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Rhetorical Problems and Cinematic Solutions: The Visual Arguments of the 'Obama Infomercial'

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RHETORICAL PROBLEMS AND CINEMATIC SOLUTIONS:
THE VISUAL ARGUMENTS OF THE
“OBAMA INFOMERCIAL”

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Professional Communication

By
Bryan Ricke
August 2010

Accepted by:
Dr. Susan Hilligoss, Committee Chair
Dr. Tharon Howard
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Abstract

Most Americans remember the outcome of the presidential election on November 2nd, 2008, and the intense media coverage of the entire campaign. Just three nights before Election Day, the Barack Obama campaign purchased primetime air slots on seven major broadcast and cable stations across the country to air a 30-minute “infomercial” entitled *American Stories: American Solutions*. This thesis looks at this television program with a specific focus not on the verbal message of *American Stories: American Solutions*, but on how this message is framed through cinematography. The thesis first explores research in the fields of rhetoric, film, politics, and race, then using the method of compositional interpretation, outlines what visual arguments are presented through cinematography. Using a formalist approach, Chapter 3 describes how camera movements, framing, and other technical aspects of cinematography organize the rhetorical object of the film in order to make it more persuasive. Chapter 4 emphasizes the rhetorical and ideological aspects of this analysis in addressing how cinematography makes a visual argument in the form of a refutative enthymeme regarding Obama’s race.

Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER ONE

A Defining Moment for Visual Rhetoric

In recent memory, there are perhaps no political moments that were more influential or memorable than the election of Barack Obama. Whether or not one agrees with his policies, the campaign season followed by his successful election as the first African-American president of the United States must be seen as a historically significant moment. Communication, in its multitude of forms, played an obvious role throughout the campaign process. Those who followed the election were able to witness the rhetorical power of televised speeches, campaign press releases, campaign logos, and not the least of these forms, campaign television commercials. According to *USA Today*, more money was spent on commercials in the 2008 presidential campaigns than in any other American election in history. “The Ad Wars,” an article from *The New York Times* gives more detailed information about the campaign’s media budget: “Over \$450 million was spent from April 3 to Nov. 5, 2008 to broadcast over 380 television ads.” Out of all of these commercials by all of the candidates, the one seen by the largest number of Americans at one time was Obama’s unprecedented half-hour commercial that was aired on multiple stations on October 30th, 2008 (Nielson). The “Obama Infomercial,” as it was dubbed by the media leading up to the broadcast, was viewed by 21.7% of all U.S. households only three days before the election (Nielson). Although it is doubtful that the “Obama Infomercial” is single-handedly responsible for Barack Obama’s success, it was viewed by a large percentage of Americans at a critical moment in many voters’ decision-

making process. It was viewed positively by much of the media, including reporters from CNN and *The New York Times*. The Obama campaign had faith in the persuasiveness of the infomercial as demonstrated when it “decided to plunk down between \$3 and \$5 million to buy half-hour blocks of time at 8 p.m. tonight on NBC, CBS, FOX, Univision, BET, MSNBC and TV-One for delivery of his final argument to the voters” (Cummings). No organization would have spent so much money if it did not expect to get a meaningful return on its investment. Nor would any well-run campaign spend so much money on airtime without first making sure that the program was expertly produced and that its message was influential to voters.

The infomercial, officially titled *American Stories: American Solutions* was able to portray this message through a compelling mix of different voices and stories. The film includes four separate diaries of ordinary American families, along with Obama’s careful explanations of his proposed policies, speeches from his campaign, as well as some personal biographical segments about the presidential candidate. By packaging all of this information into a single video, the campaign took advantage of several beneficial aspects of the format: Video is easily accessible to a large number of people, it allows the message to be seen and heard, it allows a greater sense of reality for the audience (Persson), and it allows a seamless integration of “real-life” problems and proposed solutions. By using the format of video, the campaign was able to include vocal messages, visuals, and music into one carefully planned package. No other medium would allow the campaign so much control over the sensory perceptions of so many American voters. Even an interactive medium on the Internet would not allow the

campaign to reach nearly as many citizens or allow the campaign to control the message so completely.

This package, although shot primarily on video and intended for television broadcast, resembles a documentary film more than a serial television program; and it certainly has little in common with the average infomercial in content, scope, or presentation. Because of these similarities to film and because I will include a heavy focus on film theory, I will be referring to the program as a “film” for the remainder of this thesis. Of course, it is not technically a film, but neither is much of contemporary cinema, and I do believe it has more in common with other examples of the medium and deserves this connotation as a serious rhetorical artifact.

But how exactly does the program *American Stories: American Solutions* achieve a strong rhetorical message? What specific elements of the format helped the campaign persuade its audience? The specific rhetorical elements of a film can be difficult to pin down, but generally discussions of film and television include the verbal message of the film, physical objects presented in front of the camera (*mise en scène*), cinematography, lighting, editing, texts and graphics, sound effects, and music. There are many subsets to each of these categories, and in many places a single aspect of filmmaking could be included in multiple categories. Much to my frustration and amusement, almost every list that I encountered of this sort in my research ended with “etc.” or “and so on.” That is to say that no list attempted to be comprehensive. However, there is a good reason for this: film is an enormously complex medium, which arguably includes every persuasive element of literature, painting, music, and dance, as well as the relationships therein. The

persuasive tools available to filmmakers are more numerous than in most other mediums (interactive websites or computer programs may have more) and very highly interconnected, which makes them difficult to analyze and discuss with as much detail or precision. Likewise, it would be impossible to analyze each of these elements with as much attention as they deserve in a paper of this scope. For these reasons, I have focused my attention to a single category of the filmmaking process: cinematography.

“Cinematography” itself is a loose term that includes everything from blocking (the positioning of actors), to technical decisions about equipment, to camera angles, to lighting. My reason for choosing cinematography as the focus of this research over another particular category, say verbal message, is that the amount of study devoted to the interactions between rhetoric and cinematography are disproportionate to its important place in crafting and organizing a potent rhetorical text.

I use the term “text” here to describe the film, and before continuing my line of argument, I would like to explain how the film can be considered a “rhetorical text.” Foremost, in the field of film studies and in rhetorical theory, there is a long tradition of referring to films or other visual rhetorical objects as “texts” whether or not they are primarily textually based. A recent example of this can be found in a 2009 edition of *Film Quarterly*, wherein Paul Thomas uses the term to discuss a film:

In this way, the fact that *The Manchurian Candidate*'s “articulations of anticommunism and anti-anticommunism are inseparably conjoined . . . speaks eloquently to the convoluted, contradictory textures of Cold War culture,” just as Jacobson and González say; the film “is a text not simply

on the Cold War but *of* it, participating subtly but deeply in the fortification of precisely the political edifice it would seem at first to demolish” (91).

More importantly, however, the term “text” allows an analysis of a visual rhetorical object to be placed among a history and tradition of analyses of many types of rhetorical “texts.” Visual analysts can use this background to help inform their methods. Although this informing also necessarily limits the possibilities of analysis, this is true of any field.

I am not attempting to argue that all forms of media are the same, but that the analysis of film should be informed by both the analyses of visual works, such as painting, dance, or sculpture, and of traditional textual works. As a work with a forced sequence, which must be “read” in a prescribed order, film is indeed closely related to literal “texts” and therefore it is not inappropriate to refer to it as a “text.” In this way, “text” can be used to define a linear rhetorical object, rather than define a rhetorical object which is primarily formed through words. Especially for this analysis of cinematography in *American Stories: American Solutions*, I will be paying little attention to verbal message.

In fact, cinematography has a distinct advantage over verbal message as it can be used as a more subtle form of persuasion. Arguments can be implied through cinematography without having to be bluntly stated in words. As we will see later on in the paper, this particular film does, and indeed must, make a subtle argument about race that cannot be stated in words.

Although the verbal message of a film or television program may be more important according to many theorists, cinematography is itself a powerful element. Cinematography works in tandem with all other aspects of filmmaking, and is traditionally seen to play a supporting role to the verbal message. In *Explorations in Film Theory*, Ron Burnett discusses the importance of the verbal message and how it is enhanced and shaped through cinematography. He argues that a traditional documentary “...structures reality through language and images are made to illustrate the conceptual reality defined by the voice, so that the viewer experiences not so much a visual truth (the filmic document) as a verbal and conceptual one.” (108)

So how does the cinematography in *American Stories: American Solutions* “illustrate the conceptual reality defined by the voice?” Most apparently, it does so by displaying illustrations and situations that the speaker (usually Obama) concurrently addresses in the film. Also it does so by displaying the presidential product of Barack Obama as a well-dressed, fit, and eloquent speaker. The cinematography, however, does more than merely play a supporting role. It also functions in two other ways. First, it organizes the rhetorical text of the documentary into the current problems facing the American public and the proposed solutions offered to us by the Obama campaign. There is a clear style – and more importantly – a stylistic difference between these sections that is consistently displayed during the entire half-hour runtime of the film.

Second, the cinematography overcomes a key constraint that the Obama campaign faces in its goal of a successful election: Obama’s race. The film never verbally addresses Obama’s race, although it is obviously a potent issue in the back (or forefront)

of many American voters' minds. One may argue (perhaps rightfully so) that Obama's race has nothing to do with a successful presidency and thus that his race should have nothing to do with a successful presidential campaign. However, race was clearly a "problem" for many American voters, and a game-changing fact for the entire American public. The election of America's first black president acted as both an opportunity and an encumbrance for the Obama campaign. It was a fact that the campaign had to address in a wide variety of situations, to a wide variety of audiences. It was a fact that could not be carelessly ignored, albeit one that many voters, politicians, and media pundits may not have felt comfortable talking about. Cinematography, as one of the many weapons available in the filmic arsenal, helps address Obama's race, and does so effectively. In fact, cinematography is one of the only possible ways in which the film can effectively address race without letting the issue take over the rest of the film's presence.

Cinematography also has the great advantage of being able to do so with subtlety: and the very fact of its vague argumentation allows it to speak differently to different audiences. For example, if we can imagine a moderate viewer who may have some unspoken, but potent, reservations about electing a black man as president, the film can address Obama's race by displaying an extremely competent and eloquent black man without using cliché verbal discussions about the challenges and obstacles of living as a black man in the United States. As one aspect of this, the film's cinematography also displays the presidential product as a healthy individual who is active and wholly fit to run the country. This is not an entirely separate issue from race. The issue of health, if we can think back to October of 2008, is especially important as the campaign now has only two

major candidates. Obama's only serious opponent is John McCain, one of the oldest presidential candidates in history. Although McCain seems to be in good health for his age and managed to keep up with a fairly stressful campaign schedule, he is still old when compared to Obama. This was a serious concern to many voters, especially given the exciting, but divisive vice presidential candidate of Sarah Palin, who would "be a heartbeat away from the Presidency." Like race, the film does not address Obama's level of health and fitness directly. That is to say that neither Obama, nor his supporters in the film brag about how much the candidate can bench-press, or how he has a clean bill of health. This sort of verbal argument would sound ludicrous in the final version of the film, but nonetheless, Obama's good health is a point that the campaign wishes to get across. Instead, as with Obama's race, the issue of his health is addressed subtly, but effectively through images of the candidate touring factories, shaking hands, playing with his daughters, and perhaps most importantly in the way that he carries his own body during campaign speeches and during the segments of the film in which he lays out his solutions.

Obviously, these are not the only arguments that the film puts forth. On a surface level the film does address several concrete issues. Problems with the economy, education, healthcare, and the military dominate the verbal discourse of the film. *American Stories: American Solutions* is set up in a problem/solution format, in which the "American Stories" show problems facing real life Americans in their homes, schools, and places of work, and the "American Solutions" are outlined in Obama's expositions in his office. There is a great deal of verbal persuasion taking place here, in

which the cinematography also plays a role – a subservient role to the verbal message as I mentioned earlier. When Obama discusses his plans for fixing the economy, the audience is meant to think back to the previous “stories” and remember the families portrayed. Cinematography, along with the other multitude aspects of filmmaking plays a role in displaying this family. In the first story, a close up shot exemplifies cheap, disposable dishware at a family feast (*AS:AS* 13:10).¹ Later on in the same story, a close up shot with a shallower depth of field forces the audience to concentrate on the sharply-focused furrowed brow of a concerned mother (*AS:AS* 14:22). However, when cinematography really gets to step out from the rest crowd of filmic techniques is when it is used to show issues that cannot be said. I plan to explore these issues through a method of visual analysis, as well as an extensive literature review. I will structure this discussion with theories from the fields of rhetoric, film studies, as well as racial and political representations in film and television.

