joseph Kony.

The film, subtitled *Rough Cut*, was indeed rough, not at all slickly produced, yet it is just this kind of edgy quality that attracted its youthful audience; its immediacy and authenticity resonated.

Over the past eight years, the documentary has been seen by more than five million people at thousands of high schools, colleges, and places of worship and has spawned an organization that continues to focus on this issue. Still, nobody was prepared for the reaction to a short follow-up called *Kony 2012*.

This somewhat self-indulgent video began with the birth of Russell's son, Gavin, which became his motivation and audience for explaining the history of Joseph Kony and the need for the world to find him, so that children just like Gavin across the globe in Uganda could be safe. Russell encouraged viewers to demand U.S. military intervention to catch the Ugandan warlord by the end of 2012. "Make him famous," the video urged its viewers.

And this it did. The reaction was immediate—in its first week, the video had more than one hundred million views (forty million in just the first three days), and Kony suddenly became the most famous war criminal in the world since Pol Pot. In one stroke, the filmmakers had done what years of international diplomacy and UN reports had failed to accomplish.

What was also remarkable was the strength of the negative pushback against the video and its makers. Invisible Children was accused of trying to build donations (it sold thirty-dollar "action kits" containing wristbands and brochures) through exaggerating the scale and brutality of Kony's Lord's Resistance Army. There was little evidence that the LRA had been operating inside Uganda for the past six years, and informed observers speculated that Kony himself might be dead. When the film was screened in Uganda, audience members booed and threw objects at the screen in response to what they perceived as a patronizing and inaccurate film. The awareness of the

film's deficiencies spread on blogs, tweets, and counter-videos nearly as fast as the film. A group called Uganda Speaks put together its own video to respond to the negative image and "American story" it said had been promulgated by Invisible Children. The pressure was apparently enough to drive Russell into an emotional crisis; San Diego police detained him the following month after he was spotted half-naked and yelling at passing cars in an episode of what his family called "extreme exhaustion."

But the video indisputably put Kony on the consciousness map not only of young people but also of U.S. policy makers. Six U.S. senators produced their own video in response, pledging their support. Chris Coons, the Delaware senator and chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, said, "The level of engagement we've seen from Americans—especially young Americans—because of the Kony 2012 movement has been truly extraordinary." He explained, "We had two goals in mind for this video: reiterating the Senate's deep bipartisan support for stopping Joseph Kony, and embracing and encouraging this once-in-a-generation interest in a humanitarian cause abroad. Because so many Americans first learned about Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army online, and because that's where people are talking to each other about it, we wanted to engage with interested Americans there, too."

Russell and Invisible Children answered their critics with the release of *Kony 2012: Part 2: Beyond Famous*. While this video has received far less attention or views than the original, its construction is significant. It begins with a rapid sequence of nineteen different clips from the mainstream international media first touting and then denouncing the earlier video. These images begin in a smaller frame nested within the screen and proceed to grow in size as the criticism mounts, until we hear a British broadcaster declare, "They haven't a clue what they are talking about." We then cut to a talking head, identified as Norbert Mao, former presidential candidate of Uganda, who attests that "this one grabs you by your gut and shakes you until you are forced to pay attention. That is the essence of awareness. People are now paying attention."

Russell and his associates were polarizing, but nobody can argue with their masterstroke of galvanizing interest through a compelling piece of visual media that could be distributed instantly with a click.

The seeds for this remarkable event, however, lay not only in the power of YouTube. They were sown further back in the history of the technological revolution—in the notion that the exercise of power lies mostly in what people *see* of their leaders and their enemies, and that the power to make people see things outside the official narrative, and to persuade them otherwise, has been slipping from the hands of the elite for at least a generation. Technology only accelerates this effect.

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Though the realities of government are often tedious and hard to follow, we tend to make political decisions based on gut-level instincts and emotional impressions that come through our visual processing apparatus. It is no accident that the dawn of the electronic moving image should be so drenched in political content. Then again, the relentless gaze of the camera is a viewpoint with which we already have some comfort and literacy.

Think of the famous film of the last helicopter leaving the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon in 1975. Or even the 1963 Zapruder film, shot by a Dallas clothing manufacturer named Abraham Zapruder, an immigrant from Russia who went down to the edge of a presidential motorcade with an 8 mm Bell & Howell of the Zoomatic Director Series, Model 414 PD—a top-of-the-line camera, the Flip of its day. He stood on the edge of a concrete plinth and

asked his secretary, Marilyn Sitzman, to hold him steady while he waited for the president's limousine to roll past him in Dealey Plaza.

A common observation about the Zapruder film is that it was "accidental," and in one sense this is correct. Abraham Zapruder certainly did not leave his office in the Dal-Tex building with the intention of filming the murder of an American president. But in another sense, it was not accidental at all. Zapruder set out to capture the parade of a president, the meeting of the governor with the governed in a street theater of flaunted power that went back at least as far as Queen Elizabeth I. Zapruder may have intended his home movie to be shown only in his living room, to his family and a few bored friends, but for him it was supposed to be something special, the magic presence of the chief executive—a constructed political image. It has since entered the cultural vernacular, existing as a constructed image of a different sort.

Spontaneous violence and the random cameraman have become a well-known trope in American political discourse. Even before the era of pocket cell phones, it was a tool of the citizen against the abuses of the state. The violence itself is often a sharp distillation of a long and painful experience—existing not so much for its own power to outrage but for the lengthy narrative of outrage for which it serves as a touchstone.

This was the potency behind a grainy video shot by an unemployed plumber from Argentina named George Holliday, who stepped out onto the balcony of his cheap apartment off the freeway in the San Fernando Valley on March 3, 1991, and happened to see four Los Angeles police officers using a Taser on a man they had pulled over for drunk driving. Holliday's instinct was to reach for his camcorder and hit Record. In the video, we can see Rodney King rise to his feet and start to move toward Officer Laurence Powell, who swats him with a baton. King falls and is set upon by other officers, who club him as he lies stationary on the ground.

