ARE YOU CUP OF JOKING? : THE “LATTE SALUTE”,
AMERICAN PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA’S VISUAL
RHETORIC

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ABSTRACT

The “latte salute” as it has been coined is a highly publicized image taken in 2014 made
popular by media outlets ranging from big news stations to online social media blogs. Depicting
United States President Barack Obama exiting Air Force One, the presidential plane, the “latte
salute” entered media channels and quickly became a social media phenomenon. It has been
mentioned on television by Sarah Palin, Hannity and Colmes, Bill O’Reilly and Rosie O’Donnell.
The incident has been popularized again and again by political cartoonists, activists, and artists.

Backlash has ranged from social media outrage to creation of websites petitioning for public
support to rise against the President’s actions in the photo. This research seeks to address the
visual rhetoric of the latte salute photograph. The rhetorical implications of the presidency’s
visual spectacle deserve elucidation.

Keywords: Presidential, Rhetoric, Visual Rhetoric, television media, pictorial turn, nonverbal,
mass media.

INTRODUCTION

Photographic images of the President of the United States I argue are not a reliable
source for developing an organic, honest, and true understanding of the president. Their success is too rooted in the visual spectacle to be merely fortuitous recollections of past events. As rhetorical devices presidential photographs are employed and beget to influence public opinion. Although images can be used to inform audiences, political images have an agenda rooted in argumentation and persuasion. By visually displaying their interests and activities leaders reveal the screen upon which they communicate (Finnegan & Mixon, 2014, p.244)

In this article I will describe and outline the role of the visible in politics. I will also
describe the denotative aspects of the image, as well as the connotative meaning that

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has stirred controversy created by the image will be explained, then I will delimit some major arguments that circulated in mainstream media. In this paper my artifact will be engaged in several ways. The theory of the pictorial turn will seek to inform a better understanding of the image in a broader political context. Further, the performance of past president Ronald Reagan will be evaluated as a basis for comparison. Iconic imagery, captioning, fragmentation, politics, and motivated viewership will all be addressed as they apply to the visual rhetoric of the presidency.

In this paper I argue that it is imperative to evaluate the rhetorical implications of the theory of the presidential pictorial turn. Connecting our actions to the role the visual plays in popular culture means acknowledging the image as a center of influential power. When analyzing presidential behaviors through images, behavioral norms and their impact for the performative role of presidency are valuable to consider.

Presidential performance fragments are embodied in photo opportunities and have been working for generations to inform a collective understanding of the leader of the free world (Erickson, 2000). This process has become increasingly utilized to manage presidential image. Erickson (2000) shares that “Images of Nixon toasting Chairman Mao, Ford celebrating the nation’s 200th birthday in New York Harbor, and Carter shuttling peace offerings between Israel and Egypt likewise captured the attention of witnesses worldwide” (p.139). This process of image campaigning is increasingly steeped in presidential tradition.

In a democracy in which our judgements guide decision making, the visual is a powerful rhetorical device capable of evoking emotion. “There is little doubt that mediated images can enhance state craft” (Erickson, 2000, p.138). The use of a rhetorical principle of emotional mirroring is evidence of an intrinsic connection between rhetoric and the visual. Messaris and Hawhee (2009) posit that images in journalism evoke emotion. These emotions are a part of what guides our decision making in regards to whom we wish to lead our country and how we feel about those who do so.

The finest example of a president who evoked good emotions in many he met, a man who was a master showman, is that of President Reagan who is rumored to be the first president to set a standard norm for the salute. Reagan understood the need for this ritualistic military practice of a formal salute. As a one-time service member, he upheld protocol which is time honored to service members nationwide. Reagan understood that the salute is an important part of nonverbal behaviors for those who protect our nation. This understanding along with his experience with acting made Reagan the perfect courtesan of media. He raised the bar and set a standard for presidents who followed. He executed his performative role as first an actor and then a politician.

