

Musical persuasion in Donald Trump's campaign advertising. Juxtaposition resources in contrast spots with production music

Persuasión musical en spots de Donald Trump. Recursos de yuxtaposición en anuncios comparativos con música de librería



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Abstract:

This paper studies the soundtrack of some Donald Trump contrast ads that include resources of musical juxtaposition. Adverts that used pre-existing production music during the 2016 and 2020 US presidential campaigns. The preferred technique is to reduce the number of instruments used to a minimum when talking about the adversary and bringing in full orchestration when speaking of the advertiser. Expressive silence is the most powerful musical device for signposting those words or phrases that, due to the information they transmit, summarise the advertising and campaign message in the ad. The Republican candidate opts for alternating and combining harmonious and textural changes to project himself with a tough profile in the

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Resumen:

Este artículo estudia la banda sonora de algunos spots de contraste de Donald Trump que incluyen recursos de yuxtaposición musical. Anuncios que emplearon composiciones preexistentes de librería en las campañas presidenciales estadounidenses de 2016 y 2020. La técnica preferente consiste en reducir al mínimo el número de instrumentos empleados al hablar del adversario e incorporar la orquestación completa al hablar del anunciante. El silencio expresivo constituye el recurso más poderoso que tiene la música para señalar aquellas palabras o frases que, por la información que ofrecen, resumen el mensaje publicitario y electoral del spot. El candidato republicano apuesta por alternar y conjugar cambios armónicos y texturales para proyectarse como un perfil

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second part of the spot, in contrast with the weakness of the Democrat candidates, as represented in the first, negative part. The application of harmonic changes while maintaining the instruments, rhythm and pace of the music strengthens the narrative cohesion of all the audio-visual components. The methodology utilised in this study can be applied to observe music in the audio-visual field outside the context of political campaigns, and even outside advertising.

Keywords:

Campaign ad; musical syntax; harmony; presidential campaign; Donald Trump.

duro en el segundo fragmento del spot, en contraposición a la debilidad de los candidatos demócratas, representada en la primera parte de ataque. Aplicar cambios armónicos manteniendo los instrumentos, el ritmo y la velocidad de la música fortalece la cohesión narrativa de todos los componentes audiovisuales. La metodología empleada en este estudio se puede aplicar para observar la música en lo audiovisual fuera del ámbito electoral, e incluso fuera del ámbito de la publicidad.

Palabras clave:

Spot; sintaxis musical; armonía; campaña electoral; Donald Trump.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale

Researchers familiar with publications on persuasion in presidential elections will have noted that most studies pay little attention to music and other auditory phenomena (Christiansen, 2020: 470). Although the use of commercial music and jingles may arouse certain interest (e.g., Kasper & Schoening, 2012) –the former due to the connotations and discourses that surround a piece in society, and the latter thanks to their agility in entertaining and facilitating retention of advertising messages– an academic study should not tiptoe around the musical syntax of this type of advertisement. In contemporary campaign spots, this question involves analysing advertisements that use *production music*. These are pre-existing works which the viewer may not recognise but that advertisers use temporarily in compliance with the conditions of a sound bank¹ –platforms, websites and/or digitized documentary files where images, footage, music, and sounds are acquired for audio-visual or radio projects. Such compositions contain those same musical resources that the audience has become familiar with through cinema, series, video games and advertising.

Our analysis is limited to adverts broadcast in presidential elections in the United States of America because all Western democracies try to import both American political marketing and their audio-visual techniques and technologies. The US is the birthplace of the campaign spot. Its long history and the enormous investment that the country allocates to electoral propaganda means that researchers from other parts of the world are always interested in studies showing the latest trends in the US. The study of Donald Trump's musical strategy could help this area achieve greater repercussion, since the television personality has managed to capture the attention, not only of his supporters and detractors, but also of a wider public that had seemed to be disinterested in politics (Oroe, 2018: 263). Trump's communication is the doctrine of much of the rhetorical

1 E.g., <https://artlist.io/>. The conditions of use of musical pieces –commercial and non-commercial, with attribution of rights, etc.–, as well as the price or gratuity of their use, may vary depending on the contract that the users have with the platform and the latter with the composers/producers of the desired piece.

style of the *new right*². But this paper is in no way intended as a political study, nor does it intend to establish a relationship between advertising and electoral results. This study is positioned in the field of Communication, with the aim of discovering new artistic uses of music in videopolitics, it discusses both the *musical* meanings –those that make sense within the music’s own narrative– and the *extramusical* ones –that allude to non-musical issues.

1.2. Theory & musical cognition

1.2.1. What is meant by musical syntax and musical meanings?

To study the music of Donald Trump’s presidential adverts, it is necessary to turn to publications on musical cognition whose methodologies can be applied to the context of the documents observed: generally, videographic communications in English whose soundtrack is contained within the *diatonic scale*. Although it would lack scientific rigour to say that the classic tonality includes all the possible ways of distributing *tonal space*³ in the Western world, an example of a musical system rooted in said cultural and geographical area is that known as *Western Tonal Music* –hereinafter, *WTM*. A conception of consonance built on the proportions of the intervals of a diatonic scale –with notes separated by consecutive second intervals⁴. A music that flourished from the 17th century on and whose *syntax* has influenced us ever since (Patel, 2008: 242).