Holliday called the LAPD the next morning and offered to show them what he considered to be a problem of excessive force that should be handled internally. He got the runaround and then decided the police weren't interested. So he took the footage to the KTLA television station, which broadcast the whole tape and turned it into a focal point for years of frustration between the African Americans of Los Angeles and what they considered the routinely heavy-handed tactics of the police. When the four officers were acquitted of assault three years later, portions of the city erupted in violence, as the community could not reconcile the verdict with the images they had seen in Holliday's video.

Multiple realities of modern America were revealed in the Rodney King episode, but none more so than the power of the average citizen to trigger momentous events simply through the use of a technology that was becoming democratically available.

Think what would have happened if George Holliday had gone to the LAPD with a verbal complaint about watching a drunk driver beaten up by the cops? They of course would have told him to get lost, but what if Holliday had then gone to the studios of KTLA and offered to tell his story on the air? They almost certainly would have told him to get lost. The power to shock was not in the verbal description, which is notoriously subject to interpretation and unreliability. Not even King's bruises would have been enough. To be "real" enough to be taken seriously, the event had to be *seen*. We had to *see* Officer Powell's baton striking the hapless King, to *see* those vicious baton blows being administered to a fallen man—and unless you are on a Los Angeles–area jury, those images are hard to deny.

What happened with Rodney King—as well as with Joseph Kony—was a clash between old and new methods of literacy. In both cases, the underlying

injustices had been written about and documented for years. Those who were paying attention knew all about the abuses of the LAPD in the African American community, and of Kony's slaughter in the Ugandan countryside. Reams of reports and data on each were available. But it took a video to galvanize the public at large, bringing a visceral emotional capstone to a mountain of written material. The video made it all "real." Make no mistake: the printed material provided the fuel for the outrage and put it in a proper and accurate context. But the moving images were the spark that lit the fire.

The ideology did not drive the message. *Technology* drove the message. And the widespread technology of the portable video camera and the security camera created the "language" of the grainy and eerie peek into what the authorities didn't want us to see.

As the media critic Dan Gilmor noted, "By 1991, home video gear was becoming common, heading toward today's near-ubiquity. When people saw that video, they realized a number of things, not least of which was the possibility that average citizens could hold powerful people—the police in this instance—somewhat more accountable for wrongdoing they committed in public places. Witnessing was being transformed into action, we all understood."

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In May of 2006, the drugstore CVS became the first chain store to stock a very inexpensive disposable video camera, which was soon thereafter renamed the Flip. This product had two things going for it. First, it was as easy to use as a point-and-shoot. Second, it had its own Web-based software system for editing and distribution. Two million of these cameras were on the streets within two years, and in March 2009 the company was purchased by Cisco Systems for $590 million.

The Flip camera was poised for great commercial success when, just two years later, Cisco announced that it would be closing down all Flip operations and discontinuing the camera. This was not a result of the loss of interest in consumer-shot video. In fact, exactly the opposite. The Flip had found a market that then exploded on it. The camcorder that had preceded it required a lot more technical savvy to edit movies into new creations, but the Flip made this easy on a laptop. Then cell phone cameras began to do the same trick, and the release of the iPhone in 2009 helped seal the Flip's fate.

With more than a hundred million smartphones sold in just one quarter of 2011, it will not be long before most of us are walking around with devices in our pockets that not only make phone calls, but can capture and distribute video images worldwide at the push of a button. This is the pocket telegraph of our time. And a startling portion of the content being zinged around the globe by ordinary individuals is overtly political in its content. In short, the era of the Flip is flipping political discourse.

The 2008 U.S. presidential campaign was the first to feature a significant amount of video pamphleteering that didn't air on television but on computers. What was striking about the new wave of campaign videos was that the really popular ones were not created by political consultants with their stacks of money and reams of polling data. For example, the musician will.i.am created the enormously popular "Yes We Can" video lauding Barack Obama, which was seen more than fifteen million times.

Image making is no longer solely in the hands of the candidate or his opponent, because it no longer takes significant time or resources to create these pieces or to disseminate them. This will continue to change politics at both the national and the local levels. It is also changing the very nature of the role of the political journalist.

A gruesome but important example took place on the night of December

30, 2006, when a Shiite guard in a prison in the Baghdad suburb of Kaizmain surreptitiously captured footage of the crude and chaotic hanging of Saddam Hussein. Within moments of the act, anyone with access to the Internet, regardless of where he lived on this planet, could watch this historic execution (carried out in amateurish and thuggish fashion) and intuitively understand the event in a way that written reports would struggle to communicate with equal intensity. This chronicle was not done by a reporter, but by an extremely biased individual taking pleasure in the execution. Even George W. Bush had to concede that the proceedings "looked like a revenge killing," and they brought embarrassment to the new government of Nouri al-Maliki. This was no constructed piece of documentary reporting, but rather a "home movie" that happened to be a snuff film, one that was shared with millions of people in an instant, a raw slice of an event with no embellishment or interpretation. Scholars would call it a "primary source"—the genuine article—that also symbolically stood for the closing of an era. This may seem like a new development in the visual literacy of politics, but it was actually the culmination of a force that has been building a long time in international politics, à la JFK, Saigon, and Rodney King.

Quite often, as in the examples just given, the most compelling of politicized images involves violence. In 2000, international furor erupted after a gunfight in the Palestinian Territories in which a boy named Muhammad al-Durrah was killed in a hail of bullets. Incidents like this are far too common in war zones around the world, and their casualties rendered as statistics in the news columns, but what set this incident apart was that it was captured on video by a freelance cameraman for the French 2 news station. The video shows the heartbreaking and pathetic image of Muhammad's father trying futilely to shield his son from the onslaught.

Controversy has swirled ever since as to who actually fired the shots—the Israel Defense Forces insist it wasn't they, and argue that their position didn't allow for bullets to reach the boy and his father, who were crouched behind a concrete barrel. Still, the video was disseminated far and wide, supported with commentary by newscasters in studios explaining that we were seeing the boy and his father die as victims of IDF soldiers, and it was widely seen as a diorama of Israeli heartlessness. The pose of the father and son ended up on posters and postage stamps. In *The Atlantic Monthly*, James Fallows writes, "The image of a boy shot dead in his helpless father's arms during an Israeli confrontation with Palestinians has become the Pietà of the Arab world."

