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### **Relating to ‘Ohio’ in Political Advertisements**

Interpreting Representations of Culture in Narratives, Myths, and Symbols from Democratic Spots in the 2010 Gubernatorial Campaign

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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# **Relating to ‘Ohio’ in Political Advertisements**

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**Daniel S. Schwarz**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study is positioned as an alternative discussion of televised political advertising within campaigning. With Democrats in the United States suffering heavy electoral losses in 2010, an examination of the marketed connection established with voters was important to improve understandings for political scholars and campaign practitioners. However, as previous political communication research focuses on the manipulative content in advertising, present analysis sets out an approach which reconciles the ways in which cultural discourses are represented in campaign ads. Linking the fields of political advertising, postmodern discourse, and cultural studies, research explores the narratives, myths, and symbols used by campaigns. Interpreting four spots from Ted Strickland’s 2010 gubernatorial re-election in Ohio, the cultural politics are assessed in ‘discourses-as-language’ and ‘discourses-as-representation’ which form a communicated message within the political marketplace. This connects to a relationship marketing (RM) model that is concentrated in the ‘local’, interactive relationships of exchange in politics. With the argument that culturally defined discourses are important for nurturing a connection with voters, a semiotic visual-discourse analysis develops new understandings for political advertising. Asking questions about the discursive representation of ‘Ohio’ in values, identities, and political cultures, analysis looks at manifest content as well as symbolic discourses of narratives and mythologies in the campaign. Offering a qualitative methodology based in the context of the election, research finds strong presentations of the ‘local’ while the exchange relationship is only symbolically addressed in Strickland’s ads. This suggests a divide between the reliance on political symbolism in campaign advertising and the economic hardships which surrounded the election in 2010. Yet with so many cultural representations of Ohio in Strickland’s advertising discourses, it is possible to link culturally-based messages in the campaign to an engagement with voters.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Grand Old Party (GOP) was supposed to be an “endangered species” according to the *TIME* Magazine cover on 18 May 2009. Looking at the political landscape after recent elections, Michael Grunwald wrote how “polls suggest that only one-fourth of the electorate considers itself Republican, that independents are trending Democratic and that as few as five states have solid Republican pluralities... the electorate is getting less white, less rural, less Christian – in short, less demographically Republican” (Grunwald, 2009). After the 2009 and 2010 elections, however, former Senator Evan Bayh wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed: “it is clear that Democrats over-interpreted our mandate. Talk of a “political realignment” and a “new progressive era” proved wishful thinking” (Bayh, 2010). Yet rather than attributing these results solely to a poor economy, a backlash against single party control in Washington, or even a historical tendency for the president’s party to lose seats in midterm elections, the 2010 election seemed to be part of a larger problem Democrats have long struggled with – an inability to relate with voters.

In the field of political advertising, attention inevitably has been concentrated on the presidency (Dover, 2006; Miller and Gronbeck, 1994; Morreale, 1993; Newman, 1994). Largely missing from its fair share of the literature, however, is a focus on state-level politics (Cooper and Knotts 2004, 101). While media talking-heads and politicians endlessly discussed 2010 and how it related to the national political landscape, few took note of “the most important and underreported results of the midterm elections: the GOP takeover in the states” (Balz, 2010). The election brought huge gains – over 700 seats in state legislatures – for Republicans; larger than in 1994. It was as close to a complete victory as possible, with 21 states emerging with a governor and both state legislatures controlled by the GOP compared to only 11 by Democrats (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010 and 2011). How could the American landscape swing so drastically in just a few months – from endangered species to new alpha male? Can state-level results really be explained by national factors? Is it possible that something else was responsible for Democratic losses?

This study attempts to answer this line of questioning by arguing that the key to winning elections, particularly in ‘battleground’ states like Ohio, comes from an ability to establish cultural connections with voters. Specifically, that the use of cultural representations in campaign advertisements – through narratives, myths, and symbols – help place the candidate in a relatable position of familiarity and strengthens the motivational bond with voters. As the ability to prove cause and effect in any study is difficult, present research sets out an alternative approach for how political advertising can be analyzed. This study links the fields of political advertising, cultural studies, and discourse analysis to generate a cultural

interpretation of campaign spots so that future research might better understand the construction of winning messages.

Critically assessing the content-based, quantitative approaches in political communication has been infrequent at best, creating staleness in research on political advertising. This comes from “scholarly concern primarily with the direct political effects of advertising campaigns... on voting behavior, campaign costs, raising and/or lowering the likelihood of rational political discussion, or whatever” (Nimmo and Felsberg 1986, 249). Present research therefore hopes to bring a realist view of political campaigning to the field and issues of manipulation are excluded from examination. As the linguistic scholar John Wilson argues, the key question is *how* people produce political discourse, “not whether they should have done it or not”; describing what did happen, not prescribing what should have happened (1990, 15).

Turning on these traditions, a semiotic visual-discourse analysis of selected spots from Ted Strickland’s 2010 gubernatorial re-election campaign is employed to draw out new ideas for political advertising. Offering a reflexive examination of cultural representations, the interpretation laid out from this study first analyses the discourse of advertisements before assessing the communicated connection between Strickland and voters. This contributes to the larger field of marketing and advertising in political campaigning, using relationship marketing as a model for evaluating discourses. By understanding how campaigns engage cultural representations, an alternative approach can be developed which expands future research for both academics and practitioners of political campaigning.

## **II. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION**

### **Literature Review**

The political communication tradition is defined by Doris Graber as covering “the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that potentially have a significant direct or indirect impact on politics” (2005, 479). Concurrent with this academic genre is an idea that “the message has a significant political effect on the thinking, beliefs, and behaviors of individuals, groups, institutions, and whole societies and the environments in which they exist” (Graber 1993, 305). While there are diverse interests within political communications, focus is here quarantined to the communicative field of political advertising. As Kaid, Nimmo and Sanders explain in their volume on the subject: “there are few, if any, forms of political communication which are more prevalent, more expensive, more highly developed, and which have been the object of more controversy and less serious scholarship than political advertising, especially the political commercial made for television” (1986, xi).

### **Televised Political Advertising**

For those interested in the communicative elements associated with American campaign politics, the field of political advertising is often relied on by academics and practitioners to focus research and improve tactics respectively. Connecting scholarly traditions from political science, marketing, psychology, communication, visual analysis, linguistics, and media research, political advertising elicits increased attention as a point of intersect growing in political, social, economic, and cultural significance. Today, political advertising has evolved into a sizable scholarly genre; paralleling two trends emerging over the history of political elections – “from physical power to communications power” and “from personal power to organizational [power], which resulted from the growth in population, technology, and the complexity of society” (Bryant 2004, 90).

Much of political advertising’s rise in campaign use and academic study is due to television’s place in American culture. In 1952, Dwight Eisenhower was the first to use television spots as a major part of his campaign for president. By 1968, sixteen years later, televised political advertising “had become common place and an essential part of any campaign” (Kaid and Johnston 2001, 6). Blumler and Gurevitch (1982) note how Americans eventually came to rely on television as “the prime source of political and electoral information” (in Thurber, Nelson and Dulio 2000, 4). This is built-upon by Kathleen Hall Jamison, writing that “as television became the country’s dominant mass medium, candidates’ comfort with it and with advertising on it increased” (1986, 14). Consequently, with the rise of television and a noted

decline in traditional party identifications (Putnam, 2000), parties have diminished in importance while individual campaigns spend “millions of dollars inventing images that will appeal to otherwise uncommitted voters” (Morreale 1994, 19; Aldrich, 1995; Broder; 1972; Crotty, 1984; Wattenberg, 1991).<sup>1</sup>

In general, research on political advertising is driven by an interest in “the role that ads play in connecting the messages of political actors in the electoral process with the substance and style of the information that voters take with them into the voting booth on election day” (Thurber, Nelson and Dulio 2000, 6). This is because, unlike any other medium, the televised spot “is a major component of a politician’s communications power” (Bryant 2004, 93). As such, many scholars and practitioners alike argue that ‘paid media’ is “the key to winning campaigns” (Bryant 2004, 93).

