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Manipulation as breach of arguer responsibility in *Welcome to Obamaville*

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ABSTRACT: Argumentation should encourage autonomous decision-making. Rick Santorum's political campaign ad *Welcome to Obamaville* violates this requirement by deploying a flood of subliminal images. Santorum's ad involves a fallacy by virtue of clear intent to manipulate. Arguers are responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their action. Santorum acts in bad faith even if subliminal messages are in fact ineffective and he is wrong about the consequences foreseen.

KEYWORDS: autonomy, manipulation, subliminal messages, political campaign advertising, priming, responsibility

1. INTRODUCTION

One fundamental value on which rests the rationale for argumentation is respect for the autonomy of persons. Persons have a right, even a duty, to make informed choices and to exercise their powers of rational self-government. And when anyone undertakes to get another person to believe, say, or do something, it should be undertaken in a way that preserves and even encourages that person's intellectual autonomy. There may be other reasons to value argumentation (e.g., truth-seeking, intersubjective alignment), but this ethical value has its own distinctive and central role to play in its rationale.

Manipulation fails to uphold the value of individual autonomy. It depends for its end not on obtaining an independent intellectual assessment of the grounds for belief or action, but on controlling the basis for inference and choice in a way that circumvents and nullifies the targeted actor's own assessment of that basis. Now, threats and bribes are often thought of as a kind of manipulation—and that is probably one reason why argumentation theorists are suspicious of their use and tend to treat them as fallacies. But threats and bribes are not purely manipulative. In coercion and corruption, the person is aware that a structure of punishments or rewards is in force and understands the contingent relationship between that structure and the person's choice of expressed belief and conduct. Indeed, to be effective, threats and bribes depend upon awareness and instrumentally rational choice. Manipulation is most cleanly illustrated not by pointing to compelling

threats or irresistible inducements, but by considering acts of control that depend on the manipulated person remaining ignorant of why they infer or decide as they do and unaware of how their seemingly free choice has been set up.

The concept of manipulation and its normative prohibition raises important issues for argumentation theory. For instance, if we think of manipulation in terms of fallacies we quickly come to see that manipulation is not a cut and dried matter. It is instead a matter of degree and aspect. Sometimes in some ways manipulation will be objectionable; other times or in other ways not so much or even not at all. In conceptualizing what is wrong with manipulation we will also have to reconcile its presumptive prohibition with the fact that, in some ways and to some degree, manipulation is an inevitable quality of the very communicative acts and deliberative situations in which argumentation occurs. Even if only as an unintended consequence, unavoidable side effect, or paternalistic paradox, it is always there. Or again, much of what is manipulative occurs as the groundwork and scaffolding for how we conduct arguments, how we take arguments, and how we respond to arguments—but it does not occur as arguments per se or even as aspects of arguments. Manipulation, by its very nature, blurs the line between act and effect, between omission and commission, between text and context, between implication and inference, and between the logical and propositional and the psychological and motivational. Describing what manipulation is and explaining how it works may well require us to address matters that elude the concepts and models of traditional argumentation frameworks. Clear thinking about manipulation opens an opportunity for fruitful thinking about these issues and may also offer lessons for how to think about these issues more generally.

In this paper, I propose to look at some real-life cases of manipulation in argument—cases that pretty clearly exhibit the essential qualities of interest. They are found in that paramount environment for post-Orwellian technologies of persuasion: Televised political advertisements in American presidential campaigns. I propose examining two cases. In both cases, the message strategies are not available for conscious inspection or reflective consideration—at least, not readily and not through face value inspection.

2. RICK SANTORUM'S *WELCOME TO OBAMAVILLE*

On Tuesday, April 10, 2012, former U. S. Senator Rick Santorum announced the suspension of his campaign for the Republican Party nomination to run as candidate for President of the United States. It was two weeks before the primary election was to be held in his home state of Pennsylvania. The polls were turning against him (Moody, 2012). The campaign had run out of money, his three-year-old daughter had spent Easter in the hospital with a degenerative genetic condition, and GOP leaders for some time had been calling on Santorum to drop out and get behind the inevitable nomination of Mitt Romney (Jacobs, 2012; Seelye & Rutenberg, 2012).