But to this day, there are more questions than answers around what actually happened that day. France 2 has refused to make public the section of the video that purportedly shows the boy's death agonies, although others argue that this footage might actually exonerate the IDF. More important, the video does not show the positions of the combatants firing bullets at the father and son, and it is left unclear whether they were hit by bullets from Israeli or Palestinian forces. Visual symbolism is enormously powerful when it comes to moving images, and careful viewers must also be aware of what is *not* seen in the frame, and is only implied.

What actually happened to Muhammad al-Durrah might forever remain a mystery, but one thing that all sides can agree on is the way a video, even a questionable one, put the incident into an exalted position. In his *Atlantic* article, Fallows concludes: "The images intensify the self-righteous determination of each side. If anything, modern technology has aggravated the problem of mutually exclusive realities. With the Internet and TV, each culture now has a more elaborate apparatus for 'proving,' dramatizing, and disseminating its particular truth."

Recognizing this, human rights organizations within Israel such as Witness, B'Tselem, and Videre have given away video cameras to local

individuals and trained them to document and publicize acts of violence. Documentary filmmaker Yoav Gross of B'Tselem explains that his group "spent more than twenty years writing reports and issuing press releases" that were largely ignored; yet when they began to use video to capture images of routine abuse, not only were these stories picked up by the media and broadcast on national networks, but they also inspired strong reaction and debate within Israeli society.

More recently, we watched electronically as unrest and revolution arose in the Arab Spring. Masses of people convened to protest against their autocratic governments in places such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Hosni Mubarak did not have controls to block images from being broadcast from Cairo's Tahir Square, and these were captured and shared both on stations such as Al Jazeera and across the Web twenty-four hours a day. Facebook posts and Twitter text messages were credited with being the tech channels for the revolution. But this is only partly true. The oxygen that fueled international pressure and support for the demonstrators were the provocative video images being shared with the world in perhaps the most heavily documented uprising in world history, complete with video of soldiers on horseback charging the square.

In the years ahead, there will be many more of these moments shot and shared—news that would never have been considered "news" before—as we become the most documented society that has ever existed, powered like never before by bystanders who "just happened to be there." Cameras are becoming almost ubiquitous, and the channels of distribution are easily accessible. Mainstream media outlets such as the BBC, CNN, and Fox News are relying more and more on images provided by citizen journalists not connected with any news-gathering operation—and usually not compensated for their footage.

Still, as viewers of these images, we have many questions to ask. What happened before or after the camera was recording, and how might that footage change the story? What is outside the frame that might help tell a different story? Who is shooting the footage, and who is distributing it, and what agendas might they have?

Those last three questions were of paramount concern in the September 2012 riots in Libya, which provided cover for a terrorist operation that claimed the lives of three Americans, including the ambassador, J. Christopher Stevens. Angry crowds had stormed the embassy in a protest over a meretricious piece of video that emanated from California—a badly shot promotional trailer advertising a D-grade propaganda movie called *Innocence of Muslims*, which depicted the prophet Muhammad in an unflattering light. That it depicted him at all was already an offense to Muslims, who believe that such images deify the Prophet and steal glory away from God.

The crowds were led to believe from Egyptian media reports that the video —uploaded to YouTube, of course, where it could be seen by millions—was a product of Hollywood, produced and directed by a transplanted Israeli, and therefore represented the beliefs of the United States at large as well as the Jews. But the maker, as it turns out, was Nakata Bassely Nakata, a fringe character, an Egyptian Coptic Christian living in Cerritos, California, who had been in prison for bank fraud. He shot part of the trailer in his own house using actors who had been misled into thinking they were shooting an adventure movie called *Desert Warriors*. The offensive dialogue was dubbed in later.

Here we have a case of an ordinary person in obscurity being able to move world events with a camera and a computer. But the example is a dismal one. There is a comparison to be made here with the Nazi filmmaker Leni

Riefenstahl, whose film *Triumph of the Will* helped cement racial stereotypes and create villains of innocents in the 1930s. The comparison is only partial, though, because Riefenstahl had access to the best equipment and crews that the Reich had to offer. She was also a talented filmmaker. The makers of *Innocence of Muslims* were neither well-equipped nor talented. But their race-baiting was impeccable. They were "visually literate" in the way only a bully could be.

There is another point to the Libyan riots that went almost unmentioned in the days afterward. The filmmaker knew that the "sore spot" of Muhammad's image was a very sensitive one, and they pounded it with a hammer. Yet it would have had a diluted effect—or no effect at all—if the targeted audience were visually literate enough themselves to ask critical questions about the material. Who was producing it? Why was this message being sent? What is the intended effect? Demagogues cease to have any power when we can see beyond their lies and deceptions. But such questions were not asked by that mob.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly, President Obama addressed the "crude and disgusting video [that] sparked outrage throughout the Muslim world."[5] He felt compelled to reiterate that the United States government was in no way involved in the video's production or dissemination, yet also defended the values of freedom of speech—and video. He continued: "I know that not all countries in this body share this particular understanding of the protection of free speech … But in 2012, at a time when anyone with a cell phone can spread offensive views around the world with the click of a button, the notion that we can control the flow of information is obsolete. The question, then, is how do we respond?" I believe that the only way to control response is to prepare people around the world with the literacy tools to question and critically consume the extraordinary volume of media they will be exposed to.

This movie was a fiction, but similar questions of "framing" are central to factual material as well. What is being left out of the shot? With filmmakers who have an axe to grind, there is a temptation to cut corners and simplify things to the point where the camera is *not* telling the whole story. Everything that you might consider in framing and shooting a documentary or narrative film in a more controlled setting can inform the shots you get surreptitiously and can help make that footage more effective.

