THE VISUAL CONTEXT OF ARGUMENT: AN ANALYSIS OF THE SEPTEMBER 25, 1988 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Robert K. Tiemens, University of Utah

The 1960 presidential debates between Richard M. Nixon and John F. Kennedy ushered in a new era of campaign politics. It was the first time, since the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates, that two presidential candidates would meet face to face to debate the issues. And, except for a suspension of the debates during the third succeeding campaigns, the 1960 debates became a national event that is now expected every four years.

It is unlikely that the presidential debates would have become a "national institution" without the medium of television. Swerdlow (1987) explains:

The 1960 presidential debates generated high expectations. Debate planners, acutely aware of the Lincoln-Douglas glamour, wanted to initiate what they saw as "the TV debate era," when televised debates would be a fixture in presidential campaigns. To have presidential candidates meet face to face in front of the entire nation seemed--and was--nothing less than revolutionary. The optimism that accompanied this revolution was part of an idealism that surrounded television in general. (p. 12)

Critics are quick to point out the shortcomings of televised presidential debates; but, no matter how dull or how rehearsed they may appear, the fact remains that they demand (and we give them) serious attention. This point was clearly articulated by Dan Rather just prior to the first 1988 debate on CBS:

This will not be a debate in the sense that the word is often used in the English language, because all of this is so tightly controlled by the candidates themselves and their managers. These things have developed over the years into what some people believe can be more accurately described as a joint campaign appearance or an orchestrated news conference. Whatever one chooses to call it, this is a key campaign event.

Television makes the debates a "key campaign event" for several reasons. Obviously, it provides the only means by which both candidates are able to reach millions of voters, and to reach them without a huge expense. A less obvious reason that television makes the debates a "key event" is in which the medium itself shapes the debate. Television does more than merely transmit images and sounds. It selects, transforms, and redefines the visual and auditory information that reaches the viewer.

The extent to which the television medium shapes the "images" of presidential candidates received considerable attention in 1960 when observers noted how Richard Nixon's gaunt and tired face was accentuated by a last-minute application of cheap pancake makeup and poor lighting conditions. The image of Nixon was contrasted with John F. Kennedy's youthful appearance that was further enhanced by a professional makeup job and favorable lighting conditions.

Diamond and Friery's (1987) analysis of newspaper and magazine stories and network television coverage in each of the debate years has led them to conclude "that media discussion of the images projected and dissections of the candidates' physical appearance and gestures constitute a major part of the coverage following a debate" (p. 47).

It is clear that, in a televised debate such as those presented every four years, the visual images establish an important context for interpreting the discourse between the two candidates. Moreover, the images become inextricably bound to the discourse to the extent that a comprehensive interpretation of the debate's "text" makes visual and verbal content inseparable.

A review of the research literature on presidential debates reveals that most analyses focus on the verbal texts of the debates, giving little regard to how the visual images might shape the meaning of those texts. A few notable exceptions, which have examined the reciprocal elements of visual and verbal content, show that examination of the totality (visual and verbal content) leads to a more informed understanding of how audiences might perceive the discourse.

Messaris, Eckman, and Gunpert (1979) found that selection of camera shots in the 1976 debate between Carter and Ford exaggerated the confrontational nature of the event by overemphasizing the extent to which the candidates interacted with each other and underemphasizing the extent to which each candidate interacted with the members of the panel. Similarly, Tiemens et. al. (1985) found that confrontations between Carter and Reagan in the 1980 debate were minimized by the camera treatment, and that the selectivity of images made for extremely sterile, if not dull, coverage. Morello's (1988) analysis reveals how the selection of reaction shots in the 1984 debate misrepresented the amount of clash that occurred between Reagan and Mondale.

Analytical Framework

This study focuses on selected visual elements of the September 25, 1988, debate between presidential candidates George Bush and Michael Dukakis to determine the extent to which the visual content reinforced, enhanced, or detracted from the arguments presented by the candidates. The following questions guided the analysis:

140
1. To what extent did changes in camera framing and camera zooms enhance or diminish each candidate's arguments?
2. To what extent did reaction shots emphasize or de-emphasize confrontational segments of the debate?
3. To what extent did cutaway shots enhance or diminish each candidate's arguments?

Each shot of the debate was coded with respect to the following information: (1) Person or persons shown on camera. (2) Person speaking during the shot. (3) Camera framing (relative closeness of the person shown in the shot). A number, based on how the screen image fit into a 20-scale grid, was used to index this variable. (4) Type of camera movement occurring during the shot. Changes in camera framing resulting in camera movement were coded as a separate shot. (5) Verbal references each candidate made to his opponent. A video tape recording of the network pool coverage was used. In addition, still photographs of selected shots, created by an electronic scanning video printer, aided the analysis.