Looking at thirty years of presidential television commercials, L. Patrick Devlin explains several rationales for political advertising. The purposes of political spots include increasing name recognition, influencing late-deciders, reinforcing partisan support, attacking opponents, explaining and developing issues, defining a candidate’s image, targeting certain demographic groups, raising money, and simply responding to ads being used by the competition (Devlin 1986, 22-24). However, the function of political advertisements – how they go about making this message-to-voter connection – and where the focus of study should rest is extensively debated by scholars. Kaid and Johnston break the literature into two categories; those researching the various ‘effects’ of the advertising versus those looking at the ‘content’ of advertising (2001, 15). Though there is enormous scholarly interest in effects, with obvious usefulness for understanding advertising’s affect on the “attitudes, thinking, and behavior of voters” (Kaid and Davidson 1986, 185; Joslyn, 1981; Kaid, 1981; West, 2005), it is in the content of advertisements where such uses are produced, developed, and displayed.

### *Videostyle Content*

Karen Johnson-Cartee and Gary Copeland offer four strategies for constructing political advertising: supportive (positive) messages, negative ads, reactive response ads, and proactive inoculation ads (1991, 211). Yet beyond these general strategies of construction, studying the content of spots opens new understandings for researchers. One popular approach to content research is ‘videostyle’; the way a candidate presents themselves to the public using the medium of television (Kaid and Johnston 2001, 2). Developed by Lynda Lee Kaid and Dorothy Davidson, videostyle presents a systematic description of style in political

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<sup>1</sup> Some scholars argue that political parties are not in decline, insisting that they “are instead altering their role and function in the electoral process to remain a primary source of information and influence” (Kolar 1986, 57).

advertisements by examining three main elements: “verbal content; nonverbal content; film/video production techniques” (1986, 186).

Within advertising’s verbal elements, content “focuses on the semantic characteristics of the candidate’s message” (Kaid and Johnston 2001, 27). This includes issue/image content, positive/negative content, and explicit “strategies and tactics adopted by candidates in relationship to their political positions” (Kaid and Johnston 2001, 27). Nonverbal content, according to Kaid and Davidson, “can include both the visual elements and audio elements that do not have specific semantic meaning” (1986, 187). Here, dimensions such as kinetics, physical appearance, word emphasis, spacing, and environmental factors all influence the communication of messages (Kaid and Johnston 2001, 29; Burgoon, 1974; Knapp, 1978). Additionally, the production techniques for creating a spot are equally constitutive of advertising’s content as everything within the camera shot is part of the communicated message (Millerson, 1972). The production of an advertisement can supplement the verbal content, while Kaid and Davidson argue that “video production techniques affect the presentation of nonverbal messages” (1986, 189). Kaid and Johnston go on to claim that certain production techniques are “designed with a particular effect or message in mind” (2001, 29).

### *Narratives and Myths*

Standard content, however, is not enough for understanding political ads. Dan Nimmo and Arthur Felsberg disagree with such ‘content’ limited research, remarking that “studies of the content of televised political fare continue to concentrate upon manifest content” (1986, 249). This is supported by John Wilson, who argues: “it is not always enough to simply pinpoint particular linguistic styles... one must be able to explain the structural basis of such styles” (1990, 15). As political advertising is all about “defining or branding candidates, turning their lives and beliefs and backgrounds into a story so engaging and appealing that voters want to associate with it through their vote” (Steinhorn 2004, 117), the narratives and myths used to develop these stories demand a deeper examination as part of a campaign’s marketing process.

In order to explain this ‘structural basis’, Nimmo and Felsberg propose looking at political adverts as representations and/or reflections of “transcendent human aspirations and anxieties” using a semiotic analysis of the “relationships, components, and meanings of signs” (1986, 249-250). The notion of signifying through advertisements comes from the work of Varda Leymore (1975), describing advertisements as a “process of transformation”. This ‘transformation’ refers to “the communication process through which advertising (the use of symbols) comes to influence the exchange of values” (Leymore 1975, 18); converting



explicit messages into “real life action” (in Nimmo and Felsberg 1986, 251). Additionally, a narrative structure can be explained as “the sequence of events through which all texts communicate their themes and values” (Descutner et al. 1991, 101-102). Thus, advertising’s narrative is partially designed to “signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood” (Norton 1983, 47). Put differently, manifest content acts as a series of semiotic symbols which feed the campaign narrative – what Nimmo and Felsberg (1986, 252) call the “hidden myths” of televised advertisements.

Asking fundamental questions about representation and ‘hidden meanings’, a semiotic analysis treats “cultural meanings as a given currency which is shared by everyone... activated by the style and content of the image” (Van Leeuwen 2001, 92). This is the approach utilized by Nimmo and Felsberg when they analyze political advertisements for Leymore’s “Exhaustive Common Denominator”. Yet narratives and myths only exist through an association of the manifest content. As Ian Parker explains, statements are given coherence “insofar as they refer to the same topic” and “we have to employ the culturally available understanding as to what constitutes a topic” (Parker 1992, 11). Consequentially, an understanding of discourse and the cultural context is required for the examination of campaign advertisements in this study.

### **Postmodern Cultural Discourses**

Discourse is historically concerned with issues of power; its possession and use. For political advertising, this is demonstrated in David Swanson’s statement that “political communication in campaigns is an interactive process that constructs reality for voters” (1991, 11). Many scholars support such an understanding, and Nimmo and Combs argue that reality “is created, or constructed through communication, not expressed by it” (1990, 3).

In a study of political stylistics, Pascale Gaitet claims “all linguistic production is conditioned by and operates within the interactive network of power relations that structure the social realm” (1992, 6). Gaitet explains that there is a “legitimate language” for discourses with a political function “within national boundaries, [which] is officially designated and widely accepted as “correct”” (1992, 7). These political functions include “processes of inclusion that encourage linguistic unification and ideological cohesion, and processes of exclusion that guarantee the preservation of an economic and cultural elite” (Gaitet 1992, 7). Both processes can be understood as power exercised in the use of cultural tones which are required from candidates in an election.

Yet discourse analysis – as a field of study and methodology – is often biased by a scholarly assumption that ads are one-sided instruments of power wielded by political elites. This

ignores the interactive, cyclical relationship of politics; little recognition is given to power wielded elsewhere.

Appreciative of the antagonistic nature of politics, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) advance a discursive theory where “hegemonic practices presuppose a social field criss-crossed by antagonisms, and the presence of elements that can be articulated by opposed political projects” (in Howarth and Stavrakakis 2000, 15). Though this conception refers to the interaction between political interests, its acceptance allows recognition of the back-and-forth nature in political elections. While politicians are recognized to employ power in their attempts to persuade voter support, there is an equal exhibition of power over political elites. Nimmo and Combs refer to this ‘power-over’ when they explain that campaigns “endeavor to link a candidate’s persona and positions with cherished cultural values; and, through appealing ritual melodramas, tell a story of the candidate’s vision for the office and the nation” (1990, 177). As such, in requiring certain standards and demanding particular criteria be met, voters are influencing the politicians who must acclimate to electorate concerns in order to win support.

Relating such ideas to political advertising, Kaid and Johnston argue that spots are not done by candidates *to* voters but that “the messages and the images present in televised political ads are constructed using fears, myths, concerns, and narratives that exist in culture and in voters” (2001, 25). The idea of candidates “doing” to voters comes from a postmodern tradition which has influenced the perspective of political advertising and discourse research. However, using what Calvin Schrag describes within postmodernism as the “adversarial attitude and oppositional frame of mind toward conventional values and practices” (1988 cited in Descutner et al. 1991, 96), an alternative postmodern approach can be developed.

Postmodernism “sees the world as a place where images are produced like commodities to be sold to willing mass publics... it sees culture not as a series of esthetic monuments consecrated by tradition but instead as a corpus of codes and myths designed to produce assent and quiescence” (Descutner et al. 1991, 96). Such a conception explains the easy link between postmodernism and advertising when Kroker and Cook argue how “in a postmodernist culture, it’s not TV as a mirror of society... it’s society as a mirror of television” (1986, 268). Yet this hostility towards socialized truths again dismisses the cyclical nature of elections. The “inherently marketing character” (Scammell 1999, 722) in politics is part of an interactive relationship where voter support for a politician or party has become a form of consumerism (Kavanagh, 1995; Kotler, 1981; Lilleker and Negrine, 2003; Maarek, 1995; Scammell, 2003). Representation may therefore be just as much reflective – with language functioning like a “mirror” – as it is constructive when meaning uses concepts and signs as a representational system (Hall 1997b, 24-25).