Just eighteen days earlier, on March 23, Santorum had unveiled, *Welcome to Obamaville* (Santorum for President, 2012). The campaign advertisement had been heralded as the first in a series of eight episodes (which were never produced). Instead of broadcasting on television channels, the video was posted on Santorum's

YouTube website where it was marked as “unlisted” so that no one without the URL address could find it. Selected media sources were invited to take an exclusive first look. Then, campaign manager Michael Biundo tweeted the link address. The video went viral. It was posted on websites across the blogosphere. The video was *Visible Measure’s* top political ad for the week ending April 1 (no fooling), getting 588,299 hits on YouTube alone. It had ranked second the previous week, receiving 226,475 hits after being posted for just the final three days (Hanrahan, 2012a, 2012b).

Variouly described by news reports as ominous, eerie, scary, stark, creepy, but most of all, controversial, the 64-second video was created in the style of a movie trailer. It paints in dismal blue-green palette a dystopian portrait of small town (read: white) America two years from now should Barack Obama be re-elected President. As a series of bleak images pass across the screen accompanied by spooky off-key music, a Rod Serling-type narrator intones in *Twilight Zone* fashion:

Imagine a small American town, two years from now, if Obama is re-elected. Small businesses are struggling. And families are worried about their jobs and their future. The wait to see a doctor is ever increasing. Gas prices through the roof. And their freedom of religion under attack. And every day, the residents of this town must come to grips with the harsh reality that a rogue nation, and sworn American enemy, has become a nuclear threat. Welcome to a place where one president’s failed policies really hit home. Welcome to Obamaville. More than a town, a cautionary tale. Coming soon to RickSantorum.com.

The trailer ends with a campy, 1950’s horror film signature (“Welcome to Obamaville”) as the audience peers out an automobile windshield, driving through the woods down bended black highway, into the dark of night.

The title plays off the shanty towns dubbed “Hooverilles” after then-President Herbert Hoover, who presided over the first years of America’s fall into the Great Depression. The images show us that this too is where Obama is taking us: Empty streets and empty playgrounds; boarded-up businesses and layoffs; Dust Bowl scenes of glum, still children in worn gingham dresses sitting outside houses with peeling paint. Soaring gas prices are driving people to suicide. The candlelight of religious freedom has been blown out. Obamacare hospitals feel like Soviet-era psychiatric institutions with dimly lit concrete-block hallways, missing patients, and menacing surgeons. Waves of Men in Black march in lockstep. Blank young couples and the elderly alike stare, frozen in *American Gothic* frames. The hands of the Doomsday Clock spin toward nuclear Armageddon as piles of televisions stacked in fallout shelters tune in to scratchy pictures of flag-burning Arab mobs. A bomb-hungry demonic Iranian president assembles crowds of jihadists and smirks at us from the screen. Even the children’s PlayStation game TV projects the images. And all the while, people in pews pray, Obama stands at the pulpit, Wall Street bankers drink in celebration, piggy banks go bust, and we are told to hush.¹

Most of the attention that the video received from news outlets focused on these over-the-top images seemingly drawn from some apocalyptic nightmare (cf.

¹ A PowerPoint series of distinct images with time duration is available from the author. A nearly complete set (without timestamps) can be seen online from Leggi in Italiano (2012).

CNN, 2012; Seelye, 2012). How to make sense of the images was clearly problematic. The mainstream press dutifully reported the video's face value content, summarizing the narrator's argument and noting that the imagery suggested something menacing and grim. But there was much that defied straightforward argumentative summary (of the sort, e.g., that an Obama presidency will lead to unemployment and economic depression; that the threat of international terrorism and upheaval will increase; that Iran will get the bomb). How do we make sense of images of cawing crows, a ghostly tree with pulsing eyes of light, surgeons saturated in Hellish red light, or a red-suited baby in white bassinette? Why is a woman giving a finger shush? Why show an unblinking eye? The interpretive problem seemed to be that the images did not really function as evidence or proof of the narrator's assertions. Rather, they seemed designed to grab the audience's attention, to activate and amplify what Santorum supporters already intuited, to reinforce viscerally held associations, to evoke feelings and to provoke action. Illustrations of claims can serve as a sort of clarification of emotional meaning—but much of the imagery didn't illustrate claims at all. It seemed only to give presence to emotion ungrounded in any claim.