Camera framing

Camera framing becomes relevant to public speaking events because of the way in which it directs the viewer's attention to the speaker. Enlarging the size of the speaker's image on the screen (as with a closeup) demands greater attention from the viewer and intensifies the speaker's remarks. Contrarily, a wide-angle shot diminishes the size of the speaker's image on the screen and commands less attention. When the camera image zooms in or zooms out, the variation in camera framing becomes even more significant. A zoom-in on the speaker makes the change in image size more compelling, thus demanding greater attention from the viewer. On the other hand, a zoom-out disengages the viewer's attention, diminishing the impact of the speaker's remarks.

In this study, camera framing of the candidates was operationalized by coding the relative size of the speaker's image on the screen using a 20-unit grid placed over the television monitor. The image sizes ranged from 9 to 17 for Bush (average = 12.08) and from 9 to 16 for Dukakis (average = 11.28). Overall, shots of Bush were slightly closer than those of Dukakis. These differences appear negligible and are not statistically significant. However, the general distribution of shots shows that the slight difference favoring Bush was consistent throughout the debate. The relative distribution of shots with respect to camera framing is illustrated in Figure 1.

An example of differential treatment of each candidate with respect to camera framing was evident during the final minutes of the debate as each candidate made his closing statement. During each closing statement, the camera began with a medium shot, then slowly zoomed in to a closeup. The contrast in visual treatment of the candidates during their closing statements is illustrated in Figure 2. This comparison suggests that the resulting closeup during Bush's closing statement became much tighter and more visually dominant, giving more emphasis to what Bush was saying. Again, the difference is slight but, as previously mentioned, the relative distribution throughout the entire debate shows a consistent pattern in Bush's favor.

Camera zooms

During the debate camera zooms were used nine times. The camera zoomed in on Bush four times during periods that he was speaking, and zoomed out once. While Dukakis was speaking, the camera zoomed in twice and zoomed out twice. Generally, camera movement (zooms) favored Bush's presentation of arguments since they more frequently presented tighter camera framing (zooming in), whereas half of

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1.** Distribution of Shots by Camera Framing

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2.** Closeup shots during the closing statements of each candidate. The camera framing on Bush was typically tighter than it was for Dukakis.
the camera movement during Dukakis's arguments resulted in wider camera angles. Of greater interest than the frequency of camera zooms, however, is the question of when they occurred and how they may have contextualized the arguments being presented at the time. A distinct difference of how camera movement was used for each candidate can be found in analyzing the first segment of the debate.

The first time camera movement was used in the debate came during the first segment and Bush's first appearance on camera. In answering Jim Lehrer's question concerning drug abuse in the United States, the camera zoomed in on Bush as he said:

We've seen a deterioration in values. And one of the things that I think we should do about it, in terms of cause, is to in-still values into the young people in our schools. [The word values was emphasized by Bush].

Figure 3 illustrates the relative framing before and after the zoom-in on Bush during the first segment of the debate. In contrast to how camera movement was used on Bush, when Dukakis answered the follow-up question on drug abuse (also during the first segment of the debate), the camera zoomed out as Dukakis outlined a specific program of drug enforcement and pointed to the success of his drug education program in Massachusetts. The zoom-out while Dukakis was speaking resulted in a much wider camera shot, as is shown in Figure 4.

This difference in how camera movement was used definitely favored Bush by giving greater emphasis to his argument on "values," and de-emphasizing Dukakis' proposal for a specific program of drug enforcement.

Figure 3. Camera framing on Bush during the first segment of the debate.
During Bush's first answer to the question of drug abuse, the camera zoomed in to a closeup.

Figure 4. Camera framing on Dukakis during the first segment of the debate.
As Dukakis outlined his program for drug enforcement the camera zoomed out to a medium shot.
Reaction shots and positions of dominance

Analyses of reaction shots in this study were limited to shots of the candidates themselves. For example, a shot showing Bush while Dukakis was speaking (and vice versa), was noted as a reaction shot for purposes of this study. Newcomb (1982) notes the significance of the reaction shot:

Television is at its best when it offers us faces, reactions, explorations of emotions registered by human beings. The importance is not placed on the action, though that is certainly vital as a stimulus. Rather, it is on the reaction to the action, to the human response (p. 480).

There were no shots during the first 1988 presidential debate in which one candidate appeared on camera by himself while the other candidate was speaking. Thus, reaction shots in this analysis included only two-shots in which both candidates appeared on camera.

Visual composition of two-shots, in which one person is shown in the foreground and the other in the background, generally results in an image showing the foreground person occupying a higher vertical placement in the frame, although positioning of the camera height can change the relative screen placement of the two persons shown.