An approach which is appreciative of the dual-reflexivity between society and televised political ads can, at least temporarily, set aside concerns for the manipulative exertion of power. As Stuart Hall contends, culture is primarily concerned “with the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society... culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is around them, and ‘making sense’ of the world, in broadly similar ways” (1997a, 2). Thus, with an identifiable speaker and topic in the election, focus can be directed at the presentation of cultural narratives and myths in campaign discourses. However, to analyze such representations, it is important to define ‘culture’ and the political identities and values associated with the specific political marketplace of concern.

### **Cultural Politics**

Cultural studies offer an important theoretical and methodological device for approaching this analysis. The challenge is situating it within the existing literature. Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg (1992, 4) use terms such as ‘interdisciplinary’, ‘trans-disciplinary’, and ‘counter-disciplinary’ to explain the cultural studies field. Yet, they are quick to note the difficulties of “true interdisciplinary”, asking: “what and how much must be learned from other fields to enable us sufficiently to contextualize our object of study for a given project” (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 1992, 15). With Judith Williamson noting “advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors molding and reflecting our life today” (1978, 11), the context needs theoretical expansion in order to properly support an analysis of cultural representations in political advertisements.

Raymond Williams explains culture as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1976, 87). Understood both as a way of life – “the system of categories and assumptions that makes possible the activities and productions of a society” (Culler 1999, 337) – and as the various cultural activities and products, culture has demanded generations of scholarly attention. Yet the ability to confuse culture is even greater when it might simultaneously serve as “the ground on which analysis proceeds, the object of study, and the site of political criticism and intervention” (Nelson, Treichler, and Grossberg 1992, 5).

Regardless, Williams’ influence on the field of cultural studies preferences his definition of ‘culture’, which is here understood as “the signifying system through which necessarily a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored” (1981, 13). Further contributing to this notion is the idea of a ‘cultural politics’, which Norman Fairclough uses to distinguish “a politics that is focused upon representations, values and identities” (2003, 18). Accepting these conceptualizations, an analysis of campaign spots is given a foundation in

the cultural studies literature. However, it is necessary to provide definition to the political cultures influencing such representations for any analysis to take place.

### *Political Culture – Ohio*

In his work on American Federalism, Daniel Elazar lists ‘political culture’ as one of main factors contributing to state “political structures, electoral behavior, and modes of organization for political action”, as well as a historical source of “differences in habits, concerns, and attitudes that exist to influence political life in the various states” (1966, 79-80). With roots “in the cumulative historical experiences of particular groups of people”, Elazar defines political culture as “the particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is imbedded” (1966, 84). Consequently, contextualizing the identity and values behind the specific political culture in this study is important as a theoretical grounding for research.

With historical experience confined to the boundaries of an identity within a defined ‘local’, Ohio’s special dimensions contribute significantly to its politics and culture. Commonly referenced as part of the American Midwest, Ohio also shares similarities with the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and South to create a hybrid of political cultures. This is supported by Elazar (1984, 86-94), describing Ohio as an “individualistic political culture” – a political order where the government serves as a marketplace of self-interested groups and individuals – while also exhibiting “strong traces of Moralistic dominant culture in its northern counties and Traditionalistic dominant culture in its southern counties” (in Bolotin 1993, 245-246). Yet as a cultural hybrid, several paradoxes concerning identity and values are presented in the state.

Part of the ‘Ohio’ characterization includes a “moralist political culture” emphasizing a commonwealth conception of the political order and a “traditionalistic political culture” which is “rooted in an ambivalent attitude toward the marketplace coupled with a paternalistic and elitist conception of the commonwealth” (Elazar 1966, 92-93).<sup>2</sup> These political cultures can be grouped with “most of the other northern industrial states” (Bolotin 1993, 246). However, Fredric Bolotin complicates this view by arguing that “political culture in Ohio differs greatly from the liberal or progressive behavior one would expect from urbanized, industrial states” (1993, 246). These differences, according to Graham Hutton, manifest as “Midwesterners for a long time have put a lower value on the original and creative mind than they have on material things, practical affairs, common sense, and what

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<sup>2</sup> A ‘commonwealth’ conceived political order is found in states where “the citizens cooperate in an effort to create and maintain the best government in order to implement certain shared moral principles” (Elazar 1966, 85-86).

they call realism” (1946, 191-192). While this supports an individualist political order different to the moralist-traditional political cultures, Ohio’s classification is more intricately defined.

The hybrid culture in Ohio is expressed with Elazar’s description of state government’s responsibility to promote “a proper climate for business to prosper, on the assumption that such prosperity will lead to prosperity in the state as a whole” (1994, 279). Thus, the state’s complexity is displayed with government’s individualist tasks designed to fulfill more progressive, moralistic political goals. With political activism in the Midwest that “has seldom been on the far left or right of the spectrum” (Hurt 2001, 167), Ohio presents a balancing act between the diverse political cultures of both the marketplace and the commonwealth form of politic. As such, Ohio’s cultural politics are given definition in the various political cultures represented in the state. These identities and values contribute to a framework for analyzing cultural representations of Ohio in advertisements. Yet a conceptual framework is useful for linking these theories with the televised advertisements in Strickland’s campaign.

### **Conceptual Framework**

To connect political advertising with an interest in cultural representations, a conceptual framework is necessary which not only links the two theoretically, but also empirically. This includes supporting the conception of political campaigning as an interactive discourse; a cyclical relationship instead of one based on manipulation. The concept of relationship marketing (RM) offers such a framework and adds a supportive foothold for this research.

Nimmo and Felsberg’s analysis of political myths is grounded in a concern for “examining specific televised political advertising as representative of commercial advertising” (1986, 249). While many wish it were not so, one cannot deny a resemblance between the politics of election campaigning and the characteristics of salesmanship in the commercial market (Kotler, 1981). In the market of politics, producers/sellers offer a product to customers who are in possession of a desired value – candidates/campaigns offer representation to citizens in exchange for their vote (Scammell 1999, 722). Yet Margaret Scammell notes that when services are sold, the success of such a market requires the establishment of “exchange relationships” so that consumer investment is reciprocated by the producer delivering a promised product (1999, 727-728). It is through this ‘exchange relationship’ that RM is aptly applied to political elections.

RM offers a model for engagement and mobilization in the marketplace, believing in generating loyalty and repeat business by nurturing consumer relations (Gronroos, 1997). Part of nurturing such relationships includes an interactive process of production and consumption. This prescribes an organizational structure where “service providers and

customers are co-producers, co-managers and even co-developers of value” (Johansen 2005, 88). Though the campaigning emphasis on strategic planning and organization in a limited timeframe (Dulio, 2005) make a fully decentralized, long-term relationship-building approach difficult, it does not make RM a normative ideal. Elements of the model are useful and Helene Johansen’s description of “decentralized organizations strongly rooted in ‘local’ societies” (2005, 92) with marketing efforts “directed at members and core supporters” (2005, 101) presents a valuable concept for political campaigning.

A key objective in campaigns is to establish a connection with voters and under RM, nurturing and developing a mutual relationship is essential. Recognizing this focus, it is possible to move analysis towards a study of relationship-building in political advertising. As “courtship implies action and reaction between all concerned parties” (Nesbit 1988, 18), one can assume that political spots convey elements of the RM approach. Yet in order to link courtship with the cultural narratives and myths in advertising discourses, a discussion of political symbolism is required.

In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Murray Edelman contends that political forms “come to symbolize what large masses of men need to believe about the state to reassure themselves” (1964, 2). According to Edelman, “it is the needs, the hopes, and the anxieties of men that determine the meanings” of such political symbols (1964, 2). This understanding of political forms mirrors Elazar’s argument about the importance of political culture and supports the semiotic analysis of ‘hidden myths’ by Nimmo and Felsberg. However, political symbolism also has relevance as a bridge between discourse and the representations of cultural politics in political advertising.