Reagan’s initial dealings with the public were part of a larger public relations campaign put on by Hollywood (Ritter, 1999). Ronald Reagan was not only an actor but a master of ceremonies, extensive public speaker, and a man who succeeded under the camera’s watchful eye. His winning personality made him affable and
unintimidating to voters. His platform relied upon his reputation as a well-known actor and grew to one in which he became “a defender of ordinary citizens pitted against an unsympathetic elite class” (Ritter, 1999, p.137). The anti-community rhetoric which Reagan espoused clashed at times with his sunny disposition, this was something Reagan himself monitored, aware that image is everything.

Staged photo opportunities are part of strategic message development tactics, which seek to woo captive audiences and assume dominance over their sensibilities. Reagan was famous as an actor prior to becoming president he was a man of the stage. A performer first and then a leader, his role in the spectacle of the political process was award winning.

**Iconic Images**

Photographs with a superior ability to speak to audiences are deemed iconic as they are ideals which gain widespread popularity and are easily recognized. According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007) an iconic image functions in ritual response and is copied and reproduced much in part because it invokes the collective experience. They speak to the hearts and minds of generations. They are a product of an increasingly pictorial turn in public life.

Iconic photographs unlike other images fail to disappear into obscurity. They live on creating social awareness and defining the times. According to Hariman and Lucaites (2007) images are art, the voice of democracy, pieces of systems of social relationships, and representations of dominant narratives.

The “latte salute” possesses a few markers of the iconic image. One of these markers is its frequent use in political satire. Many political cartoons have repeatedly used the “latte salute” controversy to put into perspective political situations in which the president is involved. One cartoon depicts a character wearing a t-shirt with “right wing nut jobs” on the front while holding a newspaper headlined “latte salute”. The character has flames coming from his head and Obama stands next to him using his fire hot flames to ignite his coffee pot. The cartoon is meant to depict President Obama as calm and cool, deflecting the heat or fire, ie. the anger felt by his critics, with an heir of solemn confidence. The cartoon retorts popular criticism by poking fun at those who took the image with less than a grain of salt.

Yet another political cartoon that employs the latte salute as is one in which the President Obama is criticized for his military strategy. In the cartoon the president accompanied by a military official in uniform and what appears to be a cabinet member, looks over a battle plan map that is covered with coffee. The president is holding an upside down emptied mug in his hand and the military official’s bubble thoughts read “Well it was a great battle plan”, thereby insinuating that the president had “ruined” battle plans. This adds further skepticism to an already under fire leader. It I believe means to say that the president is inconsiderate of not only his soldiers but of also his military strategy. The cartoon highlights or brings to mind Obama’s lack of military service in a way that others and marginalizes him from leadership of that helm.
Politics
An image of the president by its very nature is a political text. The image could be both aestheticized or politicized, addressed or ignored. The objective stance requires that instead of denigrating this image it be viewed as content which is political in nature. This is true not just because of the actors it contains but also because of the actions the photograph seeks to highlight. Those who view the image as purely political understand that it is filled with affect.

Given the audience for the latte salute image and history of argumentation among divided political parties, the image is in line to become a catalyst for further division among political party supporters or opponents of President Obama. The image was used as adverse propaganda. Images are credited with playing a valuable role in argument and at times playing an even bigger role in rhetoric than text does as they can be “accurate, concise, and relevant” (Birdsell & Groark, 1996, p.103).

Azoulay (2012) evaluates the word political in relation to discourse in the arts. Political art is that which contains subjects whom are identified as political. Political art is sought out, judged, and differs from the aesthetic. The image can be credited with usefulness for orienting individuals to shared group identity as well as being largely representative of history. Typically in the name of competition “presidents enhance their political attributes by posing as bigger than life, simultaneously casting themselves as strong, active, decisive, and compassionate (Erickson, 2000, p.143).

