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VISUAL ASPECTS OF CSR REPORTS: A SEMIOTIC AND CHRONOLOGICAL CASE ANALYSIS

Abstract

This paper presents a semiotic analysis of the CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) reports published by the French oil and gas company Total between 2004 and 2013. This diachronic analysis focuses on the visual dimension of the reports, and is aimed at understanding the visual rhetoric developed in these texts, its components and its evolution. How the images and visual layout of the reports contribute to the definition of meaning and to the valorisation of the firms and of their CSR actions? The result of the analysis is a list of different “phases” of the evolution of this visual rhetoric, and a typology of visual images. This analysis is a contribution to the exploration of the visual aspect of corporate CSR communication.

Keywords: Image; semiotics; responsibility; business; rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

This paper is a part of a wider research¹ project and focuses on the visual aspects of a specific genre of contemporary business communication: the sustainable development reports published (normally) each year by major business firms. This “genre” has developed widely in recent years, sometimes because of legal requirements, as in France and Norway (and soon in the EU in general), and globally because of the growing importance of

¹ See for example Catellani, 2012, 2014, 2015.

CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) discourse for businesses' justification and legitimisation². From a critical point of view, this development can be interpreted as a clear sign of the current evolution of the so-called "new spirit of capitalism" (Boltanski & Chiapello 2005): in a context of criticism and difficulties for the reputational capital of businesses, CSR discourse has the role of a support for the (re)legitimisation of economic actors.

In this paper I present a case study on CSR reports published by Total Group, an important French business in the field of energy and fuel. I chose Total because CSR is particularly "sensitive" for businesses that work in fields that have a visible and clear impact on the environment and on the life of many communities all around the globe (Libaert, 2010).

The basic research question in this paper is on the visual rhetoric developed in CSR reports: what has been the evolution of the visual aspects of these reports since the obligation for big firms to publish a CSR report, introduced by French legislation in 2001 (the so-called NRE law), came into effect? This basic question leads to some sub-questions. Which kind of images (photos, graphics, drawings...) have been used in these reports, and what has been the contribution of the visual aspects of reports to the construction of the rhetoric of CSR discourse? What is the place of internal and external stakeholders, of the environment, of industrial machines and workshops in these images? Also, which effects are developed by the layout (arrangement of elements inside the pages) of the report? What are the basic aspects of the visual dimension of the "rhetoric of praise" (Catellani, 2011a) that is, developed nowadays in businesses CSR communication? The visual aspects I analyse here can be seen as a component of an exercise of self-presentation of the firm as a responsible social actor, which combines storytelling, images, and numbers as the main rhetorical tools.

The paper presents the semiotic method used for the analysis, and some information on Total and the documents under analysis. The presentation of results will lead to some conclusions, in which an answer to our questions will be proposed, in the form of the identification of different "phases" of the evolution of Total's visual rhetoric, and of a typology of visual "solutions" and devices that contribute to a verbal and visual rhetoric of CSR.

² On CSR corporate communication, see among others Tench et al. 2014, Ihlen et al. 2011; for an approach to criticism coming from stakeholders about corporate communication, see among others Catellani, 2010a. As for a definition of CSR, see the one given by the European Union: "Most definitions of corporate social responsibility describe it as a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations and in their interaction with their stakeholders on a voluntary basis" (European Commission Green Paper 2001: "Promoting a European Framework for Corporate Social Responsibility").