The significance of political symbolism, and its use as a concept for approaching this analysis, is portrayed in Marjorie Hershey’s statement that “people do not experience political events directly; rather, we experience language about such events” (1992, 85). In the same vein, Frentz and Farrell identify symbolic acts as “verbal and/or nonverbal utterances which express intentionality” (1976, 340). Every symbol is meant to evoke “an attitude, a set of impressions, or a pattern of events associated through time, through space, through logic, or through imagination with the symbol” (Edelman 1964, 6). Consequently, understanding the campaign’s use of symbolism helps define the representations of cultural politics in Ohio when analyzing the narratives and mythologies in advertisements.

## **Research Objectives**

Based on the discussed framework, this study develops an alternative understanding of political advertisements through a semiotic visual-discourse analysis of spots from Strickland’s 2010 re-election campaign. Such an undertaking finds purpose in the limited

scope typically applied to the study of campaign advertising and a desire to define cultural elements which are usually overlooked in political science research. Additionally, based on the conceptual application of RM to political campaigning, Democrats' demonstrated disconnect in the 2010 election further begs an investigation of how campaigns go about the business of relating to voters.

Accepting the argument that culturally-based representations feed a connection with voters and empower campaigns to build relationships, this study focuses on analyzing the cultural narratives and myths in televised spots. As meaning is determined by active interpretation (Hall 1997b, 32-33), however, it is impossible to perfectly understand the representations produced in political ads and further difficulties are presented when analysis must be open to validation in order for definitive conclusions to be drawn. Therefore, research develops an answer by subjectively interpreting cultural representations in order to assess campaign advertisements for RM coherence.

Though a methodology is discussed in the next chapter, it is important to clarify the research objectives for this study. Borrowing elements from Hall's (1997b, 45-46) research on discourse, the following questions inform the cultural examination of televised advertisements:

- How does the campaign use representations as part of a cultural narrative or myth?
- How do such narratives and myths connect with Ohio's political culture? How do they connect with Strickland?
- How do Strickland's discursive representations, which are contextually constructed, convey elements of the cultural politics in Ohio?
- What is the context upon which such symbolic representations embody a sense of reality?

These questions contribute to a greater awareness of cultural narratives, myths, and symbols in campaign ads through a semiotic visual-discourse analysis. Moreover, a different discussion is added utilizing an appreciation for context in discourse analysis while injecting elements of cultural studies to advance scholarly debate. Research can then focus on whether a RM model for connecting with voters is culturally established by political advertisements.

### III. METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

#### Overview

This study approaches the examination of political advertisements from an analytical angle different to the majority of scholarly research. Whereas most studies of political communication use content analysis (Graber 2005, 491), research instead conducts a semiotic visual-discourse analysis of selected spots. Such an approach is relevant for two reasons: the theoretical grounding in discourse, postmodernism, and cultural studies lends itself to a methodology based in qualitative analysis while the central interest in a cultural interpretation of campaign advertisements necessitates an understanding of and appreciation for context.

Before expanding on the suitability of this methodology, however, reasons for avoiding other analytical methods require brief mention. Research is here concerned with the artifact of televised advertisements, which is both visual and textual. Methodologies which collect data on human interaction and opinion – i.e. interviews or surveys – are therefore rendered irrelevant when they avoid a focus on meanings *in* artifacts (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Research methods typically relied upon for meanings *in* political advertising include content and discourse analysis.

In the quantitative study of texts, content analysis is a “systematic assignment of communication content to categories according to rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those categories using statistical methods” (Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998, 3). Yet, though content analysis is recommended for scholars publishing research and articles for institutions that require quantifiable findings, the theoretical foundations and research interests in cultural representations do not lend themselves to such an approach. Furthermore, analysis is strongly influenced by the work of Nimmo and Felsberg who argue that while quantification is possible, “semiotic analysis does not employ standard content analytic techniques” (1986, 254). With Frank Biocca’s description of political ads as “a sentence uttered in the context of a discourse” (1991, 77), qualitative assessment with an awareness of the surrounding context becomes a methodological necessity. Consequently, discourse analysis is used for an appropriate model to begin analysis.



*Visual-Discourse with Semiotics*

Discourse analysis can be explained as “a practical way and a theoretically coherent way of analyzing a whole variety of talk and text” (Gill 1996, 156). Such flexibility is useful when the artifacts being analyzed convey various combinations of meanings through assorted cultural symbols in line with a specific political culture. Additionally, discourse analysis naturally fits on a theoretical-level with Williams’ conception of ‘culture’ and Fairclough’s explanation of ‘cultural politics’. This is shown as scholars identify a “close connection with discourse theory’s focus on signification and identity construction” (Carpentier and Spinoy 2008, 2).

Though there are many analytical perspectives on discourse, all are united in their “rejection of the idea that language is simply a neutral means of reflecting or describing the world and a conviction of the central importance of discourse in constructing social life” (Gill 1996, 141). This fits with the postmodernism of television advertising. Yet it is important to discern between two classifications of discourse analysis – as-language and as-representation – in order to properly define the methodology presently employed.

The first conception of ‘discourse-as-language’ can be understood by questioning “how people use language to construct their accounts of the social world” (Tonkiss 1998, 248). Looking at “the argumentative organization of texts and the different rhetorical forms used to make them persuasive” (Potter 1996, 133), focus is directed towards the rhetorical use of language. Laclau and Mouffe (1985) then offer a second discursive definition, proposing a “discourse-as-representation” understanding that focuses on “the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded in the text, and not so much on the language *of* the text” (in Carpentier and Spinoy 2008, 5). With this study, narratives in campaign advertisements exhibit a ‘discourse-as-language’ while myths and symbols offer a ‘discourse-as-representation’ that is examined using a semiotic approach.

Any analysis which hopes to focus on cultural representations in discourses must include a semiotic approach, the underlying argument being that “since all cultural objects convey meaning, and all cultural practices depend on meaning, they must make use of signs” (Hall 1997b, 36). With Umberto Eco (1976) asserting that “understanding any given text requires familiarity with other texts”, the intersection of sign systems – ‘intertextuality’ – is a particularly important element in the signification process (in Descutner et al. 1991, 100). Relating political advertising to this type of analysis, Descutner et al. argue that previous communicative messages are “cannibalized” by campaign spots “in order to produce seamless messages that remind us of these other texts” (1991, 101). This results in both forms of ‘discourse-as’ being part of the advertisement’s communicative process.

Combining the two conceptions of discourse, interest in how language creates meanings or representations of culture parallels the postmodernist notion that reality is contained/constructed by the artifact of advertising. This combination is recognized by Jonathan Potter, who explains: “discourse analysis focuses on talk and texts as social practices and on the resources that are drawn on to enable those practices” (1996, 129). This brings focus back to the suitability of a methodology that is able to take account of context-dependent discourses. However, solely focusing on the “talk and texts” of political advertisements is insufficient when developing a well-rounded interpretation and an additional dimension must be brought to the study – analysis of the visual.

Need for a visual element in the research comes at both a theoretical and practical level. Proclaiming that “the postmodern is a visual culture” (Mirzoeff 1998, 4), Nicholas Mirzoeff explains how “we interact more and more with totally constructed visual experiences” (in Rose 2007, 8). Just as Fairclough argues that discourse analysis critically interprets texts where “languages embody particular worldviews” (1992, 26), a visual analysis attempts to understand how images offer certain views as “they interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways” (Rose 2007, 6). Accordingly, Gillian Rose describes a hybrid methodology interested in “discourse as articulated through various kinds of visual images and verbal texts” (2007, 140). Such a visual-discourse analysis is useful when dealing with television advertisements which combine auditory and visual interpretations to convey meanings.

Though some criticize the subjective nature of discourse analysis, its flexibility offers an added component for political advertising research. Arguing that the social context of culture offers “a configuration of semiotic systems”, M.A.K. Halliday explains the need to “interpret language in a way which enables us to relate it to other semiotic processes” (1984, 8). Coupled with ‘visual culture’ – defined as “a particular way of perceiving the object” (Condee 1995, x) – an interpretation subjectively bedded in the case study is needed to pick-up on cultural representations. In a qualitative analysis tailored to the context of advertising artifacts, methodological validation is thereby demonstrated with the theoretical grounding, the nature of analysis, and its suitability for research interests. Yet further justification exists in the practical design of the method for examining political advertisements.