Not surprisingly, bloggers had a field day searching for sources of symbolism. The army of Men in Black alluded to the self-replicating Agent Smiths in the movie, *Matrix Reloaded*. The crow in the beginning scene was borrowed from the opening credits for HBO's *Six Feet Under*. Those perched in bare trees echoed Alfred Hitchcock's thriller, *The Birds*. The Doomsday wall clock spun like the clock from the opening of the TV classic, *The Twilight Zone*. The empty carousel and child's dropped shoe echoed Sarah Connor's nightmare of a playground obliterated by a nuclear bomb in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*. (cf. Abramavitch, 2012; Blodget, 2012; Omnivore, 2012; Richwine & Baker, 2012). Exactly how locating cinematic allusions helped make sense of particular scenes was never very clear, but it was clearly fun.

Understandably, the ad was commonly condemned as demagogic fear mongering. Some supporters applauded the ad as a bold if Quixotic bid to awaken and alert citizens of the Republic to imminent danger. The mainstream media mostly just dismissed it as the desperate cry of a dying campaign fading into irrelevance (Jacobs, 2012; Shapiro, 2012; Sorensen, 2012).

3. 'RATS' REDUX

One segment of the ad drew special attention. Virtually upon release, *Politico* blogger Dylan Byers noticed that a picture of Barack Obama was spliced into a picture of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (Byers, 2012a; 2012b). It looked to be a genuinely subliminal message. At 40 seconds into the ad, the face of the Iranian president appears on the screen of a game TV. The face of President Obama flashes two tenths of a second later, lasting for one tenth of a second (three frames). And this occurs just as the narrator pauses after saying, "and sworn American enemy." The narrator completes his sentence ("has become a nuclear threat") when the face of Ahmadinejad reappears for another 0.367 seconds (including interjection of one 33 msec frame of black screen) before shifting to a different Ahmadinejad picture. Splicing Obama into Ahmadinejad seemed to suggest somehow that Obama is an

enemy of America, but also, perhaps, a Muslim, a dictator, maybe even the Antichrist himself. He smiles because he pals around with terrorists, or at least he approves of them. All are familiar memes started in the 2008 election and continued through Obama's first term in office. People inclined to believe these things could find themselves being subconsciously reminded of them and putting them into play.

The flash of Obama is so brief that a viewer is apt to not even notice it. It is further masked by all the picture glitches and camera seizures that occur throughout the video. Warped and dissolving images, picture flutter and flicker, rolling frame bars, and quick cut white flashes and blackouts all work to make it seem that the blink of Obama is just one more visual twitch or jerk. In fact, a viewer may have to repeatedly play back that segment to finally see that Obama appears in it. It is physically possible to perceive the image if you are looking for it, but it pretty clearly skates along the threshold of perceptual awareness and would probably be subliminal for most viewers. Anyone can go to YouTube to check this for themselves or to check it against a naïve viewer.

It is interesting to notice how the image insertion works with unfolding syntactic ambiguities in the narration ("that a rogue nation, and sworn American enemy, (.) has become a nuclear threat"). "American enemy" can mean either an enemy of America or an enemy who is American. Obama could be either, but only Obama could serve as referent for the latter sense. And so long as the narrator's pause withholds the upcoming verb, "and" can indicate two distinct referents (one "a rogue nation," another a "sworn American enemy"). "Has" does resolve the ambiguity (agreeing only with a singular subject). But, even when resolved, online sentence processing leaves residual effects from any initial misinterpretation (cf. Levy, 2008; Patson, et al, 2009). And flashing a picture of Obama would be one way to elicit such a misinterpretation.

Now, the claim that the video presents a subliminal message like this raises a different kind of issue from the claim that, say, the presence of demonic forces is suggested by the scene of an eye that follows the television pictures of Ahmadinejad. The eye scene gradually brightens to reveal that the eye is not human, but reptilian (or is it demonic?). Then the scene ends in the same kind of bleach-white flash that suggested a nuclear blast at the end of the empty spinning carousel scene. The meaning of all this can be articulated, its interpretative effects evaluated, its relevance and import assessed. It can be done because at least something is there that is openly available for conscious reflection and intersubjective discussion. But that is not true of a subliminal message. A subliminal message is designed to hide its effects, to avoid inspection, and to obstruct any critical check. It raises the ugly specter of manipulation wholly independent of any problems one might have with the meaning or function of the imagery itself.

