

The visual rhetoric of iconic photographs as *topoi* in editorial cartoons: an argumentative analysis

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This paper describes the visual rhetoric of the use of iconic photographs as *topoi* in editorial cartoons and indicate how the audience can reconstruct the argumentative message underlying the cartoon. With the aid of a model that is developed for the reconstruction of the argumentation underlying cartoons in which an iconic photograph is used as *topos* an exemplary analysis is given of the visual rhetoric and the underlying argumentation of an editorial cartoon.

KEYWORDS: argumentation, argumentative activity, argumentative pattern, editorial cartoon, iconic photograph, *topos*, visual metaphor, visual communication, visual rhetoric

1. INTRODUCTION

In public discourse, editorial cartoons can be considered as an argument criticizing a current event. It is claimed that a particular situation or behaviour should be evaluated negatively because it is not in accordance with certain values of a society.¹ To represent these values, a cartoonist may refer to a certain image, or *topos*, that is considered as a visual symbol for certain commonly shared values. To express his critique in a visual way, the cartoonist uses visual rhetorical techniques. These techniques consist in performing certain changes in the symbolic image of the *topos*.

An example of a reference to a *topos* and the changes that are made to convey the critique can be found in the cartoon in Figure 1. This cartoon by the Dutch political cartoonist Joep Bertrams criticizes the behaviour of Donald Trump during his meeting with the communist Chinese leader Xi on November 9, 2017. The *topos* is the famous 'iconic' photograph of the socialist fraternal kiss made by Régis Bossu on

¹ See Feteris (2013, 2019) and Feteris, Groarke, Plug (2011).

October 4, 1979 of the meeting of Soviet leader Brezhnev and GDR leader Erich Honecker (Figure 2).² The way in which the elements of the original photograph are changed provide a clue for the interpretation of the negative message. To reconstruct the argument, the audience will have to translate the visual rhetoric of these changes in terms of components of the claim and supporting arguments.



Figure 1 Joep Bertrams editorial cartoon '#Xi Too'
<https://www.cagle.com/joep-bertrams>

² For a discussion of the concept of iconic photographs see Hariman & Lucaites (2007), Kjeldsen [2017], Melching [2019], Paul [2011], Perlmutter [1998]. For a discussion of the photo of the socialist fraternal kiss see Kleppe [2013].



Figure 2 Régis Bossu, *Paris Match* October 4, 1979, 'The socialist fraternal kiss'

In research of multi-modal and visual argumentation in editorial cartoons, authors such as Edwards and Winkler (1997) and Schilperoord (2013) have addressed the visual rhetoric of the use of the iconic photograph of Iwo Jima in editorial cartoons to convey critique with regard to current events. However, they have not addressed the question of how the visual rhetoric is used to present aspects of a particular claim and supporting arguments.

In this paper I will describe the visual rhetoric of the use of iconic photographs as *topoi* in editorial cartoons and indicate how the audience can reconstruct the argumentative message underlying the cartoon. To this end, in section 2 I discuss the use of iconic photographs as *topoi* in editorial cartoons and the characteristics of the visual rhetoric in these cartoons. In section 3 I present a model for the reconstruction of the argumentation underlying cartoons in which an iconic photograph is used as *topos*. With the aid of this model, in section 4, I give an exemplary analysis of the visual rhetoric and the underlying argumentation.

2. THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF REFERENCES TO ICONIC PHOTOGRAPHS AS *TOPOI* IN EDITORIAL CARTOONS

Iconic photographs can be used as part of the visual rhetoric of editorial cartoons. Like other well-known images (such as biblical images) which have a symbolic value, they can be used as a *topos*. This means that the cartoonist can re-use and exploit the image because it represents a well-known commonplace that is shared within a particular community. Edwards and Winkler (1997) and Schilperoord (2013) explain how iconic photographs can be re-used in an afterlife as *topoi* in editorial cartoons to evaluate contemporary events.³

The possibility to re-use iconic photographs as commonplace is based on certain characteristics with regard to the symbolic form and content of the original photo. Iconic photos have a recognizable symbolic form, like certain well-known biblical images, consisting of a combination of visual features and a narrative structure. These features and narrative structure make use of symbolic attributions. These symbolic attributions constitute the symbolic content that represents the essence of certain cultural beliefs and ideals. These characteristics make it possible to use the photo as a moral standard to judge contemporary events in the *afterlife* of the photo in other forms of visual communication.