The psychology of music studies how we perceive this art and the effects it has on listeners. Following in the wake of pioneering minds such as Diana Deutsch (The Psychology of Music, 1982), in recent decades papers have been published that study the *syntactic* dimension of music. Musical compositions, like literary stories, have *narrativity*. “The syntactic analysis of music consists of establishing relationships between a note or chord, and the ‘context’ of the previous chords or preceding harmonic structure” (Sel & Calvo-Merino, 2013: 294). Musical grammar has been studied from a Chomskian perspective – see the Generative Theory of Tonal Music (GTTM, 1983) by the professor of composition Fred Lerdahl (Madison, Wisconsin, 1943) and linguist Ray Jackendoff (Chicago, 1945). If grammar studies the components of a language and how they combine, generativism, developed by Noam Chomsky (Philadelphia, 1928) in the 1950s, ponders the principles that allow us to correctly predict such combinations. As in languages, sounds are combined in multiple ways for a conversant listener to interpret music. To explain the foundations of tonality from generative grammar, music theorists strive to explain why a succession of notes, chords, or a rhythmic pattern makes sense to listeners educated in a particular musical system. The methodology proposed by Fred Lerdahl in Tonal Pitch Space (TPS, 2001) to measure the distance and perceived attraction between pitches and between

2 Aka alternative right or “*alt-right*” (e.g., Stefanoni, 2021). Terms under discussion that can include all the formations and candidates whose discourse is attributed exclusively to the conservative political agenda in liberal democracies. The *new right* denounces the inaction or *moderation* of self-proclaimed *right-wing* parties that are too deeply assimilated into the hegemonic progressive mindset. Some of their common features are economic and migratory protectionism, the revitalization of national sentiments and criticism of international institutions, unbridled public spending, feminist or LGBT pressure groups, and indoctrination in schools by the Government. Employing politically incorrect discourse, directed towards the working classes, and contrary to progressive media bias, the candidacies of Giorgia Meloni, in Italy; Jair Bolsonaro, in Brazil; Marine Le Pen, in France; and Donald Trump, in the USA can be included within this category.

3 “Tonal pitch space”. For more information, see Lerdahl (2001).

4 For more information, see Polychoron Productions (September 23, 2020). *The tuning systems of Western music*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ofarwzq75A4>

chords constitutes the most comprehensive theory developed to date to help understand the foundations of the Western tonal system.

Since music is not a language with denotative purposes, it would be somewhat rash to delimit its minimum units of meaning. Rhythmically organised sound can be considered as transmitting –musical– meanings as long as it is capable of defining an aesthetically appreciable narrative. When human beings invent an instrument, they also produce and (re)produce a musical language. Some note scales are *easier* than others, they are well-trodden paths to transit the tonal space. Although there are several criteria to classify musical languages, one way to distinguish them is based on the *distances* that the notes keep within their most common scales –the proportions. If syntax refers to the order of the components to generate meanings, in the case of music it arranges the notes and regulates their duration to weave an aesthetically appreciable narrative –according to internal references, in the piece, and externally, from a grammar. We refer to interpretable meanings within a musical system as *musical meanings*.

The aesthetics of music lie in the rhythm, the repetition of forms, the recognition of patterns. Musical syntax generates expectations, and composers take advantage of that predictability. Melodies and progressions fluctuate between tension and relaxation, forming epicentres of attraction and resolution –which is a definition of musical *cadence*. The tension is related to the feeling of mobility, of openness, that the music *must* go on. One may also speak of tension when the notes in intervals or chords *clash* within a tonal context –*dissonance*. Attraction, specifically, occurs when said tension leads us to or infuses us with the desire to reach one or more specific points of resolution –i.e. some tonal centre, though it be only temporary. A cadence is any musical event that, by means of a short process of stability, tension, and resolution, manages to define a cycle, or lead the musical narrative to a new fragment or towards an end. This *cadential* process may be incomplete in harmony, *suspensive* cadence –or complete– *conclusive* cadence. Musical cognition expert Elizabeth Margulis describes *cadence closure* as an event that suppresses expectation (Margulis, 2003, cited in Sears, 2015: 255).

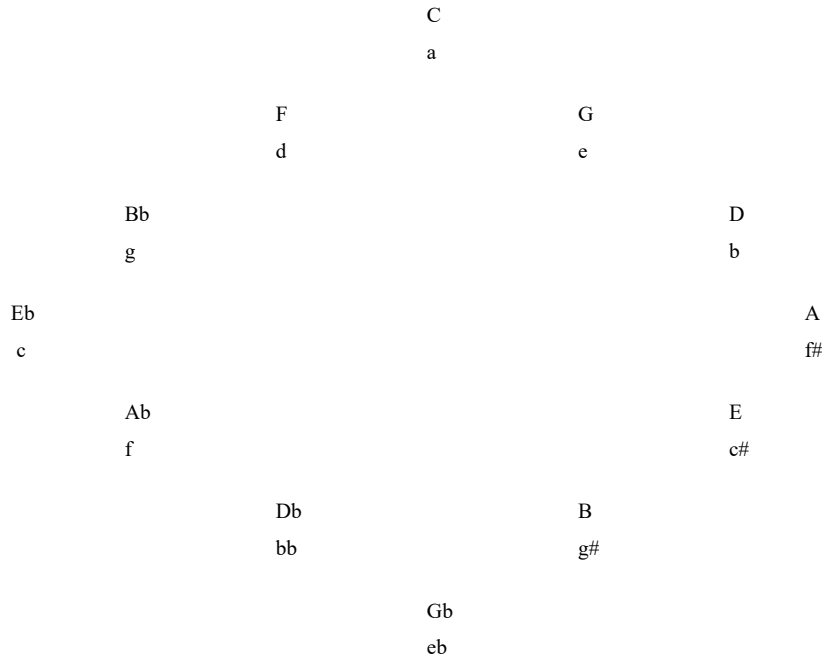
Tonic function concerns the musical events of rest (tonal centre), and the *dominant* function concerns those of tension and attraction towards said tonic. The *subdominant* would be an intermediate point, of moderate tension and a non-resolved nature. The most stable chords would be those which contain the note that constitutes the fragment's tonal centre, the dominant ones being those that contain the notes closest to the notes in said tonic chord - due to attraction towards them. In harmony, it is common to speak of harmonic degrees to refer to the chords developed from a base note which is that of the diatonic scale of a key. E.g., harmonic degrees of the diatonic scale of C major⁵:

a) I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii°	(HARMONIC DEGREES)
b) C	d	e	F	G	a	b°	(CHORDS)
c) Do	Re	Mi	Fa	So	La	Ti	(NOTES)