We must also consider the ethics around privacy and the distribution of certain images in these circumstances, as they can have an impact both in ways you imagined and intended, and in ways unimaginable and unintended. Once images are in the public's view, they in essence have a life of their own—again, Rodney King and JFK—divorced from the creator, and subject to interpretation as their own reality.

And when these are grafted onto another image, a whole new conception of reality can take hold—for better or for worse.

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The political power of the heroic image was well known to people of antiquity, who cast statues of their leaders in order to inspire respect, awe, and a sense of "that's just how things are" between the people and those who governed them.

Power, wrote the classic scholar Jas' Elsner, "is as much a matter of impression, of theatre, of persuading those over whom authority is wielded to collude in their subjugation. Insofar as power is a matter of presentation, its cultural currency in antiquity (and still today) was the creation, manipulation, and display of images."

The Romans understood that their leaders had to be seen as elevated

personages, almost demigods, in order to command subjects who would never know them personally and perhaps never see them in the flesh. Statues were routinely commissioned to portray figures such as Augustus, Trajan, and Pompey in heroic garb, wearing garlands and holding spears. These served as reminders of a ruler's majesty and benevolence, and perhaps as vague threats, deterrents to revolt. Their effect, however, was necessarily local. The statues could not travel across distances or have projective effects, unless the citizens or slaves traveled to them. When they did, the statues' craftsmanship spoke loudly. Here is somebody who was able to pay or intimidate some of the best artists in the known world to shape their faces out of stone or bronze. Such a man—even if in image—is worthy of obedience. Coins with royal heads stamped upon them later performed the same function.

A fundamental shift in the nature of political image making occurred in Gutenberg's era, when it became possible for the first time to create mass-produced images through mechanical means that didn't involve foundries or minting coins. As such, these images were not individually crafted by an artist but rapidly produced by a journeyman. The process only accelerated with photography.

In his classic 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Walter Benjamin said that the process of sending an image around the world strips it of a certain authenticity and immediacy, which he called "the aura" that surrounds an original production. There is a difference between in seeing a print of Pierre-Auguste Renoir's *Luncheon of the Boating Party* on a dorm room wall and seeing the original work hanging in the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. "One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition," writes Benjamin. "By making many reproductions it substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence." What is gained by distribution, in other words, is offset by the loss of immediate experience.

He elaborates: "An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura."

With traditional images of political power, that immediate experience of aura was sucked into the eyes in an all-at-once understanding of where authority lay. The live display of royal pomp was an important element of the "theater of power" used by British sovereigns to impress and intimidate their subjects. Queen Elizabeth I was a mistress of the procession, which featured parades through London led by a platoon of nobles dressed in their finery, followed by court flunkies bearing the scepter and the sword of state, and then the queen herself, the train of her gown being carried by a female courtier. To observers from the street, the effect was said to be transfixing. The vision of the exalted personage was enough to call forth strong feelings of loyalty and patriotism.

This was nothing that needed to be "read"—it had to be swallowed whole by the eye, and has been replicated time and time again, recently in the storybook wedding of Britain's Prince William and his bride, Kate Middleton, which was broadcast live to more than a hundred million viewers on television and to even more than this number of viewers watching a live stream on the Internet.

Political images are much less logical than they let on—in fact, they rely on the image makers' ability to tap into primitive emotional centers that govern adaptive urges such as fear, comfort, and love.

This is why the constructed images of modern American political ads so

often rely on tones and “feelings” rather than hard data about the candidates. This was on vivid display in what many historians consider to be the first widely circulated negative television ad in a presidential campaign: the “daisy” ad used by Lyndon Johnson against Barry Goldwater in 1964.

A young girl is plucking petals off a daisy in a meadow and counting up to ten. When she reaches that number, a harsh male military voice that seems as if it would be right at home at Strategic Air Command takes over and begins counting down from ten, as the camera zooms to a still shot of the girl’s terrified eye. Then a nuclear mushroom cloud envelops the screen, and a voice-over of Johnson’s voice can be heard, echoing a poem by W. H. Auden. “These are the stakes,” he says. “To make a world in which all of God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other, or we must die.” An announcer then implores, “Vote for President Johnson on November 3. The stakes are too high for you to stay home.”

The visuals were chilling: few things can tug at the emotions like a child at risk, and the nuclear blast at the end was made for the viewer to understand as a worldwide burning of all children. The voice of LBJ comes across as fatherly and soothing, in a time of increased rancor with the Soviet Union and the belligerent rhetoric of Goldwater, which Johnson’s team was trying to cast as a temptation to war.

The ad aired only once. Johnson’s team pulled it after a flood of criticism, but it still got wide attention because television reporters seized on it as a story, and its images received repeated free airplay for weeks. This enshrined a method in the minds of political consultants henceforth. Your imagery and your message could be outrageous, but as long as they were emotionally affecting, they stood a chance of being talked about in the news with far more impact than if you had had to pay for them every time they aired. The campaign could back away from the extreme message and still reap the benefits from the visuals.

In this dismal art form, one name stands out from the rest: Willie Horton. His name wasn’t even Willie—it was William—but Willie sounded “blacker” to Lee Atwater, a consultant for George H. W. Bush in the 1988 presidential campaign. Horton had been on furlough from a Massachusetts prison when he raped a woman in Maryland. Atwater seized on the incident as evidence that the Democratic candidate, Massachusetts governor Mike Dukakis, was “soft on crime.” A cheap ad featuring a police mug shot of Horton ran just a few times on local cable stations, but it was enough to elevate the incident into a turning point in the election. The ad received hundreds of hours of news coverage.

“The mug shot of Horton was obviously the most emotionally powerful image in the ad, playing on every white person’s fears of the dangerous, lawless, violent dark black male,” wrote the Emory University neuroscientist Drew Westen. “Research shows that even subliminal presentation of black faces activates the amygdala in whites, and implicit racial appeals are far more effective than explicit ones because they don’t raise people’s conscious attitudes toward racism.” Willie Horton became a household name, as Atwater predicted, not because of the hazy facts of the case—the furlough law had been signed by a Republican governor—but because the menacing face got such intense news coverage.