THE GLOBAL APPROACH: SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

This paper develops a semiotic approach to visual communication analysis, based on the poststructuralist tradition of semiotics (Floch, 1990, 1995; Bertrand, 2000; Henault & Beyart, 2004). This qualitative approach is, in our opinion, a contribution to the enrichment of the rhetoric area of research on communication and public relations (for a presentation of this area of research, see the different texts by Ihlen Oyvind (2011). Semiotics is traditionally divided into different schools. The one based on the works of Algirdas Julien Greimas and his disciples has evolved today into an effort to identify the limits and forms that specific textual configuration (expression or signifier) create and impose on the sense-making of social actors, and also on the communication and circulation of meaning. Text is studied in order to understand the probable sense production that it can provoke in the mind of specific intended audiences; Van Leeuwen (2005, p. 4) says something similar when he affirms that the social semiotics he practices is aimed at analysing the “semiotic potential” of “semiotic resources”. This semiotic research can be seen as a form of “epokè”, a form of selective attention and distancing from the object, following the tradition of phenomenology. This “epokè” is centred on the text, which is any form of material object that can become the expression of meaning for specific “interpreters” (Catellani 2011a, 2011b, 2013). Texts (including those produced voluntarily by social actors, like websites, CSR reports and other forms of corporate communication) can be seen in this way as extremely interesting “traces” and testimonies of social interaction and culture. This approach can also be applied to the result of interviews and other types of data collected through observation and research. Social semiotics, proposed today by authors like Van Leeuwen (2005, 2010), is very close to the approach developed in this paper, even if the semiotic tradition that is at the basis of Van Leeuwen’s approach is quite different, making reference in particular, but not only, to the works of M. A. K. Halliday³. Van Leeuwen’s approach is a contribution to so-called multimodal analysis, which is the analysis of “the combination of different semiotic modes – for example, language and music – in a communicative artefact or event” (Van Leeuwen, 2005, p. 281). The post-structuralist approach proposed in the present article can also be considered

³ This approach can also be connected to the critical discourse analysis of Norman Fairclough, and in particular to his proposition of analyzing the “semiotic” aspects of social facts (2005). Semiotics can contribute to the reconstruction of sense production of different social actors, taking into consideration the interaction of discourse with the economic, political and cultural context, and putting into evidence specific forms of simplification and deformation (ideology).

a contribution to multimodal analysis, given that it takes into consideration artefacts composed of (verbal) texts and visual images.

From the point of view of concrete methodology, this approach is based on the separation of texts into different analytical “layers”: plastic level (forms, colours, positions, dimensions and their probable influence on sense-making); iconic or figurative level (objects represented in verbal or visual text and their probable connotations); enunciation and pragmatic level (forms of interaction proposed to the reader-observer through the text, the relation and the “contract” between the enunciator and the receiver); narrative dimension; and, axiological level (values and their basic articulation). In this paper I focus in particular on the plastic, iconic and enunciation aspects (see section 3 below).

THE OBJECT: CSR REPORTS BY TOTAL GROUP

I focus on a selection of CSR reports by Total published between 2004 and 2013. CSR reports are nowadays the object of different types of analysis (linguistic, narrative, and discursive: see for ex. Senkel, 2011). Reports are an important part of corporate communication, and they embody the basic imperative of “accountability” of businesses and organizations, being often the longest and most detailed support for CSR corporate communication. CSR reports have developed in recent years as a concrete effect of the growing importance of CSR as a new vision of business’ presence in society, linked to the stakeholder approach. In some countries, like France and Norway, CSR reports are compulsory for big businesses – in France, it is the case for businesses that are listed on the stock exchange⁴. CSR reports can be published separately from the main (financial) report of the firm, or as a section of it.

The reports under analysis in this paper are published by Total, a French multinational integrated oil and gas company, which is a member of the list of world “Supermajor” oil companies. Total covers the whole oil and gas chain from exploration and extraction to refining and chemical processing. Total has been the object of criticism and legal pursuits in the past because of different accidents, like the sinking of ships like the Brittany (1998) and the Erika (1999), non-ethical (presumed) behaviour, as in the

⁴ A note in one of the Total CSR reports under analysis specifies that the compulsory information is in the global report (under the form of one chapter): this means that the CSR report can be interpreted as a support developed for communication more than legal reasons, within the framework of the effort to value the firm.

case of the operations conducted in Myanmar despite EU sanctions, and corruption in other countries. The French “Observatoire de la Réputation” (reputation observatory) indicated in 2010 that the reputation of Total was bad and even becoming worse. In October 2012, the Posternak/IPSOS barometer, dedicated to the image of big national businesses in the mind of the French population, classed Total at the last place among 30 French firms.