## **Method and Procedures**

Exploring the discourse of political advertisements and fitting it within the larger culture is a complicated methodological process. Meaning, according to Hall, is dependent on historical context and never fixed; it “has to be actively read or interpreted” and the meaning assumed “is never exactly the meaning which has been given by the speaker” (1997b, 32-33). This ‘license to interpret’ is a potential methodological weakness, limiting the ability to draw definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, subjectivity does not preclude an analysis from having value, particularly when a culturally-based method for analyzing political advertisements is being proposed. It does, however, place greater scrutiny on what is being examined, and a convincing argument must be laid out for the selection of artifacts.

### **Sampling Strategy**

Kaid comments that focusing on specific case studies fosters “increased knowledge about how political advertising functions in individual situations and what commonalities among cases may lead to more generalizable understandings” (2002, 211). Accordingly, the first-step in the selection process used for this study is examining a gubernatorial campaign located in the specific culture of Ohio.

As chief executives of their state, it is no wonder gubernatorial elections are becoming more and more “presidentialized” (Salmore and Salmore, 1996). Unlike presidential campaigns, however, different themes are utilized at different campaign-levels and gubernatorial elections are intrinsically tied to a local, and thereby limited, political culture (Cooper and Knotts 2004, 117). Yet with a complex combination of diverse cultures, reflections of Ohio can be found nation-wide. This is supported in an *Economist* article commenting that “no other state captures the national mood quite so conveniently” (The Economist, 2010) and Strickland’s campaign was specifically seen by some as “a case study in the politics of hard times” (Shapiro, 2010). Since RM suggests discourses steeped in ‘local’ cultural politics are necessary for connecting with voters, Ohio offers an interesting and important region for study given the diversity of its political marketplace.

Selecting specific advertisements presents another piece of the sampling strategy. Nimmo and Felsberg contend that “all ads in the same product field must be included in the analysis” (1986, 251). Given the constraints on present research, however, conducting analysis on such an extensive universe of artifacts is not feasible. Yet Fran Tonkiss believes that discourse analysis allows examination without requiring a large sample, arguing: “what matters is the richness of textual detail, rather than the number of texts analyzed” (1998, 253). Not only can

a sampling occur, but research is encouraged to discriminately select advertisements possessing ‘textual richness’.

A more extensive examination of spots would require significant resources given the methodological intensity of a semiotic visual-discourse analysis. This study is restricted to analyzing four 31-second spots – “Good Work”, “Listen”, “Angry”, and “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs” – covering the beginning, middle, and end of the election campaign. Yet to make such an analysis worthwhile, the design of the research must be thorough and well thought out. A procedural summary of the method is therefore important to support the quality of this study and link with the research objectives.

### **Research Design**

Defining methodological procedures requires an investigable conceptualization of the research. Such a concept is difficult given the diverse traditions utilized in this study. However, employing a semiotic visual-discourse analysis allows the coding frame for interpreting cultural representations in televised advertisements to evolve over the course of research. Analysis is consequently divided into two levels to engage in each of the various areas this study relies upon.

The first level is focused on the political advertisement itself; building the necessary familiarity for analysis at the second level. As Nimmo and Felsberg explain, the first step examines “the apparent characteristics of the advertising system as displayed in concrete verbal and visual material” (1986, 253-254). Adopting a similar approach to the Kaid and Johnston (2001) videostyle research, analysis lays out the verbal (language used), non-verbal (gestures, appearance, setting, etc.), and production techniques displayed by the artifacts. Added to this descriptive analysis are three modalities for visual coding listed by Rose (2007, 17) – ‘technological’ (visual effects), ‘compositional’ (strategic configuration/particular qualities of the image), and ‘social’ (meanings given social/political relations and practices surrounding the image). Yet such analysis only takes research to a “manifest-content” understanding, and a deeper examination is needed to culturally assess representations in campaign spots.

Accordingly, the second analytical level capitalizes on Roland Barthes’ (1973; 1977) semiotic notion about “the layering of meaning”; where ‘denotation’ – what/who is being depicted – and ‘connotation’<sup>3</sup> – ideas and values expressed through what is represented and the way in which it is represented – become accessible for analysis (in Van Leeuwen 2001, 94). This is where subjectivity problems come into play, using visual stereotypes to define

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<sup>3</sup> Note: Barthes (1973) called connotative meanings ‘myths’

representations based on cultural or physiognomic attributes (Van Leeuwen 2001, 95). However, Van Leeuwen explains that there are “contexts where the producers of the text have an interest in trying to get a particular message across to a particular audience, and in such cases there will be signs to point us towards the preferred level of generality” (2001, 95). Possible connotations are therefore limited by the concrete signifiers repeatedly identified in messages (Nimmo and Felsberg 1986, 254). This links the two levels of analysis so that the excavation of meanings in the image/text offers an understanding still dependent on the representations in political advertisements.

## **IV. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION**

Sampling four advertisements from the campaign, examination can generate multiple interpretations of narratives and myths. Accordingly, the double-layered methodological process describes each spot before presenting a semiotic visual-discourse analysis. After interpreting spots individually, focus moves to a collective assessment of the four advertisements. In a discussion incorporating the larger election context, analysis addresses whether the cultural representations establish a relationship with voters based on RM principles. What results is an understanding which links political advertising and cultural studies literature with the symbolic discourses in Strickland's advertisements.<sup>4</sup>

### **Research Results**

#### **Campaign Ad #1 – “Good Work”**

The campaign's first televised spot – “Good Work” (StricklandCampaign, 2010a) – is an attack on Strickland's Republican challenger, Congressman John Kasich. Using a third person-testimonial format coupled with dramatizations, the advertisement presents Meghan Cofield, a former factory worker from Dayton, to politically position Kasich as the wrong choice for governor.

Starting from a straight-on, shoulder-up shot in a factory, Mrs. Cofield begins speaking to camera – “We were doing good work here in Ohio”. The scene then moves to a dramatization of Cofield looking over an empty lot behind a chain-linked fence. Cofield's voiceover describes how her job was exported to China. After returning to the straight-to-camera shot, Cofield offers the first personal appeal, saying: “So when I heard Congressman John Kasich voted for all those trade deals that sent Ohio jobs overseas, I just couldn't believe it”. This is followed by a visual and verbal run-through of Kasich's voting record on jobs; with Cofield's voiceover paralleling on-screen text over a still-image of the padlocked fence. Kasich is then attacked for his work on Wall Street with Lehman Brothers; again, with superimposed text over a still of the Lehman Brothers building coupled with Cofield's voiceover. The spot ends with a second appeal from the straight-to-camera shot – “Congressman Kasich couldn't possibly understand what Ohioans are going through right now”. Framing zooms to a headshot of Cofield, closing with: “And now he wants to be governor? Does Ohio really need a congressman from Wall Street for governor?”

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<sup>4</sup> A depiction of the analysis can be found in the Appendix, with the first-level coding framework followed by a semiotic visual-discourse analysis for the four advertisements, including selected screen-shots from each spot.

### *Analysis*

Despite Strickland “going negative in his first television ad of the campaign” (Hamby, 2010), “Good Work” goes a long way towards developing a representation of cultural politics in Ohio for the election. Though the narrative does not deal with Strickland, it does distance his opponent from Ohio voters by engaging Gaitet’s (1992) inclusion and exclusion myths of ‘us’ and ‘them’. As such, the advertisement establishes a framework from which cultural discourses are initially engaged.

From the opening line, the spot moves to a narrative about Ohio’s past – “we were doing good work here” – and present – “then my job got shipped to China”. This verbalized historic transition is supplemented by imagery signifying loss – the empty lot – with feelings of powerlessness and abandonment after being shut out from employment – a chain-linked fence with barbed wire blocking access. Cofield gives these feelings a focus of blame in John Kasich when the ad returns to a straight-to-camera appeal. While signifiers like “congressman” and “voted” denote the political, there is an important connotation made with Washington and the politics of Capitol Hill which distances Kasich from the cultural politics of Ohio. With NAFTA and Chinese trade deals conflicting with state interests, the association of Kasich with ‘them’ is to associate his interests against ‘us’ in Ohio. Additionally, unlike Cofield who is seen and heard narrating the entire spot, Kasich is exclusively represented by a contradictory value set and given no personification in the advertisement.