Few in American political life were better at riding free news coverage on pure visuals than our first actor-president, Ronald Reagan, whose advisers learned during his first term that the handsome, wrinkly president looked best when surrounded by flags and red-white-and-blue bunting, and they took pains to wrap him in such at every public appearance. Television coverage, even when negative or cynical, usually framed the president in those images, and those were what the viewers tended to remember.

When providing commentary at the 1984 Republican convention to renominate Reagan, the NBC anchor Tom Brokaw noted just what a contrivance the proceedings would be. “This will be an evening of scripted, colorful pageantry, kind of like an old-fashioned MGM musical, in which thousands of people and bands and balloons and confetti will move right on cue directed by an unseen hand,” said Brokaw. “And at the climactic moment, Ronald Reagan, just like his good friend Fred Astaire, will glide into view.” But Brokaw’s comments made no difference. The spectacle of the Gipper as the American nonpareil was what went straight up the ventral stream of the viewing audience.

In her memoir, *Reporting Live*, the CBS reporter Lesley Stahl remembered doing a critical story about Reagan cutting funding for public health and opposing the expansion of programs to help children with disabilities. The segment was five minutes long, extremely verbose for network TV news, and was illustrated with footage of the president speaking to residents of a nursing home. She wondered what kind of a reaction she’d get from the president’s team, and sure enough, adviser Richard Darman called her that night.

“Way to go, kiddo,” he told her. “What a great piece. We loved it.”

“Didn’t you hear what I said?” Stahl replied, wondering if they had bothered to listen to her critical reporting of Reagan.

“Nobody heard what you said.”

“Come again?” she asked.

“You guys in Televisionland haven’t figured it out, have you?” said Darman. “When the pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound. I mean it, Lesley. Nobody heard you.”

This is a sad reality of political discourse in the visual age, which the makers of *Kony 2012* well understood. Facts matter much less than images. The 1992 presidential campaign between Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush included an ad whose production values could have come from a zombie movie. The ad, called “Arkansas,” depicted Governor Clinton as doubling the state’s debt, doubling spending, and signing the largest tax increase in the state’s history, yet ignored the record of prosperity and job creation that the then-governor had also left behind. It featured ominous black-and-white shots of a country road in twilight, blowing grass, forked lightning, and gathering clouds, complete with a whistling that sounded like the moaning of damned souls. “Now Bill Clinton wants to do for America what he did for Arkansas,” summed up an urgent female voice, the voice of a scolding mother. Bad lighting can be used to create a sinister image around even Billy Graham, and this is the most common negative technique used in hundreds of congressional races across the nation every two years. The grammar in these ads is as plain as that in Dick and Jane primers.

These kinds of ads feature the “good guy” (your candidate) surrounded by positive images such as children and veterans, with the camera shooting the candidate from slightly below and in crisp focus, but with soft lighting to make him look powerful but compassionate. The bad guy (the opponent), meanwhile, is shot with bad production values, grainy like those from a security camera, often out of focus, and shot from either way below or way above to make him look, respectively, either sinister or weak and out of touch. Ominous music lends the further impression that the opponent is a greedy troll. And if you’re lucky, the local TV news will do a story on your opponent denouncing your outrageous and misleading ad, thereby handing lots of free coverage your way. Even a “fact check” of the ad results in a replaying of those images.

After analyzing the way negative ads get a lot more steam from free media, Kathleen Hall Jamieson at the University of Pennsylvania proposed a

different kind of "visual grammar" for covering negative television ads. She suggested framing them inside a graphic of a television set and then using a rubber stamp–like graphic to brand them as either "accurate" or "misleading." To cover the ad by playing it in the full screen runs the risk of giving it an unintended free ride, as the audience might not even listen to what the fact check has concluded.

We are slaves not to what we know, but to what we see, and this is how we elect our presidents.

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There is hardly a book on the modern presidency that does not mention one particular turning point in the way Americans perceived their choice of commander in chief: the television debates between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. These four encounters helped decide the election and have been a classic parable of image-based politics ever since.

In the first debate, held on September 26, 1960, in the studios of WBBM in Chicago, Nixon appeared tired and edgy, even a bit desperate, as he spoke into the unforgiving vacancy of the cameras. He wore a charcoal suit that bunched at the waist. The physical awkwardness of Nixon was on display, even as his actual spoken performance was on target. Kennedy came across as relaxed and confident, the picture of American hopefulness, sleek as a jaguar in a dark suit and shiny shoes. He spoke about developing the full potential of the United States, and the charisma oozed from him.

What viewers didn't know was that Kennedy had spent most of the day getting a suntan on top of a hotel roof and had taken a nap just an hour before the event. Nixon had been recovering from a hospital stay for a knee injury and had banged the injured knee on the car door on the way into the studios. His aides had applied a product called Lazy Shave to his cheeks, to blunt the image of a dark-whiskered menace, but his nerve-induced flop sweat began to melt this product as he spoke.

Nixon was arguably better briefed on the issues than his challenger—and a small and unscientific poll of radio listeners in Philadelphia showed a listener preference for Nixon—but none of that mattered to the TV-viewing audience. The polls took a turn after the debates, and Kennedy squeaked out an upset victory. Just as the secret intentions of the author can be communicated only on the contents of the page, the motives and contradictions of a political figure are both revealed and concealed in the wordless visual image he projects—the accoutrements of a simple human face.

It is part of the accepted folklore of the debates that Kennedy was the master of the image and understood that the power of television could reach into a voter's mind and transform her thinking about which candidate to choose or which political platform to support. After the election, Kennedy himself is supposed to have said, "It was TV more than anything else that turned the tide." Nixon drew the same lesson: "I spent too much time in the last campaign on substance and too little time on appearance," he said, in a candid moment. "One bad camera angle on television can have far more effect on the election outcome than a major mistake in writing a speech." Nixon used television images with alacrity in his next presidential campaign, in 1968, which was noteworthy for its scripted precision and its carefully cultivated portrayal of a "New Nixon." The author Joe McGinness wrote a precise and devastating account of the television-friendly campaign in his book *The Selling of the President*, which further elevated the mythology of the 1960 debates.