Motivated Viewership
The president is a necessary resource for information for citizens of the United States (Demir, 2011). Hariman and Lucaites (2007) posit that “we (society) are dedicated to the critical study of public discourse and public arts on the assumption that they are crucial to the success of the democracy” (p.4). Through voyeur ship we seek guidance and influence. According to Keisner (2009) looks at movies, one type of mass medium direct thought processes and emotions, and play a powerful role in shaping reality.

We watch and listen to the television to see the president and to gain information from him, understand him, and gain trust in him. According to Demir (2011) it is important that when evaluating a political leaders we do more than listen to their verbal rhetoric alone. Some research posits that nonverbal qualities are superior as they are more easily remembered, clearer, and more convincing (Demir, 2011).

The relationship between image events and the televisual public sphere is one in which events are a central mode of public discourse powerfully inspiring thoughts in their onlookers (Deluca, 1999). The events of the image are stuck in time but the future recourse they inspire does not have to be. In essence image events work as vehicles for social change. Stirring people to question long held beliefs, in a contemporary era, image events are weapons for social change. Due to a higher frequency of use of images in such a way onlookers become accustomed to images functioning as rhetorical devices.
Captions
The meaning audiences take from an image is subjective. The process by which an individual derives meaning of a photograph is based in part upon individual interpretation. The perceptual lens, beliefs, and life experiences viewers bring to the visual experience are all determinants of their development of understanding the image as it applies to their personal and social reality. The latte salute is still relatively new and has not been a part of discourse on the visual rhetoric of the American presidency. Its meaning may change over time as subjective reality shifts and its new meaning becomes shaped by standpoints that look into the past at the event that is part of a collective America at that given time.

To label an image or create a caption for it, the picture must be viewed objectively. The caption is a piece of what Barthes calls a “complexity of concurrent messages with the photograph at the center” (Barthes, 1997, p.15). The image and caption exist separately from one another. The weight the caption and photograph bear alone is different than their combined effect.

An image which is captioned for us is a terministic screen. This screen acts to cover the individuals own interpretation with an opinion. The discursive transition from view to thought forced by televisual frames of spoken and written language. Commentators bold declarations based upon pre-conceptualized understanding of definitions of terms for objects. We become tethered to boisterous declarations of meaning. The terminology stands to influence how we conceive of what we see, words a prison holding our feelings captive. To feel the image alone requires deep contemplation, attention, and concentration.

When evaluating the weight of the social totality of an images meaning we may look to other factors such as how the image is framed by the sources which disperse it to the public. Big news media possess narrative authority. Distance stands between the public and access to knowledge of events, media closes this gap.

According to Mitchell (1994) pictures much like language are rising as a discussion topic, an unsolved mystery or problem, as well as a potential science of its own. Made public, images assist audiences in narratively constructing reality and are a growing topic for research. The study of pictures is lesser understood in the field of communication and as a discipline among scholars than is research into the written and spoken word. Communication has been predominantly interested in words but the study of visual rhetoric is increasingly of interest to communication scholars.

Viewers may travel innocently to television for information and news, but are often greeted by biased commentators framing the events of the day using their own twist. Media’s power enables strategic use of information to sway public opinion (Mitchell, 1994).

Mulvey (2012) further explains that changes in the content of film takes place when the sources of the film change. Hidden political agendas are very present in media outlets.
Fragmentation

The oversimplification of complex political issues is one ramification of reliance upon shattered visuals. Photo opportunities of presidents are fragmented performances (Erickson, 2009). Erickson (1998) argues that fragmentation under privileges the gestalt or whole collective understanding. The influx of momentary glimpses of the presidency lead the public away from speech and facts towards the false sense of understanding that exists in political illusionism (Erickson, 1998).

Imprudent photo opportunities call into question a president’s “image, agenda, credibility, and authority” (Erickson, 2000, p.138). This small window of opportunity to impress leads to manipulation. To get the desired message across politicians mask intentionality and opt for crowd pleasing performances. Tagg proposes that “existence of a photograph is no guarantee of a corresponding pre photographic existence” (1993). The photograph is not telling of behavioral norms or predispositions. A photograph could quite in fact, be a once in a lifetime moment which should not be used to generalize to a situation.

