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The Acquaintance-Function of Visual Argumentative Devices: The Case of *Visual Blends* in Social Campaigns

Abstract: The strand of research dealing with the place of visuals in argumentation has been recently enriched by philosophical pleas in favour of treating veridical images as legitimate tools in moral deliberation. Sarah McGrath extensively argued that there is no warrant in dismissing the effects of images as irrational or non-rational. From her point of view, veridical images are important in moral deliberation because of their *acquaintance-function*: they can provide viewers with factual details that may influence their opinions regarding the morality of a practice. The present paper purports to extend the current understanding of this *acquaintance-function* of visuals by looking at how this function is performed by other species of visual discourse. I propose an acquaintance-focused analysis of the argumentative action performed by *visual blends* - visual expressions of cognitive hybrid structures formed by mixing elements from different cognitive domains. *Visual blends* may provide another type of acquaintance with the moral significance of the practice that is under scrutiny: by means of the analogies, hyperboles, litotes, metonyms or other rhetorical figures they constitute, *visual blends* may throw a new light on what the practice entails, morally speaking. I situate my research in the realm of social campaigns and look at the function of *visual blends* in advancing moral arguments on behalf of a social cause.

Keywords: acquaintance, moral persuasion, visual argumentative devices

* This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/133657.

1. The controversial status of visual argumentative devices

The evolution of argumentation theory in the past two decades has seen the rise of difficult questions regarding the inclusion of non-verbal modes of communication in the category of legitimate arguments. Pictures received special attention, and their (im)possibility to form an argument has become the subject of heated debate (Birdsell and Goarke 1996, Blair 1996, Dove 2012, Fleming 1996, Johnson 2003, Lake and Pickering 1998, Kenney and Scott 2003). Should pictures be allowed at the discussion table? If so, should they be awarded a central role, that of constituting full-fledged arguments or should they be limited to providing *evidence* for verbal arguments? Are pictures harmless embellishments to an argumentative discourse or do they cause bias and distortion, drawing attention away from the argumentative core of a debate, and therefore they must be dismissed altogether? Such questions have been turned upside down in a 20-year debate that still has fuel (Goarke 2013, Tseronis 2013) and that has brought to light, among other things, the difficulty to accommodate another communicative mode in argumentation theory: while overcoming the temptation to translate it into words. If it is a *different argumentative mode*, perhaps it is not legitimate to require it to fulfill expectations that are derived from our experience with verbal argumentation, but are not necessarily characteristic to good argumentation.

Whether argumentation itself will be redefined to include nonverbal modes, or images will be given a more modest place in this larger picture is still an open question. The major gain in having asked the question in such a sophisticated manner is that the attempt to answer it stimulated the production of a solid body of literature that showed the complex forms that visual discourse may take, as well as the diverse use that images are actually given in contemporary times, one that clearly goes beyond their representational properties or their ability to cause emotions. This new understanding of the full-blown speech-acts that images may form represents the fulfillment of a project for which authors like Linda Scott (1994, 252-258) have long argued.

Recently, authors in moral philosophy have approached the subject from a different angle. In a paper that she characterized as *a qualified defense of the use of pictures in moral deliberation*, Sarah McGrath argued that pictures may provide factual knowledge in a vivid way, and that in some cases specific factual details of a practice may cause viewers to reconsider their own opinions about its morality,

which may culminate with their *moral conversion* (McGrath 2011, 271). Since changes of mind after realizing that one's moral opinions have been based on mistaken or incomplete factual knowledge fit the paradigm of a *rational* change of mind (274), McGrath does not see why the effects of images should be dismissed as non-rational or irrational. By making viewers *acquainted* with a practice that they have no direct experience with, pictures may show physical details of a procedure that may not be adequately described in words or may be altogether missed in a verbal description, that is inevitably selective with the portion of reality that it purports to describe.