But Kennedy was hardly the first to discover the principle of the refracted human face or to manipulate it. He had tapped into a lever in the psyche more primal than mere facts, yet one that has been pulled by leaders long

before him. The bearing and aspect of a man is important in person, yet that handicap can be overcome with a disassociated image sent out widely, one that stands in for the man himself.

The first presidential candidate to use film in a campaign was William McKinley, who was facing off in 1896 against the Nebraska populist William Jennings Bryan, perhaps one of the most energetic orators the nation has ever produced. Bryan made spellbinding appeals to the decency of the common man and the rapacity of big-money interests back east, for whom McKinley had sympathy. A debate between the two of them would have ended in disaster for McKinley and the Republicans. Mark Hanna, McKinley's campaign manager, recognized the possibility of a "virtual campaign" and simply invited reporters to come interview the candidate on his front porch in Canton, Ohio. Among the guests was the founder of American Mutoscope, W.K.L. Dickson, who worked up a hokey reenactment of McKinley "receiving the news" that he had been nominated at the convention. Pure theater, but the little loop played in nickelodeons across the country and gave McKinley a stateliness that he arguably had not earned. He had become the first American presidential candidate to appear on film, and the "presidential looks" of a contender would soon become more important than his ideas.

That election and its lessons were still reverberating when a fateful meeting took place. When the political boss Harry Daugherty first spotted Warren G. Harding outside the Globe Hotel in Richwood, Ohio, he developed an instant man-crush. Here was a man, Daugherty realized, whose visual charm could win an election. The historian Mark Sullivan reimagined the moment:

> Harding was worth looking at. He was at the time about 35 years old. His head, features, shoulders and torso had a size that attracted attention ... an effect which in any male at any place would justify more than the term handsome—in later years, when he came to be known beyond his local world, the word 'Roman' was occasionally used in descriptions of him ... His suppleness, combined with his bigness of frame, and his large, wide-set rather glowing eyes, heavy black hair, and markedly bronze complexion gave him some of the handsomeness of an Indian.

Daugherty went on to mastermind Harding's campaign for the U.S. Senate and his Republican nomination for president in 1920. The image makers that surrounded Harding promoted a "front-porch campaign" very much like McKinley's, an exercise in media manipulation in which Harding supposedly campaigned for the office only from the porch of his home in Marion, Ohio. Mass-circulated images and films of the kindly and handsome small-town senator serving iced lemonade to his neighbors and jawing about current events were charming and reassuring to a public increasingly relying upon newsreels to aid their sense of who the candidates were purporting to be. Harding's easy good looks also helped him with female voters, who had just been given the right of universal suffrage. Harding would become a dismal figure as chief executive, overseeing a scandal-plagued administration and complaining privately that he'd never been up to the job. He died mysteriously in San Francisco after eating a plate of spoiled crabmeat.

He was, of course, not the first man to enter the White House based on a certain "look" the voters craved. Abraham Lincoln was born with a voice pitched higher than normal, and it worked against him in his spoken performances, but he had a striking face, the visage of a frontier Cicero, which reinforced his nonvisual persona as an honest lawyer from the countryside. His campaign for the presidency in 1860 featured photographs of him sent out to political meetings all over the nation. An aide to Lincoln thanked the photographer Mathew Brady after the election, just as Kennedy

credited television. "I am coming to believe," said the aide, "that likenesses broad cast, are excellent means of electioneering."

The reverse was also true. Brady photographed the New York City mayor William Magear Tweed and made him look equally commanding and honest. But as the scholar Kiku Adatto has pointed out, the truly revealing images of "Boss Tweed" were the merciless political cartoons being drawn by Thomas Nast in *Harper's Weekly* that depicted the mayor as the fat king of patronage and bribes. "Stop those damn pictures," Tweed is supposed to have demanded of his flunkies at City Hall. "I don't care so much what the papers write about me. My constituents can't read. But damn it, they can see pictures."

Before the era of mass-produced photography, those engraved images that Nast used to such effect were an important tool of American political communication. Images of the war hero George Washington were widely distributed throughout the new colonies in a way that made him out to be like a Roman conqueror. "Not a king in Europe but would look like a valet de chambre by his side," said the London *Morning Post*, not without a hint of sarcasm. When Gilbert Stuart was hired to come paint Washington's official portrait, he found "features in his face totally different from what I had observed in any other human being. The sockets of the eyes, for instance, were larger than what I had ever met before, and the upper part of the nose broader. All his features were indicative of the strongest passions, yet, like Socrates, his judgment and self-command made him appear of a different cast in the eyes of the world." Stuart said that if Washington had been born among a savage tribe in the wilderness, he would have become their chief by default.

What has changed in the electronic visual age is the way the studio of political imagery is open to anyone. Instead of coming from a candidate or party or a political action committee, images are emerging from the initiative of voters who are discovering the ease of use of cameras and editing software.

A tawdry episode from 2010 shows the fuzzy line between the spontaneous and the constructed. A U.S. Department of Agriculture employee named Shirley Sherrod was giving a talk at an NAACP Freedom Fund dinner when she described how she came to help a white farmer secure some assistance. She did so reluctantly, she says, explaining, "What he didn't know, while he was taking all that time trying to show me he was superior to me, was I was trying to decide just how much help I was going to give him. I was struggling with the fact that so many black people had lost their farmland. And here I was faced with having to help a white person save their land. So, I didn't give him the full force of what I could do." Later on in the speech, she explained that she had come to realize that his skin color did not matter, and that her government service was about helping all people in need. But the video was leaked to conservative blogger Andrew Breitbart, who chose not to tell the whole story, but rather manipulated the experience for viewers by posting only the first section, which, taken out of context, is damning, as Sherrod appears to be saying the white man's skin color had worked against him. Fox News commentator Bill O'Reilly broadcast the video on his program the same day Sherrod was forced to resign by nervous White House officials.