When focus moves to the congressman’s work for Lehman Brothers, Kasich is further distanced from voters. Rather than being concerned with Ohio, Kasich “moved to Wall Street” where he “made millions working for Lehman Brothers”. This narrative makes the private interests of Kasich conflict with the interests of the state, and Kasich’s situation – working for Lehman Brothers – is contrasted with the situation of Ohioans like Mrs. Cofield. ‘Wall Street’ symbolizes a mythology of foreign values, which is set against the symbolic Blue-Collar values myth. On top of representing the alien corporate world, “moving” signifies an abandonment of Ohio; both in time and space and in values and identities. Kasich is further vilified by working for a company associated with the start of the financial meltdown. For voters in Ohio who lost their jobs in the economy, this is a personal and ideological betrayal.

More connotations can be interpreted from Cofield’s environment in the empty lot with padlocked gates, contrasted with Kasich’s setting in the Lehman Brothers building. Transitioning from the closed factory to the corporate skyscraper elicits a symbolic message by contrasting the realities of both worlds. Here, the Midwestern realism described by Hutton is set against Wall Street’s bubble of creative speculation. The rise of corporations – physically, in the skyscraper’s labor and materials, and financially, in the economic recession

– comes at the expense of Blue-Collar industries. In the first reality there was reliability; people had jobs and were “doing good work”. In contrast, Wall Street’s corporate ‘reality’ has been disastrous. It is not difficult to assign responsibility for the economy in Ohio on Wall Street interests, and the spot is linking Kasich with this reality.

### **Campaign Ad #2 – “Listen”**

Six and a half weeks before the election, the campaign aired a testimonial-format spot titled “Listen” (StricklandCampaign, 2010b). In the advertisement, Jim Hagedorn – introduced as CEO of Scotts Miracle-Gro in Marysville, Ohio – endorses Strickland by highlighting his pro-business record as governor. Using *cinéma vérité* footage of Strickland walking through a factory and talking to employees, Hagedorn’s voiceover explains: “Ted Strickland understands the issues that business people deal with. He’s made it easier for us to hire people in Ohio”. Returning to Jim’s office for a straight-on, shoulder-up shot, Hagedorn speaks to camera describing how the Governor helped his company keep their jobs. Hagedorn then makes a more personal appeal, rhetorically asking: “Why would Jim Hagedorn, a Republican, support a Democrat? Because he’s shown a commitment to our business, he’s shown a commitment to growing businesses in the state of Ohio”. In footage of Strickland speaking to a group of workers, Hagedorn delivers the closing line in voiceover – “Ted’s found a way to get the job done”.

### *Analysis*

Strikingly different from the first advertisement, this spot presents a mythology fitting with Elazar’s depiction of state government’s responsibility in Ohio to promote “a proper climate for business to prosper” (1994, 279). With discourses that also speak to the state’s politics, “Listen” primarily addresses the individualistic political culture in Ohio. Yet there is additional meaning in the visual connotations of the advertisement. Such symbolic references feed another myth which the campaign builds around Strickland’s term as governor.

From the start, the shot zooms-in on an outdoor scene with flowers and sunshine eliciting an optimistic feeling that is carried through the ad. Fading into a straight-to-camera testimonial from Hagedorn, folksy background music is supplemented by objects like a Native American tomahawk and family photos. Yet one prop in particular is symbolically significant as a representation of the larger narrative in the spot: the box of Miracle-Gro. As a product used to invigorate plant life and help gardens grow, there is a hidden myth in the connotation made with Strickland’s work on the economy. As the narrative focuses on how Strickland kept jobs in the state, the advertisement symbolically draws a correlation between what



“some business leaders say [has] improved the state’s job climate” (Hallett, 2010a)<sup>5</sup> and an economic ‘miracle’ being performed in Ohio. This links with the positivity in the opening image of sunshine and flowers – things associated with Miracle-Gro.

Equally important are the discourses explained by Elazar (1984) of an individualistic political culture. The marketplace of self-interested groups and individuals is apparent in statements such as; “Strickland understands the issues that business people deal with” and “he’s shown a commitment to our business”. Here, the advertisement’s representation of Strickland makes him a conduit for promoting the interests of the state. Instead of being a political actor, Hagedorn mythologizes Strickland as someone facilitating the marketplace based on the cultural assumption that the prosperity of private businesses “will lead to prosperity in the state as a whole” (Elazar 1994, 279). However, holding true to Ohio’s complex cultural politics, a paradoxical moralistic culture also finds representation in the ad.

While the ad is formatted in a testimonial, the use of *cinéma vérité* with Hagedorn’s voiceover produces a visual narrative of Strickland personally engaged with the business of Ohio. As Hagedorn verbally delivers a perspective of the Governor’s work from the board-room level, Strickland is shown at the factory-floor level with employees. Even if limited to the visual, being associated with the common man instead of the corporate executive works with Ohio’s Blue-Collar, moralist political culture and a connotation can be interpreted where footage of Strickland engaged with factory workers corresponds to his concern for working-class Ohioans. Thus, when companies like Scotts Miracle-Gro are able keep jobs, Strickland is actually interested in the employees benefiting and not the executives.

An additional discourse concerning Ohio’s differing cultures comes from Hagedorn’s rhetorical question of why a Republican would support a Democrat. As a melting-pot of various identities and values, Strickland’s bi-partisan appeal is as much political as it is cultural for Ohioans. This allows the advertisement a flexibility to offer multiple cultural representations in mythologizing Strickland for the electorate.

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<sup>5</sup> As governor, Strickland cut income and property taxes, reduced business regulations, and supported investments in high-tech business ventures (Hallett, 2010a).

### **Campaign Ad #3 – “Angry”**

In this spot airing shortly after “Listen” was released, the candidate-appeal is used to format the advertisement. Mixing multiple tones and production techniques, “Angry” (StricklandCampaign, 2010c) focuses on Strickland’s efforts to put Ohio on the right economic course. Beginning with several rapid-fire cuts of Strickland talking to a group of workers, an aggressive visual-tone opens the ad. This is matched in the verbal text, with Strickland explaining: “Ohioans are angry, and I’m angry too”. “Wall Street” and “executives” are then targeted by Strickland for enjoying federal benefits and receiving bonuses while Ohioans lost their jobs.

Transitioning to a style of *cinéma vérité* using longer camera shots, the ad uses Strickland’s voiceover to positively focus on his work benefitting Ohio. The transition is wholesale; non-verbally changing on technological, compositional, and social levels with a less aggressive tone, more engaging spatial organization, and scenes where people are actively shown at work. Additional verbal changes come with Strickland’s use of strong phrases such as; “I stood up to Washington” and “I fought to improve education”. These are read over a series of supplemental panning *cinéma vérité*. From people working with machinery, Strickland touring a factory, and standing next to students sitting at a computer, each scene visually communicates a pro-active tone. These sequences build to a final shot which returns to the opening scene. With noticeably less tension in everyone’s facial expressions, Strickland says: “I don’t work for the Wall Street guys, I work for you”.

### *Analysis*

“Angry” uses two narratives in discourses speaking to different cultural representations of Ohio. One interpretation of this divide is that the advertisement attempts to connect with voters in two steps; establishing a commonality through shared hardship before presenting Strickland as a personification of cultural politics in Ohio.<sup>6</sup> From a personalized narrative using various discourses-as-language to address a suffering state, the spot transitions to a symbolic depiction of Ohio actively moving forward in concert with myths developed from its political culture.