McGrath's refutation of common objections to the use of pictures in moral deliberation was discussed in detail in a previous work I published (Grancea 2015, 172-178), which is why I will not develop any of these points here.

My current interest is whether this acquaintance-focused analysis of visual argumentative devices can be extended to other forms of visual discourse. While McGrath's analysis was devoted to veridical images, I will look closely at *visual blends* that are used by creators of social campaigns in order to make the audience (re)consider the moral significance of a practice.

2. Visualizing Conceptual Blends – a few theoretical clarifications

Visual blends are created by bringing together *input spaces* that contain elements which belong to different conceptual domains to create a cognitive hybrid structure which is rendered visually. The somewhat exotic terminology is imported from Cognitive Linguistics, where the mental process of *conceptual blending* was comprehensively theorized. In an influential book, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (2003), Fauconnier and Turner explained *conceptual blending* as a mental process that supports a great part of our everyday cognitive activity: in trying to make sense of the world around us, we *blend* information from different mental spaces and arrive at *hybrid cognitive structures*, containing thoughts that are suitable for solving the situation we are confronted with (Fauconnier and Turner 2003, 40-59). The *hybrid cognitive structures* thus created comprise elements of the *input spaces* they used in the *blend* as well as novel features of their own (Fauconnier and Turner 2003, 113-139). With their help, we decide on the course of action to be followed in situations that we have not

handled before, situations which pose a cognitive challenge to us.

Most of these mental operations occur unconsciously and therefore go unnoticed, but they may also be done in an intentional manner: the human mind can mix elements that come from different cognitive domains in order to produce a 'creative' hybrid structure which may be expressed verbally or visually (or both).



Figure 1. Visual blend comprising users and victims of the cosmetic industry.

Text says: „Help us fight the effects of cosmetic testing”, followed by the call-to-action „Send a text message to 48585 to donate one euro to help us treat surviving animals”. The message is sent on behalf of the Society for the Protection of Animals.

The verbal or visual expressions of hybrid cognitive structures are usually incongruent with the mental schema readily available on a given topic and thus invite receivers to an act of deciphering: readers or viewers are searching for a reason of the unusual association, since the implicit assumption of any communication act is that there is a reason for authorial choices of any signs (be they words, images or some other form of discourse). According to the Relevance Principle formulated by Sperber and Wilson (1995), it seems that the audience usually assumes that any string of signs organized as a discursive piece is not a simple expression of occasional thoughts passing through the author's mind, but intentional assemblies of cognitive entities presented with a purpose. Especially in the case of public campaigns of persuasive communication, the audience is taught (by previous exposure) to search for the warrant of any creative stunt performed by the authors of a campaign.

Visual blends may constitute print ads, like the one provided in

Figure 1 (for other examples, see Grancea 2013b, 72-74) or unconventional forms of communication which transform physical elements in the urban space into hybrid objects (see Grancea 2013a, 78-83). In both cases, they pose a cognitive challenge to the viewers, who need to engage in active interpretation and deciphering of the *visual blend* they encounter.

My hypothesis is that in the case of social campaigns, this additional elaboration of the message may result in increased salience of the moral problems posed by that social issue to viewers' conscience. In other words, a well-built *visual blend* may invite viewers to think more carefully about one aspect of the problem, to see it in a new light, thus providing *acquaintance* with the issue and its moral significance.

3. *Visual blends* as discursive devices in support of a moral cause

In what follows, I bring in a few examples of print ads and unconventional advertisements to help uncover the argumentative action of *visual blends* in communicating a morally laden message attached to a social cause. Let us begin with the example already provided - the visual synecdoche used by the *Society for the Protection of Animals* to send a message about human responsibility towards the animals that are subject to cosmetic testing (Figure 1).