Bloggers widely reported Byers' discovery, mentioning its subliminal quality as well as its apparently offensive content (cf., Digby, 2012; B. Johnson, 2012; Re, 2012; Weigel, 2012). David Folkenflik of National Public Radio and Alex Johnson of MSNBC also picked up on the subliminal message angle. Johnson (M. A. Johnson, 2012) pointedly suggested that the ad was reminiscent of the notorious 2000 RNC campaign spot for George Bush, known as 'RATS' (Republican National Committee, 2000). Interestingly, a third mainstream news outlet was Christine Poe, columnist

for the conservative but Pro-Romney *Washington Times*. She described the Obama-in-Ahmadinejad splicing as an attempt to “subliminally make the Iranian president and our President the same person, the one the ad calls the ‘sworn American enemy’.” She also called the ad a “smear” and wondered if it would backfire.

Not surprisingly, the Santorum campaign denied everything. Spokesperson Hogan Gidley called “ridiculous” and “absurd” the idea that the interspersed images were meant to suggest that Obama and Ahmadinejad were somehow the same. “We’d be a whole lot more deliberate if that’s what we were trying to do,” video producer John Brabender protested. “The intent was to show that there will be a constant threat back and forth between the United States if they have nuclear capability. . . . To see [a conflation of Obama and Ahmadinejad] would be to see something that was not intended to be there in any way. And there’s nothing in there that says ‘Buy Popcorn’ either” (Byers, 2012b).²

Denials weren’t really needed, however, because most of the mainstream news media never even raised the charge of subliminal influence. The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, Reuters, NBC, and CNN all reported the Obama-in-Ahmadinejad segment, but none used the term “subliminal.” Instead, the images were described as “quickly interspersed,” “switching back and forth,” “quickly flashing” between alternating images, or as “flickering” from one to the other. Nothing was written to indicate that most people would not have even noticed that Obama’s picture had flashed by. And only CNN suggested that Obama’s image was timed to appear at the end of the phrase “sworn American enemy.”

4. ‘RATS’

This lack of interest in any subliminal message in Santorum’s *Welcome to Obamaville* stood in stark contrast to the widespread consternation when the Bush ‘RATS’ ad was exposed. On August 20, 2000, the Republican National Committee first ran a 30 second TV spot on behalf of presidential candidate George W. Bush (officially titled, *Priority*). It aired 4,400 times in 30 television markets until September 12 (Stewart, 2008). The ad promoted Bush’s Medicare drug prescription plan and attacked Al Gore’s drug benefit plan. Alex Castellanos produced the ad. In 1990 he had written and produced for Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina the notorious race-baiting campaign commercial, *White Hands*. In that ad, a pair of white hands tears up a rejection letter as the narrator says: “You needed that job, but they had to give it to a minority because of racial quotas” (Castellanos, 1990). His RNC commercial became known as ‘RATS’ after it was discovered that in a single 1/30th second frame the word was flashed in large bold capital letters. The frame occurs toward the end of the ad as the narrator turns to attack the Gore Medicare plan:

² Brabender was alluding to James Vicary’s infamous hoax where he claimed that subliminal frames of “Drink Coca-Cola” and “Eat Popcorn” inserted into a movie led the audience to do so (Rogers, 1993).

Gore opposed bipartisan reform. He's pushing a big government plan that lets Washington bureaucrats interfere with what your doctors prescribe. The Gore Prescription Plan: Bureaucrats Decide. The Bush Prescription Plan: Seniors Choose.

As a visual highlight to the narration, the phrase 'The Gore Prescription Plan' appears in white font across the middle third of a black screen. Over the course of the next six frames (.2 secs) the phrase 'BUREAUCRATS DECIDE' is "jump-cut" underneath. In one frame the bottom half of UREAU extends across the top of the screen. Then BUREACRATS DECIDE appears in small font on the left half of the top border of the screen. The next frame contains the bottom half of BUR in the upper right hand corner of the screen. In the fourth frame the small font BUREACRATS DECIDE again appears, now centered in the bottom right quadrant of the screen. Next, the word 'RATS' appears in the center of the screen, and in font so large that it fills the center third area of the screen, extends almost its entire width, and covers "The Gore Prescription Plan." The next frame contains 'BUREAUCRATS DECIDE' in place, with font sized so as to line up widthwise with "The Gore Prescription Plan." Simple inspection shows that the 'RATS' frame had to have been deliberately produced and deliberately inserted into the video (cf. Stewart, 2008).

