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# The story behind the plot: About the propositionality of visually presented argumentation

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# The story behind the plot: About the propositionality
# of visually presented argumentation

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ABSTRACT: When we define argumentation as a communicative activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability of a standpoint by putting forward information justifying or refuting this standpoint, it is clear that elements of this information can be brought forward in other than verbal modes. An important question is then whether visually presented information needs to be translatable into a set of propositions as traditional definitions require. The answer is: not always.

KEYWORDS: diegetic utterances, mimetic utterances, propositionality, visual argumentation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we define argumentation as:

> a *communicative* activity aimed at convincing a reasonable critic of the acceptability
> of a standpoint by putting forward *information* justifying or refuting this standpoint,

it is clear that elements of this information can be put forward in other than verbal modes. This is explicitly recognized by Van Eemeren when in his definition of argumentation he replaces *verbal activity* by *communicative activity* (2010: 5, fn 5). An important question is then whether visually presented information is translatable into a set of propositions, as is required in more traditional definitions of argumentation, including the one in Van Eemeren & Grootendorst (2004).

This paper starts with an analysis and subsequent illustration of the rhetoric of the division of labor between narrator and interpreter in argumentative narratives. It is argued that in a prototypical pictorial text the narrator predominantly expresses mimetic elements of the narrative. The interpreter has to attribute motives, construct causalities and supply evaluations. In a prototypical verbal text, the narrator predominantly expresses motives, causalities, evaluations. The iconic qualities of the narrative, however, will cause the interpreter to fill in at least some of the mimetic elements.

This (relative) difference has consequences for the argumentative reconstruction of such texts. Utterances in which a narrator attributes motives, constructs causalities and supplies evaluations fit quite easily into the propositional format. Pictorial mimetic elements and verbal utterances in which queues for a mimetic reconstruction are given seem to resist such a format. Thus the question whether visually presented information is translatable into a set of propositions can be reformulated as: are mimetic elements (presented verbally or pictorial) in an argumentatively relevant narrative translatable into a set of propositions or should they be accounted for in a more holistic way?

## 2. A SPECULATIVE EXAMPLE

In the literature on intermediality, we find a great variety of opinion on the relationship between verbal texts and their pictorial adaptation, particularly where film adaptations of novels are concerned. Discussing the generic concept of adaptation Elliott claims: "Although the assertion ["I am Heathcliff!", spoken by Cathy in Wuthering Heights/pvdh] emerges as radical statement in any representational form, its expression in the manifesting structure of written words standing alone in an unillustrated novel is less systematically problematic and incongruous than its expression from the lips of an embodied actor in a sound film". She goes on to argue that "Uttered by an actress, the *I* emerges from a mouth in a female face and fails to equate or encompass the male face and body representing Heathcliff" (2004: 231).

Even though she probably underestimates the reader's ability and readiness to mentally 'visualize' aspects of the characters, Elliott is right in observing that the reader needs to visualize the personae to live through this mimetic incongruence while the spectator is directly confronted with it.

In writing about adaptation, most scholars tend to favor the novel over the film (Elliott 2004: 237), mostly because of what is lost in the depth of the insight into the characters, the motives, the feelings of the characters. Basically, filmic narratives are perceived as being limited to telling by showing, which implies that in-depth interpretations and evaluations can only be presented in dialogues between the personae or through the use of specific means such as voice-overs. Critics are seldom explicit about the means verbal texts have at their disposal to make it possible for the reader to arrive at these in-depth interpretations and evaluations, but it will be clear that for the major part this will have to be external focalization by a narrator.

If this makes sense then the narrator of a predominantly pictorial text determines the mimetic qualities of the personae, determines the *mise-en-scene*, the dynamics of the actions, and so on. But in-depth interpretations such as the attribution of motives, causal relations and evaluation are necessarily made by the spectator, although cinematography, sound design, and editing give the 'narrator' the means to suggest what way they would like these to go. In verbal texts, in-depth interpretations and evaluations are often presented to the reader through a narrator's voice whose view of things is obviously subject to the reader's critical judgment. The mimetic qualities, however, are merely indicated and need to be imagined by the reader.