In musical theory, *authentic* cadence is the resolution of the V to I degree, and the *plagal* cadence IV-I. One usually speaks of *harmonic rhythm* when observing the frequency with which the chords change in a composition. The *relationship* between the

5 To indicate whether a chord or harmonic degree is major or minor, an uppercase (I/C) or lowercase (i/c) letter or Roman numeral is used, respectively.

chords and between the tonalities that are derived from each of the 12 notes of the tempered system is usually represented in the commonly-termed *circle of fifths*⁶, where each chord/tonality is followed by whatever plays the dominant role, successively⁷:



Musical psychology studies often point to *tempo* and *mode* as the mechanisms that modulate the feelings evoked by music. The quicker the tempo –or pace–, the greater the level of excitement. Similarly, the use of broad intervals is recommendable to express joy and shorter intervals to express sadness (e.g., Mattheson, 1739/1999). The mode would define what is known in psychology as *valence* –positive in major keys and negative in minor ones. Tonality implies tone –pitch– and mode (Zamacois, 1949/2007: 53). This mode is defined by the third note of the musical scale. It is major when there are two tones between the I and III degrees, and minor when there are one and a half tones from the base note. It might be thought that the major mode sounds more joyful because it is the one that has a natural base in the frequencies that form the harmonics when playing a note –it is the major third that appears in these, and not the minor (e.g., Sansa Llovich, 2013: 72). From this perspective, major

6 Further information in Jaime Altozano (February 1, 2019). *Un truco increíble para entender acordes y escalas: El círculo de quintas*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRBTCIK_9_g

7 In the circle of fifths, the chord/key that appears below each major chord/key is its relative minor (e.g., C and a). Relative keys share the same musical scale but change modes. The chief difference is the note with which it begins, and which is the tonal centre of the scale.

keys would seem more familiar to us and, therefore, would evoke an aura of *imperturbability* that invites optimism and a more carefree feeling. On the contrary, the minor keys would contain the unknown, since their minor third note adds a sombre hue to the music that agitates the listener. However, researchers affirm that the quality of these variations is more influenced by tradition than by acoustic issues, and could vary depending on human culture (e.g., Patel, 2008: 314).

The evocations of a timbre in a community can also be rooted following centuries of musical praxis. But with regard exclusively to the acoustic dimension of music, less intensity in the percussion of the strings and a greater proportion of resonance with respect to the immediate sound gives rise to “sweeter” sounds (e.g., Quintana Quintana, 2015, p. 162), as when the keys of a piano are played gently, or the strings of a Spanish guitar are caressed. On the contrary, the great pressure that brass players exert on their instruments with their mouth and breathing implies a high speed of wave propagation, the distortion of which causes the sounds to “break” and to be perceived as “strident” (e.g., Esteve Rico, 2018, p.11).

1.2.2. *Musical emotion and cadential synchronisation*

The music theorist Frank Lehman (2018) studies the resources of harmony in Hollywood films within what he calls “the art of amazement” (165). This academic has analysed how harmonic cadences are integrated into cinematographic scenes based on the knowledge that creative workers have of the dynamics of attraction and tonal resolution. In *Hollywood Cadences: Music and the Structure of Cinematic Expectation* (2013), Lehman analyses how cadences come together with visual elements to create expectations and satisfy, break, or redirect their narrative and tonal resolution. The cadences direct the viewer's attention at the right moment to the content of the director's choosing. Lehman (2013) defines this phenomenon as “cadential synchronisation” (4).

Following this line of research, the author suggests what techniques of expert manipulation of musical harmony manage to produce pleasurable physical reactions. Causing piloerection in response to a musical stimulus is of great interest to creatives. Researchers have referred to this bodily reaction as the “shivers” (Sloboda, 1991), “chills” (Hunter et al, 2010), “thrills” (Huron & Margulis, 2010), or, in ascending order according to the intensity of the bodily reaction, “chills-shivers-thrills-goosebumps” (Jaimovich et al., 2013). Panksepp (1995) referred to this phenomenon as “skin orgasm” (203). John A. Sloboda, a musical psychologist, said that *goosebumps* would occur in response to new and unprepared harmonies (Sloboda, 1991). The expert in musical cognition David Huron (2006) rounds off this idea by pointing out that such harmonic movements must be unexpected but not threatening in terms of musical syntax. Everything seems to indicate that the emotivity of a harmonic progression is among those formulas that explore, distort, and *twist* a system without breaking its internal logic. Meyer sees composers increasing the intensity of a stimulus by postponing the outcome of musical cadences (cited in Storr, 2002, p. 117) –it is from this premise that Lehman develops his analyses of cadential synchronisation. The hedonic effects of dopamine are more closely linked to the experience of expectation than to the pleasure of satiety (e.g., Huron & Margulis, 2010). There is greater pleasure in the wait when you imagine the resolution –also true in the world of tone. Amazement implies both admiration and quivering (Lehman, 2013: 13), and has an epistemological character based on the awareness that one has of one's ignorance (Lehman, 2018: 169). The more difficult it is to achieve this *gnosis*, the greater the pleasure of emotional discharge can be.

1.2.3. *The extramusical and extramusical meanings*

By definition the words *extra* and *musical* combine to be everything that lies outside of music. Some schools of thought have it that music is not related to anything extra-musical (Schlenker, 2017: 5), while others maintain that all music is *programmatic*, either explicitly or implicitly (e.g., Storr, 2002: 111). The classic division between programmatic and *absolute* music usually occurs depending on whether or not the compositions are related to other texts. Programmatic music would intentionally seek to evoke images and ideas and would oppose the idea of absolute, pure, or abstract music, for which the composer would not have sought any relationship with non-musical issues. But when we talk about *extra-musical* meanings, we are not referring solely to the meanings that a piece of music wishes to transmit from its conception, but to all those non-musical issues to which a piece can take us back regardless of the composer's intentions –in most cases it is impossible to distinguish between them since the creative purpose of the work is unknown. Such issues, values, or objects have nothing to do with the music, but are signalled through devices, formulas and attributes present in the musical forms.