¹ Each citation of specific shots or segments of *American Stories: American Solutions* will appear in this format. The reference source used is from the Obama campaign’s YouTube channel: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtREqAmLsoA>

CHAPTER TWO

A Review of Relevant Literature and Methodology

Is it even possible for cinematography to perform rhetorically as an organizational tool or for cinematography to make an argument? If so, how? In this chapter, I will answer those questions through a review of relevant literature from rhetorical theory, argumentation theory, film theory, and theory of race and otherness, leading to the method for my analysis of *American Stories*, *American Solutions*. When discussing how cinematography may or may not make certain arguments in any film, we must first decide if cinematography can indeed be rhetorical in nature. There is a great deal of academic research as well as a breadth of discourse on both the fields of rhetoric and film studies, but surprisingly few theorists have tied the two together. This is especially surprising and unfortunate because rhetorical theory has a great deal to offer film in terms of how verbal and visual arguments can be made. Rhetorical theory can inform almost every aspect of a film, from the script, to the cinematography, music, and sound effects. Cinema also has a great deal to offer the field of rhetoric; rhetoricians can use films as incredibly complex illustrations of rhetoric. A relatively recent focus of rhetoric is this turn towards the visual. Although traditional rhetorical theory deals with oratory or the written word, an increasing amount of attention, study, and discourse have been taking place around visual rhetoric. However, some theorists disagree as whether visuals can even make rhetorical arguments, a question that must first be answered before this discussion can advance.

A Question of Visual Argument

In *Toward a Theory of Visual Argument*, David Birdsell discusses the current state of visual rhetoric in academia:

A decision to take the visual seriously has important implications for every strand of argumentation theory, for they all emphasize a verbal paradigm which sees arguments as collections of words. Most scholars who study argumentation theory are, therefore, preoccupied with methods of analyzing arguments which emphasize verbal elements and show little or no recognition of other possibilities, or even the relationship between words and other symbolic forms. (2)

In *Meaning of Composition*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen discuss visual argumentation by demonstrating the large effect layout and composition have on the way that material is read and messages are received. They discuss several conventions of page and screen layout. Although their focus is on print and web design, these conventions also hold true in video. They also introduce the concept of *saliency*, defined as “the degree to which an element draws attention to itself, due to its site, its place in the foreground or its overlapping of other elements, its colour, its tonal values, its sharpness or definition, and other features” (225). The authors discuss how saliency can create a hierarchy among visuals and information which denotes some different aspects or sections of a visual text “as more important, more worthy of attention than others” (216). In this way, saliency can help organize a visual text and emphasize aspects of the message. Another main point of this section is the concept of framing, which

connects/disconnects objects, ideas, or people. Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that “In film and video a similar effect can be created by the choice between showing two or more actors together in one shot, or editing between individual shots of the actors in which each is isolated from the others by frame lines” (218). These are just a few examples given by Kress and Van Leeuwen that illustrate how visuals are rhetorical.

David Birdsell also refutes the common argument that visuals cannot be considered rhetorical because they have more imprecise meanings than verbal arguments:

Visual images can, of course, be vague and ambiguous. But this alone does not distinguish them from words and sentences, which can also be vague and ambiguous. The inherent indeterminacy of language is one of the principal problems that confront us when we try to understand natural language argument. This is why historians endlessly debate the interpretation of historical documents, law courts struggle continuously with the implications of written and spoken claims, and personal animosities revolve around who said what and what was meant. (4)

From Kress and VanLeeuwen and Birdsell, we can see that visuals can persuade and that there is a form of a visual rhetoric. Although it does not work in the same ways and through the same constructs as verbal rhetoric, rhetorical theory can inform and explain visuals and visual persuasion.

However, *rhetoric* is different from *argument*. In *The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments*, Anthony Blair contends that just because something is persuasive doesn't make it an argument. Arguments need strong evidence and explicit reasons, so

much so that the persuasion ceases to be a choice for the audience—they are compelled to agree with the rhetor. Blair contends that yes, visuals can be powerful, but their meaning can also easily be lost. He argues that a visual argument must have a linguistically explicable claim and overtly expressed reasons, which are communicated to an intended audience who are capable of being swayed. I agree that rhetorical images should have explicable claims - it should be possible to explain them through words - but disagree that these must be grounded in traditional forms of rhetoric in order to be considered arguments. Blair says that visuals are impactful, but vague.

In *Semiotics and the Analysis of Film*, Jean Mitry wholly disagrees with Blair. He argues that we do not think purely in words and that if visuals affect our thoughts, they can convince us to take a certain action:

There is no need for me to formulate in my mind an explicit phrase or, though thinking is a mental activity, it is not a linguistic action in the strict sense of the word, as would be the case with “interior monologue.” Of course thinking requires a semiotic support but, this substratum does not necessarily have a linguistic characteristic” (249).

This is to say that in our everyday lives, thinking does not require words and decisions do not require words. Neither do our interactions with visual texts. Just as arguments can exist verbally, they can do so visually, both in conjunction with verbal or written arguments or on their own.

Cinematographic Additions to Visual Rhetoric

However, there may be more to a cinematic rhetoric than what is addressed by these rhetorical theorists. Anders Fagerjord discusses the importance of motion in visual rhetoric and argues that different modes of a visual text in motion interact in complex ways. In *Multimodal Polyphony: Analysis of a Flash Documentary*, Fagerjord discusses how different modes of a visual text form different voices that communicate individually, as well as through homophony, dissonance, polyphony, and accompaniment. These modes include the different aspects of a still image as well as the speeds and directions in which they move. Obviously these concepts relate to film production as many different elements each add their own voice to the overall message of a filmic text.

In *Camera Movement and Cinematic Space*, David Bordwell also tackles the rhetorical effects of specific cinematographic techniques. He argues that through character and camera motion, especially through the use of tracking shots, a filmic space seems more genuine to an audience. “Subject movement gives us a sufficient amount of information to define a particular spatial layout. A moving vantage point supplies a dense stream about object’s slants, their edges, their corners, their surfaces, their relations with other objects” (233). Showing more of the space, and allowing the viewer to infer special relationships of a particular place “through time [and] camera movement, can reinforce, modify, or shift expectations and hypotheses about the sceneographic space” (234). Clearly, there is at least some persuasion that occurs in the visuals of a filmic rhetoric.

With its composite verbal, visual, and musical campaign message, *American Stories: American Solutions* is indeed a rhetorical argument, but how does the

cinematography itself make an argument? Is this visual argument dependent on the verbal, the aural, or the argument of the film's *mise en scène*? To answer these questions, we will turn to contemporary rhetorical theory.

How is American Stories: American Solutions Rhetorical?

To explain how *American Stories: American Solutions* is a rhetorical text that responds to a specific rhetorical situation, I will use terms from Bitzer's *The Rhetorical Situation*. Bitzer's definition of the rhetorical situation is the "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence" (6). It requires an outside need for action, an audience that is open to influence and is able to act on change, and a set of environmental constraints that force action to go in a limited set of directions; Bitzer calls these three concepts *exigence*, *audience*, and *constraints*. The first constituent, *exigence*, must be modifiable, but must also need the support of the rhetor's audience to become modifiable. *American Stories: American Solutions* is a response to the exigence of the Bush presidency. In the eyes of many Americans this is the problem that can be removed through the action of a national election that concludes with a Democratic candidate in office. Although Obama was not running against Bush, his campaign constructed much of its discourse around the idea that the election of John McCain as the candidate from the incumbent party would be the election of four more years of the same policies, whereas Obama was the candidate of "change."

The second constituent of Bitzer's rhetorical situation is the *audience*, which is defined as persons capable of being influenced and being mediators of change. The audience of the film is the entire United States populace, more specifically, registered voters who may possibly be willing to cast their vote for Obama. Only these individuals are capable of action that would result in the removal of the original exigence of the situation. Bitzer further divides audience into two types. Audiences can either be *scientific*, influenced by logos, or *poetic*, influenced by pathos. For the most part, the American electorate is a poetic audience, and the film capitalizes on this by stirring the emotions of the viewer through music and other filmic conventions.

The third and last constituent of Bitzer's rhetorical situation is the set of *constraints*. This is the set of "beliefs, attitudes, documents, facts, traditions, images, and motives" that force action to go in a limited number of directions. This means that the rhetorical situation consists of only the environment that can be altered by the rhetor and their impact on *open* and *actionable* people. The set of constraints in the rhetorical situation of *American Stories: American Solutions* consists of many different limiting factors to Obama's successful election. Most of these constraints are directly addressed in the video, whereas race is only indirectly addressed. As the video has a clearly defined exigence, audience, and set of constraints, we can conclude that it is indeed a rhetorical text: it responds to a rhetorical situation and does so quite successfully.

Bitzer introduces a need to focus on the exigence and the situation surrounding the discourse. He argues that the typical focus of rhetoric is on the orator's method or the discourse itself rather than "the situation which invites the orator's application of his

method and the creation of discourse” (2). With this in mind, we can see that the situation around the film is perhaps more important than its surface level arguments. The exigence and constraints form the film’s arguments on any level.

What Kind of Rhetoric is it?

Now that we have established that the film is rhetorical, we can look at what kind of rhetorical object it is. In *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civil Discourse*, Aristotle more clearly defines *rhetoric* by separating it from *dialectic*. He uses these terms to show the difference between the two forms of persuasion. Dialectic is defined by a question and answer format, where the speaker interacts with the audience to prove his argument through questions that seek specific and predicable answers from the audience. Dialectic uses syllogism, a rhetorical method that first takes a given truth - one that the audience already agrees with - and expands on this to prove a new maxim.

Rhetoric, however, is persuasive through “continuous exposition.” Rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle, is “the ability to see the available means of persuasion in any given situation” (1356). Rhetoric uses the concept of *enthymeme*, which first uses an accepted concept, proves a second seemingly related idea, and then invites the audience to connect the two. Syllogism is to dialectic as enthymeme is to rhetoric. This audience-driven connection is what makes an enthymeme so persuasive, the conclusion of which results in a new maxim for the audience. Aristotle argues that all speakers necessarily employ syllogisms and enthymemes in their persuasion.

Another difference between dialectic and rhetoric is that rhetoric not only includes logical paths down which the speaker leads the audience, but also includes the art of how the speech is presented: the building of the speaker's character and the manipulation of the audience's emotions. However, Aristotle does include a warning against using pathos-heavy persuasion when he states "It is wrong to wrap the jury by leading them into anger or envy or pity; that is the same as if someone made a straightedge rule crooked before using it" (30). Aristotle states that rhetoric can either be atechnic or entechnic, a distinction between what exists in the outside world, and what the rhetor invents through the use of persuasive techniques, personal style, and the presentation of truth. Rhetors must use atechnic facts and opinions held about the specific situation and invent entechnic ways of presenting their case.

With these definitions in mind, we can place the film in the category of rhetoric rather than dialectic, although dialectic is certainly less commonly used today. *American Stories: American Solutions* does indeed use enthymemes; it sets up a major premise through the use of the four stories, offers solutions through Obama's explanations, and invites the audience to produce the idea that if they elect Obama, he will use his expertise and careful planning to solve each of these problems. There are other enthymemes used less explicitly in the film as well, regarding race, which I will address a little later. The film also fits into the category of rhetoric rather than dialectic under Aristotle's further explanation since it is not based solely on logical appeals. Entechnic appeals to emotion during the four "stories" as well as in the parts of the film detailing Obama's personal life add a great deal to the persuasive power of the text.

Aristotle further divides and describes rhetoric as either *deliberative*, *forensic*, or *epideictic*. Deliberative rhetoric is an attempt by the rhetor to convince the audience of what is going to or what should happen in the future. Forensic rhetoric is an attempt by the rhetor to rewrite or confirm the audience's views on what has already happened. Finally, epideictic rhetoric focuses on the present and attempts to place praise or blame on certain individuals, groups, or events. "In epideictic the present is the most important; for all speakers praise or blame in regard to existing qualities, but they often also make use of other things, both reminding [the audience] of the past and projecting the course of the future" (48). Specific sections of *American Stories: American Solutions* could be viewed as epideictic as they identify problems for the audience and place blame squarely on the shoulders of the current president and subsequently on the shoulders of the incumbent political party. However, the film as a whole is predominately deliberative. The entire purpose of the film is to encourage the audience to action – to go out and vote for Obama. At the time of the original rhetorical situation, the moment where the audience interacts with the text, this intended action is to occur in the near future. The film is an attempt to shape the audience's view of what should happen in the future; what the audience is capable of causing.

Aristotle contends that enthymemes are either *demonstrative* or *refutative*. Demonstrative enthymemes use preexisting "known" ideas that are commonly held by the audience and expand on these using logical paths to form a conclusion. Refutative enthymemes work in the same direction, but use the audience's beliefs to "prove" conclusions that would not be agreeable to them or would not coincide with their original

orientations. Therefore, refutative enthymemes present more of a challenge to the rhetor. *American Stories: American Solutions* uses several enthymemes in the way that the campaign sets up various problems, constraints, and then offers solutions to these problems. In terms of the individual solutions offered by the presidential candidate, Obama sets up the given of each of the problems, then offers solutions. This is a demonstrative type of enthymeme. In this case, the major premise is that America has a set of serious problems, namely that the economy is doing poorly. This major premise is of course already known outside of the film, but is supported through the illustration of the four American stories. The minor premise is that Obama will be able to conquer these issues. This is illustrated through the policy explanation in his office. The audience completes the enthymeme by tying the two together and voting for Obama. A refutative enthymeme also exists in the film's implicit presentation of Obama's race.