The photo as moral standard is used as a *topos* in the visual rhetoric in editorial cartoons. This visual rhetoric makes use of certain graphic changes. These changes concern the insertion of new elements, the substitution of existing elements, the removal of existing elements and the distortion of existing elements. The aim of the changes is to express critique on the behaviour or event in light of certain common values embodied by the *topos* of the photo.

3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ARGUMENTATION IN EDITORIAL CARTOONS WITH AN ICONIC PHOTOGRAPH AS *TOPOS*

The question has to be answered how the visual rhetoric of the changes in the symbolic form of the *topos* of an iconic photo can be interpreted in terms of elements of an argumentative message supporting a standpoint that criticizes the behaviour of a public official. To this end it has to be established how the message conveyed by the visual rhetoric

³ For a more detailed discussion and analysis of the visual rhetoric of the iconic Iwo Jima photograph by Joe Rosenthal and its re-use as *topos* in editorial cartoons see Edwards & Winkler (1997) and Schilperoord (2013). For other discussions of this iconic photograph see Bertelsen (1989) and Hariman & Lucaites (2002).

that refers to an iconic photograph as *topos* can be translated in terms of certain parts of the argumentation.

As is indicated in Feteris (2019), editorial cartoons are a specific argumentative activity type that is governed by certain conventions and constraints. In an editorial cartoon the behaviour of a politician, public official, institution or situation is criticized in light of certain common norms that are shared by the cartoonist and his audience. The critique is presented in a specific way, that is by means of a particular image containing certain forms of visual rhetoric such as a visual metaphor, a hyperbole, etcetera, often in combination with verbal elements. In an editorial cartoon the cartoonist can use various graphic techniques that create possibilities to formulate the critique in an indirect and often humorist way and to leave the interpretation to the audience.

In Feteris (2019) it is explained how the complete argumentation can be reconstructed on the basis of an analysis of the visual rhetoric.⁴ The argumentative pattern of Figure 3 represents the commitments of a cartoonist who gives a negative evaluation of the behaviour or event X on the basis of certain characteristics Y that conflict with value W.⁵

- 1 The behaviour/event X must be evaluated negatively
- 1.1a The behaviour/event X has characteristics Y1, Y2 etc.
- 1.1b The characteristics Y1, Y2 etc. of the behaviour/event X must be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1b.1a Characteristics Y1, Y2 etc. conflict with value W
 - 1.1b.1b Value W is a generally accepted value

Figure 3 Argumentative pattern based on a symptomatic relation in an editorial cartoon

In an editorial cartoon, the largest part of the complex argumentation remains implicit. The cartoon contains certain visual and verbal information about the behaviour/situation X, as well as a characterization of X with characteristics Y and the negative evaluation of these characteristics Y. The value W that is considered as an accepted value is left implicit.

⁴ Feteris (2019) also describes a similar argumentative pattern for causal argumentation in which a particular behaviour or policy is evaluated negatively because it will lead to certain negative consequences.

⁵ For a discussion of the concept of an argumentative pattern and the discussion of various prototypical argumentative patterns in different institutional contexts see van Eemeren (2017).

The content of the characteristics Y, the negative evaluation of Y as well as the content of the values W must be reconstructed by the reader on the basis of an analysis of the visual rhetoric, in combination with certain visual and verbal information provided in the cartoon. Often the cartoon does not contain information about the negative evaluation and the values or goals because the audience and the cartoonist are supposed to share certain common values. Because these values are tacitly shared, the expression of the criteria for evaluating Y in a negative way on the basis of W can be considered as superfluous because they concern the tacit common values of a particular audience or culture. Such a reconstruction by the reader is possible on the basis of the shared knowledge of the conventions of the genre of the cartoon.