I will explore the implications of these relative differences for the argumentative reconstruction. What happens when a predominantly pictorial text that is meant to fulfill an argumentative function is adapted and 'translated' into a verbal text? In order for the adaptation to be a faithful one, the slots in an argumentative reconstruction that are filled with pictorial information will need to be filled with 'equivalent' verbal utterances. Methodologically, the problems involved in performing such an experiment are numerous, but let us simply ignore these for the sake of argument.

An interpreter is confronted with an almost entirely pictorial advertisement (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHwZbesnCHg). Here are stills from the first and the last 20 shots of this 74-seconds long clip.

Fig. 1. Pictorial advertisement (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHwZbesnCHg

The slogan: "Nu se termină acum. Acum începe" is Romanian and means "This is not The End. This is The Beginning."

It requires a certain amount of background knowledge to interpret this text in its argumentative function. The following is an authorized proposal, made by a Romanian colleague (compare Cmeciu & van den Hoven 2009).
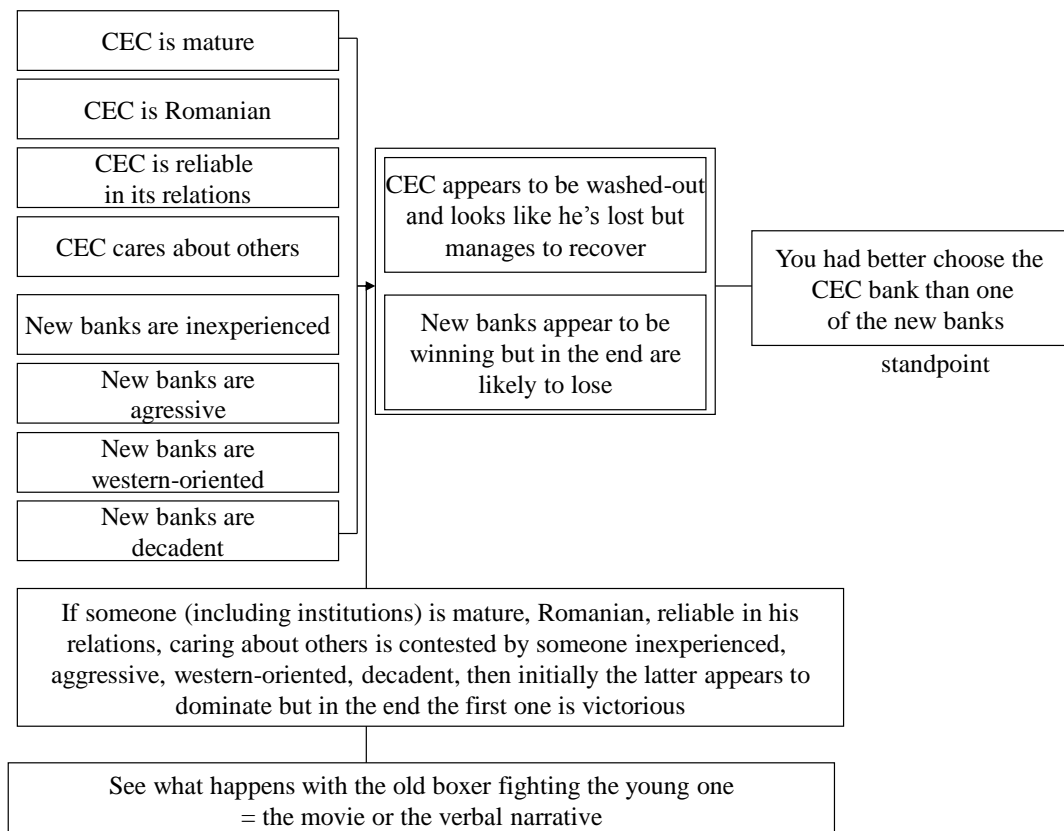


Fig. 2. Proposal on background knowledge

Suppose that one needed to replace the pictorial elements by verbal elements, what would these look like? If the reconstruction above reflects a plausible interpretation of the pictorial text, then it makes sense to assume that the interpreter reads a series of propositions in it about the boxers that are paralleled by those about CEC and the new banks.