Statements that imply causes, but don't explicitly state them in an enthymeme format, are defined as *enthymatic*, but are not considered true enthymemes. Visual enthymemes may be considered to fit into this category, as they usually are not as clearly organized or defined due to their visual nature. For example, the *element*, or major premise of a visual enthymeme is not as clearly linked to its outcome as it is in Aristotle's clear example of an enthymeme:

It is never right for a man who is shrewd
To have his children taught to be too wise:
For apart from the other idleness they have;
They incur hostile jealousy from fellow-citizens. (182)

A visual enthymeme can only imply certain cause-effect relationships. For example in *American Stories: American Solutions*, many of the “stories” show illustrations of families struggling with money through their humble surroundings – the implied cause of which are the economic policies of the previous president and the incumbent party. All of this is said without being verbally expressed, but is abundantly clear throughout the film. This cause-effect argument is less explicit than it would be in a verbal or textual message, but it is certainly not less powerful.

How Does the Film Function at the Site of Its Audiencing?

So we can now see that *American Stories: American Solutions* does include deliberative visual arguments that may either be demonstrative or refutative, depending on the audience. Using Bitzer’s concepts from *The Rhetorical Situation*, we can describe the exigence, audience, and constraints facing Obama, which the campaign addresses through the film. As stated previously, the film’s audience consists of only the individuals who are capable of action that would result in the removal of the original exigence of the situation. However, this seems to be a rather simplistic definition. With such a large audience, how would different groups and individuals interact with the rhetorical text of the film? To answer this question we can turn Kenneth Burke and Michel Foucault.

In *Terministic Screens*, Burke argues that terms inherently include and exclude by their very nature. For example, a Burkean view of the word “hope” which was extensively used by the Obama campaign, would state that this term not only invites

Democrats and independents and excludes Republicans, but that different individuals must view “hope” in opposition to either “despair,” “reason,” “action,” or perhaps “logic.” Audiences develop these orientations depending on their past experiences and beliefs. In this way language both combines and divides ideas and ideologies. “All terminologies must implicitly embody choices between the principle of continuity and the principle of discontinuity” (1344).

Burke argues: “Even if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, its very nature as a terminology must be a *selection* of reality, and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (1341). Burke continues to state that each individual’s response to any situation and their interaction with rhetorical texts is unique to that person’s knowledge, beliefs, and experiences. Individuals create their own subjective terministic screens based upon the “particular combination of insights associated with his peculiar combination of experiences” (1346).

Burke also directly addresses terministic screens in national elections as a time when great stress is put on a division between the citizens. Discontinuity can be unified when “warring factions join in a common cause against an alien enemy” (1344).

American Stories: American Solutions certainly attempts to unify warring factions to join against a failing economy and a failing healthcare system. Obama purposefully does not try to compare himself or attack his opponent, as he does not mention McCain’s name even once in the film. This is an interesting fact when seen through Barton and Barton’s “Ideology and the Map,” which argues that a mapmaker’s ideology determines what is given preference on a map. As *American Stories: American Solutions* is similarly meant

to be a condensed representation of reality, it is interesting to note what the campaign has decided to include and exclude. From their take on the situation, only American problems, Obama's solutions, and his supporting cast of characters are worthy of representation.

Similar to the idea of terministic screens, Burke's discusses the notion of "orientations" in his book *Permanence and Change*. Orientations are the way that people interpret the signs around them. Orientations are "a bundle of judgments as to how things were, how they are, and how they may be" (14). He also describes how one builds these orientations through *piety*. This is not piety as known in the religious sense, but instead is defined by Burke as "the sense of what properly goes with what" (74). These orientations need to be evaluated by any acting rhetor, because in order to communicate and persuade an audience it is necessary that "the matter discussed bears in some notable respect upon the interests of the auditor" (37). This interest must be developed or must already exist in an audience because as Burke states "the mere fact that something is to a man's interest in no guaranty that he will be interested in it" (38). The development of this interest is the purpose behind displaying the problems of the American stories in the film.

In "The Discourse on Language," Michel Foucault also agrees that our experiences fully shape how we see the world; thus, our realities are socially constructed. He argues that things and events turn themselves into discourses. He goes on to state that theory places too much emphasis on the text and the author and that instead we need to "abolish the sovereignty of the signifier" (229). To do this, Foucault recognizes four "principles" of reversal, discontinuity, specificity, and exteriority. Enacting the principal

of reversal entails questioning our emphasis on what texts “say” rather than what they leave out. The principle of discontinuity states that we have a natural tendency to see things as connected and puts unrelated discourses into relationships. Foucault argues that we need to consciously try to avoid doing so. Similarly, Foucault also argues for the principle of specificity: “a particular discourse cannot be resolved by a prior system of significations; that we should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face, leaving us merely to decipher it” (229). Lastly, in the principle of exteriority, Foucault argues that theorists need to look for “external conditions of existence” (229).

Foucault concerns himself with the suppression and control of voices and ideologies and in “The Discourse on Language” makes the argument “I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organized and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality” (216). This is most certainly true in the organizational, simplifying procedures of writing, shooting, and editing a film. *American Stories: American Solutions* seems to have the express purpose of giving the audience a feeling of understanding and an sense of control over an over-simplified representation of American problems.

In “The Discourse on Language,” Foucault claims that discourse is seen as a risk and that three constraints of discourse are in place to control its growth: external constraints, internal constraints, and conditions of disciplines. Exclusion can exist through explicit prohibition or through qualifying other’s statements as either true or false, reasonable or mad. Internal constraints include commentaries of what the text may

actually mean and changes to the text through its surrounding discourse. Last, conditions of a certain field may change the appropriateness or the meaning of a text. According to different disciplines a text may or may not be considered to be “in the true” (223). Certainly Democrats and Republicans automatically see *American Stories: American Solutions* as more or less “true” and a differing level and type of persuasion would be needed for each discipline. This stresses the importance of the rhetor knowing their particular audiences and the specific context in which the rhetorical text will interact with its viewers. Likewise, cinematographers and editors, as well as experienced audiences already have a preconceived notion of what filmic conventions they should uphold or expect to see.

As Bitzer addresses earlier, audiences can either be scientific or poetic and usually contain elements of both. Richard Weaver claims that likewise, effective rhetoric needs to appeal to both. Rhetorical arguments need to have elements of humanism, which includes both rationality and emotion. He argues that “man is not a logic machine” (205) and that knowing both the actual context of a rhetorical text and a focus on emotion are essential to persuasion. He also discusses how making a proposed or hypothetical situation seem more real helps persuade both an audience of the importance of the topic being discussed and of the validity of the proposed course of action. He introduces the terms of *energía*, which is the “liveliness or animation of a scene” and *enargía*, the “vividness of a scene” (217). Both of these terms can inform both the production and the reading of a film – especially one where its verisimilitude is essential.

Display of a Presidential Product

So how are the stated and unstated arguments of the film portrayed to these different audiences? How is the presidential product put on display? I will now give a little bit more background on how the presidency is often portrayed in both campaigns and in cinema. Along with a review of rhetorical theory, the importance of political representations in cinema, television, and news coverage must not be ignored. American political advertising has a long history and has undergone a constant evolution, reflective of the political landscape. Leading the way for other political campaigns, presidential campaigns have the manpower, monetary resources and the national attention to carry out large-scale advertising, and the ability to constantly look for the next way to reach potential voters.

In *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, Morley contends that television can create a national identity by allowing people a “space of identification” and does so more deeply than cinema because television can be experienced ‘live’ (267). Morley quotes K. Nordenstrong, a Finnish cultural researcher, to support his argument: “The fact of watching and engaging in a joint ritual with millions of other viewers can be argued to be at least as important as any informational content gained from the broadcast” (quoted in Morley 268). In *Television and the Public Sphere*, Peter Dahlgren also argues that this experience and television’s power to shape culture cannot be overestimated. “Television functions as a purveyor of shared frames of reference; it serves as producer/reproducer of implicit sociocultural common sense” (40). He goes on to argue that television shapes politics, or at the very least, our views of politics so much that our government does not

actually exist in the way that generally think. “The official political system exists as a televisual phenomenon” (45) which is fully created by producers, news anchors, reporters, and photographers. “The interaction between journalists and power holders, the ensemble of news values, the framing of events, the accepted modes of discourse, the style of interviews, and so on, all express an integration of television and political culture” (45). Dahlgren argues that television as a text uses natural (dress, speech), technical (cinematography), and ideological codes to create its experience. “This verisimilitude is achieved through a combination of specific codes which we associate with the depiction of reality. Thus, news and documentary programs, for example, use particular types of camera work, editing, sound, and so on in their portrayals of reality” (35). In this way, television has programmed us to see through some, although certainly not all, of the same terministic screens. As Dahlgren states, “we see *with* these techniques, without actually seeing the techniques themselves” (35).

As a part of this, American audiences have been trained to see through a standardized, Eurocentric lens. Teun Dijk argues that audiences have: few or no alternative sources for “ethnic” news, and few readers have the resources to resist this consensual, dominant framework. It is precisely in this way that the press and the media generally both define and legitimate the ethnic consensus and its underlying ideologies, and thus play a central role in the reproduction of racism” (261). This is not an overt racism, and at least partially is a visual racism, which is somewhat refuted visually in *American Stories: American Solutions*, as Obama is seen as the calm, respectable, and trustworthy “anchorman.”

Just as media forms racial opinions and political ideologies, it also shapes how we see the presidency. In “The Transforming Presidency,” Myron Levine argues that Hollywood ideals and representations and views of the U.S. executive branch have shaped political television and the presidency itself. He asserts that cinema recognized the importance of visual image and imagery before real politicians started to give a lot of attention to their image. (64) Ian Scott criticizes this “spectacle of image over content” and argues that:

American elections have thus not simply become ... style over substance, but the transformation of symbolic language and rhetorical excess from a mythologized fantasy existence into a mythologized reality at the heart of modern media politics in America. (95)

Cinema has changed the way politicians and their policies interact with the citizenry.

Television also took Hollywood’s cue on how to present American politics. “American elections have become a commodification of democracy, but the packaging of policy and opinion performed through the media has cinematic presentation as one of its sources” (65). Campaign advertising itself has especially taken Hollywood representation to heart. Levine quotes Phillip Davis to support this claim: “Campaign advertising has continued to look towards cinema and television for technique and inspiration” (68). Cinematic representations are certainly apparent in *American Stories: American Solutions* in the stylized lighting, smooth camera motions, and shallow depth of field in some of the documentary’s segments.

Likewise, Obama himself must look presidential. John Shelton Lawrence describes exactly what this Hollywood-inspired look is in his chapter “The 100 Million Dollar Men” in *Hollywood’s White House*, wherein he argues that the president is now seen as a stronger character than in the past. He discusses the use of the presidential character in such top grossing films of the 1990s as *Independence Day*, and *Air Force One*. These presidents are strong, active, white men. Obama is only missing one element of the equation.

In *American Politics in Hollywood Film*, Ian Scott discusses how Hollywood has connected Washington to the average American citizen through representations in popular cinema. “The thoughts and feelings, scenes and rhetoric create symbolic imprints and allow American politics to be considered relative and relevant to its citizenry, even though its processes and are often far more complex and abstract” (6). These representations have changed a great deal throughout American cinema history, but Hollywood films have always shown the importance of politicians and of the American voter. Although shown as an integral part of the American political system, the average voter is often seen as somewhat passive:

What all these films argue for is the need to be recognized, to be appreciated, and to find a mandate for one’s actions. That is why the treatment of the ‘common folk’ in political bio movies is so important to an understanding of ideology. They remain static players, an amalgam of hopes and beliefs waiting for guidance, hoping for a prophet” (149).

The Obama campaign has a solution for this hungry audience. However there is still a constraint in the way for much of the American public: Obama's race. To further explain this "problem," we will now turn to racial theories of rhetorical texts.

The Complications of Race

During a speech at UCLA in 2008, Michelle Obama discussed some constraints about her husband's previous U.S. senate race in Illinois:

They said he was too young, they said he was too inexperienced, that he couldn't raise the money... They said he was too black. They said he that he wasn't black enough. And then when all that didn't work, they threw in a fear bomb and they said his name. His name is funny and there is no way that white folks in downstate Illinois will vote for a man named Barack Obama.

This quote addresses why Obama's race is indeed a problem that the campaign must overcome. It is not necessarily overt racism that would keep Obama from serving as president, but a persistent cultural belief that black people comprise an outside group of "others," who are seen as less intelligent, less experienced, and less capable of leadership. Many people may not see an individual black person as having these qualities, but will still attribute these characteristics to the group as a whole. This problem is of course deeply rooted in American society. Thinking of race as a problem indeed has a long history in America, as Cornel West discusses in *Race Matters*: "Nearly a century later, we confine discussions about race in America to the 'problems' black people pose for

whites rather than consider what this way of viewing black people reveals about us as a nation” (2).

What does this way of viewing black people reveal about us as a nation? Nothing new. As stated by Franz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*, the standard consensus is that:

Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black.
Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth,
abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and, on the other side, the
bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light.
(36)

These ideas do not generally rise to the surface, at least not in popular media, but still to this day, we can often hear the differences in how sportscasters discuss black and white athletes. Black athletes are still given the stigma of being physically superior and intellectually inferior. This dichotomy is a package thrust upon both white and black athletes. In people’s minds, one can’t be superior at both. In *The New Plantation*, Billy Hawkins asserts that: “The media’s preoccupation with their athletic prowess often fuels the racial ideology that Blacks are intellectually inferior but physically superior, because they are praised as athletes but often ignored as students” (10).