The person whose image is higher in the frame takes on a greater dominance and creates the illusion that he is looking down (literally and figuratively) on the other person. As in previous presidential debates (see Tiemens, 1978), this phenomenon occurred in 1988. Figure 5 illustrates the two-shot which places Bush (the speaker) in the foreground, and Dukakis in the background. This shot tends to exaggerate the actual difference in height between the two candidates, and Dukakis's already diminutive image is dwarfed by the dominant and overpowering image of Bush.

The reverse angle shown in Figure 6, which has Dukakis in the foreground, alters the relationship shown in Figure 5 by placing Dukakis's image higher in the frame; but the discrepancy in height still shows Bush at about the same eye level as Dukakis, and there is no indication that Dukakis is "looking down" on Bush.

Another discrepancy between these shots can be seen in the relative screen space occupied by each foreground image. When Bush is shown in the foreground (Figure 5), his image dominates the frame by occupying half of the screen's space, compared to one third or less of the space occupied by Dukakis's image. This relationship does not hold true, however, when Dukakis is shown in the foreground (Figure 6). If the camera angle from Dukakis's side of the stage had been equivalent to the camera angle from Bush's side of the stage, Dukakis's image would dominate the frame (as Bush's image does in Figure 5). But Bush's image still dominates the frame by occupying at least half of the screen's space while Dukakis's image is crowded into less than a third of the space.

This principle of visual dominance resulting from differences in camera angle has significant implications for how it contextualizes the arguments being presented. Figuratively, Bush has the upper hand in dealing with Dukakis on screen. His image is more prominent, occupying a superior position. The compelling nature of this visual comparison suggests the likelihood that this perception of dominance carries over to the verbal arguments as well.

Reaction shots and moments of confrontation

Morello (1988) points out, and rightly so, that a two-shot of speaker and opponent is one of the most effective tech-
niques that the director can use to visualize the combative element of a debate. When one speaker attacks or refutes his opponent, the two-shot focuses attention on the target of that attack, leaving no doubt in the audience's mind about whom the speaker is talking. The shot also allows the audience to read the other candidate's reaction.

To determine the extent to which two-shots were used to emphasize confrontational segments of the debate, all instances in which a candidate made reference to or addressed his opponent directly were noted according to the following categories:


2. Indirect reference. Dukakis making reference to the current (Reagan/Bush) administration; Bush making reference to the Boston police force, Boston harbor, or the state of Massachusetts.

3. A statement directed to the other candidate. Use of the pronouns, "you" or "your," using names or titles, or looking directly at the other candidate while speaking.

4. A question directed to the other candidate.

It was then noted whether or not these references were followed (within a reasonable period of time—30 to 40 seconds) by a two-shot showing the reaction of the other candidate.

Throughout the debate, 56 two-shots were used, of which 32 were taken while Bush was speaking (showing Dukakis's reaction) and 24 were taken while Dukakis was speaking. Of the 32 taken while Bush was speaking, only 26 were motivated by remarks Bush had made about or had made directly to his opponent. In other words, eight of the shots showed Dukakis's small figure in the background for no apparent reason. In contrast to this, all of the 21 shots taken while Dukakis was speaking were preceded by comments that Dukakis had made about or directly to his opponent.

It is indeed curious that more two-shots occurred during segments in which Bush was speaking, particularly in light of the fact that Dukakis made more references to Bush and made more statements that were leveled directly at Bush. Table 1 shows the frequency of statements made by each candidate which referred to or were directed to his opponent, and the number of times these statements were followed by two-shots. As the table shows, Dukakis made more than twice as many direct references to his opponent (26 vs. 12), but only half (13) of those references were followed by a two-shot showing Bush's reaction. On the other hand, 11 of the 12 direct references made by Bush were followed by a two-shot.

Similarly, there were nine instances in which Dukakis addressed Bush directly, but only six of those instances were followed by a two-shot. These discrepancies in how two-shots were used in the debate clearly indicate that the visual treatment of Dukakis was not as favorable as that afforded Bush. A clear example of what might be regarded as a bias

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References made to opponent</th>
<th>By Bush</th>
<th>By Dukakis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Direct reference</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference followed by 2-shot</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indirect reference</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference followed by 2-shot</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement directed to opponent</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement followed by 2-shot</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question directed to opponent</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question followed by 2-shot</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total references to opponent</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References followed by 2-shot</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

against Dukakis is found in a segment of the debate in which Dukakis makes a direct and pointed attack on Bush's record:

The problem, Mr. Bush, is that you've cut back by 90 percent on our commitment to affordable housing for families of low and moderate income; and when you do that, you have homeless families. We didn't have two and a half million or three million homeless people, living on streets and in doorways, in this country ten years ago... This attack on Bush continues for another entire minute. Dukakis is very animated in his delivery. His voice and facial expression are intense. He looks directly at Bush and gestures toward him. But there is no two-shot to show Bush's reaction or to emphasize the target of Dukakis's attack.