Although the specificity of the semantic concepts stimulated by music is much less and more variable between individual listeners than those activated by language (Patel, 2008: 334), the ideas and images that certain musical forms give rise to are a primary phenomenon for interpreting a composition. In his operas, Wagner used musical motifs to invoke recurring characters or places, just as films use *leitmotifs* (Patel, 2008: 328). Few composers doubt that, to predict reactions to certain musical formulas, both authors and listeners must share the same musical culture. The composer achieves an approximation to the unanimity of listeners' reactions through progressions that evoke images and feelings (Hindemith, 1961: 42). The tones are arranged forming scales and progressions, signifying tonal functions –musical meanings– and evoking extra-musical images. The system of references that a song utilises to call out to the listener is completed by the “discourses” that are built around it (Pelinski, 2000).

There is nothing better than habit for leaving indelible reference marks. Our habits, sculpted by repetition, give a musical resource the power to act as a reference. Certain musical formulas carry extra-musical meanings by the simple fact of being recurrently paired with texts, ideas, narratives and/or images –just consider the music that adorns dreams, hallucinations, and flashbacks in cinema (Forceville, 2009: 17). Music acts as an effective retrieval cue for scene recognition and vice versa (Boltz, 2004). References can originate within the work itself or outside of it (Lehman, 2018: 60). Extramusical meanings exist for a human group in a time and place. For the musical forms that signal them, music is just a signifier. Although we can distinguish between musical and extra-musical meanings, one does not function whilst blind to the other, and the emotional response can be the result of both the musical and the extra-musical meaning (Sel & Calvo-Merino, 2013: 293).

1.2.4. *Leading-tone exchange transformation as a resource of amazement*

Lehman completes his analysis of cinematic harmony with neo-Riemannian theory (e.g., Lewin, 1993), which seeks to relate harmonies directly to each other, without taking a tonic as a reference point. This “agnostic” attitude with respect to tonic assignment is liberating in a repertoire such as film music (Lehman, 2012: 182). The main premise of this approach, taken by both Frank Lehman and Fred Lerdahl, is that the proximity between triads lies in the number of steps that must be taken to reach one chord from the previous one. Neo-Riemannian theory speaks of *leading-tone exchange transformation*. *LT* or simply

L, to refer to the harmonic leaps from the minor first degree to the major sixth degree $-i \rightarrow VI-$ and from the major first degree to the minor third degree $-I \rightarrow iii$. Whilst it is true that the movement has many possibilities in both directions, the ascending route –e.g., $e \rightarrow C-$ possesses greater emotional force as it moves from a minor chord to a major one –positive tacit valence being associated with the major mode, and negative with the minor. The resource meets two of Lehman's conditions for efficacy in causing amazement (2018: 172):

- a) Frustrate general harmonic expectations.
- b) Prolong tonal tension through associative ambiguity.

Listeners, who might think that the fragment is in a minor key, would change their minds when they hear the following chord, since the harmonic leap can be interpreted as $i \rightarrow VI$ or $vi \rightarrow IV$. Likewise, this progression has another great advantage that places it as one of the most skilful emotional resources of harmony in WTM: its simplicity. It requires a single semitonal alteration to achieve major perceptual changes.

1.3. Juxtaposition in comparative advertising

For Benoit, Pier & Blaney (1997) there are three basic functions of political communication: “acclaiming”, “attacking”, or “defending”. But when a single campaign advert includes both a wish to embellish one candidate's image and disfigure that of the opponent, one finds oneself faced with a type of hybrid advertisement: the comparative or *contrast* spot (e.g., Gronbeck, 1985). Most scholars agree to distinguish between examples of campaign advertising communication according to three purposes (e.g., Kaid & Johnston, 2001):

- a) Praise or *defend* one side.
- b) *Attack* the opponent –“attack ads,” “attack spots,” “attack commercials” (e.g., Trent & Friedenberg, 1983).
- c) *Compare* the advertising candidate with his/her opponent.

Comparative advertising generally places the competitor immediately before or after the advertiser. In the electoral sphere, these advertisements present a very interesting “musical juxtaposition” (Ron Rodman, 2012). *Juxtaposing* means “placing two objects together or describing them together, so that the differences between them are emphasised” (Collins, 2024). Juxtaposing means in grammar “to place close together or side by side” (Collins, 2024). Positive sentiment may be greater when it is preceded by negative sentiment (e.g., Huron & Margulis, 2010: 598-599, cited in Lehman, 2018: 173). Musically speaking, creators reinforce audio-visual narrative with compositions that leave no doubt in any fragment about the purpose of the advert. Without music, neither the villainy of the adversary would seem so perverse, nor the words of the advertiser so right.

2. Method

2.1. Delimitation of the sample and documentary source

There are five basic criteria to define which Donald Trump adverts have been viewed or discarded:

- a) *Comparative advertising with techniques of musical juxtaposition.* As political advertising always tends to make comparisons –contrasting the society desired by the advertiser with current society or the one proposed by the adversary– this study only qualifies as *contrasts* those spots that mention or show the name of the advertiser and the opponent or in which their image or voice appears while expressing –verbally, orally or in writing– a clear desire to compare. We align ourselves, then, with the classic description of the contrast campaign spot –communications that include explicit comparisons between the attributes of the candidates (e.g., García Beaudoux & D’Adamo, 2006, p. 88) –regardless of whether these are integrated in a spot mostly of defence or attack, or if they separate each purpose by fragments. Likewise, we focus on those ads with a soundtrack that does not change compositions during the video. We infer that if the author takes greater care to attend to the musical syntax to define said juxtaposition –beyond downloading music from an audio bank that *sounds* sad, macabre, motivational, or epic and integrating each composition into the corresponding fragment–, the adaptation of the musical content to the rest of the audio-visual components will also be of greater artistic interest.
- b) *Financing.* Spots explicitly approved and paid for by the candidate –*political candidate advertising* (e.g. Tedesco, 2008: 7). Ads produced by the party or affiliates, interest groups or PACs⁸ are excluded. Choosing to include spots due to their financing helps to organise these documents so as to identify styles, since they are communications produced by teams that work in a campaign and for a candidate, under a single strategic command.
- c) *Epoch.* In the absence of a legal definition in the US, we deem the presidential campaign to begin the day after the close of the convention in which each party announces its candidate –including that day– and that it ends the day before the election –also including that day. Presidential spots have been studied –that is, spots by a presidential candidate. The spots that Trump broadcasted during the Republican primaries are therefore excluded. The videos analysed appeared between the following dates:
 - a) 22/07/2016 – 11/07/2016
 - b) 28/08/2020 – 11/02/2020
- d) *Broadcast medium.* We focused on video spots. Of these, only those that include the tagline *I am* [candidate name] *and I approve this message* have been considered. This legally-required oral message tells us that the video was created to be broadcast on television, without meaning that it may not also be broadcast on the Internet or other media.
- e) *Anonymous music.* To address the adaptation of musical syntax without being distracted by other issues related to the discourses that surround a composition in society, those spots that employ well-known songs –commercial music, hymns,

⁸ Political Action Committees or PACs are private organisations formed with the objective of intervening in elections.

anthems, etc. -have been avoided. We have considered those musical productions that are not recognisable by the viewer, and in the current advertising field this leads us directly to pre-existing royalty-free library works, chosen from digital banks.

This paper analyses a total of 13 Donald Trump spots⁹:

- a. *Deals*¹⁰ (2016)
- b. *Change*¹¹ (2016)
- c. *Choice*¹² (2016)
- d. *Great American Comeback*¹³ (2020)
- e. *Joe Biden has done absolutely NOTHING for America in 47 years!*¹⁴ (2020)
- f. *For You*¹⁵ (2020)
- g. *The best is yet to come!*¹⁶ (2020)
- h. *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*¹⁷ (2020)
- i. *Seven Hundred Percent*¹⁸ (2020)
- j. *Jen*¹⁹ (2020)
- k. *Joe Biden is a Trojan Horse for the Radical Left!*²⁰ (2020)
- l. *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump's Great American Comeback*²¹ (2020)

9 Videos available for viewing and downloading: <https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1LnwOrJ8S8WmxqeeMhtvL0v0s-5rQGfHp>

10 Donal J. Trump for President, Inc. (2016). Retrieved from Election Watch Ads (October 14, 2016). *Trump presidential campaign 'Deals': First broadcast October 14, 2016*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

11 Donal J. Trump for President, Inc. (October 18, 2016). Retrieved from Election Watch Ads (October 24, 2016). *Trump presidential campaign 'Change': First broadcast October 18, 2016*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT8yjMGMqGE>

12 Donal J. Trump for President, Inc. (November 1, 2016). *Choice*. Living Room Candidate. <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016/choice>

13 Donal J. Trump (September 5, 2020). *Great American Comeback*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

14 Donald J. Trump (September 15, 2020). *Joe Biden has done absolutely NOTHING for America in 47 years!* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-cOlmSu3Mw>

15 Donald J. Trump (September 16, 2020). *For You*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfHvC>

16 Donald J. Trump (September 17, 2020). *The Best Is Yet To Come!* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnwwUnKK82s>

17 Donald J. Trump (September 17, 2020). *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

18 Donald J. Trump (September 18, 2020). *Seven Hundred Percent*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TQvqk8EqIE>

19 Donald J. Trump (October 1, 2020). *Jen*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClvctstDdhLk>

20 Donald J. Trump (October 8, 2020). *Joe Biden is a Trojan Horse for the Radical Left!* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ0TBpf2r4s>

21 Donald J. Trump (October 12, 2020). *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump's Great American Comeback*. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a29Hy0f5npk>

*m. President Trump puts American workers first!*²² (2020)

In contemporary elections, the most reliable digital archive for downloading and preserving the spots of each campaign is the candidates' YouTube channel²³, as it allows the real time observation of their launch. It is an authentic repository with videos arranged chronologically which allows the following of the candidates' actions and the study of the artistic development of their spots. In the case at hand, the videos viewed were released simultaneously on the Internet and on television.

2.2. Description of musical meanings

We apply Meyer's principle (1957) according to which musical meaning appears at the moment when the listener notices a contradiction between what they expected to hear and what they actually hear (cited in Storr, 1992: 115-116). A change in harmonic progression, cadential processes, silences, prolongation in time of the attraction towards the tonal centre, emotional harmonic cadences, distances between chords much greater than the average of the fragment, etc. We must explain the musical meanings that these progressions carry and their possible extra-musical meanings, the instruments used and the pace of the song –if it changes during the piece. And, in all cases, observe what relationship these musical attributes have with the rest of the visual and verbal components of the audio-visual narrative.

It is assumed that the music analysed is within the WTM and that most spots integrate music with triad chords. In this sense, one can start by:

- a) Interpreting chords in the form of harmonic degrees.
- b) Observing the progressions to explain the musical structure of the composition.
- c) Identifying the harmonic resources of amazement (Lehman, 2018).
- d) Locating possible changes in tonality.
- e) Observing the end of the narrative –conclusive or suspensive.