So how do we get past these outdated orientations? In “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” Henry Louis Gates argues that blacks must raise themselves up through discourse, through creative expression, as was the case throughout American history:

The recording of an authentic black voice – a voice of deliverance from the deafening discursive silence which an enlightened Europe cited to prove the absence of the African’s humanity – was the millennial instrument of transformation through which the African would become the European, the slave become the ex-slave, brute animal become the human being. (12)

He goes on to discuss how this can be a trap in which the black author is confined to only one voice, and the limited voice as a “black author.” This also comes with an unintended consequence of marginalization from some members of the black community. Billy Hawkins discusses how some in black communities “unfortunately emphasize physical development over intellectual development” (23).

Cornel West, in an interview included in *Barrack Obama: The Power of Change*, himself an academic, states his own kind of skepticism of Obama as a black politician and as a black man:

I’ve been very critical of Obama. I thought anytime he becomes the darling of Time magazine, Newsweek, The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, I’m kind of suspicious of you. (laughter) I really am. I’m old school. If the mainstream white media’s in love with you, something’s wrong.

So is Obama too black or not black enough? Unfortunately, he is simultaneously both to different audiences. This problem makes the subject of race even more impossible to

discuss in *American Stories: American Solutions*, but cinematography can help address this issue where words would not dare.

Racism is complex, informed by centuries of practices and beliefs and unfortunately is still present. It has recently, however, taken a very different shape than in centuries past. Contemporary racism is well defined by Smitherman and Dijk as the “subtle, covert, social and public practices and policies, the negative effect of which falls overwhelmingly on black and or Hispanic citizens and communities” (14). A great deal of the social practices of racism have taken place through television and film as is argued by Bell Hooks:

Certainly in the space of popular media culture black people in the U.S. and black people globally often look at ourselves through images, through eyes that are unable to truly recognize us, so that we are not represented as ourselves but seen through the lens of the oppressor, or of the radicalized rebel who has broken ideologically from the oppressor group but still envisions the colonized through biases and stereotypes not yet understood or relinquished. Nowhere is this more evident than in contemporary filmmaking. (155)

This visual representation of the black body has of course been discussed in film theory, through semiotics as well as psychoanalysis. Before going into these subjects, however, I will discuss film theory in general in order to understand how cinematography can help make a racial argument.

Applying Film Theory

Film theory has been developed by writers from other media, predominantly psychology, philosophy and literature into its own field. Theorists have traditionally differed on whether film is primarily a *realistic* or a *formative* medium. Formative theorists argue that film should “give the viewer a larger and more meaningful vision than he or she can obtain in the real world” (Konigsberg 143). The other side of the spectrum is represented by film theorist Siegfried Kracauer, who argues that film should be used to explore what is already in existence: “It is the function of film to expose, to enlarge our vision of the physical world” (143). There are a multitude of theories used to dissect, analyze, and discuss film. Some of the more commonly accepted analysis orientations are based in semiological, psychoanalytical, Marxist, feminist, or foundationalist theories. Each of these theories have grown and receded in popularity and have all been more or less favored at different points throughout the history of film. These paradigm shifts have affected the way films have been studied and been addressed in the film discourse community.

One of the earliest film theories to gain popularity among film scholars and filmmakers is the concept of *montage*. A montage film – typified by Soviet directors and film theorists V.I. Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein – places heavy focus on editing techniques that imply relationships and even causality between juxtaposed shots. In *Film Form* (1949), Eisenstein claims “that the shot itself is only a ‘montage cell,’ and these cells undergo a transformation through ‘collision and ‘conflict’” (qtd. In Konigsberg 143). In this sense, a particular shot means little without a context of associated images.

Eisenstein employed montage in his most famous work, *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), which arranged shots to either enhance or question their original meaning.

Soviet montage films are naturally also associated with Marxist film theory, which is marked by its portrayal and criticism of class distinctions and its focus on groups, rather than an individual protagonist, as seen in most Hollywood productions. Richard Taylor argues in his book, *Propaganda Film*, that Soviet montage fits snugly into the side of film that represents a fantasy and that seeks to shape reality rather than be a realistic medium. “The cinema, was concerned not to reflect reality but to change reality, to shape it in accordance with a predetermined mold to convey what I have described as ‘not reality as it is, but as it ought to be’” (231). Marxist film theory, especially its focus on power relations, oppression of people, and suppression of voices, is also closely related to feminist film theory. However before this theory can be discussed, psychoanalysis and semiotics first need to be introduced.

One of the more influential film theorists to address semiotics was Christian Metz, who developed a system of codes. These were divided into *cultural* and *specialized* codes to analyze narrative structures in film, where cultural codes include “speech-accompanying gestures” and specialized codes include “montage, camera movements, optical effects, etc” (Konigsberg, 144). Film theorists have also directly applied psychological and philosophical theories to individual films and the field itself. Jean-Louis Baudry, a significant film theorist of the 1970’s, relates “the regressive experience of the spectator in the cinema to the child in Lacan’s mirror phase; first constituting a sense of self by seeing its reflection in the mirror” (144).

Combining the focus on power relations of Marxist film theory and the psychoanalytic focus of semiotics and psychological theories, feminist film theory became especially popular in the 1970s. The most influential essay in feminist film theory is Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, published in 1975. This seminal work ushered in a new age for cinema studies and cinematic analysis and has had a major effect on most film theories since. It addresses "the male gaze" and discusses how cinema, especially mainstream Hollywood cinema, places the audience in the position of a male viewer looking upon a feminine object. Through this lens, women on screen are seen as passive objects to be viewed in order to "diminish the male's fear of castration" (14). Obviously, this theory borrows a great deal of terminology from psychoanalysis. Similar to feminist theories, racial and queer film theories have focused on other differences and group suppression based on ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation as represented in film. Racial film theories in particular borrow heavily from feminist theory.

Rhetoric and Film Theory

In *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies*, Morley David seems to channel Foucault's principal of specificity and questions the appropriateness of much of contemporary film theory. He argues that in most film and television theory, not enough attention is given to the membership that audience members already have in multiple discourse communities. Screen theory in particular looks at audience-text relationships, but "the subject is not conceived as already constituted in other discursive formations and

social relations” (60). Morley argues against the prevalence of traditional film theories, based in psychoanalysis “We need to question the assumption that all specific discursive effects can be reduced to and explained by, the functioning of a single, universal set of psychic mechanisms” (59). He argues that a new set of theories need to be developed to address television and cultural studies. He also argues that psychoanalytic film theory ignores context and is actually a kind of universalist theory which does not prove useful in describing social relationships with film and television that may develop with any one person or group in real life situations.

If we are to theorize the subject of television, it has to be theorized in cultural and historical specificity, an area where psychoanalytic theory is obviously weak. It is only thus that we can move beyond a theory of the subject, which has reference only to universal, primary psychoanalytic processes and only thus that we allow a space in which one can recognize that the struggle of ideology also takes place at the moment of the encounter of a text and subject. (71)

For my analysis of *American Stories: American Solutions*, I feel it is particularly important to not ignore the kairos surrounding the film for its original interaction with the audience. The film was aired just days before the election and the film itself directly and indirectly addresses current events in politics, war, and the economy, as well as race. The ways in which the film makes visual arguments cannot be taken out of context.

A renewed area of interest in film theory is to tie rhetorical theories and concepts into the discussion and analysis of filmic technique. This “rhetorical turn” is discussed in

a collection of essays from several film scholars assembled by David Blakesley, aptly titled *The Terministic Screen: Rhetorical Perspectives on Film*. In this book, Blakesley argues that rhetorical terms and techniques can be applied to film theory. These essays place a particular focus on how meaning is created through the interaction between filmic text and its audience. Blakesley borrows heavily from Kenneth Burke's *Terministic Screens* in his discussion of the importance of the audience's experiences, knowledge, and preconceived notions of film and concepts of genre. The essays also discuss psychoanalytic concepts of "identification" and their interaction with film and rhetoric. Blakesley argues that Burke "saw identification as both condition and the aim or rhetoric" (7). *American Stories: American Solutions* certainly invites us to shift our identification, if only slightly, as responsible American citizens. Despite this connection between psychoanalytic film theory and rhetorical perspectives on film, Blakesley warns against trying to define strict categories of film theory and warns against any attempt to create an all-encompassing theory of film that tries to explain everything which perhaps drifts into foundationalism. Instead, Blakesley argues for a "film rhetoric:" a way of seeing film as a collection of signs viewed psychologically and socially.

Likewise, Per Persson places heavy focus on the individual audience member and adds to the field of psychological film theory in *Understanding Cinema* with the concept of the "Phenomenal World:" reality as perceived by individuals through cultural and personal frames. Persson poses the following questions: "On what level and to what extent are phenomenal worlds shared universally, culturally, or socially? Is there a pan-human unity? In what ways do cultures, nations, and social groups differ in terms of the

phenomenal? And how can one phenomenal world be understood by and translated to another?" (4). We may all be watching the same movie, but it is unclear if we are all seeing it in the same way.

Both Persson and Blakesley's connections of audience members' screens and their relation to the experience of viewing is also seen in a similar way on the side of production. Directors' and producers' own terministic screens affect the final product of film. In "Textual Trouble in River City," an article from Blakesley's collection, Harriet Malinowitz argues that "by cleverly employing film ethos, filmmakers can screen out rival ideologies and screen in their own political predilections" (274). Each choice by a film's writers, producers, directors, actors, and cinematographers places a new screen on the film that simultaneously "reflects, selects, and deflects" reality.

Formalist Film Theory

A more grounded, but less comprehensive alternative to the above theories is the formalist theory of film. Formalist, or structuralist theory attempts to dissect film by looking at both its individual elements such as dialogue or cinematography and how these elements fit together to make a cohesive text. Formalism in auteur theory focuses on how techniques of film combine to create a style unique to an individual filmmaker. Auteur theory in general focuses on this unique style of filmmakers that often control a great deal of the artistic direction of a film and place their own personal mark on the film. A filmmaker is recognized as an auteur when they establish a consistent style throughout

several films and a viewer could potentially recognize one of their films without knowing the filmmaker's association.

Formalist film theory focuses more on the visually apparent aspects of film than other theories, and can also delve into some of the technical aspects of the filmmaking process. It attempts to make distinctions between film ideologies, film authors, and film genre. In *Explorations in Film Theory*, Ron Burnett discusses the genre of documentary filmmaking and how specific cinematographic techniques help contain films neatly or often clumsily into the genre. He describes specifics of the documentary genre that help convince the audience of the authenticity of a film:

Using a style which Bazin described as framing and containing reality rather than impinging upon it- long takes, depth of field, long shots – confers on the profilmic event the quality of a given whole, in its totality. A world so presented is securely constituted and apparently authentic.

(105)

Also discussed in *Explorations in Film Theory*, the concept of self-reflexivity of a film can have an effect on its apparent authenticity and objectivity. “Cinema-Verte” a documentary style popular in the U.S. and Europe in the mid 20th century, the filmmaker's equipment was often shown in the background of shots. Essentially this reminds the audience of a film's construction and may hurt their acceptance of it as objective. In “Self-Reflexivity in Documentary,” a paper included in Ron Burnett's *Explorations in Film Theory*, Jeanne Allen argues that these self-reflexive moments “draw attention to the process of selecting and reconstructing events to convey meaning”

(103). This goes back to the debate between film as a reflection of reality or as artifice. In *Directing the Documentary* Michael Rabinger agrees that showing film equipment or crew members “sabotages confidence in the film’s integrity without substituting something of greater value” (170). I agree that these moments in documentary film can hurt the apparent objectivity of a film, but would argue that they do not necessarily hurt the film’s apparent authenticity. Today’s audiences are used to a variety of filmic techniques and genres and that in documentary film, showcasing the construction of a film (through shaking camera movements and “inadvertent” acknowledgements of crew members in the shot) can actually help convince the audience of the film’s authenticity.

Burnett also addresses how documentary film showcases the differences between historical footage and re-enacted footage in a BBC documentary about the Nazi invasion of Leningrad. He discusses how in Jerry Kuehl’s *The Siege of Leningrad* from the *World at War* series, historic footage is made to seem more real by labeling other re-enacted footage as such. The director “underscores the veracity of all the historic footage not labeled ‘reenactment’ and suggests that it is free from the taint of manipulation” (107). Burnett labels these “neutral” and “committed” sequences, a pattern that is also seen in the problem/solution pattern of *American Stories: American Solutions*.

In *Directing the Documentary*, author Michael Rabinger defines documentary film as “a film that ... invites the spectator to draw socially critical conclusions” (4). This definition of course, would also include narrative films that meet this criteria, as well as what one’s standard description of a documentary film. Similar to the montage film, Rabinger argues that “in documentary the filmmaker is in the position of a mosaic artist”

(170). He also discusses the detail of editing and the importance of establishing a predictable “rhythm” between shots. “The audience will either work fast at interpreting each new image, or slowly, depending on how much time they were given for the immediately previous shot” (190). That is to say that a rhythm needs to be established so that audience members know how long they have to digest the meaning of any particular shot. Bill Nichols, in *Introduction to Documentary* addresses the powerful nature of authentic documentary as it “helps give tangible expression to the values and beliefs that build or contest, specific forms of social belonging, or community, at a given time and place” (142). Certainly narrative films can do this as well, but perhaps not as explicitly. *American Stories: American Solutions* also attempts to build this concept of the “transcendent ‘we’” with the audience.