Cutaway shots

A similar example in which the visualization diminished the impact of Dukakis's argument occurred during the segment of the debate in which Dukakis claims that his patriotism is being questioned, a moment described as "the toughest exchange of the debate" ("Playing Hardball," 1988, p. 22).

As asked to explain why Dukakis's ACLU membership is an issue, Bush offers a defense of his position and denies that he has questioned Dukakis's patriotism. Dukakis counters with a sharp attack by saying, "Of course the vice president is questioning my patriotism. I don't think there's any question about that. And I resent it. I resent it!" The entire segment appeared visually as follows:
I'm not questioning his patriotism. He goes out and says the man is questioning my patriotism, and then all the liberal columnists join in. I am not!

I am questioning his judgment on these matters, or where he's coming from. He has every right to do it. But I believe that's not what the American people want. . . .

All I'm trying to do is put it in focus; and I hope people don't think that I'm questioning his patriotism when I use his words to describe his participation in that organization.

Governor, a response?

Well I hope this is the first and last time I have to say this: Of course the vice president is questioning my patriotism.

I don't think there's any question about that. And I resent it. I resent it! My parents came to this country as immigrants. They taught me that this was the greatest country in the world. I'm in public service because I love this country. I believe in it. And nobody's going to question my patriotism as the vice president has now repeated.

The wide cover shot which served as the visual context for Dukakis's impassioned rejoinder is shown in Figure 7.

The visualization of this exchange minimized its confrontational force. There was no reaction shot of Bush; and by cutting away to a very wide cover shot, the fervidness of Dukakis's remark was lost as he said, "I resent it. I resent it!" Instead of intensifying "the toughest exchange of the debate," network television diminished the moment by visually interrupting the concentrated flow of the debate. According to Newsweek, "Bush smiled thinly" at Dukakis's retort; but it was not to be seen by those viewing the debate on ABC, CBS, and NBC.5

One other instance in which the camera cut away to a wide cover shot minimized the potential impact of Dukakis's ver-

Figure 7. As Dukakis exclaimed his resentment to his patriotism being questioned, the network coverage cut away to this wide cover shot.

bal remarks. Dukakis argued that Bush's promise to cut the federal deficit, while pledging greater support for weapon's systems and tax breaks for the wealthy, made Bush "the Joe Isuzu of American politics." The camera cut away from a medium closeup of Dukakis to a wide cover shot of the auditorium. The cutaway was not as intrusive as the example cited earlier, since audience applause had interrupted the flow of the debate. But it carried much less impact than would a shot showing Bush's reaction, for example.

Several additional cutaway shots were used throughout the debate; but they didn't interrupt the flow of the debate, or direct the television audience's attention to extraneous material. Other cutaway shots consisted of wide-angle and medium shots of panel members taken while either Bush or Dukakis was speaking.

Conclusions

This analysis of the September 25, 1988, presidential debate shows that camera framing, camera movement, and shot selection created a visual context that favored George Bush. The question of whether this bias was intended in any way is irrelevant and perhaps impossible to determine. The general conclusion offered from this study is simply that there was a bias, and it was in favor of George Bush.

The important issue addressed by this study is not whether the visual treatment favored Bush or Dukakis. In fact, a cursory look at the second debate between the two presidential contenders suggests a bias in favor of Dukakis. Rather, we should understand how the visualization of the debate contextualizes the candidates' arguments. How television visualizes the speakers in a debate can enhance, emphasize, or embellish what the speakers say. Alternatively, the images can de-emphasize or diminish the speakers' arguments as well.

Television has become the predominant medium for public discourse. Its pictures and sounds reach millions of viewers, most of whom depend on it as their primary source of news and information. But, the medium does more than merely transmit the pictures and sounds that represent an event such as the political debate studied here. The visual nature of the medium transforms and shapes what the viewer hears to such an extent that it influences the viewers' understanding and attitudes toward the event and toward its participants. It is, therefore, incumbent upon scholars of argumentation to understand how the visual elements of the medium shape the public discourse it carries.

Notes

1 An estimated 65 million viewers watched the presidential debate televised on September 25, 1988.

2 All commercial networks shared a common pool coverage, provided by NBC. It is this coverage on which the analysis in this study is based. CNN's coverage differed from the network pool coverage. Although CNN used the same sources (i.e., cameras) for their coverage, the shot selection—the sequencing of images throughout the debate—was markedly different.

145
There were no reaction shots of the audience during the debate due to an agreement between the Commission on Presidential Debates and the candidates. Several shots which showed members of the panel were used as reaction shots, however.

Bush is six feet, 2 inches tall; Dukakis is 5 feet, 8 inches.

The coverage on CNN included a cut to a two-shot showing Bush's reaction as Dukakis said, "I resent it. I resent it!" As noted previously, CNN's shot selection differed from the other networks.

References