The quality of the video itself added to the content of what was actually said. Sherrod, a heavyset, middle-aged African American woman, is wearing a professional suit and rimless glasses, and is standing behind a lectern. The camera is positioned about twenty feet away from her. She sways back and forth gently as she speaks, and her bearing is confident. Her face is expressive, and she rolls her eyes as she talks about believing that the white farmer was trying to assert his superiority. She is surrounded by a small crescent of black faces, both old and young.

How the viewers perceived Sherrod had a lot to do with their preexisting bias (much like, I might add, the preexisting bias Sherrod recognized and corrected in herself, which was the very point of the talk). You could see a practical, accomplished professional woman speaking from a perspective of wise authority. Or you could see an oppressive and even aggressive representative of an overreaching government trying to exact some petty revenge for the racial injustices of the previous century. That America was in the first term of its first black president only added to the racial dimensions of this kerfuffle, which touched an old nerve in American public life.

There was another element: the video had an uncontrived look to it. The picture is a bit grainy and unprofessional, the coloring fuzzy. The lighting was "off." It looked like it had been created by an amateur, which it had. This only heightened the sense that what Sherrod was saying was a moment ripped from obscurity, a shocking admission that "people were not supposed to hear," a kind of unguarded moment taken out of its private context and displayed to the public as an exposé, posing the question in viewers' minds: *If we caught her saying this when she thought only a few people could hear her, what else is she saying when the camera is not around to catch her*?

The effect would have been quite different if the video had been professionally produced and lit, and the whole speech made immediately available to the public. Sherrod's statements would undoubtedly have seemed more acceptable—and less vulnerable to manipulation by citizen journalists such as Breitbart, who played on his readers' lack of visual literacy.

That was the whole irony of the video. To watch the full forty-three-minute speech was to see an encouraging example of a woman who had refused to allow her beliefs to be manipulated by the pressures of history or of her own first impulses. It was a sophisticated take on race, somewhat similar to President Obama's famous speech in Philadelphia that acknowledged the lack of easy answers in this question that has haunted the United States ever since the first shipload of slaves arrived at Jamestown.

The iconography of race, class, and politics is one of the most powerful tools a filmmaker can use, and this brings us to a film called *9500 Liberty*, which tells the story of an immigration law passed in Prince William County, Virginia, in 2007. Anticipating Arizona's harsh documentation law by several years, this local ordinance required police chiefs to inquire into the immigration status of anyone they stopped who showed "probable cause" for not holding a U.S. passport or other correct documents. The roots of the crisis were economic: the county had thrived in the nineties, and there were a lot of construction jobs available for unskilled laborers. Many of these laborers had come up from Mexico or other Central American nations. This annoyed and frightened a number of locals, including a blogger named Greg Letiecq, who publicly fretted about the proliferation of Spanish signs and the possible influx of gang members and drugs. His blog had previously been concerned about Islamic terrorism and was filled with images of training camps in Afghanistan. When he switched to illegal immigration as a top concern, he started creating videos for his website, using images of shadowy figures jumping fences in Arizona—stock footage that television reporters are also fond of when illustrating stories about illegal immigration. The times changed, said one observer, but the ancient question remained the same: *Who among us is one of them?*

Letiecq started a pressure group called Help Save Manassas, and persuaded the county board chairman to back the resolution cracking down on illegal workers and their families, who by that point constituted about 20 percent of the population.

Two people sat up and took notice: Eric Byler, a Chinese American from a nearby county in Virginia, and Annabel Park, a Korean American who'd

grown up in Texas. They heard of the confrontation brewing and showed up with a camera to document what was happening.

Their film, *9500 Liberty*, took its title from the address of a vacant lot where a man named Guadencio Fernandez had erected a giant sign: "Prince William Co. Stop Your Racism to Hispanics," it read. "We Do the Jobs That Nobody Else Wants to Do." Passersby added their own notes to the sign, either for or against. Eventually somebody tried to burn the sign down. It became a symbol for the nasty little "civil war," as one man termed it, that had erupted in the county over questions of lawbreaking, American identity, and overreaching government.

Byler and Park recorded footage of residents arguing with one another and shots of the defaced sign in the lot at 9500 Liberty, and realized they were in the middle of something very important. Rather than simply observe and document with their cameras until the story had completely played out (and they had a feature-length documentary), and realizing that the power and immediacy of these images lay not just in their documenting a story, they decided to influence the story while it was unfolding. They posted some of their unfinished video to YouTube. This drew wide attention to the controversy.

"We gradually came to realize that the footage we were capturing was vital to the public," Byler told me. "It was our duty as citizens to share it."

With editing and postproduction, the spontaneous images were molded into a constructed whole. A remarkable aspect of the film is the video shot inside the meetings of the county board. Government meetings are not usually regarded as arenas for high drama, but some of the film's finest moments come when members of the public were invited to approach the microphone and state their support or opposition to the law. At one point, Robert Duecaster, a cofounder of Help Save Manassas, says, "It's about an invasion of this county. This county is being invaded no less as if a horde of armed people came across it borders. This invasion is not armed, but it's got weapons. The weapons they use are its anchor babies … Mark these words, we are going to repel this invasion."

9500 Liberty is an unusual piece of political imagery that straddles the border between constructed and spontaneous. Park and Byler captured a litany of spontaneous moments that stand as expressions of the deep divide that had emerged in Prince William County. In an opening scene, an agitated man in a baseball cap and glasses comes up to a group of Latinos near the sign and berates them for not knowing English. Park herself starts to argue with the man. The camera cuts to a young girl, who appears to be eight years old, who says, almost to herself, "The Indians were here first."

You can see the dawning consciousness of herself as both native and immigrant, in the midst of one of the oldest disputes known to mankind: Who belongs here?

The scenes from the Prince William County board meetings themselves were iconic in that they captured local government at work, the building blocks of what we consider American self-government. They were full of passion and even occasionally nasty, but wholly representative of the "public meetings" of our old New England roots.