Regarding the use of musical silences to indicate verbal content, this study interchangeably uses the synonymous concepts of *expressive silence* (e.g., Sánchez-Porras, 2013, p. 351) or *significant silence* (e.g., Torras Segura, 2010; Lehman, 2015). When referring to “silence” in the audio-visual framework, we refer to the “sensation of silence” caused by the variation of some psycho-acoustic parameters, since “absolute silence” does not exist (Torras Segura, 2012, p. 490). This referential resource also occurs when the music specifically decreases its volume or reduces its number of instruments at a crucial moment, considering the verbal and/or visual content of the moment. If this temporary circumvention of several musical instruments –fully orchestrated in the rest of the piece– occurs throughout an entire fragment, we can speak of an *orchestral hollowing out* [*sui generis* term]. When the harmonic rhythm is reserved for the second musical passage and in the first fragment the harmony remains static, with a single chord or without triads, we appreciate an intended harmonic *containment* or *retention* [*sui generis* term].

²² Donald J Trump (October 29, 2020). *President Trump puts American workers first!* YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya1qpIWF_10

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/DonaldTrump>

3. Results

3.1. Contribution of musical and extra-musical meanings

Musical content's contribution of meanings in the spots usually occurs when they coincide with those provided by the verbal content or other audio-visual components. The music in *Joe Biden is a Trojan horse for the Radical Left*²⁴ (2020) provides extra-musical meanings by setting the scene of a story with the harmonic rhythm performed by bowed string instruments that make triplets in the *chanson de geste* style, as well as the incorporation of a medieval music instrument –the *lira da braccio*– into the ensemble for the melody. *For You*²⁵ (2020) and *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*²⁶ (2020) has the speaker explicitly and negatively judging the opponent's policies, but in the following spots the candidate's policies are not said to be beneficial or harmful per se –at least not across the entire political spectrum. In these cases, it is the music that offers the information to understand the audio-visual narrative in its entirety, since the visual components and the text do not explicitly judge the message either positively or negatively:

In *Great American Comeback*²⁷ (2020) the music begins an orchestral hollowing out at the moment when Joe Biden says the phrase “I would shut it down”. This leads to the assumption that closures during the COVID-19 pandemic were mala praxis.

When the voice-over in *Seven Hundred Percent*²⁸ (2020), assures us that Biden proposes increasing the intake of refugees, it is the short intervals and the notes of equal duration in the music which crank up the tension concerning a normally delicate issue: risk, the danger inherent in welcoming people from unstable countries en masse [“from the most unstable, vulnerable, dangerous parts of the world”]. The music in the spot also provides extra-musical meanings by congruence when using a Phrygian scale typical of Middle Eastern culture –among others– to suggest the refugees' place of origin: “SYRIA, SOMALIA, YEMEN” [text on screen].

When the businessman in *The best is yet to come*²⁹ (2020), affirms that Biden sympathises with the Chinese [“Joe Biden hasn't done anything but cozy up to the Chinese”], the orchestral hollowing out is already underway and thus it is the music that indicates that sympathising with China is a bad policy. The speaker does later add a value judgment to these policies [“Joe Biden hasn't done anything but ship our jobs overseas. Joe Biden hasn't done anything but enrich his own family. I think he's done everything he can to work against the American people”]. The music in the spot also provides extra-musical meanings when country music is used to set the scene of a *local-national* businessman in a Stetson.

24 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ez0TBpf2r4s>

25 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfhVc>

26 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

28 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TQvqk8EqIE>

29 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnwwUnKK82s>

In *President Trump puts American workers first*³⁰ (2020), when the voice-over points out that President Trump is “playing hardball with China”, the harmonic progression of the composition can already be heard with full orchestration. Similarly, extra-musical meanings are provided by congruence as all the music has an aesthetic similar to that of television openings from the eighties and nineties –good times for the working class in the industrial zones now in decline who make up the target audience for this spot–: repetition of high notes in the melody played by an obviously digital piano and a progression which alternates major chords separated by two whole tones.

In *Jen*³¹ (2020), the beat of a reverberating bass drum strikes just as Biden lays out his intentions to end fracking, evoking the sensation of *your heart skipping a beat*. Environmentalist voters would not necessarily see Biden ‘s measures on this matter as something harmful. However, this Trump spot aims to warn of the impact that such policies would have on the workers of Pennsylvania, where the subsoil is rich in hydrocarbons. A few seconds later, this time coinciding with the meanings expressed by the protagonist of the spot, the instrument strikes again along with the phrase “it will be devastating”.

3.2. Resources of musical juxtaposition

In campaign advertising, the contribution of meanings from hollowing out the orchestra is created by removing most instruments from the fragment in which the *ineptitude* that the candidate wishes to project onto his opponent is pointed out, to define a complete instrumental texture in the part of the spot which praises the advertiser. A feeling of emptiness is evoked around the adversary’s policies, underlining his inaction in the face of *our* candidate’s efforts, or for situations that the latter is condemning. The resource has the single function of acting as negative reinforcement if in the defence fragment the music incorporates or reincorporates a fuller orchestration. Said orchestral hollowing out is applied in the following spots without in any way disturbing the musical narrative:

- a. *Choice*³² (2016)
- b. *Deals*³³ (2016)
- c. *Great American Comeback*³⁴ (2020)
- d. *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*³⁵ (2020)
- e. *Joe Biden has done absolutely NOTHING for America in 47 years*³⁶ (2020)
- f. *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump’s Great American Comeback*³⁷ (2020)

30 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya1qpIWF_10

31 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C1vct5TdhLk>

32 <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016/choice>

33 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

34 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

35 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-cOImSu3Mw>

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a29Hy0f5npk>

- g. *The best is yet to come*³⁸ (2020)
- h. *President Trump puts American workers first*³⁹ (2020).