Latte Talk

What has been deemed the “latte salute” by media conglomerates is just that a recording of the President of the United States ducking as he exits then standing erect as he steps off of his official plane. The event was recorded by and then presented by the media in both video and pictorial form. The image is of President Barack Obama stepping off Air Force Once with a latte cup in his right hand. Still wearing his sunglasses the president's head remains upright as he seems to be assessing his visual surroundings while multitasking his way down the decline. The video of the entire series of events is less than thirty seconds. Following the presidential exit shortly thereafter is the First Lady Michelle Obama in a red dress and black sweater who is also captured in the photograph. Her face unseen and curtained by her dark mane which hangs as she seems to be concentrating on walking in a black kitten heel so intently that she fails to look out past the stairs. In uniform at the bottom of the stairs standing on either side of the stairs next to the plane are two uniformed marines standing at attention, their white cloves perched close to the bill of the black bill of their white caps. They stand still, firm and unwavering, one with his back facing the lens the other poised with a stern facial expression. Just as the president’s right foot (first) hits dry land his salute is at its apex. All the while he retains the firm grip on his cup as he almost hunches to make his hand reach his brown in lieu of the repository clutched. The images sky rocket to infamy really rests in the artifact occupying President Obama’s right hand, the white paper coffee cup. The president is a busy many as the picture reveals, he is unfastening his sport coat jacket with his right hand.

Within hours of the event, much in part because of the globalization of social media giving rise to the dissemination of images rapidly, an event of monumental proportions evoking argumentation from many factors became the talk of the town. Captured at a time when the pressures of the presidency were insurmountably immense, a time of war, and a time of global unrest and sickness, the image is one frame of a leader carrying the burden of running the country in the midst of a busy day.
The “latte salute” was born in an era of social media. An era in which every person has the power to author their own media and disperse it. Also an era in which public discourse plays a vital role in the consumption of media. No longer passive participants in the once spectator sport of mass media, social media is making discussion at the help of the process of participation in civic life. The image sparked waves of discussion through various social media channels like twitter, inciting those who saw the image on the news or through online sources to share their feelings and beliefs about the nature of the behavior espoused by President Obama, the meaning behind this behavior, and opinions about how his actions should or are received.

Method
The theory of the pictorial turn will frame some of the understanding this research hopes to bring to the “latte salute” image. Using what has been learned about political imagery this paper will attempt to frame the image in the space in which analysis can be made possible through

Pictorial Turn
The history of rhetoric has been predominantly concerned with things, idea, and words. Words hold a familiarity to us that pictures sometimes do not. Images possess an inherent ability to be completely foreign to the eye. According to Mitchell, 1994, p.12) a paradigm shift has taken place called the pictorial turn, “this complexly related transformation occurring in other social sciences” is a turn in public culture. The visual is a newer and lesser understood medium for research which communication researchers and a growing number of disciplines are interested in. The pictorial turn “is a post linguistic, post semiotic, rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and frugality” (Mitchell, 1994, p.16).

In American public culture, daily life is in part constituted by mediated representations of the state of life. Media works to sustain the process of engagement that constitutes citizenship. Erickson (1999) explains that mediated images of American presidents work to legitimate their claims. Hundreds of photo opportunities, staged sessions, in which presidents attempt to outdo or live up to past standards of other presidents have been conducted in order to enhance public opinion. The picture has given leaders an outlet for influencing political interest, creating awareness, and molding an image for themselves.

Analysis
Whether this image is considered prudent or imprudent, the latte salute is not a “Kodak” moment for the president. Captured at a time in which the pressures of the presidency were immense, a time of enduring war, a time of emergency in public health on a global level as Ebola began its rise, and a time when the first African American president has taken the helm, the latte salute is the product of tumultuous and rapidly changing times. The president’s responsibilities are insurmountable, what we see in his images is quite possibly a reflection of the tremendous mental and emotional burden the president is under. He is a burdened man both literally and metaphorically in this image. He is weighted by his impending responsibilities, as
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represented by the full cup that he lifts to his brow in honor of a presidential tradition of salutation.