So now we have seen that indeed *American Stories: American Solutions* contains several rhetorical arguments, and have touched upon ways in which the cinematography assists these and can indeed make its own visual refutative argument. I have shown the importance of the film and why it deserves serious rhetorical inquiry, and shown how cinematography plays an important argumentative role that cannot be achieved verbally. However, to illustrate how cinematography achieves this, a close reading of the film must be undertaken. This close reading will explore the following two research questions:

1. How does the cinematography organize and structure the text?
2. How does the cinematography make a refutative argument about Obama’s race?

To provide structure in answering these questions, I will use a method of close analysis known as *compositional interpretation*.

A Visual Methodology

In *Experimental and Quasi Experimental Research*, Davida Charney outlines several “classical rhetorical stases” that may guide rhetorical inquiry: whether a phenomenon exists, what its definition may be, if the phenomenon is involved in any cause and effect relationships, what “value” the phenomenon may have to society in general, and finally what action may be taken by researchers or individuals involved in the field where the phenomenon exists. Whereas questions of cause are best answered by experimental research, questions of existence and definition can be addressed through textual analysis or ethnography. Questions of value and action are based upon discussion and opinion, but basing these on clear definitions will lead to more acceptable and appropriate conclusions.

To answer my set of research questions, I will primarily use a form of textual analysis. The two research questions are both questions of definition and of value. As questions of definition, I hope to answer what cinematography is, and how it can be dissected and have its elements defined. As a question of value for my first research question, I must show how and why these different cinematographic elements have been altered to create structure for the overall film. As a question of value for the second question, I must show how and why the cinematography displays Obama as a competent and effective black leader.

The type of close reading I will be using fits under the category of *scholarly inquiry*, (as opposed to quantitative, qualitative, or practitioner inquiry research) as outlined in *A Practitioner's Guide to Research Methods*, by Patricia Goubil-Gambrell. This category is defined by its text-based approach, its goal to “seek knowledge through deliberate confrontation of opposing views” (584), and its potential use of historical, critical, or philosophical points of view.

The specific research methodology that I will use to inform my analysis is described in *Visual Methodologies*. In this book, Gillian Rose outlines several possible research methods that are used to analyze visual texts. I will be using a method that she terms *compositional interpretation*. Compositional interpretation is described as “visual connoisseurship” (33) and consists of the researcher using their experience and theory to discuss how an image looks, how it is organized, framed, and how these concepts contribute to the message of the text:

Compositional interpretation offers ways of describing the content, colour, spatial organization, light, and expressive content of a still image, and the mise-en-scene, montage, sound and narrative structure of a moving image... moreover, compositional interpretation may also begin to say something about an image's possible effects on a spectator. (52)

This method pays most attention to the site of an image itself and its “compositional modality” (34). It is a method of visual scrutiny, and one that works best with clearly defined terms. I will define several film terms before delving into a deeper analysis of *American Stories: American Solutions*. By being able to differentiate between different

aspects of cinematography, I can better articulate how they help organize the argument and message of the video as well as how they make a visual argument on their own and through their interaction with the verbal message of the film. This articulation is consistent with Rose's methodology of compositional interpretation. I will use twelve standard film analysis terms, which are listed and described in Appendix A.

There are, however, limitations to a methodology based upon the dissection of these filmic techniques. Rose discusses how compositional interpretation "...can end up relying on notions of connoisseurship, or genius, or Art. It thus needs to be combined with other methodologies in order to address these latter sorts of issues" (53). In order to alleviate this problem and be able to delve deeper into excluded issues, I will also pay particular attention to the theoretical terms as outlined in my literature review. This *theoretical triangulation* will support the reliability (and *construct validity*) of my research method (Goubriel-Gambrell, 589). By grounding this methodology through my discussion of film, rhetoric, and racial representation, we can see what role cinematography plays in both the apparent and the undisclosed arguments of the film.

In using this form of close reading to answer how the cinematography makes a refutative argument about Obama's race, we must keep in mind Aristotle's concepts of enthymeme and refutative arguments as outlined in the lit review, Laura Mulvey's theory of the male cinematic gaze, as well as the complications of racial identity as presented through visual media. These of course cannot coalesce to form a specific methodology, but will all be used to inform my close reading of the film in order to answer this second research question.

Cinematography's Close Relationship with Other Filmic Elements

In order to address these research questions, I will focus on the way the film's messages are framed and enhanced only through cinematography. However, in addition to the aspects of cinematography outlined above, I would like to briefly touch upon other basic filmic elements that have played a role in the rhetorical arguments of *American Stories: American Solutions*. This will also help define what cinematography is and what it is not. These include editing, mise en scène, music, sound effects, and on-screen text. Editing especially has a close relationship with cinematography, as shot duration is both a choice by the editor and the cameraman in the field. Professional cinematographers and photographers shoot particular shots (with a beginning and an end) with editing in mind and should consider how these shots will be pieced together in the editing room. A documentary photographer knows how to get a variety of angles and distances, as well as different subjects in order to collect the best footage for the editor to assemble. The photographer will base many of their choices on the layout of a particular location, of which they may not have had any prior knowledge. They figure out the best way to frame people, locations, objects, and events and how these will eventually fit together.

These people, locations, and objects make up what is called mise en scène. This literally means "placing on the stage" and is originally a French theatrical term. (Filmplus) As a term, mise en scène is sometimes considered to include the framing of these objects and characters as well, but for the purposes of clarity, I will consider framing and cinematography as a separate category, but clearly the two are closely related. Mise en scène includes any visuals that are considered part of the universe within

a film, known as the *diegesis*. These visual diegetic elements include set design, props, wardrobe, diegetic lighting, and blocking (the position and motion of people in relation to each other). Non-diegetic elements, include the way this world is framed, voice over narration, soundtrack music, studio lights used but not shown, etc. For example, the American flag behind Barack Obama during his policy explanations is part of the world portrayed on screen whereas the shot composition is simply how that world is framed. An easy way to explain this difference is with an well known music example: music played from a film character's stereo onscreen is diegetic music, but the soundtrack of a film, only heard by the audience, is non-diegetic. (Hill and Church Gibson)

Mise en scène also has an especially close relationship with cinematography. The position of people and objects on location will inform the cinematography and vice-versa. In some cases, it is impossible to analyze cinematographic choices without discussing character positions, set, or prop choices. For example, if a particular prop includes a geometric design, the cinematography may reflect this through a corresponding camera angle. In my analysis below, I pay particular attention to Obama's positioning of his own body. In the simplest terms, mise en scène interacts with cinematography, as the framing of characters and objects inherently either emphasizes or deemphasizes their physical presence.

Other filmic elements may interact with cinematographic choices, but usually to a lesser extent. These include music, sound effects, and text. The music choice in *American Stories: American Solutions* does indeed play a very strong role. Like cinematography, the film's music also helps organize the text into a problem/solution format. Additionally,

it opens and closes the film. In the opening shot of the film we do see a strong interaction between soft, glorious music and the cinematography. Here the audience is shown slow motion close ups of American wheat fields. Smooth transitions between these shots and close ups that allow the audience to visualize the textures of the grain, work together with the pastoral music. This combination is designed to introduce the audience to the film and allow them to arrive in the mindset of one witnessing an important moment in American history – their history – in their own backyard.

Sound effects also play a small role in the film during segments of b-roll. This includes footage of the four American families or of Obama interacting with citizens while voice-over (be it Obama or one of his supporters) discusses the presidential candidate. During some of these sections, we may hear some of the natural sound of these b-roll scenes, known as *nat sound*. (Rabinger) Although the documentary-style footage mostly exists for its visuals, this natural sound does play a small role. It enhances the salience of the moving images, and increasing the scene's verisimilitude for the viewer, without distracting from what is being said by the speaker. Although there is undoubtedly a great deal to discuss here, my analysis will mostly exclude both the influence of music and sound effects.

Curiously, *American Stories: American Solutions*, uses only minimal text. We only see text in the opening still image which denotes Obama's official approval of the film, titles to identify the location of each of the film's four "stories," titles under politicians and businessmen who support Obama, and text to underline Obama's "bullet point" list of solutions during his policy proposals. In all four of these instances, the text

appears at the bottom of the screen. This follows Kress and Van Leeuwen's discussion of top-bottom design, which places factual information at the bottom of screen, in order for it to play a subservient role to the image above. This text is undoubtedly important to the message of the film, but is used sparingly, unlike the average political campaign commercial one may see on T.V. This was a deliberate choice by the film's producers in order to break out of the genre of a political "powerpoint" video and break into the genre of film.

As we have seen, each of the elements of film production and post-production do indeed contribute to the arguments of the film. Furthermore, they each interact with cinematography in some way. Film is thus highly *emergent*, as a complex system of elements and relationships; one that is more than the sum of its individual parts (Fagerjord). However my analysis will focus exclusively on the twelve elements of cinematography listed in the appendix. As stated earlier, my analysis will be guided by these two research questions, which will each be addressed in a separate analysis chapter:

1. How does the cinematography organize and structure the text?
2. How does the cinematography make a refutative argument about Obama's race?

CHAPTER THREE

Cinematographic Organization

As I have shown previously and as even its title seems to suggest, *American Stories: American Solutions* has a classical rhetorical organization. It is clearly set up in a problem/solution format. Other than a brief foray into some of the biographical details of Barack Obama and his running mate, the film first shows an American problem, then counters with an Obama solution. Each of the four stories of the film is meant to portray major problems in contemporary American life - problems that the campaign hopes the American electorate will identify with. All four of the stories illustrate the biggest of these problems: the economy. Healthcare, education, and the military are also discussed in both the stories and the solutions, although Obama's answers do not necessarily address all of the problems presented in the "story" immediately preceding.

There are several differences between how these problems are illustrated and solutions are portrayed. In television advertising, we are all familiar with cheesy infomercials that show a disgusted homemaker filmed in black and white struggling to deal with a home appliance. When she is finally able to conquer her problem through the use of a new kitchen gadget, she is filmed in cheery, saturated colors. Not dissimilarly, *American Stories: American Solutions* uses several subtle differences in cinematographic style to organize the film into a problem/solution format. However, Kress and Van Leeuwen argue that visual composition does even more:

Composition is not just a matter of formal aesthetics and of feeling, or of pulling the readers (although it is that as well), it also marshals meaningful elements into coherent text and does this in ways which themselves follow the requirements of code-specific structures and themselves produce meaning. (213)

The four stories show families from four different towns across the country. The first story shows Rebecca Johnston and her family in North Kansas City Missouri. This story discusses her husband's inability to pay for an operation and the resulting difficulties at work (*AS:AS 1:47*). The second story illustrates problems with the economy and healthcare through Larry Stuart and his wife Juanita, an elderly African-American couple in Sardina, Ohio (*AS:AS 7:30*). The third story discusses the economy and educational difficulties through Juliana Sanchez, who lives with her two children in Albuquerque, New Mexico (*AS:AS 13:19*). The final story illustrates problems with unemployment by focusing on Mark Dowell and his family. Mark is a third generation Ford employee in Louisville Kentucky (*AS:AS 21:57*). These four stories not only illustrate specific problems, but also create a tone and a mood which can only be later resolved through Obama's proposed solutions.

The campaign chooses to focus on these issues because they are the most urgent problems for which the campaign has a ready answer. As such, the audience must first be convinced that these problems are real and that they pertain to them, before they can be invited to be a part of the solution. As we saw with Bitzer's rhetorical situation, the American voters must be convinced that only through their action can these problems be

solved. By voting for Obama's solutions, the film argues, we the American people are still capable of saving ourselves from poverty, sickness, ignorance, and war. In this chapter I will examine some of the cinematic elements of *American Stories: American Solutions*' problem-solution structure, focusing on techniques representative of the entire film.

The film's director, Davis Guggenheim, used a similar structural technique in *An Inconvenient Truth*. In "An Inconvenient Truth: Myth and Multiple Genres in Popular Environmental Rhetoric," Thomas Frenz discusses the rhetorical trope of *Jeremiad*, which portrays an extremely dire situation that only has a slim chance of a positive outcome through a very limited set of options. This is a sort of exaggerated version of Bitzer's rhetorical situation. Frenz argues:

The discourse of many activist groups refers to both impending catastrophe and future redemption, characterized by a simultaneous warning of a coming "cataclysm while holding out hope of a millennial future." We hear, Ellis concludes "echoes of the American jeremiad" in the rhetoric of environmental activists" (171). In their work on the rhetorical character of American environmental discourse, John Opie and Norbert Elliot concur, arguing that, more than any other, the jeremiad is the predominate rhetorical form which prefigures most environmental discourse. (4)

In both *An Inconvenient Truth* and *American Stories: American Solutions*, this problem/solution format is exaggerated and partially created through differences in

cinematography.