Input space 1 is that of cosmetic use: the typical ad produced by the contemporary beauty industry will most likely include a pretty girl enjoying the use of a product. In the present case, the girl provides the opportunity for identification – either normative or idealized identification. If the viewer is using cosmetics, she *is* – in a sense – the pictured girl or aspires, to some degree, to be (more) like her: a woman with good taste in cosmetics, who knows how to wear her make-up, attractive while not showing off her sexuality. The image shows her enjoying fully the sensorial stimulation she is engaged in - her facial expression and the closed eyes suggest she is living the moment intensely; we can guess that the perfume or the face spray provides her great pleasure that she wants to taste at its fullest. It is one of her moments of indulgence.

Input space 2 is that of animal suffering because of cosmetic testing. The dog we see is not in a cage or a laboratory, and it does not show exterior signs of having undergone a dangerous procedure. Yet, his facial expression expresses intense suffering – he seems to be crying out for help. But what is it that comes out of his open mouth? To our horror,

his "silent scream" lets out the substance that the girl is spraying on herself - he has become a sprayer for the perfume she is using, and this lets us assume more about what is happening inside his body. His looking like a real dog now seems more frightening: just like a tortured person, the appearance may be deceiving – beyond a normal appearance, there may actually be terrifying bodily consequences of torture. It is almost as if we're seeing a modified being – more like a dog-package than a real dog: who can dare ask what is inside him, since he produces regular sprays of cosmetic substance, every time his head is pressed like a button?

The *visual blend* makes us 'sniff out' the sense of guilt that she should feel. She shares the blame for all the harm that the cosmetic industry continues to cause to these animals. Her self-satisfaction is so important to her, that she closes her eyes and simply presses on the dog's head – she is only interested in the result, not in the process by which that substance reaches her. Yet, if she had just opened her eyes, she would understand his urgent need for help – help to recover being the actual theme of the campaign.

The small size of the dog in this *visual blend* may suggest our human tendency to minimize their importance as autonomous beings, and transform them into tools we use in our own interest. This rhetorical effect is strengthened by the choice of a *single-scope* blend for accommodating the moral argument that is conveyed. According to Fauconnier and Turner, single-scope blends are characterized by the fact that the organizing frame of one of the input spaces becomes the organizing frame of the blend (Fauconnier and Turner 2003, 126-131). On a higher level of meaning, this sends the message that we are trying to fit animals in the organizing frame of a hedonistic world centered on human selfishness.

The *visual blend* is particularly inspired in its choosing an everyday situation, a gesture that is typical of cosmetics consumption: in this manner, users of cosmetics will be primed into thinking on a daily basis of the animal tests that may have led to the development of that product.

The *visual blend* is trying to acquaint us with a specific moral take on the problem: all users of cosmetics are contributing (more or less consciously) to the harm that is done to the animals which are subject to cosmetic testing. The tremendous suffering of animals underlies our everyday cheap pleasures that involve cosmetics. Yet, we keep our eyes closed, sheltering ourselves from the true consequences that our choices have on the victims of cosmetic testing. The thoughts are then redirected to the object of the campaign: (the guilt we share implies a moral responsibility to attend to their needs and) thus we should donate to

programs that attempt to treat animals which survived cosmetic testing, such as the one advertised here – this latter part of the discourse is not, technically speaking, implied by the *visual blend*. It is words that do this job. Yet, the *visual blend* can, on its own, help us grasp the moral meaning of the choices we make in what concerns the animals that are used for cosmetic testing. Needless to say, agreeing with the problem does not imply agreeing with the solution: just because we may grasp the moral problem, it does not mean that we have to donate precisely to *this* type of action coming from *this* type of organization.

Could have veridical images done the same job in acquainting us with our responsibility towards animal testing? Strong images that show details of animal testing have been made available to the public by organizations such as PETA. But the creators of this ad did not choose one of these rather shocking images to make their point. The argumentative route is not “look how bad it is for them, bad enough for us to do something now”. The *visual blend* is trying to put us, co-authors and accomplices of this large-scale massacre, into the larger picture of animal testing - since we, as users of cosmetics, are feeding this industry and implicitly approving of its practices, we share the blame for what is happening (even with our eyes closed, as the visual blend suggests). This point would have been harder to make by means of a veridical picture. *Visual blending* thus creates this opportunity to merge events that occur in different sequences of time in order to acquaint the audience with the close relationship that exists between them. This relationship would normally remain unseen.