In light of the characteristics of the visual rhetoric of editorial cartoons that refer to an iconic photo as *topos* (section 2), for editorial cartoons with an iconic photograph as *topos* the following characteristics of the sub-genre apply, where (1) concerns the *symbolic form* and the changes performed in the original image, and (2) the *symbolic content*:⁶

- (1) The negative evaluation of the characteristics Y of X (in argument 1.1b) is represented by deviation of the *symbolic form* of the image of the iconic photo performed by means of the visual changes by the cartoonist in the original image of the *topos* of the photo.
- (2) The value W on the basis of which the characteristics Y are evaluated as negative because they conflict with this value (as stated in argument 1.1b.1a) is the *symbolic content*, represented by the *topos* of the original iconic photograph (that may change over time).

With regard to (1), the negative evaluation of the characteristics Y of X that form part of the symbolic form, this evaluation must be reconstructed on the basis of the way in which the cartoonist has presented the symbolic form and the original narrative structure with the elements of the photo. Characteristic for the genre of cartoons based on an iconic photo is that certain changes are made. The operations

⁶ For a discussion of the role of *topoi* in editorial cartoons as argumentative message see Feteris, Groarke & Plug (2011) who give a reconstruction of the function of the *topos* as part of the complex argumentation. See also Schilperoord (2013:2007) who characterizes the role of an iconic photo as *topos* as the minor premise in an enthymematic argument. See Feteris (2013) for an argumentative analysis of allusions to cultural sources in general in editorial cartoons.

described by Schilperoord (2013) such as insert, substitute, remove and distort that perform certain changes in the original image indicate the way in which the reader is supposed to interpret the message from the cartoonist.

When the elements X, Y1, Y2 etc., and W have been reconstructed on the basis of the analysis of the visual rhetoric (in combination with certain verbal elements), the complete complex argumentation can be reconstructed on the basis of the argumentative pattern of Figure 1 for editorial cartoons. The way in which the arguments can be formulated depends on the shared background knowledge of the audience and the cartoonist with regard to the historical and factual knowledge, the knowledge of the symbolic content of the value attached to the *topos* of the photo as well as the values W that are referred to by the cartoonist. As Edwards & Winkler (1997) indicate, these values are often presented on a high level of abstraction so that the audience can give its own interpretation of these values in the concrete case. The argumentative commitments reconstructed on the basis of the model define the interpretation space for reconstructing the content of the argumentation in light of the interpretation of the visual rhetoric of references to iconic photos as *topos*.

4. EXAMPLARY ARGUMENTATIVE ANALYSIS OF AN EDITORIAL CARTOON WITH AN ICONIC PHOTOGRAPH AS *TOPOS*

By using the model for the reconstruction, I give an exemplary analysis of an editorial cartoon with an iconic photograph as *topos*. For my exemplary analysis I have chosen the iconic photograph by Régis Bossu of October 4, 1979, also known as 'The socialist fraternal kiss', and its afterlife in an editorial cartoon of Joep Bertrams referred to in earlier parts of this contribution.

4.1 *The iconic photograph of 'The socialist fraternal kiss' and its afterlife*

The iconic photograph of 'The socialist fraternal kiss' was made by the French photographer Régis Bossu at a festive meeting after the 30th annual celebration of the German Democratic Republic's foundation as a Communist republic on October 4, 1979. The photo shows Leonid Brezhnev, General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (left) and Erich Honecker, General Secretary of the Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic (right)

engaged in a kiss. The kiss is known as the Socialist fraternal kiss which was a form of greeting between statesman of Communist countries, demonstrating the special connection that exists between Socialist states. The photograph was first published in the *Paris Match* and later in *Stern*, *Bunte* and *Time*. It was reproduced as an image in print and became widespread.