The opening narrative comes in a series of observational shots where Strickland is talking to a group of factory workers. Using a heavily edited rapid-sequence of shots and short zooms from awkward angles, the viewer is left with a tense and disorientating feeling. Such production supplements the frustration and uncertainty Strickland addresses in the actual

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<sup>6</sup> Ulrich Beck refers to the political force of “solidarity from anxiety” in a post-modern risk society, though he is quick to note that “it is completely unclear how the binding force of anxiety operates, even whether it works” (1992, 49).

text. This narrative is accompanied by a discourse-as-representation of Strickland the Ohioan. Saying “I’m angry too” conveys sincerity as the camera progresses from medium-distance to close-distance shots; drawing the viewer towards the speaker. Not a disconnected politician, Strickland is shown – close-up – standing amongst regular Ohioans and verbalizing the same feelings of anxiety.

A hidden discourse is also found in the first narrative which communicates a different ‘personal’ connotation. Strickland’s conversation is framed in a collection of observations, switching between different camera angles so that each shot offers another perspective from somewhere within the gathered group of workers. Strickland is speaking directly to the audience in the room and not addressing the larger state when talking about Ohioans’ anger. Yet this ‘audience’ that is in the room includes those behind the camera; the voters watching the advertisement. Employing these production techniques, the viewer becomes part of the spot’s narrative where *we* are angry at Wall Street and executives for losing “our jobs”. This symbolic reference to ‘others’ feeds a mythology ideologically threatening to the local culture.

Because of this threat, an alternative narrative offering a pro-active discourse of Ohio is used to provide voters with answers. Rather than being acted upon, the second narrative uses Strickland as a positive representation of Ohio’s political culture. When advertisements “arrange, organize and steer *meanings* into *signs* that can be inscribed on products” (Goldman 1992, 5), Strickland is made a personification standing in opposition to the helplessness in the opening narrative. This starts with a panning shot from switchboard to machinery as Strickland reads: “we’re putting a stop to that right here in Ohio”. The connotation in this shot speaks to Ohio’s Blue-Collar work ethic and common-sense values (Hutton, 1946), which are offered as remedy to the lack of control people feel. Furthermore, Strickland is representing Ohio values, protecting ‘our’ cultural identity when he “stood up to Washington”. Strickland is not mentioned as “Governor”; he is the guy standing next to ‘you’ in the first narrative and protecting Ohio in the second narrative.

Additionally, references to helping small businesses again are used to signify an individualist political culture. Yet, also significant is the moralistic political culture signified when Strickland talks about education. Switching from students at computers to a woman working in an automation plant, the scene visually links with Strickland’s position “to improve education so Ohioans have the skills they need to compete”. Standing with students in the classroom associates Strickland with these future opportunities. As such, one of the messages in the second narrative is this association between Strickland and Ohio’s future.

### **Campaign Ad #4 – “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs”**

Strickland’s final spot aired less than a week before the 2 November election. “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs” (StricklandCampaign, 2010d) offers the most personal advertisement using a direct appeal from the candidate to the viewer. Opening in Strickland’s home, a straight-on, chest-up camera angle frames the candidate in the foreground with stairs and a wooden bureau behind. “I believe...” is the repeated refrain, with Strickland prioritizing Ohio “by opposing outsourcing and standing up to China on unfair trade”, “helping new industries and small businesses create jobs”, and making investments in education and job training “to help our families get ahead”. Each “I believe...” line returns to the opening’s straight-to-camera shot of Strickland in his home, with a follow-up voiceover statement accompanying a *cinéma vérité*. The voiceovers by Strickland explain a policy-related stance – opposing outsourcing, creating jobs, and improving schools and college opportunities – relevant to his “I believe” appeal. In the final pitch of the ad, Strickland looks to camera (zoomed to a shoulder-up shot) saying: “I don’t work for the Wall Street guys, I work for you”.

#### *Analysis*

This spot engages in a discourse-as-representation linking Strickland with the many cultures in Ohio. Practicing a simple and direct format supported by sequences of *cinéma vérité*, the ad offers a discourse for each of Elazar’s political cultures – individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic – as part of a targeted appeal before the election. Following three “I believe...” narratives, Strickland reflects the various cultures by symbolically describing mythologies which are then used to connect with voters in the state.

In the first line, “I believe in Ohio” speaks to a larger mythology in the culture. Signifying the state itself, Strickland’s opposition to outsourcing and “standing up to China” are discourses on the values and identities in Ohio. This macro-appeal establishes a parallel for the ad’s closing line – “I don’t work for the Wall Street guys, I work for you”. Aside from taking a shot at his opponent,<sup>7</sup> Strickland is defining priorities and setting boundaries in an attempt to reduce his distance from voters. This is supplemented by the connotations in a slow zoom – bringing Strickland closer to the viewer – and setting the ad in Strickland’s home, which increases the personal-feel of the advertisement.

Yet more specific discourses offer important appeals which target the separate political cultures in the state. In the narrative of “a brighter future”, Strickland initiates a myth from the individualistic political culture when he discusses new industries and job creation. Believing in a marketplace of self-interested groups, a “brighter future” is achieved when

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<sup>7</sup> See Campaign Ad #1

government facilitates rather than intervenes in private concerns. As such, by “helping new industries and small businesses”, Strickland is symbolically serving the myth he has set-up as a candidate for individualistic voters.

This pattern is repeated in the myth that by investing in education and job training programs, families will be able to “get ahead”. Symbolically representing two political cultures, an association is made with the moralistic commonwealth – improving schools and expanding college opportunities – while the traditionalistic political culture is served with job training programs. Moralists look to aid later generations by supporting education in Ohio and programs which send more Ohioans to college fits with a commonwealth political order. At the same time, with Blue-Collar industrial jobs quickly become ‘old’ industry, maintaining the social order becomes a real concern for traditionalist voters (Elazar, 1966). The image of a welder can be interpreted as a visual representation of this traditionalistic culture where ‘old’ industry opportunities are available.

Thus, in the closing advertisement of Strickland’s re-election campaign, the cultural diversity of Ohio is reflected in the collective narratives used to make an appeal. Primarily engaging in symbolic discourses, the language and representations in “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs” are used to create three distinct narratives feeding a targeted mythology for each political culture. These discourses are then fortified in the closing line that re-introduces the ‘other’ of Wall Street, contrasting it with “you” – the Ohio voter.

### **Discussion of Analysis**

It is clear from the empirical research that cultural representations can be defined in Strickland’s 2010 television advertisements. However, the subjectivity of analysis raises concerns when discourses within the artifact are actively read and the interpretation generated is not necessarily what the speaker intended or the initial audience experienced. Furthermore, as this study exclusively looks at the Democratic candidate’s spots, no comparison exists between the opposing advertising discourses in the election. Research is therefore unable to analyze the representations of Ohio’s cultural politics across campaigns and definitive conclusions about which party better responds to voters on a cultural level cannot be reached.

This begs the question of present research – ‘so what’? What does it matter that a cultural discourse-as-representation is found in Strickland’s campaign ads? Who cares if narratives and myths link with Ohio’s political culture? Why is interpreting the cultural politics in campaign advertisements important?

Answer comes after relating the empirical analysis to the conceptual framework responding to a question of how ads connect candidates with “the information that voters take with them into the voting booth” (Thurber, Nelson and Dulio 2000, 6). Motivated by the argument that cultural representations are a means of connecting campaigns with voters, the ‘so what’ for research is found in testing the relationship marketing of Strickland’s advertisements. If the cultural interpretation of discourses fits with the RM model, then analysis of representations in political advertising’s narratives and myths is validated as important for future focus by academics and practitioners.

### *Accentuating the ‘local’*

Based on Johansen’s (2005, 92) description of the orientation in RM, an advertisement would need to stress the ‘local’ as a form of decentralized organization to be considered relationally-marketed. This can be interpreted in each spot sampled when Ohio – in a discourse-as-representation – holds a connotation of congruous values and identities for voters. Speaking to individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic political cultures, Strickland is decentralized in the various ‘locals’ of Ohio. Accordingly, with election discourses considered cyclical, the campaign presents an interactive process of production and consumption when the different cultures are all made contributing components to the larger cultural politics of the state.