“Those who understand the rhetorical messages at play become empowered citizens” (McCabe, 2012, p.35). What makes this so difficult is the myriad of meanings that can be taken from different messages. Reading emotions and underlying thoughts and beliefs of a person via their nonverbal communication can be difficult because as Demir (2011) points out “nonverbal communication is vague” (p.2). To rely solely on a fragmented image of nonverbal behavior may be a foolish way to attempt gaining understanding.

Doubts exist about the role which pictures play in philosophical and other discourses (Mitchell, 1994). This era stirs questions about the photos ability to remain under control (Mitchell, 1994). Mitchell (1994) explains iconophobia or the fear that exists as a result of pictures and their powers to move rhetorical as powerful forces.

Presidential rhetoric’s visual turn privileges dominant ideology (Erickson, 2000). One of the many devices, presidential travel, is used to gain favorable attention and popularity by many constituents (Darcy, 1998). Scholars rely however on cues such as the “economy, tides of war, and political socialization as presidential support”, instead of visual rhetorical means (Darcy, 1998, p.7). Presidential travel for the sake of improving public opinion however would not be effective. Decades of research has revealed contrary to what is assumed that popularity is not directly related to presidential travel spectacles. Further, the public’s presidential approval ratings are numb to facts whose staying power has not been seen (Darcy, 1998).

Considerations must be made for the pictorial turn and for mass media. Keller (2001) states as he discusses the implications for the transition rhetoric has taken from literary to visual form “Abraham Lincoln could still afford to wear crumple suits and sweat soaked shirts without detriment to his career” (p.2). This really puts into perspective how we judge the president. According to Mullen (1997) campaign impact and political news comprehension are influenced by the visual. An effective leader today requires leaders to be active participants in the complex relationships remaining mindful of all aspects of communication (Oliverio, 2008).

CONCLUSION

The “latte salute” has an important place in the study of visual rhetoric. Scholarly research reveals as supported by this article time and again that political imagery is powerful and enduring in the minds of the public. Further, photographs seek to affect evaluations of presidents’ credibility, image, agenda, and authority (Erickson, 2009). This paper has discussed the implications of the “latte salute”. It also argues for greater understanding of the nature of political images.

Given what we know about the nature of political imagery, and more specifically presidential photos, it can be said that political images are not untouched reliable sources for images that are unorchestrated. I encourage you to remember this as you consume mediated images. I also encourage you to view them analytically with concern for the nature of the political photo. Is the image purely created or used for
propaganda? Too often political scenes are engineered to further political agenda alone. The game of the visual spectacle is crafted to manipulate the public into beliefs that may not reflect truths that are hidden behind a veil of visibility.

The president himself could have staged this rendering in order to make deep and meaningful connections between his presidency and that of past presidents for his audience of constituents. In yet another revealing political cartoon Obama is drawn facing a cartoon President George W. Bush. Both president in this cartoon are holding an item respectively, one a dog, and the other a coffee mug as they salute one another. The cartoon highlight a shared moment in which both presidents lack the proper form in their wave. Time seems us to continue to bring us these images coincidentally.

Speculating that the presidency would strategize in such a way may seem beyond what the general public might assume, however as we have come to understand the presidency is a performative role where there are winners and loser, and creating a desired image may make or break a candidate requiring that they manipulate their appearance to create a socially constructed self out of desired elements.

The visual is so very important to our construction of our social realities. The importance that we place on it however can be manipulated. This must be acknowledged when acting as consumers of media through which our daily lives are regularly influenced. The “latte salute” is a reminder to continue to question what we see and where and by whom its meaning is derived and framed.
REFERENCES