The photograph was re-used by Dmitri Vrubel as a painted representation in the form of a mural in the East Side Gallery in Berlin on the remains of the Berlin Wall. Vrubel entitled his painting 'My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love'. The mural was not made as a direct reaction to a particular event, but was a re-popularization of the image in 1990, 11 years after its publication. It was after the re-use of the photo in the East Side Gallery that the image became an iconic image that was given new re-interpretations. The symbolic value of the original photograph was 'neutral' in the sense that it was published as a news picture of a ritual meeting of two Communist leaders embraced in a greeting in the form of the traditional Socialist Fraternal Kiss.⁷ However, since the GDR was dependent on the Soviet Union, the kiss was not a kiss between equals but between the GDR as a dependent 'satellite' state of the Soviet Union. In light of later historical developments the kiss can be seen as a 'Judas kiss'.

The cartoon '#Xitoo' made by the Dutch cartoonist Joep Bertrams comments on the behaviour of the US president Donald Trump during the meeting with the Chinese leader Xi Jinping on November 9, 2017. The cartoon was sent as a twitter message with the commenting text 'Sudden Big Friend #Trump # 'XiJinping #MeToo' ('Plotselinge Grote Vriend #Trump # 'XiJinping #MeToo') on November 11, 2017.⁸ The cartoon shows the US president Donald Trump (on the left) and the Chinese leader Xi Jinping (on the right).

The meeting of Trump and Xi followed a period of tension between the US and China. Trump had criticized the economic policies

⁷ See Kleppe (2013) for a discussion of the reactions in the West where such a kiss was seen as something unusual as a way of greeting of leaders, whereas in Socialist countries this was a normal way of greeting between statesmen.

⁸ The primary audience of the twitter message were Dutch followers of Joep Bertrams (who can understand the Dutch text 'Plotselinge grote vriend'). Later the cartoon was published on Bertrams site <https://www.cagle.com/joep-bertrams> that is also accessible for an international audience. The image and the caption of the verbal text '#Xi Too' are accessible for a wider international audience.

of China because they would damage the interests of the US. The meeting with Xi concerned trade negotiations. Apart from the trade issue, for Trump an important issue was to get Xi's help in stopping the nuclear threat of North Korea.

During the short meeting of November 9, Trump gave an eight-minute address in the Great Hall of the People (the ceremonial heart of Communist Party Rule) in which he praised Xi and asked him to 'act faster and more effectively' to extinguish North Korea's nuclear 'menace' and said that he was convinced of Xi's capacities to rein in North Korea's weapons programmes.

The cartoon by Joep Bertrams makes use of the symbolic form and content of the original photo and uses these aspects of the *topos* as a vehicle to convey the critical message. The meaning of the symbolic form of the image and the changes Bertrams makes in the original form constitute the source domain of the visual metaphor that he uses to present his critique. The arguments in support of his critique can be reconstructed on the basis of the changes that have been made in the original image.

The message of Bertrams is that the behaviour of Trump in his address is improper. The US and China are rivals from a geopolitical, economical and ideological perspective. Trumps exuberant speech is not in line with the conventions of the reserved way in which American leaders used to behave towards Chinese leaders. The behaviour of Trump is also inconsistent with Trumps' earlier critical comments on China's economic policy. Furthermore it is considered as exaggerated from the perspective of these conventions and Trumps earlier behaviour.

4.2 Analysis of the visual rhetoric of the re-use of the iconic photograph 'The socialist fraternal kiss' as topos in the '#Xi too' cartoon

In the analysis of the visual rhetoric it must be established how the original image of the *topos* and the changes that are performed can be interpreted in terms of the source domain of the visual metaphor and how the target domain can be interpreted in light of the knowledge of the actual event.

The reference to the original photo of the 'Socialist fraternal kiss' is the basis for the way in which the source domain of the *topos* of the iconic photo must be interpreted. As is indicated in section 4.1, the *topos* of the 'Socialist fraternal kiss' represents the way in which leaders of the

former communist countries used to greet each other at official meetings. The extra meaning of the *topos* in its afterlife is that the message conveyed by the *topos* is also a visual representation of 'Deadly love', love out of hate, as a Judas kiss. The cartoon also refers to other forms of re-use of the photo as *topos* in which Trump is depicted, mouth-kissing with other world leaders.