Retired Boeing technical writer, Gary Greenup, thought he noticed something when he first watched the ad in Seattle. He recorded then replayed it, and alerted the King County Democratic Party (Stewart, 2008). Somehow, Fox News' *Special Report with Brit Hume* first reported the story. During its roundtable section, host Tony Snow previewed a freeze frame display by commenting, "Take a look at this. This is really cool." Two weeks later, when the Gore campaign sent a copy of the Greenup tape to *The New York Times*, the story ran on its front page. The rest of the news media then picked it up and went into a frenzy of consternation (Berke, 2000). ABC, CNN, and MSNBC all led that evening's news with the 'RATS' story while CBS and NBC also ran full stories in their second slot. NBC's *Today*, ABC's *Good Morning America*, and CBS's *The Early Show* all covered the story the following morning (Baker, 2000). None of these news sources thought that the 'RATS' ad was cool.

Castellanos insisted the occurrence of the word was "purely accidental" and denied any intention to influence subliminally. He called the word's appearance part of "a visual drumbeat" meant to grab the viewer's attention, not to send any message (Berke, 2000; Democrats smell a rat, 2000). Bush himself called "ridiculous" the idea that the ad contained a subliminal message and stated, "One frame out of 900 hardly, in my judgment, makes a conspiracy." The news media left the issue suspended between two virtually unanimous conclusions. On the one hand, no professional believed that the frame could have been accidental. It was obviously carefully produced. Each scene of the jump-cut must have been checked by multiple parties in the editing process. On the other hand, everyone knows that subliminal messages don't work and the advertising industry is insistent that no serious professional would bother to use one (cf. Barone, 2000; Berke, 2000; Montgomery, 2000). In any case, the RNC pulled the ad after Democratic senators Ron Wyden of Oregon and John Breaux of Louisiana called for an FCC investigation (Stewart, 2008).

Federal Communications Commission stated policy is to deplore subliminal advertising techniques in broadcasting. Genuinely subliminal images are defined as those “below the threshold of normal awareness” (Tristani, 2001). Its 1974 Public Notice declares that the use of such techniques is “inconsistent with the obligations” of licensed broadcasters and that “broadcasts employing such techniques are contrary to the public interest. Whether effective or not, such broadcasts clearly are intended to be deceptive” (Tristani, 2001). But this is not a regulation. Even if it were, the FCC only has regulatory authority over licensees who broadcast over public airwaves; not advertisers or cable broadcasters (Furchtgott-Roth, 2000). Moreover, there is no practical way to apply such an ill-defined standard (Furchtgott-Roth, 2000). In the case of the Bush “RATS” ad, 90% of the broadcasters didn’t notice the frame. They could hardly be punished for broadcasting something they didn’t know was there. And the other 10% who did notice the frame thought that meant it was not subliminal. And so, there the issue dropped.

5. RETURN TO *OBAMAVILLE*

At the time, reporters and pundits simply assumed that *Welcome to Obamaville* was internet-only for financial reasons (Black, 2012). Its peculiar form of exclusive access was taken to be a strategy to gain buzz in the blogosphere. Journalists took at face value video producer Brabender’s explanation: “It’s just a little teaser to get people to start watching our episodes and do it in a way that piques their interest. It’s all about driving traffic to the Web site” (Seelye, 2012). Why other, far less attention-grabbing ads were broadcast in primary states was a question no one asked. A few writers did notice that Santorum did not explicitly endorse the ad. The video failed to include what would be a mandatory tagline had it been shown on TV: “I’m Rick Santorum and I approved this message” (cf. Doyle, 2012). But no one suggested this might have something to do with FCC policy.