- Boxer 1 appears to be washed-out and looks like he's lost but manages to recover
- Boxer 1 is mature
- Boxer 1 is Romanian
- Boxer 1 is reliable in his relations
- Boxer 1 cares about others
- Boxer 2 appears to be winning but in the end is likely to lose
- Boxer 2 is inexperienced
- Boxer 2 is aggressive
- Boxer 2 is western-oriented
- Boxer 2 is decadent

Notice that these statements are *all of them* attributions, evaluations and predictions, fitting quite smoothly into a propositional format. But this is not what one *sees*, looking at the movie. The 'mimetic' information underlying these 'propositional' interpretations is not so easy to grasp in the format of a determined, finite set of propositions.

Interpretative values are attributed on the basis of the mimetic elements of the text, on the basis of the assumption of a coherent narrative and also on the basis of the experiences and values that the interpreter associates with the icons (van den Hoven 2010). The woman near the boxing ring, for example, turns out to be the wife of one of the boxers. The interpretation of the expression on the face of the boxer who initially gets knocked down will inevitably be colored by this additional relational information, making the moment this boxer scrambles up one of shared victory. These attributed values are consistent with the argumentative function.

Now we come to what methodologically is the most dubious step. What might a 'smooth-running' verbal text look like whose argumentative function is (roughly) equivalent to the pictorial sequence? It is important to notice that this is clearly not a narration of descriptive statements. It will be a text that encodes the propositions listed above or even stronger interpretative ones. The following version might be an option.

> X is a somewhat older boxer, thickset *but* well-trained. One day he has to fight an aggressive, tattooed, young skinhead. Initially he gets knocked down by his opponent. The nasty young bastard has already got a broad smile on his face, thinking he has won. While he is being counted out by the referee, the older boxer, half dazed, as in a dream thinks back how happy he was as a nice little kid, how hard he trained as an adolescent, to how proud he was to be the groom at his wedding, his love for his wife, his child, his coach, the support of a large crowd of friends. Then, roused *by* his coach, he musters up his courage and gets up just in time to carry on the fight. His friends are cheering him; the skinny young upstart is about to find out what a strong body, a good heart and a lot of experience can do.!

We see that the evaluations, which in the moving pictorial text had to be made by the observant interpreting viewer, are now made explicitly by the narrator. Not only that, but the selection of what is relevant in the light of the argumentative function of the metaphor

is also made by the narrator. Mimetic elements, however, are only loosely indicated; they need to be completed to 'visualize' mentally a convincing, coherent mimesis of the event.

## 3. A SHIFT IN THE DIVISION OF LABOR

In the pictorial text, the point of departure seems to be basically mimetic. In the verbal text, the point of departure seems to be basically diegetic (for this distinction, see Ryan 2004: 13). These conventions are strong enough to (a) cause interpreters to tend to perceive certain interpretative elements as being intrinsic parts of a pictorial text ("These pictures show gruesome information"), while (b) a seemingly purely descriptive ('mimetic') verbal text sometimes seems to 'block' evaluative interpretations (as is likely to be the case, for example, in forensic autopsy reports). This is illustrated by an experiment with mock jurors in which one group gets to see 'gruesome' photos and the other group does not, while all get to read the autopsy report, which gives a detailed description but not one that would invite the evaluation 'gruesome' (Douglas e.o. 1997, compare also Van den Hoven, to appear).

When we approach the texts as argumentative, following the principle of a maximally reasonable interpretation (Van Eemeren & Grootendorst 2004: 1), we need to determine the argumentative responsibilities of the one who brought the text in as a (complex) move in an argumentative discussion (potentially the protagonist when it is reasonable to read a standpoint in the text). Reconstructing the argumentation that the protagonist is accountable for, we are confronted with this relative difference between the pictorial and the verbal version. A shift has occurred in the division of labor between narrator and interpreter. This shift is relevant because the narrator is in the realm of responsibilities of the protagonist of the standpoints (the historical author or someone who assumes the responsibilities of the communicative acts performed with the text).

## 4. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PROPOSITIONALITY

We can restate our analysis so far as follows. Pictorial text elements can encode argumentative communicative acts. However, reflecting upon the argumentative reconstruction of a pictorial argumentative text, such a reconstruction includes utterances that formulate attributions, evaluations, interpretations of causality, and so on. These are suggested by the text structure through a variety of cinematographic means and by general principles of coherence and relevance, but strictly speaking they are not produced as diegetic utterances by a narrator, as is the case in a 'natural' verbal equivalent of the pictorial text. They are produced by the interpreter. On the other hand, in verbal texts, mimetic elements are only suggested by the narrator in a selective, very rudimentary way. This means that the mimesis in the narrative is mainly produced by the interpreter.

