Cultural Daily

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Synecdoche, Washington

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, January 9th, 2019

For once the Dems got the visuals right. There they were, Chuck Schumer and Nancy Pelosi, backed by a sea of American flags. They stood before the symbols of political legitimacy, and by extension power accrued to them. Schumer was correctly placed to the left, because he's taller (we scan visual images left-to-right, because we read that way). Both were dressed in subdued, serious clothing.

Remember when Trump held his campaign rallies? He, too, backed himself with American flags, creating the visual image that he was presidential long before he was President.

Images matter. Research shows that the actual text of what we say is less than 10% of the received meaning. Ninetly percent of audience takeaways come from visuals and tone of voice.

A synecdoche, as most of our literary-minded readers know, is a figure of speech where the part stands for the whole. We say "the White House" meaning the entire presidential administration. That's a synecdoche. The power of a single image in a nationwide political address is the power of synecdoche. The image stands for the full content of the speech. In this way, Schumer and Pelosi's address, like Trump's Oval Office speech itself, told its story with visual trappings of power and authority.

But the text does matter, too — that 10% is critical. And here, Trump's synechdoches were more powerful. In painting his nationalist, racist picture of an "immigrant crisis," Trump told emotional stories: "In California, an Air Force veteran was raped, murdered, and beaten to death with a hammer by an illegal alien with a long criminal history. In Georgia, an illegal alien was recently charged with murder for killing, beheading, and dismembering his neighbor. In Maryland, MS-13 gang members who arrived in the United States as unaccompanied minors were arrested and charged last year after viciously stabbing and beating a 16-year-old girl."

These anecdotal stories — both factual and horrific — overwhelm the reality that immigrants are safer and more law-abiding than US-born citizens. But it doesn't matter. The synecdoches broad-brushed for immigrants as a class.

Pelosi and Schumer, instead, offered factual information. "The fact is… The fact is…" Pelosi repeated. They told no anecdotes or stories at all. They could have named names: the federal worker who can't feed her family; the children who died in border detention. They could have and

should have, because in political discourse facts rarely stand a chance against emotional synecdoche anecdotes. Pelosi and Schumer's intellectual approach, at the textual level, does not counter Trump's emotional attack.

Until and unless Democrats' rhetoric employs anecdotal synecdoches that connect emotionally, it will be hard to keep Trump from being re-elected. But, at least, for once, Schumer and Pelosi got the visual symbolism right. Now, they and their colleagues need to work on their textual synecdoches — the single, anecdotal stories that stand for huge swaths of voters, and will connect on an emotional level.

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