At the same time, *Great American Comeback*⁴⁰ (2020) displays a change in the pace of the music: swifter in the defence fragments. In *For You*⁴¹ (2020), the contribution of musical meanings is applied by changing the main instruments and increasing the intensity of the music in the part in which the spot defends the advertiser, but without changing the harmonic progression. The following spots use a *brass*⁴² instrument –synthesised brass– to give positive contrast:

- a. *Deals*⁴³ (2016)
- b. *Change*⁴⁴ (2016)
- c. *Choice*⁴⁵ (2016)
- d. *For You*⁴⁶ (2020)
- e. *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump's Great American Comeback*⁴⁷ (2020)

Change (2016) applies harmonic containment in the attack fragment since the harmonic rhythm does not come in until the second part. *Jen*⁴⁸ (2020) simply applies a change in harmonic progression with positive contrast –from the minor mode to the major mode. *Deals* (2016) and *Jen* (2020) apply this mode change without at any time shifting the tonal centre of the composition, while *Joe Biden is a Trojan horse for the Radical Left*⁴⁹ (2020) or *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*⁵⁰ (2020) modulate their main minor key to their relative major. In *Deals*⁵¹ (2016), the music utilises the minor mode

38 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnwwUnKK82s>

39 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya1qpIWF_10

40 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

41 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfHVc>

42 “Brass” (e.g., Kunimoto, 1994, p. 3688) –*brass, metal*– includes synthesizer sounds that were originally intended to imitate the brass section of an orchestra –such as a trumpet. Over time, all sounds with metallic and blurred timbre and with a rapid attack have come to be designated this way –the *attack*, in musical performance, is the time it takes for the sound to appear after the instrument has been played. These instruments usually express the same note in several octaves, and when they play chords, they do so in the form of a harmonic interval, producing an enveloping sensation. Brass instruments with a harder sound have been widely employed in hardcore electronic music and are currently very common in the most effective audio-visual projects. The term *brass synth* is often used to describe this sound in the world of music production. See Sunday Sounds (May 13, 2023). *EPIC BRASS SYNTH*. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wGu_24F8OQ

43 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

44 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT8yjMGMqGE>

45 <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016/choice>

46 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfHVc>

47 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a29Hy0f5npg>

48 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ClvctstDdhLk>

49 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ez0TBpf2r4s>

50 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

51 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

when the past and present are spoken of, and changes to the major mode of the same key to talk about the future. The meaning that this change in valence provides was of great value as the candidate was new in the American political landscape of 2016.

“Our economy *once dominated* the world (...)” [PAST; key = e]

“*Today*, jobs are gone (...)” [PRESENT; key = e]

“(...) Donald Trump knows business and he *will fight* for the American workers” [FUTURE; key = E]

3.3. Emotional harmonic resources

The following emotional cadences are noted. They serve as a harmonious resource of positive contrast in the fragments in which the advertising candidate is defended:

b) I - V - vi - IV (*Deals*, 2016).

e) i - III - VII - IV (*Great American Comeback*⁵², 2020).

f) I - ii - vi - IV (*The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*⁵³, 2020).

With the sole exception of *Great American Comeback*, the harmonic movements present in these chord progressions share a wish to reach the tonal centre from its relative minor through the subdominant IV degree. The listener’s aesthetic pleasure could arise from *relocating* the tonal centre –satisfaction of expectation– changing from a minor chord to a major one –negative to positive valence– and reaching the desired tonic via plagal cadence IV-I –emphasis of the tonal repositioning by dominant notes, since I is the fifth of IV. Going indefinitely through the circle of fifths gives listeners satisfaction by *dislocating* the tonal centre in a dynamic of recomposition heading towards rest. The plagal and authentic cadences always work together in the tonal realignment processes. The authentic V-I cadence could evoke a feeling of drive, of moving up a step, of heading towards something new; while the plagal cadence goes downwards, it rests. The *Great American Comeback*⁵⁴ (2020) has chord progression *which* runs through the circle of fifths in two consecutive movements, as IV is the fifth of I, which is the fifth of V –pleasure deriving from a perpetually satisfied expectation via tonal *repositioning*.

3.4. Cadential gestures, expressive silence, and bass drop

Film trailers often include “cadential gestures” (Lehman, 2015) that, through a game of expectation without instant satisfaction, manage to retain the viewer’s full attention for a few seconds for the final content that appears on the screen –at the end of the spot. The extended attraction toward the tonal centre in *Choice*⁵⁵ (2016) helps to focus the viewers’ attention on the words “is yours”. The main idea in the advert is summarised by suppressing the expectation with a cadential closing, a tonal resolution

52 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

53 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

54 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

55 <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016/choice>

that coincides with the big reveal of the campaign message: [*The Choice*] “is yours” [VOTE HERE appears on screen] –vote to choose. This resource can be described as “cadential synchronisation” (Lehman, 2013), in this case synchronisation of the music with the oral verbal content of the spot.

The cadential gesture at the end of a spot to signpost the final verbal information is also utilised in *Change*⁵⁶ (2016) and *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump's Great American Comeback*⁵⁷ (2020). The device is accompanied in both instances by a silence that highlights Trump's slogan in both campaigns [“Make America Great Again!"]. Similarly, *Great American Comeback*⁵⁸ (2020), *For You*⁵⁹ (2020), *Seven Hundred Percent*⁶⁰ (2020) and *Joe Biden is a Trojan horse for the Radical Left*⁶¹ (2020) use silences to point, not to the crux of the advertiser's proposals, but to the damaging points of the opponent's policies. In *Great American Comeback*⁶² (2020), it is Biden himself who appears defending these policies, highlighting his unfortunate phrase with a meaningful silence:

“I would shut it down” [Jo Biden, in the expressive silence in *Great American Comeback*, defends his proposal to shut down activity during the COVID-19 pandemic].