Maybe it was because the news media considered the Santorum campaign already all but dead. Maybe it was because reporters did not want to be played for suckers and help Santorum revive his campaign by promoting his “umbrage bait” (Shapiro, 2012; Weigel, 2012). Maybe there was just too much wiggle room with the whole package of jagged, fast-cut production techniques to pin down for sure an intentional use of a subliminal technique. Or maybe any message that was being conveyed “subliminally” was just too obscure for the charge to be articulated. Images are vague like that. The meaning of print words like ‘RATS’ or print phrases like ‘Drink Coca-Cola’ is much more easily explained and their point much more easily established. In any case, the mainstream news media did not push the charge that there was an attempt to subliminally influence the viewer by splicing in the image of Obama just after the narrator said “sworn American enemy.”

Still, one has to wonder if caution did not enter into the calculation to stay on the web. It took the amateurs (myself included), with their video editing software, to actually break down the video into 33 millisecond long frames in order to see that, if there was an accident in the Obama-in-Ahmadinejad cut, the accident was that the Obama shot had been left too long or had been insufficiently masked. It turns out that *Welcome to Obamaville* overflows with subliminal and barely perceptible

images, so many that there can be no plausible denial of intent to influence subliminally, even if no one can agree on how that influence was supposed to work (cf. Blodgett, 2012; Editor, 2012; Novak, 2012; Omnivore, 2012; Pamela, 2012; Red Tory, 2012). What follows is a list of all the scenes that are so brief as to evade clear awareness.

At about 11 seconds, there is a series of fast-cut scenes of two- and three-frame length (each frame = 1/30th sec, or 33 msec). The scene of the empty spinning carousel ends in a bright flash that immediately cuts to the scene of the child's empty shoe. Following the empty shoe are three frames of some kind of swirl as seen from behind an automobile windshield (dust, rain, wind?). Is it the pressure blast from a nuclear bomb? Why is it there? Then come two frames of a person's eye looking in the camera before the video cuts to black. This is followed by two frames looking up at a white fenced porch where an aproned mother stands behind her blonde grade school daughters in church-best white dresses (twins?). This cuts to two frames of a smoke-filled backroom scene of grinning, cigar-chomping men huddled under a glaring light around a table filled with ashtrays, newspapers, take-out coffee cups, and notepaper. Political kingmakers after polls have closed? Next come three frames of a white man in prison orange jumpsuit, standing in the shadows of his jail bars, illuminated by the glow of security lights outside. Next come two frames of a baby in red bodysuit lying on its back, seen from above its bassinette. Because there is an immediate cut to black, the red-suited baby image is not masked. But the other scenes are barely trackable, let alone recognizable. Following the scene of the red-lipsticked woman making a finger shush, at 16 seconds, there is a single frame of a staring eye.

At 52 seconds, the video accelerates through a flurry of images in grand finale fashion. Four frames of a prison guard tower are followed by four frames of a little blond girl running away in the woods, then four frames of an eye looking downward. A mob of Middle Eastern men with an Iraqi flag is shown for three frames followed by four frames of a mob holding a poster of Ahmadinejad with "Israel must be wiped out the world" written on the bottom (Try reading that in real time). Next there are four frames of the face of a bearded Arab protester chanting.

At 53 seconds, the flash of frames accelerates further: There are two dark frames of a prison guard closing a cell door; then three frames of ocean waves crashing against a rocky shoreline. Two frames repeat the long dim medical hallway scene. Then for three frames the screen is filled with an image of hamburger being pushed out of a meat grinder. Next flashes two frames of the Capital building, bleached in a red tint. Three frames show a close-up of the chin and mouth of a white woman, her lower lip scabbed from a cut. Next follow two frames of the swollen face of an angry black man, Barack Obama. (Beaten-up white girl—angry black man, get it?) The next two frames are seething dark with red. (Get it now?) Next is a single 33 msec frame of a disgusted woman, the camera lens stretching her face into a distorted caricature--Nancy Pelosi with glasses? Some kind of *Chick Comics* character? (Omnivore, 2012; Pamela, 2012). Next follows a single frame repeat of the woman shushing—this time in the red glow motif. Then comes a single frame zoom-in on an eye. An earlier picture of Ahmadinejad now is shown in red filter for two frames, followed immediately by a single frame of the same earlier

flash of Barack Obama smiling—also in red filter. More single frames show the edge of some kind of ribbon of red light above black (a nuclear blast at night?) and then what might be an x-ray negative of a metal suitcase. An earlier picture of the red-suited baby in a white bassinet is now bathed in red light for three frames before everything cuts to black. The final nine seconds of the video present the closing signature as the narrator concludes: “Welcome to Obamaville. More than a town, a cautionary tale. Coming soon to RickSantorum.com.”