Predominantly pictorial argumentative texts based on a narrative as well as predominantly verbal argumentative texts based on a narrative thus present a challenge to argument theory, especially in activity types in which a lot depends on the accountability of the author as a protagonist, as in legal procedures for instance.

The problem in predominantly pictorial texts is the accountability for diegetic interpretations. Although this problem is far more frequent in predominantly pictorial texts, it is not confined to these. The problem also pops up when iconic text elements (for

example narrative schemes) dominate and interpretative diegetic elements, though often suggested by the narrator, need to be inferred by the interpreter. In narrative schemes for example, a well-nigh perfect coherence is often suggested. This gives a verbal narrator the opportunity to suggest motives and causalities without uttering this explicitly.

The problem presents a challenge to argument theory. It is not adequate to simply accuse the interpreter/antagonist of committing the fallacy of the straw man when he reads 'gruesomeness' in the picture of a victim's dead body and responds: "The prosecution emphasizes the gruesome character of the murder but that is irrelevant". But it does not seem adequate either to accuse the prosecutor/protagonist of refusing the burden of argumentation when he states that he presented the photo as part of an argument to support his standpoint about certain details of the circumstances, the alleged gruesomeness of the crime deduced from the picture not being his responsibility.

Argument theory should reflect upon the principles to guide the historical author as the protagonist and the interpreter as the antagonist between the Scylla of the antagonist creating a straw man and the Charybdis of the protagonist refusing the burden of proof.

The problem in predominantly verbal texts is protagonist's accountability for the mimetic presentations. Again, although this problem is frequent in predominantly verbal texts, it is not confined to these. The problem presents itself whenever text elements indicate aspects of the mimesis, while the mimesis as a whole is argumentatively relevant. This can also be the case in edited movies with highly selective points of view.

The main theoretical issue here is the issue of propositionality. Confined to a verbally presented text it may seem in the first instance that the text presents a set of more or less descriptive utterances that may be read as propositions, even as truth-conditional ones. But from the perspective of a relevant argumentative reconstruction, this is not the case. A more 'holistic' representation is required, or at least a representation of a large set of 'propositions' in a complex structure of internal relations. Paul Auster in The City of Glass describes Stillman through the eyes of Quinn:

> His hair was white, and it lay on his head uncombed, stitching up here and there in tufts. He was tall, thin, without question past sixty, somewhat stooped, inappropriate for the season, he wore a long, brown, overcoat that had gone to seed, and he shuffled slightly as he walked. The expression on his face seemed placid, midway between a daze and thoughtfulness. He did not look at the things around him, nor did they seem to interest him. He had one piece of luggage, a once beautiful but now battered leather suitcase with a strap around it. Once or twice as he walked up the ramp he put the suitcase down and rested for a moment.

This text is exceptionally descriptive, but there are some beautiful traces of the diegetic narrator as well. Its purpose seems to be to present a mimetic image of Stillman to the reader. Although the text is not argumentative, the mimesis functions to help the reader determine whether or not he shares Quinn's attitude and agrees with his attributions. But to create a clear picture even of Stillman's appearance, the reader is given absolutely insufficient information when we read the passage as just a limited set of propositions. We need to read the passage as an invitation to create a complete 'mimesis', given a set of anchors. The interpreter is expected to fill in what is missing in such a way that it is in harmony with the elements given.

This mechanism functions in a similar way in very serious argumentative contexts. When a judge motivates a sentence by sketching the terror that the condemned has brought upon his family for two years, he cannot give a complete description of these two

years (nor can a pictorial text), nor can he present an adequate 'visualization' of a number of incidents. The utterances presented are thus meant to be interpreted beyond their strict 'truth-conditional' content as indices of a complete mimetic narrative (see Van den Hoven 2011 for this example). At the same time, however, they have a truth-conditional propositional status as well, namely in the sense that each explicit descriptive element needs to follow from established evidence.