The communication activities of the group are extensive and their analysis does not fit into the object of this research. It is worth noting the importance of ambassador strategies (as in the case of the sponsorship of a young French-Swiss F1 driver, Romain Grosjean), for a general audience, and the development of a Foundation (Total Foundation), whose activities are presented in a quite discreet way on the corporate website of the group, which contribute to its corporate communication. The negative context and criticism is sometimes present in reports, as will be shown later, under the form of “questions” addressed by specific stakeholders to the top management of the group.

METHOD: CATEGORIES AND DIMENSIONS OBSERVED IN THE TEXTS

The qualitative review of nine Total CSR reports focused on two different aspects of these texts.

SPATIAL ORGANIZATION AND LAYOUT

In this case, I focused on some aspects, like: the number of columns; the (relative) dimensions of paragraphs; specific ways of putting titles and subtitles in evidence; and, visual devices to separate and underline paragraphs and chapters (lines, colours). This observation of the layout was guided by reference to a basic opposition between continuous texts or text sections (made of long paragraphs, without much space between paragraphs), on one hand, and segmented texts (made of short paragraphs, with an evident separation between paragraphs and a global “collage effect” in the layout), on the other. This opposition can be seen as a manifestation of the abstract opposition between continuity and discontinuity. This formal (expressive) opposition can be linked to possible effects on reading and observation by the intended reader: a continuous text asks for a more continuous effort, while a more discontinuous text allows the reader to “jump” from one element to the other, allowing a more rapid and superficial reading⁵. I also

⁵ This opposition is inspired by the analysis of the Paris Underground Railway (the métro) in Floch (1990).

considered the meta-textual and para-textual structure of texts: they include all of the elements that are introduced to manage and orient reading, like titles, subtitles and notes in the margin. The quantity and evidence of meta-textual devices can be linked to the possible production of connotations of accessibility and legibility, and can improve the opening to a more partial form of reading, similar to the consultation of an encyclopaedia.

VISUAL IMAGES PRESENT IN REPORTS

In this case, I observed which iconic contents were dominant in order to establish a typology, and how plastic variables (colours in particular) influence the probable meaning production of text.

These two aspects have been analysed from the point of view of the plastic, iconic and enunciation levels identified above (section 2). Observations on the CSR reports are organized in sections below, following the basic discontinuities identified between them⁶.

FROM 2004 TO 2008: COMPLEXIFICATION AND FOUNDATION OF A STYLE

2004

The 2004 report is basically a short “PowerPoint-like” presentation, probably previewed also as a support for meetings, completely based on lists of bullet points. I already identified the importance of lists as a device of corporate rhetoric (Catellani 2011a; Boudès 2005): listing elements is a basic part of the rational “method” proposed by the philosopher René Descartes; lists create a probable connotation of control, knowledge, pedagogy and science, contributing to the “ethos” of the enunciator (the firm).

The text is organized in small paragraphs and is much segmented: points, colours and font differences contribute to the internal articulation of subjects. Diagrams and graphics complete this structure, with few photos (pure illustrations of the text). The document presents the achievements of the firm in a summary way via a solid quantitative approach.

2005

The following edition shows a radical shift towards a magazine-like structure, with longer texts and a rich “fauna” of images and visual

⁶ All the reports in French language are downloadable at the page <http://analystes-csr.total.com/actualites/publications> (visited on 26 February 2015).

aspects. Blocks of text are sometimes long (descriptions, presentation of actions), but the layout of different elements on the page creates a sort of constellation of texts and images (although less than in following editions). The number of columns and the arrangement of elements are quite regular with exceptions, like the passage from two columns to one to underline important elements, or the opening sections of chapters. The blocks are separated in a very evident way with large coloured lines, and some elements like graphics are highlighted with colours. The text presents an alternation of short and long elements, of synthesis and analysis.

Images are quite numerous in the report, in particular photos, drawings and graphics. Some different types are identifiable and they will also be common in following reports. The first is illustrations, which are images, often very iconic and “high-definition” (like photos), that double and *re-present* in a different semiotic form the same subject presented by the corresponding verbal text, without adding specific conceptual notions or participating in the development of a pedagogical explanation or analysis. Illustrations allow the addition of a second semiotic substance (image) to the textual one, increasing the impression of accessibility and redundancy of the discourse. This redundancy is never complete anyway: all new signs added to a text inevitably change, in part, its meaning⁷.