Making sense of these images, determining what they represent or evoke, and how they might play a role in the rhetorical design of this campaign ad is not something we need to do with any great certainty to see that something has gone very, very wrong. We do not need to understand exactly what all these things are doing to see that things like these are there all too often for it all to be some accidental coincidence.

In fact, the seemingly nonpropositional, imprecise, associative and evocative quality of all these images is perfectly compatible with subliminal processing—if there is such a thing as subliminal processing. Calling out emotions of fear, anxiety, anger, disgust, and dread would all fit the overt message in this ad and would not need clear and determinate meanings to be called out. And saturating scenes in red light, flashing a close-up of a staring eye, or pushing ground meat out the TV screen would seem to promote just the kind of visceral reaction that doesn’t need reflective interpretation. The source of an emotion need not have much to do with the object that an emotion comes to consciously latch onto once that emotion is activated. And any disconnect between source and object of emotion is all that much easier to rationalize if the source is not retrievable for conscious analysis. Likewise, images of prisons or frightened little girls running away from something in the dark woods need not express any clear propositional content in order to activate a network of categories, stereotypes, and attitudes that would make a viewer more receptive to the overt claims that are being made clearly in this ad. That would also be the case with subliminal juxtapositions. It is also not too hard to understand what a political persuader might be up to by splicing a picture of Obama into Ahmadinejad (i.e., into someone who readily calls up for many conservative Republicans categories like “Muslim,” “terrorist,” “anti-Semite,” “enemy,” or “antichrist”). Nor is it too hard to understand how racial fears and stereotypes might be activated by juxtaposing a picture of a white girl’s split lip with a picture of an angry black man (a man who also happens to be the subject of the overt argumentative message in the video).

6. INTENTION & EFFECT IN MANIPULATION

Of course, if conventional scientific wisdom is to be believed, subliminal messages don’t work. Using subliminal imagery is like taking homeopathic medicines, sticking pins in voodoo dolls, or using dowsing rods to find water. Subliminal messages have no real persuasive effects. You can look it up on *Wikipedia* (Subliminal stimuli, 2013). The public’s fascination with their possibility and fear of their deployment was born from an advertising agency’s publicity hoax in 1957, an obsession no doubt prepared by a decade that brought the Red Scare, Communist brainwashing techniques, and rumors of Soviet ESP experiments (Acland, 2011; Pratkanis, 1992;

Rogers, 1992). This is now the 21st Century, so it's probably not time to pull out the tin foil hats.

But this is not really a good reason to feel sanguine. The general literature on the "affect heuristic" (Slovic, et al, 2002) and on preconscious priming effects (Merikle, Smilek & Eastwood, 2001; Nobuaki & Zacharias, 2012) both suggest that much goes on without awareness that can influence what goes on within awareness. Moreover, two specific studies should give us all pause. Stewart and Schubert (2006) conducted on Election Day 2000 an experiment using Bush's "RATS" ad with and without the subliminal "RATS" frame. You won't find much better naturalistic, external validity than that. The study found that subjects exposed to the subliminal "RATS" frame were significantly more likely to approve the Republican's Medicare program, showed significantly diminished trust in Democrats compared to Republicans, and were significantly less likely to vote for Al Gore. In a later study, Weinberger and Westen (2008) had subjects evaluate a hypothetical political candidate whose photograph was preceded by a subliminal flash of the word RATS. Subliminal flashes of the words ARAB, STAR or just XXXX served as contrasting control conditions. The RATS condition again showed a significant effect, this time uniquely eliciting negative ratings of the candidate. While effect sizes in priming experiments (including these two) are usually small, it is worth remembering that Al Gore lost election to the Presidency of the United States because he lost the state of Florida by less than 600 votes. Market research concluded that in Florida 3,785,510 viewers were exposed to the 'RATS' ad (Stewart, 2008).