Also adding to the ‘local’ connection in advertisements are discourses containing ‘because of motives’ – “variables in life that “cause” or “lead” the individual to act in a certain way” – and ‘in order to motives’ creating “goal-seeking and goal-achieving behaviors” (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1997, xxii). Through an exclusion mythology of ‘others’ in a populist narrative about Ohio’s economic hardships, blame is assigned to dissonant values and identities. Washington, Wall Street, China, and corporate executives serve as a ‘because of motive’ for rejecting non-local cultures. Voters are then offered ‘in order to motives’ as a response to the distant “causes” of hardship. These exist in the supportive mythologies linked to Strickland. Symbolic representations of economic growth and opportunity as well as personifications of Ohio’s political cultures offer “goal-seeking” motivations for voters.

However, accentuating the ‘local’ is only part of RM building a connection with voters. Talk of motives must develop from the exchange relationship between producer and consumer in the political marketplace (Scammell, 1999). As such, it is with representations of exchange where the subjective cultural interpretation can be assessed within the context of this study.

*Relationships of Exchange*

Focusing on “the importance of sustaining mutually satisfying exchanges” (Bannon 2005, 74), RM “sees the role of a producer as doing things *for* customers” (Baker 2000, 21). As an incumbent, Strickland had an established connection with Ohioans from the 2006 election. This meant his 2010 relationship with voters had to be nurtured in reference to his term as governor. However, with 18-20.9% in Ohio underemployed and an Economic Confidence Index that was 10<sup>th</sup> lowest in the U.S. for 2010 (Gallup, 2011), attempting to highlight any economic achievement was a complicated endeavor. It should come as no surprise then that Strickland’s term is rarely referenced in the advertisements sampled. When a reference is made, it comes from a third-party and not the candidate himself.

Nevertheless, a relationally-marketed campaign should demonstrate the benefits of the interactive exchange between candidate and voter. Despite “an angry and skeptical electorate” (Hallett, 2010a), the campaign still managed to outperform every state-wide Democratic candidate in Ohio (The New York Times, 2010) and “exit polls demonstrated that Strickland far outperformed national Democrats among seniors, rural voters and even those who strongly support the tea party” (Catanese, 2010). Yet it is possible that the successful use of symbolism to represent Ohio’s cultural politics actually hindered the exchange relationship from properly being displayed in Strickland’s advertisements. As explained in the conceptual framework, symbolism is employed in politics as “people do not experience political events directly; rather, we experience language about such events” (Hershey 1992, 85). But between 2008 and 2009, the number of Ohioans reporting employers who were letting people go went from 20% to 26.8% (Gallup, 2011) and housing foreclosures jumped 3.8% (Policy Matters Ohio, 2010).

These figures of economic hardship formed the reality in 2010 Ohio, with unemployment and housing foreclosures directly experienced by voters in the state. Because the election revolved around a climate of such experiences, indirect cultural discourses engaged in symbolic representations were incapable of directly addressing the exchange relationship. This speaks to a larger gulf between symbolic political discourses and directly addressing the political marketplace of exchange in campaign advertisements. Yet if anything, the campaign did nurture a relationship between Strickland and voters. Polling showed Strickland’s deficit decrease as the election drew nearer (Huffington Post, 2010) and while not definitively linked, representations of Ohio found in the analysis did strengthened from “Good Work” to “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs”. Though Strickland lost, the ‘local’ connection offered in the campaign ads potentially allowed Strickland’s performance to outshine other Democrats facing the same political landscape. While this research cannot conclusively answer this

question, it does demonstrate the need for further scholarly interest on the subject of cultural discourses in politics.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

This study brought an alternative approach to thinking about televised political advertising. Designed to examine the narratives, myths, and symbols contributing to a campaign discourse, the larger objective in analyzing representations of cultural politics was to advance political advertising's academic research and practical application. Using Ted Strickland's 2010 re-election campaign for a case study of this approach, research interpreted discursive representations of Ohio culture with a semiotic visual-discourse analysis. However, to justify the alternative analysis, it was important to demonstrate the significance of cultural discourses and their contributions to political messages in campaigns.

Critically assessing political advertising research and the post-modernist tradition in discourse studies, the theoretical foundation set out to offer an idea of political discourse as cyclical rather than asymmetrically manipulative. The antagonistic nature in politics (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) was therefore used to support the interactive, back-and-forth relationship in the marketplace of elections. With politics understood as having an "inherently marketing character" (Scammell, 1999), defining Ohio's political marketplace was essential for research and cultural studies provided a field from which such definitions could evolve. Taking an explanation of 'cultural politics' from Fairclough (2003) coupled with Elazar's (1966; 1994) descriptions of political cultures, a set of values and identities representative of Ohio were developed for a conceptualization of the 'local' in Strickland's campaign. Explaining a political strategy of relationship marketing for connecting with voters, a framework was then built so that discourses could be contextualized within the political advertising field. Applying Johansen's (2005) decentralized organizational structure with Scammell's (1999) emphasis on the exchange relationship in politics, a model was established to test the argument that cultural representations were important for nurturing a relationship with voters. Furthermore, to tie analysis to the theoretical discussion of narratives and myths, a discussion of political symbolism was able to validate the use of semiotics for interpreting advertisements from the campaign.

This interpretation developed from a methodology that was as much influenced by the theoretical grounding as the empirical suitability for research objectives. Focusing on cultural discourses in advertisements, a double-layered semiotic visual-discourse analysis was designed to examine the manifest content of 'discourse-as-language' as well as the 'discourse-as-representation' of cultural symbols and 'hidden myths'. Uncovering layered meanings,



analysis actively-read cultural discourses in each of the sampled spots. Most significantly, the decentralized RM principle of integration in 'local' societies was repeatedly interpreted in symbolic narratives and mythologies. Using a variety of verbal and non-verbal discourses, Strickland communicated a representation of Ohio's cultural politics targeting individualistic, moralistic, and traditionalistic political cultures. In this way, justification for the alternative analysis existed as a cultural interpretation was not only possible, but uncovered interesting information about the messaging in political advertisements.

The campaign failed, however, to sufficiently emphasize the exchange established in the RM model for analyzing the importance of cultural representations. With the recession affecting all elections, incumbents were at a disadvantage. Yet, the analysis of political symbolism in discourses could suggest that symbolic expressions of "intentionality" (Frentz and Farrell, 1976) are incapable of connecting with voters experiencing direct hardships. As such, the benefits of an exchange relationship would need to be explicit to sufficiently address voters given the context of the election. Further study expanding research is therefore necessary to continue developing this analytical model. In the hopes of advancing debate on the use of culture to nurture a relationship with voters, research is encouraged to include an analysis *between* campaigns from the same election. The comparative element would allow for greater scrutiny of different cultural discourses in the political marketplace. Additionally, such an inspection is helpful when the winning message is equally in relation to the opposing campaign as it is a product of the election's context. This is important for political advertising as context contributes not only political elements but cultural representations to the campaign messaging.

What is certain from this study is the value of culture in political campaigns. Whether as a set of values and identities or a representation of the 'local', culture offers an important discourse in political relationships. As such, Strickland's 2010 gubernatorial campaign was a case study for both cultural discourses and "the politics of hard times". Evident from this analysis was the richness of cultural discourses communicated through the narratives, myths, and symbols interpreted in Strickland's ads. It therefore successfully increased our knowledge about how political advertising functions in specific situations (Kaid 2002, 211). Though additional work is needed to move research forward, such knowledge would not have been made 'manifest' if analysis had been constipated with a concern for the manipulative power of discourses. Discourse, like a relationally-marketed campaign, is interactive and greater attention to the context of this connection is important for evolving our understanding of political advertising.

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## **APPENDICES**

### ***Campaign Ad #1***

**Title:** “Good Work”

**Producer:** Ted Strickland for Governor

**Date:** 4 May, 2010

**Time:** 31 seconds

### ***Campaign Ad #2***

**Title:** “Listen”

**Producer:** Ted Strickland for Governor

**Date:** 16 September, 2010

**Time:** 31 seconds

### ***Campaign Ad #3***

**Title:** “Angry”

**Producer:** Ted Strickland for Governor

**Date:** 23 September 2010

**Time:** 31 seconds

### ***Campaign Ad #4***

**Title:** “Improving Schools, Creating Jobs”

**Producer:** Ted Strickland for Governor

**Date:** 27 October 2010

**Time:** 31 seconds



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