Illustrations are often anonymous. On page 44, for example, the chapter on health opens with the image of an African doctor examining a patient. The identity of the character and the space-time are not specified; the scene is “an” illustration of the subject of health, a visual anonymous duplicate of the verbal text. This kind of stereotypical situation is quite common in corporate reports (Catellani, 2014). A specific type of anonymous illustration is that of “covers” of chapters: they are images that include two pages, and the probable effect on the intended reader is an immersion in visual reality, a sort of visual spectacular parenthesis in the flux of verbal text. For example, on the pages with no number between pages 21 and 22, a large photo of a worker beside two enormous pipelines is printed with a strong effect of depth of field. This construction of the image creates a sense of contact with the firm’s men and their world (referential effect).

The second type of image is the non-anonymous illustration, each of which has a legend that specifies the content and the characters, and links the representation to a specific place and situation.

A third type is the “ethos” image: here the word “ethos” is used in the sense of Aristotelian rhetoric, and refers to the presentation of the

⁷ No sign can be considered as completely “empty” from a semantic point of view.

enunciator of a text, in order to create an effect of contact and personal relation with him/her (enunciation effect). In the 2005 report, ethos images are normally small photo portraits of the enunciator who is at the origin of a specific section of the text, starting with the CEO on page 2.

Another type of image is the pedagogical or “knowledge” image. These images are normally (in some cases, large) drawings or synthetic images that represent objects and scenes with the aim of explaining relationships, interactions and dynamics or processes. They participate in a process of explanation and of vulgarization of technical knowledge, which is a specific way for the firm to have a “citizen” role in society. The images include different visual solutions aimed at highlighting relationships, like arrows and lines, vivid colours, and simplification of the image in the form of a reduction of the “definition” (in particular with the passage from photo to drawing and synthetic techniques).

In some cases, this “pedagogical” aspect is not so significant and the images are very nearly simple illustrations, like on pages 6 and 7 of the 2005 report (figure 1). Here the reader does not learn much about oil extraction and refining; the image is used to identify and represent in a quite precise way the different objects and plants linked to the firm’s different activities (representing the development of the process from left to right). The visual part of the double page does not increase the reader’s knowledge in any significant way: they are “poor pedagogical images”. This same image on pages 6 and 7 is also an example of how the visual dimension of CSR reports is able to show the conciliation of different elements, like industry and nature (represented here by green fields and blue sea), and the harmony and conciliation of oil and other more renewable and ecological types of energy sources (wind, solar power).

A specific type of pedagogical image is the geographic map (see pages 4-5 and 13), which is a low-definition representation of the Earth aimed at highlighting a specific conceptual content (like the presence of the firm in different parts of the world).

Finally, graphics and grams constitute an important type of visual solution in the report: they can be considered an extreme form of pedagogical image, different from the previous ones because of their total aniconism (they do not represent objects and scenes, but quantities and numbers). Graphics are the perfect visual support for the rhetoric of numbers and quantity, clearly very important in corporate communication (what will later be called the “rationalistic sense effect”; see the conclusions).



Figure 1: Rapport Sociétal & Environnemental 2005, pages 6-7, Total group⁸.

2006

The following report is not very different from the previous one with respect to the layout and image types. As for the organization of pages, the separations between text blocks are less important; colours are used to isolate some blocks and to create alternation and variation inside pages. Bullet points are used in many cases. Longer and shorter paragraphs alternate in the text; many pages are built in the form of a puzzle or collage. Para-text is quite developed in the form of notes in the margin that synthesize important information (like “our achievements” during the year). Numbers are highlighted, and the probable effect is the creation of a second way of reading that jumps from one element in evidence to the other, skipping the longer blocks reserved for more interested readers.

The types of images used are the same: anonymous and non-anonymous illustrations; ethos images; pedagogical images, like the drawing that shows the procedure for capturing CO₂ on page 31; and graphics.

⁸ All images are used with the kind permission of Total.

2007

This edition of the report, which is not very different from the two previous ones, includes a specific para-textual component. The upper part of the pages present different elements linked to the subject of the page, like important numbers, sentences on engagements and achievements, and images (anonymous illustrations) in some cases. This para-textual device supports a secondary form of reading, less complete and more rapid than the “normal” one (linear and complete): the text evolves towards the form of a “hypertext”, a constellation of interconnected elements.