The organizational power of cinematography is not a new concept, especially the concept of visual rhythm created in the editing room. In *American Stories: American Solutions* this rhythm exists not only in the shot duration differences between different sections' cinematography, but also in the fairly even spacing of both the "stories" and the solution scenes set in Obama's office. In film theory, the Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein is credited with developing the montage film, which relies heavily on creating a rhythm between cuts (Konigsberg 143). In "The City: The Rhetoric of Rhythm," Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson discuss *The City*, a 1939 documentary film directed by Ralph Steiner and Willard Van Dyke, which is formed around a thesis, antithesis, synthesis structure, organized by shot duration (71). The film serves as a warning against industrialization, and attempts to find a balance between the pastoral, which is illustrated through long shots, and the industrial, which is illustrated through quick cuts between shots. These differences between shot duration in different segments of *American Stories: American Solutions* similarly helps organize the film, although it is not the only way in which cinematography creates structure.

Photojournalistic Stories

To illustrate how cinematography illustrates these American problems, I will now turn to specific examples from the film. The third story of *American Stories: American Solutions* uses a family from Albuquerque, New Mexico to show the real-life problems facing a widowed mother of two (*AS:AS* 13:20 - 15:10). In this section, the

cinematography employs a photojournalistic style. This style is marked by shorter shot duration, a wide variety of subject distances, angles, focus shifts, and depths of field. It almost always is filmed via a shoulder-mounted camera, with either slight motion or somewhat shaky motion. None of these shots is perfectly still. The shot shown in Figure 1 displays the fairly dark lighting of this sequence, and this particular close up employs a shallow depth of field, meaning that while part of the frame is in focus, the background is blurred (*AS:AS 13:39*). The saturation, brightness, and temperature of the colors vary from location to location, but are all natural. All of these shots are played at normal speed (with the exception of two slow motion cityscapes shot through a car window) and there is either no studio lighting, or its presence is not noticeable.



Fig. 1 – The photojournalistic style of the third American story (AS:AS 13:39)

Using the first “American story” of the film, which shows a family from North Kansas City, Missouri, we can dissect the individual elements of this photojournalistic style (*AS:AS* 1:47). This includes some uncontrolled camera motion, natural lighting, short shot duration, shallow depth of field, changes in focus, and wide variety of angles and camera distances that constitute full coverage of the scene as an event. This particular story starts with a close up, shallow depth of field, shoulder-mounted camera shot of a woman filling up her gas tank (*AS:AS* 1:52). The proceeding shot is a close up of the increasing price at the pump. Following Obama’s voice-over, which says “Rebecca Johnston is all about her family,” the sequence then goes to similarly-styled shots which show the mom talking about her family and taking her kids to school. Obama’s voice-over discusses her family’s difficulty with the economy and her husband’s recent injury, which has kept him from working (*AS:AS* 2:40). During this section, the audience is shown a darkly-lit shot of her husband sitting in a living room chair, a close-up of his twitching fingers, a close up shot of a framed photograph of her husband and their baby, and finally a shot of the mom and one of their kids sitting on the couch. All four of these quick shots employ dark lighting, shallow depth of field, and slightly unstable camera movement. This style, apart from its organizing effect in comparison to the rest of the film, is also persuasive on its own. The dark lighting has obvious natural connotations of fear and the unknown. The short shot duration, and slightly shaky camera movement both add to this feeling of uncertainty, and the shallow depth of field, especially in the close up shot of her husband’s hand as seen in Figure 2, forces the audience to focus on his hand and the uncertainty and worry it expresses (*AS:AS* 2:43).



Fig. 2 – A close up shot with a shallow depth of field displays expressive hands (AS:AS 2:43)

As noted by Kress and Van Leeuwen, the individual elements produce meaning as part of a recognizable structure – the photojournalistic style of production. The most important effect of these individual elements is that they do achieve an expected and respected style similar to the television news package audiences are familiar with. Burke’s notion of *piety* explains how the familiar cinematographic style helps the audience to view these segments as realistic, and perhaps somewhat troubling. Piety also explains how the individual cinematographic elements fit together. In the cinematographic style, somewhat shaky camera motion “properly goes with” short shot duration, changes in focus, and natural lighting. Each of these elements work together to form this recognizable style, which denotes only the first premise of the visual enthymeme of the film. Furthermore, the shorter shot duration and the slightly shaky

camera style, as well as small shifts in focus, also work to highlight the issues being illustrated by this story. Whereas long, still shots give more of a feeling of finality, these elements are consistent with an unresolved feeling, and an active sense of energia, or the liveliness of the scene. The difference here illustrates the film's use of jeremiad, by further exaggerating the gap between problem and potential resolution.

More important than these individual effects, however, is that the collective effect is to make the stories seem more real. This is a common technique, which is also often used in cinematic features. For example, in *Saving Private Ryan*, the filmmakers intentionally used handheld, fast shutter speed, grainy film, etc – all with the effect of making the scenes seem more exciting, dangerous, and most importantly more real – as it also employs a recognized photojournalistic style. In *American Stories: American Solutions*, the short edits, close ups, somewhat intentionally sloppy camerawork, and the diegetic lighting all make these scenes – and the problems portrayed – more real for the audience. It would have been very easy for the director, Davis Guggenheim, to film hypothetical situations in a studio, but this would be seen as more contrived, and would not have achieved a convincing effect for the American electorate.

Cinematic Solutions

Just as the stories are filmed in a “realistic” journalistic style, the solutions must be shown in exactly the opposite terms in order to show the minor premise of the enthymeme: that Obama is indeed capable of fixing these problems. It must be apparent that we are no longer in the flawed world of current reality, but on the other side of the

election, when Obama will undoubtedly be elected and be given the opportunity to find solutions. Here Obama is put on display as an eloquent speaker and a presidential product. By employing a very long, but single shot (Figure 3) for each of the solution sections, the filmmakers create a feeling of stability, and allow us to put Obama on the spot. As the audience, we must listen to his eloquence as he outlines his proposed solutions to the dire problems that we have just witnessed. By remaining unedited, as though these segments are occurring live in real time, which is a powerful experience, as noted by Nordenstrong (quoted in Morley 268). Additionally, this long duration has the audience wait in tense apprehension to see if Obama makes a slip in his speech or posture, but of course he does not. He remains in complete control of his body, maintaining eye contact with the audience through the camera lens. His posture, word choice, vocal and eye control all convince us of his ability and even the inevitability of his leadership. He is in charge, and the cinematography makes this all the more apparent.

Each of the sections in Obama's office is filmed in a very similar manner. Obama is seen sitting in a nicely but modestly adorned office with large windows that allow us to see the sunny, pastoral scene outside. The room is obviously lit with studio lighting, which allows us to witness every detail in his facial expression and posture. More importantly, however, the lighting is bright, energetic, and hopeful. The camera movements are smooth and subtle. The camera's deliberate control mirrors Obama's control over his own body. Unlike the stories, which are messy and somewhat frantic, the office space, created through what is included and excluded in the frame is calm and controlled. Another important aspect to this camera movement is its inclusion of both a

medium wide angle and a medium close up, with everything in between. By either slowly zooming in, out, or both, each of these sections lets us see both the details in Obama's expression as well as the control he exerts over his own body (Figure 3).



Fig. 3 – Obama walks out from behind the presidential desk (AS:AS 0:51)

This difference between images that primarily show a person's face or his or her full body is often discussed as a difference between treating that person as a passive, sexual object, or an empowered individual. Images that primarily show an individual's face are considered to have a high *face-ism ratio*. "Irrespective of gender, people rate individuals in high face-ism images as being more intelligent, dominant, and ambitious than individuals in low face-ism images" (Lidwell et al. 88). When the camera finally

zooms in enough to frame Obama as a portrait, the audience recognizes him as such an individual.

Kress and Van Leeuwen also discuss the importance of the camera's power in audience's perception of individuals on screen.

The relation between the human participants represented in images and the viewer is once again an imaginary relation. People are portrayed as though they are friends, or as though they are strangers. Images allow us to imaginarily come as close to public figures as if they were our friends and neighbours – or to look at people like ourselves as strangers, 'others.'

(132)

While the camera zooms in, our attention goes from noticing Obama's power over his own body, to noticing his personality in a way that lets the audience become familiar and comfortable with the new presidential product.

Another important way in which Obama interacts with the camera is through eye contact. In these sections he looks directly into the camera, which unlike other elements in these sequences, does not follow cinematic convention but broadcast journalism conventions instead.

In television newsreading the look at the camera is commonplace and, we would think, not exactly 'self-reflexive' – at least for the presenters: an interview who looks at the camera in a television news program breaks the rules in an unacceptable way. Not everyone may address the viewer directly. Some may only be looked at, others may themselves be the

bearers of the look. There is an issue of communicative power or ‘entitlement’ involved in this, not only in pictures, but also in everyday face-to-face communication, for instance in interactions between men and women. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 126)



Fig. 4 – Obama makes eye contact with the audience (AS:AS 1:40)

Obama’s eye contact with the camera (Figure 4) enhances his authority through this convention. In *American Stories: American Solutions* he is the only “anchor” and the only individual who is allowed to directly address the audience. This eye contact also lets us see Obama in a more familiar and intimate way, especially when the camera is in close proximity to the presidential candidate. By making eye contact with the audience within touching distance, Obama demands our attention and challenges us to take his ideas with all seriousness.

Of course other cinematographic differences also exist in these sections of the film. The colors shown are bright and warm and contain slightly more yellows and reds than are displayed in the four stories. This color scheme is also a common used technique in mainstream cinema, and one that our eyes have been trained to associate with the hearth, comfort, and home. Likewise the straightforward camera angle (or perhaps stated better, the lack of an apparent angle) puts us at ease. Obama is neither looked down upon or up to in these sections. We are his equals, and he needs our help in order to achieve each of his proposed solutions. In Bitzer's terms, the audience's action is necessary for the conclusion of this rhetorical situation. Of course this angle is a convention of documentary filmmaking, but we can also see a similar effect in the way he positions himself on the desk. In the opening section, Obama walks from behind his desk and positions himself in a relaxed way, by halfway sitting on the edge of his desk. These motions display a confident, but friendly and relaxed leader. Just as the camera slowly zooms in, his movements first display his authority (behind the desk), then his approachability as he is casually perched on the office furniture.

Apart from angles, and the inclusion/exclusion of Obama's body parts through framing, the camera's apparent motion is also at play in these sequences. In each one of these sections, the camera – and thus the audience – is an active participant in the film. The camera does indeed give its full attention to the speaker, but it is not merely a passive player in this dialogue. Through its subtle and controlled motions (zooming, dollying left and right), the camera motion puts us in the role of an active listener. This camera motion reflects the topics he discusses as well. When the camera is at a distance, the audience is

poetic, while Obama discusses the importance of this “defining moment in American history.” The camera only moves in during Obama’s discussion of individual policies. At this point, the audience should shift along with the camera to become more scientific. Through the camera’s constantly changing inclusion and exclusion of background settings, our eyes remain fixed on the future President.

The depth of field also emphasizes the President in the third dimension. By keeping the camera physically distant from the presidential candidate, zooming in, and keeping the camera’s iris open, the filmmakers are able to achieve a shallow depth of field. While Obama is in sharp focus, the background becomes increasingly blurry as the camera zooms in. This highlights the President as a physical presence, perhaps even as a physical commodity. Jean Mitry describes this as a way of including a montage within a single shot, one that emphasizes one aspect of the frame (78). In this case, Obama is always emphasized throughout the long, constantly changing shot. This simply means that through changes in framing, and through depth of field, we are able to see several slightly versions of the same subject – all within a single, unedited shot. This would not be possible with a stationary camera.

Of course each of these are filmic conventions, and without this level of motion and shallow depth of field the film would seem boring and dated. Its genre and apparent production value would seem inappropriate to the grand importance of the successful election of America’s first black president. This in itself is an important argument to be made through the cinematography of the film: production value as ethos. These sections

look professional and obvious attention and money were spent on them. Of course these segments, just like the problem illustrations in the film, also need to seem real.

In an oppositional way to the grimy underworld of contemporary American reality, Obama's message is also made to seem real in this office setting. Without a convincing argument that his solutions are actually achievable, the film would do little good in convincing its audience to go out and cast their vote. Camera motion and the duration of these shots play a role in this way. By tracking left and right – that is physically moving the vantage point throughout the shot, the camera allows us to explore the space in which Obama is seen, as well as a more complete view of his body. More importantly, the long duration of these single shots creates a live-like view of the candidate. He really is this eloquent, informed, and intelligent – in real time. By all appearances, Obama had no trouble performing perfectly in front of the camera, and was able to nail it in a single take, unedited.

Both of these styles presented in the film are not achieved through inherent human reactions to these filmic stylizations, but are instead achieved through audiences' concepts of genre. Through years of watching television and film, audiences have been trained to see through certain orientations; slightly jerky camera movements, fast-changing focus, and indigenous lighting equal reality. Without these preconceived notions, these styles would not work as effectively. Without the cinematography's ability to convince the audience of the film's authenticity, neither the problems nor the solutions would be acceptable to the voter watching at home. Each of these decisions is a deliberate visual argument for the film.

Genre conventions of course exist in literature and other art forms, but are especially true of film, as many meanings are represented purely through visuals. Without first learning the language of filmic convention, a viewer would not know what to think of a blurry fade into a dream sequence, or at first, even understand the difference between diegetic and non-diegetic music. Of course, even without first knowing the language, it is easy to pick it up. In *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations*, David Bordwell argues that “We understand movies fairly easily because in many respects their conventions are easy to learn: they are simplifications of things we already know” (x).