In a self-conscious piece of scene setting, the filmmakers took some opening shots of the nearby Civil War battlefield of Manassas. That battle was the first big armed confrontation of the clash between North and South, fought in July of 1861, a conflict that surprised both sides with its heavy casualties and particular viciousness, a foretaste of the nearly four-year conflict that was to follow. Like most Civil War battlefields across the mid-Atlantic region, Manassas is regarded as "hallowed ground," and its soil protected from development by the National Park Service. Byler and Park

make visual use of the silent cannons and grassy expanses in an opening establishing shot, pointing out without using words that America has fought over questions of racial identity and economic justice before. One man is interviewed in front of a ceremonial cannon near an old railroad depot that was a target of the Union Army during the battle; it happened to be right across the street from Fernandez's polarizing sign.

The filmmakers looked for ways in which they could relate their story in images as opposed to words. The camera captures a meeting of Help Save Manassas, the group pushing for the anti-immigrant legislation. All of the attendees are white, and nearly all are over fifty years old. "We didn't have to say it," said Park. "We could just pan the room."

Another pan shot that has wordless emotional effect: the parking lot of a grocery store called Giant Food, which is deserted except for a taxi driver taking a break. Weeds grow in the asphalt cracks. The shot is contrasted with an interview with the economist Stephen Fuller, who explains how the climate of fear surrounding the ordinance has drained away a good portion of Prince William County's customer base, leaving struggling retail stores and empty homes in the breach. Park and Byler also captured a pathetic image of a lone child on a bicycle riding through a landscape of For Sale signs. The message: he has lost all his friends in the economic disaster. One sign, which might describe the boy or Prince William County itself, reads HOME FOR SALE, OWNER DESPERATE!

9500 *Liberty* is a wordy, talky film—which is not surprising, as it is in essence about a community dialogue, about the power of words in a community—but the power of the film, its emotional core, is found in its images.

You don't need to be a professional filmmaker to command the language of visual expression to make change occur. Ordinary people now have tremendous power to do just that.

Here is one story out of many that could be told:

The parents of Danny Chen certainly had an insatiable thirst to make a difference. Their son enlisted as a private in the U.S. Army and was deployed to Afghanistan. On October 3, 2011, Chen was found dead, in what the military termed "an apparent self-inflicted gun wound" in his guard tower somewhere in the Kandahar province of Afghanistan. He was nineteen years old.

Chen's parents were distraught by the news of their only child's death, and felt in their bones that there was more to the story than just suicide. In letters to his family, their son had been detailing instances of abuse and humiliation around race by his peers and platoon leaders. The Chens wanted to know the truth of the circumstances surrounding their son's death. Concerned that the military would pass this off as just another suicide and not investigate further, they turned for help to the New York chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA-NY), who got Chen's story in *The New York Times* and other media outlets. But it didn't seem to move anything at the Pentagon.

Liz OuYang at OCA-NY knew that they needed to find a better way to convince people that they should care about the Chen case, and to pressure the military to do something. The family wanted to convey their loss, tell a story about their suspicions around the case, and get others to ask these questions and demand an investigation. The group understood that as important as print media could be, "visual media would have a bigger impact." Together with the Chen family, a New York University graduate named ManSee Kong decided to create a video asking, "What Happened to Danny Chen?" shot with a cheap video camera.

They shot everything in one day, and OuYang and Kong spent just a few

days more sitting in front of Kong's six-year-old Apple laptop computer editing the piece. The video begins with several people talking about what they are most looking forward to during the holidays. Each of the subjects is nicely framed—placed comfortably to the side of the screen—and speaks easily and happily. Several people into this sequence, Lily Woo, identified as the principal of P.S. 130 in Chinatown, says that she is happy that each holiday season "so many of our graduates come home to visit us." Holiday piano music has been playing softly, but the music fades and Woo says, "But Danny won't be one of them."

The film cuts to a group of Danny's friends asking, "What happened to Danny?" They are shot in a diagonal line cutting across the frame, which helps suggest that many more with them are asking the same question. The next shot adds even more intensity and weight to the piece, as we have the first directly centered shot of someone, an older Chinese American man, identified in text as Tom Lee. He is wearing a hat that identifies him as a Vietnam veteran, and he talks about being happy that he is alive, but he proclaims that Danny Chen will not be coming home and asks, "What happened to Danny?" Danny's cousin next appears, telling us that Danny died on October 3 in Afghanistan, but that "he did not die in combat." Over images of Danny's dog tags and a picture of him in uniform, we begin to hear from his friends and family about what a great young man he was—full of life and promise until "he was beaten by his superiors."

A series of recurring shots of people asking "What happened to Danny?" is capped by a shot of his clearly distressed father asking the same question, and then a cut to his cousins standing around his parents, with his mother holding all she has left of Danny: a framed picture of him. The video had tremendous emotional impact. Mainstream media covered the YouTube piece as a respectable ten thousand viewers eventually watched it, and within days the online petition grew by several thousand more signatures. The pressure ticked upward to the military, and it started to become more forthcoming with its information to the Chen family.

Less than four weeks later, the military disclosed the truth. Chen's fellow unit members had dragged him out of bed and forced him to crawl across the floor as they threw rocks at him, to punish him for forgetting to turn off the hot water heater when he went to bed before his shift. There had been a long history of racial humiliation and taunting of Private Chen during his service in the unit. Eight members of his unit, including his commanders, were charged with a variety of crimes that the investigators contend led to Chen's suicide.

The military says it would have conducted this investigation with or without public outcry or pressure from the family, and this may be the case. But there is little doubt that the family's and OCA-NY's efforts to publicize the case, and their emotional visual plea for public support in demanding an answer to the question "What happened to Danny Chen?" helped achieve this goal. Chen's is a horribly sad story, but it is a good example of how, when told with the new paint of the electronic moving image, by quite ordinary people, a story can make change happen; it can affect the world in a small but meaningful way.

Being able to meld text with images is a key skill and part of the new way we define literacy. But being a literate communicator does not mean having to invent a whole new language for yourself. It means mastering a language that already exists.