All types of images already identified are present. On page 5, different actors (“civil society”, “stockholders”, “employees”, etc.) are represented with simplified and stereotypical drawings. On the two following pages, 6 and 7, similar small “pictograms” are used and connected to legends (“on-shore platform”, “off-shore platform”, etc.), which create a (low level of) pedagogy, (poor pedagogical images presenting to the reader the form of different types of plants). Once again, I underline here the use of green and the presence of trees next to the plants, with evident connotations of reconciliation between industry and nature.

2008

The 2008 CSR report is divided into two parts: a first one, magazine-like, with a lot of illustrations, and an appendix with a long list of quantitative data on CSR performance.

From the point of view of layout, the text keeps the same aspect of hyper-textual “puzzle” and constellation of previous years. Like the year before, the upper part of the pages is a para-textual component with numbers and short abstracts of achievements and engagements or other information. This section is also in part a meta-text, because information added in this part obviously has an impact on the reading of the rest of the page.

From the point of view of images, the report is very rich. Ethos images – and in particular a very big one of the iconic CEO of that time, Christophe de Margerie on page 7⁹ – are present. There are also examples of poor knowledge images, like on pages 44-45, in which a big drawing representing a landscape is used to show different sources of energy. The image is clearly, once again, the place for a connotation of conciliation of nature and industry.

⁹ This portrait is not integrated in a “frame”, but the silhouette of the CEO appears in the middle of the page, directly next to his verbal text. This position, combined with the fact that he looks into the eyes of the reader, creates an effect of direct contact, a strong form of enunciation impression.

2004-2008: SYNTHESIS

The basic evolution identified between 2004 and 2008 is the passage from the very simple style of the 2004 report to a magazine-like text, with the development of a hyper-textual or collage style of layout, and the differentiation of long textual blocks and shorter elements. In later reports, starting in particular in 2006, the same subject is presented to the reader in longer and shorter versions, with the combination of verbal and visual solutions. Ethos images and pedagogical and poor pedagogical images also become quite frequent.

FROM 2009 TO 2011: HUMAN AND DIALOGIC TURN**2009**

The 2009 report presents a simple layout: the body of chapters is articulated in two columns only and isolated blocks are less numerous. The para-textual component of previous editions is also strongly reduced.

Each chapter of the report is structured as an answer to a question addressed to Total by a specific “stakeholder”, a person who is in relation with the firm for various reasons (like an official of the German government or the president of an NGO). This stakeholder is represented on the opening double page of each chapter, on the left side, while on the right side there is a verbal text providing Total’s answer (“our answer”). Images contribute to a sort of “dialogic turn”, a specific strategy of “humanization” and (representation of) opening and accountability to external society and “symmetric” communication (referring to the well-known model of public relations proposed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt). The floor is given to someone other than the firm’s management, including a regular employee of Total. Nonetheless, the portraits of the CEO and other people in charge of the group are present, together with other “traces” of their identity like Mr de Margerie’s signature. These images are very strong visual “breaks” in the flux of the text; the physical presence of “the other” is highlighted.

2010

The following year’s report retains the direction of the “dialogic turn”. The layout is simpler than before 2009 (and even simpler than in 2009), with regular blocks, some long paragraphs, and a more flux-like aspect. Colours, letter dimensions, fonts, and lines are used to underline and isolate important information. The last part of the report presents indicators and is aniconic, as in earlier years.

This time each chapter opens with an image that takes up the whole double page: on the left side, a stakeholder presents a question (a student from MIT university, the director of a public institute in France, the director of another business which collaborates with Total, etc.); on the right side, Total is represented by one of its executive officers (the director of a local branch, of a business unit, etc.; see figure 2). The image shows the two characters looking into each other's eyes, even though the "meeting" is clearly not a real one, but the result of a photomontage, at least in some cases. The background of the image is also added via photomontage, and it is coherent with the subject of the chapter (for example, an image of the sea and an off-shore platform at the beginning of the chapter on risk management).



Figure 2: Rapport Société et Environnement 2010, pages 22-23, Total group.