There has been a great deal of argument as to whether a film grammar exists, and the level of strictness to which it may apply. Christian Metz attempted to develop a film language and a film grammar. Jean Mitry counters this by arguing that a grammar cannot be superimposed on its structures. Mitry argues that “it is impossible for there to be a film grammar... Since it does not operate with previously established signs, the cinema does not presuppose any *a priori* grammatical rules” (19). There are of course conventions that create meaning, but perhaps these “rules” are much more flexible in film than written grammatical conventions. At any rate, filmic conventions that are accepted by an audience do help make a film’s argument “maximally understood,” and can persuade audiences (Kress and Van Leeuwen 11).

Through all of this discussion about the film’s cinematographic power, I do not mean to convey that the filmmakers were perfect in their execution. One could certainly argue that a different angle here, or perhaps a fill light here would have added to the film’s argument. Indeed with on-the-fly videography, many decisions need to be made in

real time, and camera operators and editors perhaps could have improved upon their visual argumentation. After watching the film many times, I can notice a few instances where I would argue the filmmakers should have made different choices. The very possibility of potential “mistakes” seems to add weight to the argument that film does indeed have some sort of a loose grammar.

Cinematographic conventions play a major role in organizing the overall text in this way. Through consistent differences in shot duration, sharpness of focus, depth of field, camera motion, style of motion, color temperature, and lighting style, much of the film is organized into different segments. Cinematography plays a vital role in setting the tone of problem or solution for the audience. However, Obama cannot step out of the film to become this promised solution in the real world until another constraint is overcome: his race. Again, cinematography can help. Cinematography interacts with the control that Obama exerts over his own voice and his own body. His fame as an excellent speaker precedes him and is especially necessary for his successful election as a black president. As I will show in the next section, the cinematography makes a visual refutative argument to prove to the film’s audience that, yes Obama is both a black man, and capable of leading the country effectively.

CHAPTER FOUR

Cinematography's Unique Ability to Display the Unspeakable

Let us now return to the rhetorical situation of the film and look at what else is said without being said. What other constraints exist in this rhetorical situation? What has the potential to prevent the audience from going out and voting for this represented presidential product? American voters may have issues with some of Obama's views and plans for the executive branch, they may be reluctant to vote for someone with relatively little experience, or they may even be just the tiniest bit reluctant to elect a black man as president. We have seen how *American Stories: American Solutions* uses demonstrative enthymemes in the way the film organizes itself through a problem-solution format. However, a refutative enthymeme is also prevalent throughout the film and can best be seen through a Foucauldian lens. When looking at the film in terms of race and power, we can see an attempt by the filmmakers to disprove Obama's potential lack of experience and potential lack of ability to be a potent, competent and effective leader. The notion that the filmmakers have an "uphill battle" in this way, forces them to use what Aristotle has termed a refutative enthymeme – one that uses given, previously agreed upon facts to disprove an unwilling audience and require them to accept a new maxim. The film must either "disprove" Obama's "blackness" or disprove many voters' concepts of what it means to be black.

So what exactly must be disproved? The film must counter the following supposed enthymeme that exists in the mind of many potential voters:

Black people are unlikely to make strong, intelligent, effective leaders.

Barack Obama is black.

Therefore he is unlikely to be a strong, intelligent, effective leader.

Many voters, at least on some level, believe the major premise of this enthymeme, and the minor premise simply cannot be refuted. Unlike FDR's polio, Obama's skin cannot be hidden from the public, even if this was desired by his campaign. This potential problem with race – even with one's self identification is a well-explored concept in racial literature and film and is explored in Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Overnight the Negro has been given two frames of reference within which he has had to place himself. His metaphysics, or, less pretentiously, his customs and the sources on which they were based, were wiped out because they were in conflict with a civilization that he did not know and that imposed itself on him. (62)

This “fact of blackness” described by Fanon, has an enormously complex, dark, and confusing history that confuses racial relations and racial identification. Further complicating this situation for Obama is the fact that he is indeed labeled as a black man, though he does have a white mother and was raised by white grandparents. In *Dreams From My Father*, Obama himself discusses his own struggles with his racial identity.

We become only so grateful to lose ourselves in the crowd, America's happy, faceless marketplace; and we're never so outraged as when a cabbie drives past us or the woman in the elevator clutches her purse, not so much because we're bothered by the fact that such indignities are what

less fortunate coloreds have to put up with every single day of their lives – although that’s what we tell ourselves – but because we’re wearing a Brooks Brothers suit and speak impeccable English and yet have somehow been mistaken for an ordinary nigger. Don’t you know who I am? I’m an individual! (100)

Obviously Obama has thought about his own racial identity a great deal, and does find a certain amount of uncertainty with what race he should most identify with. He questions whether he can truly succeed as a black man, or if he must ingratiate himself to the white elite. Perhaps this fear is not unfounded. In *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, Jan Nederveen Pieterse discusses the perennial character of Uncle Tom. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was an influential book on race relations because Uncle Tom was a friendly and respectable black man. Pieterse argues that he is seen in this way: “Uncle Tom is *black and yet* a Christian. This echoes a trusted theme in western perspective – *black and yet*, or *black but*, as in black skin but white soul” (61). Many voters, who may or may not support Obama, see him in such a way. In a sense, *American Stories: American Solutions* does not seek to challenge this viewpoint. The film does not purposefully try to change its audience’s views of all black people, but instead portrays Obama the individual as a respectable and eloquent black man.

Of course, we must be reminded at this time, that these labels and indeed the entire notion of race is a social construction. Henry Louis Gates points to this fact in the title of a compilation he edited and contributed to. In the forward of “*Race,*” *Writing and Difference*, he defends the quotation marks around the word “Race” in the title.

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents of specific belief systems which - more often than not - also have fundamentally apposed economic interests. Race is the ultimate trope of difference because it is so very arbitrary in its application. The biological criteria used to determine difference in sex simply do not hold when applied to race. (5)

Throughout all of the essays he urged the authors to consistently put the word within quotation marks to emphasize its artificiality - that is it is not real in a sense, but only a development of cultures, societies and their differences.

This is not to underestimate the influence of race, or to undermine the importance of its study and discussion. Contemporary racism is seen much as a problem of ignorance and exclusion. It is a "problem" often much easier to ignore, although it is unfortunately still very prevalent. In *Race Matters*, by Cornel West, he argues that at even many liberals with the best intentions see black people in this way.

Hence, for liberals, black people are to be "included" and "integrated" into "our" society and culture, while for conservatives they are to be "well behaved" and "worthy of acceptance" by "our" way of life. Both fail to see that the presence and predicaments of black people are neither additions to nor defections from American life, but rather constitutive elements of that life. (3)

Given that racism still exists and a lack of discussion still enables much of its perseverance, and that Barrack Obama is indeed black, the Obama campaign is faced with a problem. As stated before, a certain enthymeme exists in many American minds:

Black people are unlikely to make strong, intelligent, effective leaders. Barack Obama is black.

Therefore it is an inescapable fact that Obama will not make a good leader.

So how does the film counter this argument? How does it overcome this constraint? To answer these questions, we will now turn our attention back to Foucault.

In “The Discourse on Language,” Michel Foucault discusses how we have a tendency to ignore certain subjects - namely politics, sexuality, and also race - in our professional, academic, and everyday discourse communities.

Yet, maybe this institution and this inclination are but two converse responses to the same anxiety: anxiety as to just what discourse is, when it is manifested materially... but also, uncertainty faced with a transitory existence.... When we suspect the conflicts, triumphs, injuries, dominations and enslavements that lie behind these words, even when long use has chipped away their rough edges. (216)

Foucault goes on to describe how this fear is still prevalent in any discussion which attempts to ignore or exclude these dormant topics: “It is as though discussion, far from being a transparent, neutral element, allowing us to disarm sexuality and to pacify politics, were one of those privileged areas in which they exercised some of their more awesome powers” (216). By ignoring the elephant in the room, and only discussing it

from a limited points of view, it only seems to invade our thoughts and language even more.

Increasing the Exposure on Dark Skin

So how can we use these Foucauldian prescriptions to see the suppressed truths in *American Stories: American Solutions*? Most prevalent of these, through the principle of reversal, we should look at what the film may seem to leave out. As introduced earlier, the biggest rhetorical constraint placed on Obama's election that is not directly addressed within the film is Obama's race. However, this does not mean that the film ignores race entirely but instead attempts to refute the problematic racial associations that exist in the orientations of many voters. It does so visually, rather than verbally. In order to elect Obama as the next American president, the film must convince the audience that he is a competent and effective leader. This rhetorical aim would also be true of any candidate's rhetoric. Obama simply has more of challenge due to his "racial handicap." This is done through many different aspects of the film including Obama's speech, the support of politicians and other respectable citizens, and through the way Obama is presented on screen. The presentation of a presidential product is achieved through a number of visual techniques, wardrobe choices, settings, music, and through cinematography.

Obama is seen on screen in two major ways throughout the film: in footage on the campaign trail and in his office while he addresses the camera. I have already discussed how he positions himself and how the camera positions his body in the office segments where he directly addresses his audience through the camera lens. The film also includes

several examples of Obama interacting with American voters in campaign speeches, town hall meetings, and in footage of him shaking hands and taking tours of facilities around the country. These segments, which are filmed with a photojournalistic style also differ in the way they portray Obama's physical body. In *Practices of Looking*, Sturken and Cartwright employ Laura Mulvey's concepts of voyeurism and expand on this to describe differences in empowered and passive subjects. They argue that subjects "depicted in action... negates attempts to objectify them because they are shown as powerfully within the frame" (88). Furthermore, as Obama is witnessed in these scenes, he is seemingly unaware of the presence of the camera. "A potentially objectifying gaze can be deflected in an image if the subject refuses to acknowledge it" (88). In this way, Obama's body remains unaffected by our objectifying gaze.



Fig. 5 – A voyeuristic gaze on the presidential body (AS:AS 6:32)

Just as these campaign trail footage segments seem “less scripted” than the office section, they still vary among themselves in how they put the presidential body on display. For example, footage of Obama taking questions among a group of twenty to thirty voters in a small room is in stark contrast to footage of Obama addressing the Democratic National Convention, although they both carefully display Obama in control of his voice and body.

After the introduction, the first “American story,” and Obama’s first office explanation of specific policies, a short segment is shown where Obama is seen listening to several potential voters and answering their questions (*AS:AS* 5:45 – 6:26). This scene is filmed in a similar style to the stories. It employs short shot durations, somewhat shaky camera movements, constantly adjusting focus, shallow depth of field, and the color temperature is more natural than the slightly warm tones of Obama’s office. Additionally this scene is comprised of mostly close ups of both Obama and the individuals he is communicating with. This setting is more intimate, and the cinematography helps create this intimacy. As Obama is getting to know these select few individuals, they are large within the frame. This portrait view allows us to see these people more as individuals, and less as passive, sexually objectified bodies.

In contrast, the footage of Obama making public speeches to large crowds represent a sort of middle ground in between the office segments and footage of Obama interacting with individuals. In the first major speech shown in the film, Obama is shown addressing the Democratic National Convention (*AS:AS* 3:51 – 4:15). Here, a photojournalistic style is used for the most part. Shots still have a fairly short shot

duration, the color temperature is natural, and the camera is still in motion, although slightly more controlled than in b-roll of the president meeting with his constituency. Here, more wide-angle shots are used - four out of the six shots during this short section are wide angles. These shots are used to witness the speech as event. They show Obama from behind addressing the stadium seating surrounding him and the grand stage on which he is the only actor. The wide angles here include as much of the scene as possible and are anything but intimate. Obama is a spectacle here, and as voyeurs we are allowed to take in his entire frame from several angles. The other two of the shots are taken from the same camera footage are medium shots, but certainly not as close as the camera gets to Obama during the town hall meeting later in the film.

This footage is particularly powerful as it reminds the viewer of the reality of Obama's campaign. It reminds the viewer of how they have most likely seen him before as a candidate and relate the rest of the film back to the actual presidential campaign and to their responsibility in the electoral process. Of course, all of these scenes, no matter what, must show Obama as a black man. These scenes with verisimilitude, show him as a *real* black man – one whom exists in the waking world, and who with their vote will make *real* changes to the country. These scenes show Obama as having enduring qualities that exist beyond this particular film. Just as his race precedes the film and endures after it, so must the audience's sense of his ability to lead, which his race may seem to challenge. Obama must present himself visually and materially as a strong, intelligent, effective leader despite his race.

Inhabiting a Presidential Body

We can use Angela Trethewey's "Disciplined Bodies: Women's Embodied Identities in the Workplace," to better understand how this constructed cognitive dissonance results in real constraints for Obama and his run for the White House. Obama's position in this film is similar to that of professional women, who also have bodies that are at odds with the professional identities that are expected in the workplace. Trethewey contends that for women, "inhabiting a professional body is a complex endeavor that requires thought, training, good choices, and even subconscious performances" (437). The film also has a similar endeavor in its presentation of Obama as a professional and effective leader. In order to persuade the largest number of American voters, the film must ensure that Obama presents an identity consistent with the presidency, especially since he does not fit the historical physical description.