Still, for the purposes of argument, let's assume that conventional wisdom is correct, and any subliminal "message" located in *Welcome to Obamaville* received no real uptake and wasn't really a message at all. Should that change our assessment of the ad to one of indifference, at least as far as those so-called "messages" are concerned? I don't think so. Regardless of whether or not undertaking to influence subliminally is always ineffective, is silly and should not be taken seriously, the would-be influencer thinks such an undertaking can be effective and takes it seriously. It is hard to see what other reason there might be for all the work of inserting all this imagery into the advertisement. If the Santorum campaign had simply wanted to create a publicity buzz about the subliminal images, the media strategists would have made sure to bring those images to the attention of the mainstream news. But no such sources appear to have been tipped off. Most websites and news outlets took the ad presentation at face value and made no mention of the insertion of any of the fast-flash or subliminal imagery found by bloggers other than the one flash of Obama in the Ahmadinejad television picture. And rather than using discovery of that flash to draw investigative reporters down the trail for more, the Santorum campaign seemed perfectly satisfied to laugh off suspicions and kill it all with ridicule.

Indeed, it is difficult to see how any politician or campaign manager, no matter how desperate, would think that it would be politically advantageous to gain public attention by letting the public know that you were targeting them with subliminal imagery. Not even the followers of Rick Santorum would feel comfortable with the idea that the sweater-vested evangelical Christian was treating them like an army of zombies. So, video producer John Brabender and the Santorum ad team

must have been genuinely undertaking to have some persuasive effect by using images that people can barely see or not even see at all. There must have been an intention to manipulate. There must have been an intention to achieve acceptance of a claim (“You should vote for Rick Santorum” or “You should act to prevent the re-election of Barack Obama”) by affecting judgment and inference in a way that would escape notice and avoid critical consideration.

7. CONCLUSION: BREACHES OF RESPONSIBILITY

Even if subliminal messages are in fact or in principle ineffectual, the fact of their deployment suggests that the candidate and the campaign were acting in bad faith. Santorum entered into democratic deliberation with disregard for a constitutive principle of the act of argument. That principle is this: *Audience members are autonomous agents who engage in rational decision-making.* This principle is a pragmatic precondition for argument. It makes no sense to argue with people who are unable or unwilling to exercise rational autonomy. To argue is to present oneself as assuming that this precondition is satisfied.

This principle is also a normative obligation. People are obligated to ensure that this condition is satisfied as a consequence of their actions. People have a responsibility to see to it that those who deserve treatment as rational agents are so treated. That responsibility extends to the foreseeable consequences of one’s actions. And the Santorum campaign apparently foresaw a quite different treatment.

And this principle is a social presumption. People are entitled to assume that, unless there is good reason to think otherwise, other people respect this obligation. People trust one another not to engage in manipulation.

The subliminal act of manipulation in argument is an especially vicious abuse of principle. Not only does subliminal manipulation disregard this moral obligation by treating people as less than rational agents; it does so in a way that exploits their presumption and trust that the communicator is in fact respecting that obligation. By making an argument in the first place (as in this ad’s narration), an arguer openly presents himself as treating viewers as autonomous agents whose rational powers are being appealed to. So, by undertaking to manipulate, even should that undertaking be ineffective, the would-be manipulator like Rick Santorum acts with vicious disregard for the democratic deliberation he pretends to respect.

Bad faith like this has implications for character and not just for arguments. Trust is in character, and arguers who disregard the obligation to uphold their trust deform deliberation and debate—both in the moment and in general. How, exactly, to repair damage to the preconditions for argumentation is an open question. But detection and exposure is a first step in any system of self-regulation. It may not be sufficient, but it is necessary so long as there are not foolproof means of preventing damage. Unfortunately, if the news media fail to publicize violations, then public enforcement and public adjustment—whatever may be fitting—cannot take place.

And if it is hard to take Rick Santorum and his campaign seriously, think back to the 2000 Presidential election and George Bush’s ‘RATS’ ad. Is it any surprise that George Bush and his political team, once in office, would have conducted an

argumentative campaign for the invasion of Iraq that today stands as a paradigm case of what Harry Frankfurt (2005) would call “bullshit”?³

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³ According to Frankfurt, bullshitting is speaking with disregard for the requirements of truth.

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