These comic-strip-like “dialogic images” (a bubble with the question or the answer comes out of the head of each character, and their mouth is open) embody even more than the year before the desired image of opening and dialogue with stakeholders. This time, the firm is also embodied in one of its members, who is represented as open to interaction, “at the same level” as their interlocutor. These dialogic images can be considered a sub-type of “ethos image”: they highlight the reality and human nature of

enunciators, stakeholders and Total's members. They are the embodiment of symmetry between the interests of Total and of other social actors around the world. The firm's voice is not anonymous or limited to the CEO; other members take the floor as its "representatives".

Besides ethos images and dialogic ethos images, the report also presents examples of illustrations and (strong and poor) pedagogic images.

2011

The 2011 report is very similar to the previous one from the point of view of layout. As for the images, a new version of "dialogic ethos images" is offered. Each chapter opens with a big photo (instead of a photomontage) that shows a "real" work situation, in which an internal or external stakeholder is "in action". For example, a member of a technical section of Total is represented in a business meeting situation working with other people around a table (pages 14-15). She addresses a question to top management about personnel policies: her question is written on the right side (without balloons) and, under the question, the person responsible for the answer is presented with a small photo. Like two years before, the "other", the human actor at work is highlighted, and their word is taken into account and opens the development of the chapter. On the other hand, the firm is still represented by concrete people, too. A human dimension is integrated into the text and balances the "digital" and verbal development of the chapters. Even the CEO, Mr de Margerie, is shown discussing with another person (in a large photo on page 2).

2009-2011: SYNTHESIS

These three reports present three different versions of a dialogic and human turn: a visual space is given to actors who are not members of Total top management; ethos images are highlighted, the variety of stakeholders and Total's members is underlined (men and women, Africans and Asians, young and older people appear in the images); a dialogic visual rhetoric is developed. This turn is accompanied by a simplification of the layout, with a decrease in the complexity of para-textual and meta-textual devices. The report tries to create the impression of a conversation between Total and its stakeholders.

2012 AND 2013: FROM DIALOGUE TO COLLAGE

2012

The 2012 report is quite exceptional in the series¹⁰. The layout is organized in two parts with a main column of text and a sort of secondary one, on the right side of the page. The second one includes different forms of meta-textual and para-textual devices: short synthesis, links, key numbers, quotations, and small icons. This column supports hyper-textual reading, based on the selection of specific chunks of data, jumping from one element to the other (discontinuous reading). Connotations of readability and accessibility to information are probably introduced: this part of the text enhances the firm's efforts at self-vulgarization.

From the point of view of the images, the report completely abandons the structure based on questions from stakeholders and answers by the firm, with big ethos images opening the chapters. Instead, it develops a sort of rich vocabulary of small abstract ideograms, small and simplified drawings representing, for example, the presence of quotations, links, added information and references to specific types of information ("integrated performance"). There is also a legend for some icons at the beginning of the report to explain their meaning. These ideograms are a contribution to the rhetoric of clarity and access to information.

The report also uses small, simplified iconic images based on the use of simplified geometrical forms (squares, circles) and colours. These small figures are used in the text as representations of the objects the verbal text is referring to. They constitute a specific type of anonymous illustration: they create a sort of systematic visual double of the verbal text. For example, when the text is talking about women who work for Total, three small icons of "working women" are shown next to it (page 12).

In some cases, these small icons are integrated in pedagogical images, like on pages 16 and 17 (figure 3). In this case, each component of the global figure (representing how Total creates value for its stakeholders) is named verbally and represented visually. This systematic visualization is quite surprising. We can interpret it as a contribution to a global "aesthetic" and "ludic" effect: the intended author of the report seems interested in creating possible connotations of simplicity, happiness, and childhood (as usual, these connotations should be verified through observation of the reactions and interpretations of real audiences).

¹⁰ Previous articles have already analysed this text, see Catellani (2014, 2015).