The fact that many serious moral issues are hard (if not impossible) to visualize by means of veridical images is also important to consider. It is a limit often invoked by those who would rather reject pictures from any moral deliberation forum. Sarah McGrath touches briefly on this point, when she says that the use of veridical pictures in moral deliberation may be considered to lack fair-play if the issues presented by the opposite side of the debate are harder (or impossible) to visualize (McGrath 2011, 283-284).

I purport to see *visual blending* as a way out of this difficulty, because of its superior power to capture more abstract problems and deliver them in a vivid manner to the audience. The moral argument thus sent also has greater chances to be recalled by the audience than veridical images: the tendency of our brain to get rid of disturbing stimuli may mean that people will tend to avoid repeated exposure to negatively-valenced images (Hastings et al 2004) such as the ones presenting

tortured animals. By offering a softer, aestheticized version of the same story, we increase the chances that people will want to look again at the ad. In addition, the heightened elaboration that a visual blend requires in order to be understood may create multiple cognitive pathways back to the originating message, which then increases the probability that the message itself will be recalled (McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 579, 583).

Yet, it must be said that the tendency of *visual blends* to offer a softer version of the story (compared to veridical images) also involves certain risks in what concerns the outcome of the campaign. The line between aestheticization and loss of persuasive power is rather thin. It is quite difficult to anticipate when the public will change the mode of engaging the message and will switch to a mere evaluation of the aesthetic quality of the creative stunt, ignoring the moral appeal of the campaign. An example of an ad that is placed very close to this thin line is the unconventional ad in Figure 2, part of a campaign to abolish torture. Chairs in buses and theatres were modified to create a strong visual impression: when looking at them from behind, one had the illusion that the person sitting on it had her hands tied behind with a rope that had already left ugly marks on her skin. A sticker at the back of the chair said: “Victims are people like you and me”, together with a link to the *acat.ch* website, which spoke extensively about current activism for abolishing torture.



Figure 2. Visual blend aimed at raising awareness of freedom deprivation and torture that happen nowadays - more on this larger campaign for abolishing torture, on its website, acat.ch

The argument is quite powerful indeed, but the *visual blend* has a weak point in its attempt to acquaint the victim with what it means to face

torture. I am not arguing for a violent ad that would replicate the exact feelings experienced by people who undergo such nightmare, but I am thinking about one architectural choice that authors of this *blend* made: since it is precisely the victim that does not see the back of the chair, the probability for the honest thought "it can happen to me" to occur is quite reduced. In self-centered cultures like ours, the fact that it can happen to the person in front of me (whom I do not know) is far from being equally powerful in conveying the potential proximity of such event. His innocence is not something I can count on. Who knows what he has done?

That being said, one must recognize that the *visual blend* does a good job in acquainting us with the idea that *anyone* could be next: the chair is there, and the people who accidentally sit on it have no idea about what is "behind" them. Intrusion of the unexpected in a regular life is quite powerfully sent by means of this visual blend.

To sum up, although the pathos of this *visual blend* is quite reduced, its work as an argumentative device is quite powerful: it manages to send the idea that right now, right as we travel by bus or watch movies at public theatre with no worry, a horrifying plan may be weaved for our future, one that we have no idea about, one that we implicitly allow to happen by not engaging publicly with this issue.

Until now, I have looked at *visual blends* that employed fictional elements and thus departed quite far from the argumentative route of veridical images. But *visual blends* can also take a veridical form. Veridical images can be reframed by means of an equally realistic "input space 2" in order to throw a new light on their moral meaning.