In light of the symbolic value of the *topos* of the photo as source domain, the reference to the photo can, in general terms, be interpreted as a negative characterization of the improper behaviour of a political leader, given the fact that the other leader should be considered as an enemy. The narrative structure of the photo characterizes the leader on the left side as the more powerful one in relation to the one on the right side. The less powerful leader on the right side puts his arm around the more powerful on the left side. The facial expression of the two leaders while kissing is neutral, both have their eyes closed.

For a further analysis of the source domain, the graphic techniques used to perform the changes must be interpreted in terms of indications of differences between the photo and the cartoon. In the cartoon Bertrams has made the following changes:

- (1) The negative evaluation of the characteristics Y of X is represented by deviation of the *symbolic form* of the image of the iconic photo, performed by means of the following visual operations in the original image of the *topos* of the photo:

Changes:

- The actors (Trump and Xi)
- The nature of the embrace: the form of the kiss
- The position of the arm (in the cartoon the arm is put by Trump on the left around the Xi on the right, in the iconic photo the arm is put by the less powerful Honecker on the right around the more powerful Brezhnev on the left)
- The facial expressions

Addition:

- The saliva of Trump
- The text '#Xitoo'

Removal:

- The faces in the background

- (2) The value W (the convention that an American president should be reserved towards a Chinese communist leader who is a traditional 'enemy' of the US) on the basis of which the characteristics Y are evaluated as negative because they conflict with this value (as stated in argument 1.1b.1a) is the *symbolic*

content, represented by the *topos* of the original iconic photograph.

These changes can be interpreted as a visual expression of a violation of the behaviour of the conventions for the way in which US presidents behave towards communist leaders (and more in general towards other world leaders). By presenting the behaviour of Trump as that of a fellow communist leader, it is made clear that his behaviour is not in line with leaders of western democratic countries who do not behave according to traditions of communist leaders. The distortion of the embrace and the addition of the spit represent the exaggeration of the way in which Trump addresses Xi.

On the basis of this analysis of the source domain of the cartoon, the target domain of the cartoon can be interpreted as a critique on the behaviour of Trump by viewing his behaviour in terms of a representation of 'Deadly love', love out of hate for the Chinese communist leader. The changes can be interpreted as a further specification of this behaviour in terms of a violation of the conventions of the behaviour of US presidents towards communist leaders that are traditional 'enemies' of the US.

By presenting Trump as a male who wants to kiss the other against his will (which is clear from the facial expression of Xi) and by using the reference to the #MeToo movement Bertrams adds an element to the original photo by presenting Xi as an 'object of desire' for Trump and the intrusive behaviour of Trump as a form behaviour that constitutes a critique in terms of a violation of certain conventions among human beings. The reference to the #MeToo movement and Xi's facial expression make clear that part of the message is that Xi does not appreciate Trump's behaviour as a fellow communist.

4.3 The analysis of the argumentation underlying the '#Xi too' Cartoon that uses the 'Socialist fraternal kiss' as a topos

In the analysis of the argumentation, it must be established how the results of the rhetorical analysis can be translated in terms of elements of the argumentative pattern of an editorial cartoon with an iconic photo as *topos*. To this end I will explain how the negative evaluation of the characteristics of the behaviour of Trump can be analysed as characteristics (Y) that must be evaluated negatively. Furthermore I will explain how the standards on the basis of which Y must be evaluated negatively can be analysed as values (W). The complete reconstruction is represented in Figure 4.