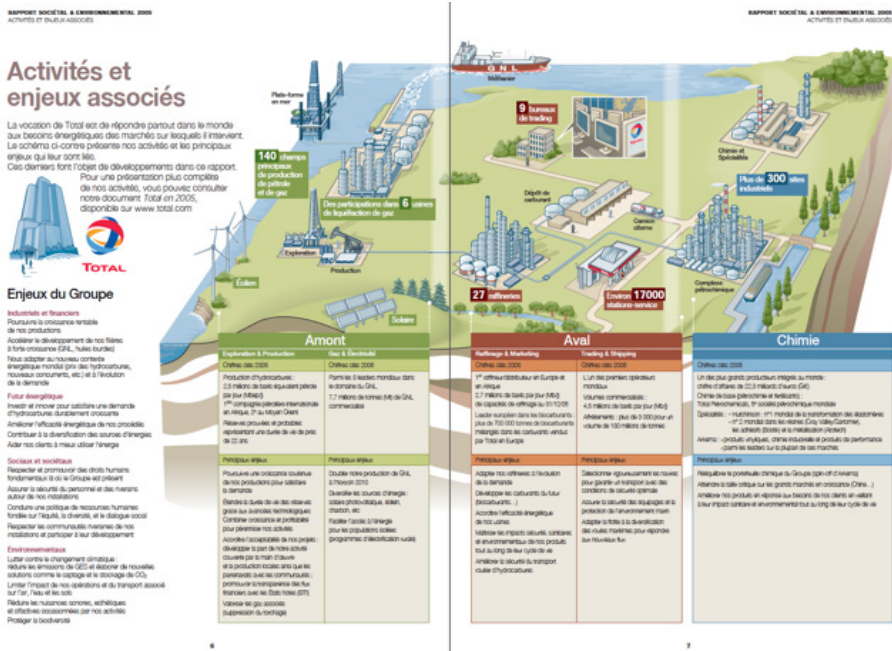


Figure 3: Rapport CSR 2012, pages 16-17, Total group.

Ethos images are still present, but in a limited number (the portrait of the CEO and other members). Many illustrations show members of Total in action: they are not technically ethos images, but they contribute to the humanization of the firm.

2013

The last edition of the CSR report, a short document of 33 pages, confirms that the dialogic structure has been abandoned. The layout is based on a strong hyper-textual or collage structure: different elements (titles, textual blocks, margin notes and images) combine on each page, encircled by large empty spaces. This is probably the most developed example of a magazine-like style of layout, very far from the traditional form of a report.

Images are very numerous, with many photographic illustrations, graphics and a very small number of pedagogical images (geographical maps). The firm does not pretend to explain complex processes or show its technical knowledge; it prefers to expose achievements and engagements combining data and short stories.

2012 AND 2013 SYNTHESIS

The two last CSR reports show that dialogic structure and images have been dropped. They also offer different layouts and meta-textual solutions to the problem of creating an aesthetic added value for the report: the creation of systematic, non-photographic visual doubles of notions via simplified icons, and the definition of a meta-textual set (2012); the intensification of the collage or hyper-textual effect on pages (2013).

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The study of nine of Total's CSR reports leads to two different results: a typology of images that compose the visual rhetoric of these texts and the identification of different phases of the development of this rhetoric.

From a *chronological* or *diachronic* point of view, I propose the identification of four phases or "turns":

1. From 2004 to 2009: magazine style turn
2. From 2009 to 2011: dialogic turn
3. 2012: meta-textual turn
4. 2013: collage turn (back to the magazine-like style).

The comparison with ordinary, contemporary magazine style is useful to synthesize a series of formal features we detailed above, like the layout on the page of different textual and visual blocks (collage effect). This comparison can be completed with the observation that the reports, in particular the last ones, tend to get near to the dominant form of web textualities, based on shorter blocks of text which are an ideal support for "web surfing" (a discontinuous form of reading). Globally, these different "turns" demonstrate the fact that the visual rhetoric of these reports is an expressive effect of some basic imperatives of today's corporate communication: pressure to adopt forms and language that are well known and familiar for the intended public; pressure towards more consideration for stakeholders and the integration of other voices; pressure to make the business understandable and accessible, and "transparent".

On a more *synchronic* level, the analysis leads to the proposition of a typology of images.