In Figure 3, three garbage bags are situated in a row, as if they were presents under a Christmas tree, accompanied by chalk-drawn white ribbons placed above each of them. The text says: "Over 200000 children are spending Christmas on the streets", followed by the name of the children charity Childhope Asia Philippines. Input space 1 "life on the street" and input space 2 "Christmas" are brought together in a *visual blend* that manages to acquaint us with the moral significance of our ignoring these children – it is our selfishness that produces such inappropriate presents for their Christmas. Is this all we have for them? Before encountering this print, we may have had various abstract images regarding what it feels like for these children to lack a roof above their heads. But the image fulfills its acquaintance-function with full force: we are invited to contemplate the feeling that we ourselves would experience when all that we could hope for as a Christmas present would be bags of garbage. Factual details relating to what these bags contain are ellegantly

removed from the discourse, but we are left to imagine their meal, their bed, their state of health, as well as the coldness that poisons their entire life. In other words, the *visual blend* acquaints us with their pain and allows us to grasp the moral underpinnings of our decision to help or not.



Figure 3. Christmas presents for children living on the street - a visual blend based on veridical input spaces.

4. In the end, what kind of argumentative function do *visual blends* perform?

The examples I have brought to your attention are proof that there are serious reasons to recognize *visual blends'* ability to acquaint viewers with the moral scent of an issue.

One major theoretical difficulty that arises when attempting to integrate *visual blends* in argumentative structures is the following: what kind of arguments are they? In what sense can we speak of their argumentative action?

My strong thesis is that to understand their argumentative action, we should place them in the same category as analogical arguments. Of course, not all *visual blends* include analogies, but that is not the point. What is important is to see the similarity between the argumentative action of verbal analogies and that of *visual blends* in the realm of moral reasoning.

The purpose of analogical argument in moral reasoning is to throw a new light on the matter. Although sometimes the analogies are rather exotic and have no imaginable correspondent in real life, they may turn out to be useful in moral deliberation precisely because of the debate they stir: is the analogy suitable for the given situation or not? If not, which

features of the situation make it inappropriate? Which features of moral importance does it manage to bring to light? In his defense of analogies as valuable tools in moral argumentation, Smith (2002) writes that

“Even when analogies are held to be weak or irrelevant, this may itself serve an important ethical function. In seeking to defeat an analogy, by bringing out the dissimilarities between two cases, we can help foster moral wisdom by being more informed, morally speaking. [...] In being brought to see these things, we can recognise certain moral relevances that were there anyway, but were obscured or ignored by our short-sightedness or lack of imagination” (Smith 2002).

It is precisely the relevant, but largely ignored, moral aspects of a social issue that can be brought to light by means of a *visual blend*. And it is precisely this similarity between analogical arguments and *visual blends* that I believe is important when it comes to justifying the argumentative status of *visual blends*.

Just like analogies, *visual blends* can sometimes be weak or irrelevant, at other times they can be quite powerful in conveying a morally relevant aspect of the issue that had not been fully understood before. But in neither case, do they pretend to have the last word on the issue: they invite pondering, counterargumentation, equal consideration of other aspects. From this point of view, their action is different to those veridical images which purport to be *windows on reality*. The danger of bias, in their case, is huge, because of their awkward pretense to capture reality *as it is*. But *visual blends* are *open* in what concerns their artifact-status, the artful deviations and technical procedures that make them possible. They offer *a* point of view on the issue. Not the issue per se, captured on camera - a well-known illusion.

All in all, this work contributes to the current debate regarding the argumentative potential that may rest in images. Sarah McGrath's insights into the acquaintance-function of pictures proved to be most useful to my analysis of a category of images quite different than the ones she had in mind. While accepting the possibility for veridical images to provide material for factual arguments, I complete the picture with *visual blends*.

Future research may look more deeply into the complementary functions that these two types of images may fulfill in moral deliberation. One of the most interesting areas of development is a careful articulation of the *conditions* that should be fulfilled by these images for them to constitute sound arguments.

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