Confined to pictorial elements, the interpreter is confronted with the reverse problem. He does not need to supply information to complete the mimesis; prototypically, all the information is in the picture. But it seems impossible to represent this information in the format of a limited set of propositions.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Pictorial elements in argumentative texts raise two problems argument theory has to deal with. The first one is that the narrator of a predominantly pictorial texts acts relatively implicitly in his diegetic position; this means that it is hard to determine which interpretative propositions can be ascribed to the author as the protagonist. This problem pops up too when an interpreter is confronted with iconic elements in a predominantly verbal text. Argument theory should reflect upon procedures to guide the interpreter between the Scylla and Charybdis of committing a fallacy of the straw man and of not rightfully calling a protagonist to account for the burden of argumentation.

The second problem is the difficulty of translating the explicit mimetic information into a limited set of propositions (pictorial mode) or to complete the mimesis from a limited set of propositions (verbal mode). Argument theory should reflect upon procedures to evaluate such 'holistic' elements as part of an argument.

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# Commentary on "THE STORY BEHIND THE PLOT: ABOUT THE PROPOSITIONALITY OF VISUALLY PRESENTED ARGUMENTATION" by Paul van den Hoven

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Paul van den Hoven addresses the following question in his interesting paper: "What happens when a predominantly pictorial text that is meant to fulfill an argumentative function is adapted and 'translated' into a verbal text?" I have to confess that I had to do some translation on my own before I was able to discuss this question and van den Hoven's answer to it. Although my translation is informed by some additional communication we had about terminological questions, I am still not sure whether my understanding is adequate. Since argumentation theory is a very interdisciplinary field, it is not surprising that there are problems of communication. To move things forward, I will try to rephrase many things van den Hoven discusses, hoping that putting side by side his language, which is informed by literary theory, pragma-dialectical argumentation theory, and semiotics, and my language as a philosopher will enlighten the discussion.

The meaning of van den Hoven's question becomes clearer when we apply it to the example he is using: There is this advertisement of a Romanian bank, a short movie clip of 74 seconds, and there are two different "translations" he provides for the clip. The first one is informed by "background knowledge" that a Romanian colleague contributed. This translation is represented in form of a diagram in which a set of propositions about elements of the movie are arranged in a Toulmin-style model of argumentation. This way, van den Hoven can represent the argumentative structure of the clip: a "standpoint"—the bank's opinion that the movie watcher should "better choose the CEC bank than one of the new banks"—is justified by a network of reasons.

The second translation is a translation of what we can see in the movie into a colourful, verbal description that talks about a "somewhat older boxer, thickset *but* well-trained," and a second boxer who is introduced as "an aggressive, tattooed, young skinhead," a "nasty young bastard" who "has already got a broad smile on his face, thinking he has won." We get the picture. And that is exactly one of van den Hoven's points: We can watch the movie and we can tell a story about what we see in a way that tries to recreate the images of the movie in the imagination of the listener.

But what "happens" in both these translations, to turn again to van den Hoven's central question? Some of the points that van den Hoven highlights are the following:

(1) The diagrammatic translation which represents the argumentative structure of the clip as a graphical arrangement of a "finite set of propositions" does not capture "what one *sees*, looking at the movie. The 'mimetic' information underlying these 'propositional' interpretations is not so easy to grasp" in the Toulmin-style format. All the emotions, we could say, that are induced by both the movie *and* the story told about it are no longer present in the diagram. The movie presents actions, and the story describes actions, but the argument is simply a structure without time, movement, images, and feelings.

(2) While the story told about the movie still presents all these elements of the advertisement, it is crucial that the narrator of the story has to make explicit what he or she considers being the movie's central images. The narrator needs to select "what is relevant in the light of the argumentative function" of the images, and he or she has to explicate the meaning of these images in evaluative terms. In order to create in the listener the impression of a convincing and coherent story it is not enough to talk about a young skinhead with tattoos; we have to talk about a "nasty young bastard."

(3) In making explicit what might only implicitly be given in the movie, the narrator—and obviously any interpreter—risks to get lost between the Scylla of creating a straw man out of nothing and the Charybdis of not calling on the responsibilities and the burden of proof that the author of a "pictorial" argument carries as any author of an argument.

I think Paul van den Hoven is right when he emphasizes that argumentation theory should take these points seriously. Movies and images can transport an argumentative message, but it is far from clear what exactly happens when we try to "take" this message and look for another carrier. Something will get lost in translation, and other things will need to be added, and that calls the responsibility of the translator into question.