Anonymous and non-anonymous illustrations: the image re-presents the content of the corresponding verbal text, with or without legends that

specify the time and space and other details of the situation. A sub-type is the less iconic small icon, like drawings or synthetic images (of people or objects) that visualize a notion or a subject exposed by the verbal text. These small icons can also become parts of other types, in particular, complex pedagogical or poor pedagogical images. Illustrations are the support for the creation of the impression of getting in touch with visual reality through the image (the impression that a part of the world can be seen thanks to the image), the referential effect.

Ethos images: the image, normally a photo (other visual forms, like drawings, can also be used), represents the enunciator of a text. Ethos images can be connected to strategies of “humanization” of a business and of valorisation of the central characters of the firm like the CEO or other top managers. Specific cases are the dialogic images seen in some reports. In semiotic terms, ethos images contribute to another specific basic sense effect, the impression of a direct connection with the enunciator (enunciation effect).

Pedagogic or knowledge images: in this case, an image is the support of teaching, explanation and vulgarization. Normally, these images are simplified and less iconic than most illustrations; they integrate non-iconic signs like arrows and connection lines, and are linked to different forms of legends and explanations. Images are not simply the visual double (the re-presentation) of verbal text; instead, they allow the reader to visualize different parts of an object or different phases of a process, or the relationships between different elements. The image contributes more to analysis and to the construction of meaning. Maps, in which different elements (like firms’ branches and their performance or numbers) can be connected to specific areas, are a subtype of pedagogic images. Many reports present what we called poor pedagogical images, in which the visual dimension does not add much information to verbal discourse. This is the case when a large image presents different types of plants and structures. The difference between normal and poor pedagogical images is sometimes unclear and further research could suggest more precise distinction criteria. Pedagogic images are often drawings or synthetic images, less iconic and more “artificial” than photos. The reduction of iconic resemblance and of visual richness allows the image to support the representation of relationships and connections: a lesser “definition” allows for focusing on some aspects and dimensions in particular, and the introduction of abstract elements like arrows and connection lines supports the pedagogical efficacy of these images. A possible connotation of these images is also linked to

this “artificial” condition. Controversial processes like the extraction of oil and gas through hydraulic fracturing or from tar sands can be shown in an aseptic, clean form of visual representation: it can be seen as a contribution to the definition of a particular form of “ideology”.

Graphics, including diagrams and histograms: These abstract forms of representation are very frequent; they are the perfect visual embodiment of the rhetoric of numbers and quantities, and the basis of what can be called the rationalistic sense effect, which is the impression of getting in touch with information and of controlling reality via data management, calculation and quantities. Lists of points and tables can contribute to this kind of rationalist sense effect, as I said before, as it is for pedagogical images.

These types of images can be ordered from the more iconic (images that represent their referent in the world in a very defined and faithful way) to the less iconic (images that have a more symbolic and abstract relationship with their referent). Another classification can oppose more synthetic images (illustrations, ethos images) and more analytic images, which are useful for representing processes and parts (pedagogic images).

The Total Group’s CSR reports present a rich visual rhetoric. Its analysis leads to the identification of different solutions, accents and forms, and also variations in time. This research is qualitative and limited to a small corpus of texts. Its ambition is also clearly limited. However, I think the method and results can be used for other analyses, in order to progressively build a truly global understanding of CSR reporting visual rhetoric. One of the results is the identification of three basic sense effects, each of which is linked to different types of images:

The *referential effect*: contact with a part of the empirical world through the image, which is iconic enough to let the viewer believe that reality is really “like” the representation he/she is looking at;

The *enunciation(al) effect*: for example, contact with a character, a “hero” of the business through the image which contributes to the valorisation and the building of his/her “ethos” (credibility and value);

The *rationalistic effect*: contact with the rational, quantitative and scientific essence of reality, with graphics, pedagogical images and numbers.

The three effects are present in the CSR reports I analysed. Their specific “blending” and evolution define the specific traits of Total reporting visual rhetoric. These effects and the typology of images I presented above are globally the same as I identified in corporate CSR websites and in the communication of environmentalist NGOs like Greenpeace (Catellani 2011, 2011b, 2014, 2015). This demonstrates that the research about what could

be called “responsible communication”, or communication about societal values, can lead to the identification of universal and recurring patterns.

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