- 1 The behaviour of Donald Trump in his exuberant praise of Xi (X) must be evaluated negatively (is improper)
- 1.1a The behaviour of Donald Trump in his exuberant praise has as characteristics that it is not in line with the behaviour of former US presidents (Y1) and that it is inconsistent with Trump's earlier behaviour towards Xi (Y2)
- 1.1b Behaviour that has as characteristics that it is not in line with the behaviour of former US presidents (Y1) and that it is inconsistent with Trump's earlier behaviour towards Xi (Y2) must be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1b.1a Behaviour that is not in line with the behaviour of former US presidents (Y1) conflicts with the convention that an American president should be reserved towards a Chinese communist leader who is a traditional 'enemy' of the US (value W1) and should be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1b.1a.1 An US president should be reserved towards Chinese communist leaders since China represents the opposite of the values of the US nation as a capitalist country and constitutional democracy that respects fundamental human rights.
 - 1.1b.1b The convention that an US president should be reserved towards a Chinese communist leader who is a traditional 'enemy' of the US (Value W1) is a generally accepted value in the US foreign policy towards communist leaders
 - 1.1b.1c Behaviour that is inconsistent with earlier behaviour towards another world leader (Y2) conflicts with the convention that an American president should be consistent in his/her foreign policy (W2) and should be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1b.1c.1 An US president should have a consistent foreign policy towards Chinese communist leaders since China is an aspiring world power and should be handled with care.
 - 1.1b.1d The convention that an US president should be consistent in his foreign policy (value W2) is a generally accepted value in US foreign policy

Figure 4 Reconstruction of the argumentation underlying the cartoon '#Xitoo' by Joep Bertrams

In this reconstruction the evaluation of the behaviour of Trump (X) is represented by the characteristics Y1 and Y2 and their negative evaluation. The characteristics Y1 and Y2 are a translation of elements of the target domain of the visual metaphor. This target domain, as was indicated in section 4.2, is based on an interpretation of the source domain formed by the *topos* of the 'Socialist fraternal kiss' and the graphic changes in the symbolic form of this *topos*. The negative evaluation of Y1 and Y2 is based on the values W1 and W2 that are a translation of elements of the target domain in terms of the values that form part of the argumentation. These elements of the target domain are the values that are to be upheld in US foreign policy in general, and toward communist leaders of China in particular. In their turn, the interpretation of these elements of the target domain is based on an interpretation of the source domain of the symbolic values of the original image and its afterlife referred to by the cartoon.

Given the reconstruction of the elements of X, Y1 and Y2, W1 and W2, the further content of the arguments that form part of the argumentative pattern can be reconstructed as is indicated in Figure 3. The complex argumentation represents the commitments of the cartoonist on the basis of the interpretation of the visual rhetoric and the argumentative commitments of a cartoonist. As has been indicated earlier in section 2, the values referred to in a cartoon are of a general nature and are represented on a high level of abstraction. For this reason the audience has a certain interpretation space to formulate the values for the case at hand. Also the way in which the changes can be interpreted and the meaning to be attached to these changes leaves the audience ample space for its own reconstruction of the message. This interpretation space is part of the nature of the argumentative activity of editorial cartoons and their suitability to criticize and mock the behaviour of public officials and current events in a creative and humorous way. This gives images and the values they refer to a powerful tool for contributing to discussions about the behaviour of politicians in the public arena.

5. CONCLUSION

In this contribution it has been explained how iconic photographs can be used in editorial cartoons as *topoi* in the context of an argument in which a certain behaviour of situation is criticized. They have been characterized as an argumentative activity type in which it is one of the characteristics that there is 'reason to dissent' about the behaviour of a public official or situation. Starting from the conception of an editorial

cartoon as an argumentative activity, I have implemented the general model of the argumentative pattern in editorial cartoons developed in Feteris (2019) for the specific genre of editorial cartoons with an iconic photograph as *topos*. This implementation makes it possible to clarify the argumentative commitments of the cartoonist that are specific for this genre. In this way the commitments can be made explicit in the interpretation of the visual rhetoric and the translation of the message conveyed by the visual rhetoric that forms part of the argumentation.

Using this implementation of the model, I have given a demonstration of the way in which the visual rhetoric that refers to an iconic photo as *topos* can be analyzed as a means for conveying part of the argumentative message. I have done this by indicating how changes with respect to the original iconic photograph represent a key to the interpretation of the critique that is conveyed indirectly by the cartoonist. I have shown how the visual rhetoric can be analyzed and how the critique can be reconstructed as part of the argumentative message underlying the cartoon. On the basis of this analysis I have given a reconstruction of the complex argumentation underlying the cartoon.

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