Some effects, fade-ins, and different ways of spreading the musical texture, such as a pause in the percussion followed by a reintroduction of drums accompanied by a heavy bass line, are employed to convey a sense of *loading* –towards something different, something new. This resource, very common in electronic music and easily available for productions edited using loops with music software, is employed to underline the juxtaposition in the following contrast spots, in order to separate the first attack fragment from the defence:

- a. *Choice*⁶³ (2016)
- b. *Change*⁶⁴ (2016)
- c. *Deals*⁶⁵ (2016)
- d. *Great American Comeback*⁶⁶ (2020)
- e. *For You*⁶⁷ (2020)

56 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT8yjMGMqGE>

57 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a29Hy0f5npk>

58 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

59 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfHvc>

60 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TQvqk8EqIE>

61 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ez0TBpf2r4s>

62 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

63 <http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2016/choice>

64 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT8yjMGMqGE>

65 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

66 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=de10uQej6sA>

67 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPoO2xdfHvc>

- f. *The last thing American small businesses need is Joe Biden*⁶⁸ (2020)
 g. *Joe Biden threatens to undo President Trump's Great American Comeback*⁶⁹ (2020)

4. Conclusions

This article standardises concepts that are essential for audio-visual analysis (e.g., *expressive* or *significant* silence) and proposes new expressions to describe in few words the musical phenomena observed (e.g., *orchestral hollowing out*). The lexicon utilised to analyse the integration of music can be employed by both researchers and communication, film, and advertising professionals. Expressive silence constitutes the most highly valued musical resource for creatives to signpost words or phrases that summarise the advertising message or which they choose to highlight. The orchestral hollowing out seems to be a *sui generis* resource of campaign spots with regard to the integration of music in the audio-visual narrative, being its main device for negative contrast. Any narrative such as the audio-visual, where several human languages come together in the same document, calls for the study of the components –such as music– to be approached from their relationship with the rest of the components –such as the visual or verbal. Audio-visual language consists precisely in knowing how to combine all these semiotic systems to create its own narrative, and not simply in synchronising the visual and the auditory.

Comparative political advertising is an idiosyncratic field, with specific techniques concerning musical syntax. The current trend in the electoral field is that the spots be, in this order, half negative and half positive, and that they concentrate the comparison in under a minute –going from one type of spot to another without intermediate passages– the music becoming a highly effective component in the swift and accurate contrast of the two proposals without a break in the audio-visual narrative. If the words of the speaker/narrator project a specific image of the present, past and/or future, music can contribute value judgments to each era, and that is something which must be interpreted in accordance with the situation of the candidate in each race –if they hold the presidency, have or do not have a political past, etc. *Governing parties* usually conceive a positive vision of the present, while the opposition evokes a negative vision. Conservative groups express nostalgia for a romantic past and the hope of recovering it in the future –see the slogan “Let’s Make America Great Again” (Reagan, 1980), revamped as “Make America Great Again” by Donald Trump (2016, 2020) and imported by Santiago Abascal in 2018 as “Make Spain Great Again” (“*Hacer España grande otra vez*”). This was reflected in 2016 spots, when Trump focused part of his first presidential campaign on remembering his condition as *an outsider* (see *Deals*⁷⁰).

68 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkZu9HGZSBk>

69 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a29Hy0f5npk>

70 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDKb3JGzJLQ>

Although there was a time when a campaign spot would mirror the cinematic aesthetics of a few years earlier, it has caught up in recent years. The bulk of younger voters is largely made up of *series addicts* accustomed to “theme-park” style mainstream cinema⁷¹. Creatives face the challenge of choosing music for an increasingly heterogeneous audience, and the need to connect with audio-visually hyper-stimulated viewers leads us towards productions that integrate the punch of the cinematic trailer with the sentimentality of emotional advertising. Musically speaking, Donald Trump's presidential spots absorb the rhythm of the former and the harmonic resources of the latter.

Campaign committees strive to attract and retain creatives who define the idiosyncrasies of their candidates, musically or otherwise, developing a bespoke musical style instead of merging into a standardised audio-visual landscape, knowing the opponent's strategy so as to distinguish their side from the competition, with music as part of their arsenal. Trump's political movement landed in the US enveloped in the aura of an *epic*. A heroic anti-elitist quest against the *political establishment*. Something that can be seen in the style and narrative that the candidate has adopted from the new right, manifesting in his rhetoric, language, and gesticulation. Of course, this can also be seen from the music in his communication, as he seems to perform well in the field of *musical dramatization*. The Trump creative team has chosen to alternate between and combine harmonious and textural changes to define the Republican candidate with a tougher profile in the second fragment of his spots, in contrast to the weakness of the Democrats as represented in the first parts. Fade-ins as a dynamic transition to the defensive segments which employ their principal instruments, new and with a harsher timbre, to come in with greater intensity to thus interpret harmonic progressions that include emotional devices. The candidate manages, by means of this style, to project implacable personality and policies in his spots.

Studying the soundtrack of Trump's spots allows the identification of some of the most innovative musical resources in campaign advertising on American television, as well as an *epic* musical style that, inherited from Hollywood films, has spread across the political sphere from Donald J. and through the *offshoots* of the new right that have emerged in the other Western democracies. The spots cited in this paper can serve as a model for future campaigns, as the application of harmonic and textural changes while maintaining the tempo of the piece strengthens narrative cohesion that has a direct impact on the quality of the integration of all the audio-visual components –and therefore on the aesthetic experience of viewing. It should never be forgotten that the causes behind electoral results derive from many factors, but the musical persuasiveness of the spots plays a decisive role in the aesthetic pleasure that the candidate causes his potential voters to experience –even more so with new communication channels such as the Internet, which help adverts reach their target audience more accurately in an era of individualistic consumption and segmented advertising. Those who edit the fragments of a composition in such a way that they integrate and highlight the pertinent words in the discourse, manage to appeal to the widest possible audience with the soundtrack of a spot, or use music to segment the audience, will have a greater impact on communication and will thereby gain influence in this symbolic and media representation of a war that has been waged since politically organised societies have existed.

71 Director Martin Scorsese defined Hollywood cinema in this way when asked about the new Disney and Marvel superhero movies. For further information, see EFE (October 5, 2019). Martin Scorsese attacks Marvel: “They are not cinema; they are theme parks.” *El Mundo*. <https://www.elmundo.es/cultura/cine/2019/10/05/5d982eed21efa08c668b46b3.html>

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6. Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest contained in this article.

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