As I mentioned in the last analysis chapter, Obama's control of the camera by keeping consistent eye contact with the audience through the lens is also an effective technique in displaying his confidence, competence, and the mastery of his own black body. Frantz Fanon describes a fearful moment in the black psyche that Obama seems to conquer in these segments:

And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man's eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims. In the white world the man of color encounters difficulties in the development of his bodily schema. Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity. It is a third-person consciousness. The body is

surrounded by certain uncertainty. Movement in this world creates a real dialectic between my body and the world. (63)

Obama is undoubtedly aware of these conflicts and barriers to entry into the white world of the presidency. He is however able to overcome. He does not falter under the close and lengthy scrutiny of these intense, long, and smooth camera movements which represent the close eye of the American public. We analyze his black form, looking for flaws and, as both he and his policies are represented in the film, it is difficult to identify any on the surface.



Fig. 6 – Positioning the presidential body (AS:AS 0:59)

A major aspect of the visual presentation of effective leadership exists in the control that Obama exerts over his own body, not just how he positions it, but how he

maintains it. In *Provocateur: Images of Women and Minorities in Advertising*, Anthony Cortese states that “Consciousness of one’s body as an object has three components: body surveillance, internalization of cultural body standards, and beliefs about the controllability of appearance” (55). In the way he carries himself in and outside of the film, his body surveillance and controllability of appearance are apparent. He also adheres to cultural body standards of the “athletic black man.” Similar to professional female bodies described by Tretheway, Obama must also present a “fit body” throughout the film. Tretheway contends that overweight female bodies in the workplace are seen as excessive, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable. Politicians undergo a similar scrutiny, especially those who may already be seen as “other.” Although any politician would rather portray a healthy and well-disciplined image, Obama’s physical fitness is especially important as an irrefutable visual fact. This acts as a major visual counterbalance to his dark skin. Both his well-maintained body and his dark complexion cannot be debated as they are both simple, visual facts displayed throughout the film: visual facts that form part of his personal and political identity. This fit political identity is similar to the challenges which Tretheway describes for women in the workplace: “a fit (as opposed to fat) body quite literally indicates that a woman is disciplined and in control. Second, a fit body is better able to perform the duties required of a professional woman” (430). Of course, having a fit body does help somewhat with the physical duties of a president, but the illustration of control is far more important.

This drive to maintain a fit body - of course - does not only apply to black politicians, but is a cultural fact that is innocuous throughout many aspects of

contemporary American life. “This omnipresent cult of the body is extraordinary. It is the only object on which everyone is made to concentrate, not as a source of pleasure, but as an object of frantic concern in the obsessive fear of failure or substandard performance” (Baudrillard qtd in Cortese 62). The film shows Obama as active, happy, and healthy – a person in complete control of his own body. As the audience, we are only permitted access to some physical aspects of his life. We can see him taking walking tours of a factory, playing with his daughters outside, and working at his desk. Enacting Foucault’s principal of reversal, we must look at what is excluded from the film. We are not allowed to see him eating fatty foods or smoking. The President is indeed a smoker, but due to the unhealthiness and social stigma of the activity, it is excluded from the film. Smoking is a messy and unintelligent activity and gives smokers the connotations of those who are powerless or lack the self respect to quit. This is certainly not the image Obama wants to project.

Not only would it be detrimental for Obama to project an unhealthy image as a politician, but this is especially true as a black politician. Just as it is absolutely necessary for Obama to prove his intelligence and eloquence because he is black, it is also necessary for him to conform to the physical ideals of the young black man. Given the racist stereotypes of the lazy and ignorant black man that still persist, it becomes imperative that Obama appear fit. A fat man may be able to overcome his image problem to be elected president, a black man be able to be elected president, but the chances of the overweight black man, however eloquent and intelligent he may be, seem quite small. However, the importance of fitness being stated, it is also important that Obama not seem

too physically domineering. Similar to smoking, another well-known fact about the presidential candidate was excluded from the film. If the film seeks to show that he is indeed fit, it would seem a natural conclusion to show one of the president's passions - playing basketball. Why then, did the filmmakers choose to exclude this part of his life that would express fitness, healthy competition, and leadership? Simply put, basketball is often thought of as a black sport, and rather than conjuring up images of a hard-working intellectual, it may display Obama as an average urban youth, undoing much of what the film achieves in other segments. It seems that Americans would like their president to score better than a thirty-seven on the bowling lanes, but perhaps not brag about his presence on the court.

Does the film then undermine his blackness? Does it make him seem too white? Unfortunately, these are questions that any black leader must contend with, and in the eyes of many, the answer is yes. The film does not attempt to directly change its audience's notions of black, but seeks to distance Obama from many voters' notions of the race. Of course, this changes with the audience. A politician can simultaneously be accused of being too black and not black enough. This is simply a fact that white politicians do not have to deal with as the "normal" majority. They are not given the burden of representing an entire race.

So we have seen that the *American Stories: American Solutions* seeks to portray a healthy, racially-neutral version of Obama, and does so purely through visuals. There is not a single point in the film where his health or race are directly addressed, however these are important issues. A visual display of Obama's fitness - and his apparent

blackness - is indeed only possible through a visual argumentation. This visual argumentation states that although he is black, he is still in control of his own body, voice, and mind. This control is seen as a positive notion, but is simultaneously constraining. Obama's identity is thus constructed through his physical body and its physical motions. Tretheway argues a similar point for women's professional identities: "professional and gendered discourses are quite literally written upon members' bodies in ways that often constrain and sometimes enable women's professional identities" (423). Obama's presentation of his own body in *American Stories: American Solutions* is likewise enslaved. He shows a great amount of discipline in the way he holds his body upright during the lengthy and complex descriptions of his proposed solutions. This control over his own body and vocalizations enable him to prove himself as a man capable of taking charge of the country.

The cinematography helps prove this point in similar ways to my previous discussion of the film's segments that take place in his office. As I stated earlier, the camera explores Obama's control, through long shot durations, and shot distances that frame the control of his own body, or - in close ups - the control of his own voice. In close ups, the shallow depth of field, focuses our attention to the candidate's control of his voice. The saturation and warm temperature of color, and smooth camera motions in these segments attempt to put the audience at ease with the idea of a black president. Likewise, these office segments are noticeably brighter than the four stories. This brightness attacks the audience's notion of the candidate's "blackness." Obama's body language, along with his speech and the framing techniques of the filmmakers, attempts

to make a visual refutative argument to the film's audience: Obama is indeed a capable and effective black leader.

However, did the film advance the fight against racism? Did it influence the American notion of "black?" There is a long history in American literature of black self-portrayal as part of the fight against racism. Bell Hooks, in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* discusses the importance of black creative works as a means of questioning the status quo. "Black artists concerned with producing work that embodies and reflects a liberatory politic know that an important part of any decolonization process is critical intervention and interrogation of existing repressive and dominating structures" (110). However there is another way to look at black creative influence as – at least partially - a means of forced assimilation. In *Writing and Difference*, Henry Louis Gates writes:

We black people tried to write ourselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage. Accepting the challenge of the great white Western tradition, black writers wrote as if their lives depended on it – and in a curious sense, their lives did, the "life of the race" in Western discourse. But if blacks accepted this challenge, we also accepted its premises, premises which perhaps concealed a trap. (13)

I believe this statement accurately allows us to answer the above question about the overall impact of the film on race, as well as questions about Obama's presentation of his own blackness. As presented in the film, Obama does indeed "accept the challenge of the great white Western tradition," and does so successfully. Likewise he also accepted the

premises and the resulting trap. A long history of racism and deeply ingrained notions of what it means to be black and what it means to be white cannot be escaped, not even by Barack Obama. To appear in control, to appear intelligent and eloquent - from a historical, socially constructed view - does indeed mean that he must appear less black. On some level, the film then tries to subjugate and control blackness, to force it to assimilate. However, the idea that whiteness owns notions of control, intelligence, and mastery of language is deeply flawed.

In the final verdict of what the film has done for race relations in America, the main evidence is not the film itself, but what it helped to achieve. Obama's subsequent election as the first black president, under any circumstances, is an enormously important milestone in American history; one that will be remembered for many years to come, and serves as yet another small bandage to a long history of injustice. Any film which played a small part to help our country reach that milestone is undoubtedly a positive influence on race overall.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ramifications for Rhetoric and Cinematography

The theories addressed in this thesis can also be expanded to other visual media. As a case study, this analysis of the cinematography of *American Stories: American Solutions* can be used to inform other examples of visual refutation. Cinematography can in fact be used as an appropriate rhetorical solution to problems that cannot be addressed through traditional verbal rhetoric. Cinematography is particularly relevant when there is a very limiting constraint in the rhetorical situation, to return to Bitzer's terms. Race is an especially difficult and unyielding constraint, but there are others, such as the perceptions of the wrongdoings of the energy industry. Even in recent history, a visual refutative argument was seen in the aftermath of the BP Gulf oil spill. As part of the company's public relations recovery effort, a commercial entitled *Making it Right* featured a BP executive who claims to be personally invested as a Gulf shore native. He is an African-American, pictured in blue jeans and a polo shirt, seemingly chosen to combat BP's image as British executives who have no interest in the Gulf coast's economy or environment. His verbal claim is supported by refutative visuals, in other words. This is just one recent example of how the ideas presented in this thesis have a great deal to offer other visual rhetorical texts.

Another example of a visual refutative argument can be seen in a GE advertisement for "Clean Coal." The commercial, titled *Model Miners*, features attractive models working in a coal mine and states "now, thanks to emissions-reducing technology

from GE Energy, harnessing the power of coal is looking more beautiful every day.” This choice of words obviously plays with the visual tactics being employed by the commercial - without undermining their persuasiveness. The commercial literally makes an unattractive resource more attractive. Likewise, cinematography helps with this persuasiveness through slow motion shots, changes in focus, shallow depth of field, and close up framing which allows the audience to analyze and enjoy the attractive bodies on display. The ad’s use of the song *Sixteen Tons* adds a whole new and possibly conflicting level of analysis, which I will not attempt to address here. These examples may not be as powerful in their effect as the refutative visual rhetoric of *American Stories: American Solutions*, but they show how cinematic techniques can be employed in other contexts as counter-arguments.

Based on the rich theories of film and of rhetoric, and the available materials that tie the two fields together, I believe that further research into how the two fields relate is needed. This is not as important to prove a certain cinematographic grammar, as Christian Metz would advocate, but as an alternative view for both fields.

Cinematography is rhetorical. Specific shots are chosen and elements are adjusted to entertain or persuade audiences. Rhetorical theory offers a unique set of terms that can help with the study of cinematography. Using a rhetorical lens, further research could help explain cinematographic choices in storyboarding films in pre-production, overcoming unforeseen constraints to cinematography in the field, and de/selection choices made in the editing room.

Likewise, cinematography has a great deal to offer rhetorical pedagogy. Few visual mediums are so complex and interdependent as cinematography. This offers the study of visual rhetoric illustrations that are rich and intricate, as well as memorable and interesting to students. Furthermore, as I have shown in this thesis, cinematography can be used as a rhetorical technique to address issues that cannot be addressed verbally. This is a unique form of rhetoric which certainly deserves further research.

American Stories: American Solutions is of course an important example of how rhetorical cinematography works in a political documentary and is a prime illustration of why this matters. Although the cinematography of the film is only one aspect of the rhetorical argument, it does indeed play a vital and irreplaceable role in the rhetorical organization of the film and works as a refutative visual argument displaying Obama's ability to be an effective black leader.

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APPENDIX A

Elements of Cinematography

These terms are compiled from the following sources: *Cinematography*, by Kris Malkiewicz, *The Complete Film Dictionary*, by Ira Konigsberg, and *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, edited by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson. I have tried to make this list both short and comprehensive, although an infinite number of other special effects are certainly possible.

shot duration - the temporal length of each individual shot

distance to subject - extreme close up, close up, medium, wide, or extreme wide shot

angle to subject - frontal shot, $\frac{3}{4}$ angle, profile shot, low, or high angle

focus of subject - sharp, blurred, or shifting

*depth of field** - shallow or deep

level of camera motion - still, slight, smooth, or shaky

*type of camera motion** - still, pan, tilt, tracking, dollying, shoulder, steadicam, or zoom

color saturation - full color or black and white

color temperature - warmer or cooler colors

*light level** - light, normal, or dark

*style of lighting** - studio or natural

speed - full speed, slow motion, or photograph

Further explanation of terms:

*Depth of field is the amount of the frame that is in focus at one time. A shallow depth of field indicates that only a small amount of the frame is in focus, whereas a deep depth of field indicates that all or most of the objects within the frame are in focus.

*A tracking shot indicates the camera moving left or right, which is not to be confused with a panning shot. A dollying shot indicates the camera moving towards or away from the subject, not to be confused with a zoom. A shoulder-mounted camera is distinct from a steadicam-mounted camera in the amount of smooth motion that is seen on screen.

More than one category can be selected for this aspect. For example many shots in the film include tracking, zoom, and pans simultaneously.

*The overall light level can be achieved through several different parts of the production and post-production process, including the shutter speed, aperture settings, gain, and changes in gamma or contrast, among others.

*Natural lighting includes any lighting not in existence for the purpose of video production. For example, sunlight, lighting inside people's homes, and the lights set up for a nighttime speech would still all be "natural" – that is they are *diegetic* lights and exist within the actual world portrayed in the film. Whereas lights not seen within the frame that exist for the sole purpose of the camera would be categorized as studio lighting.