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### The Polyphonic Object. Argumentation/rhetoric

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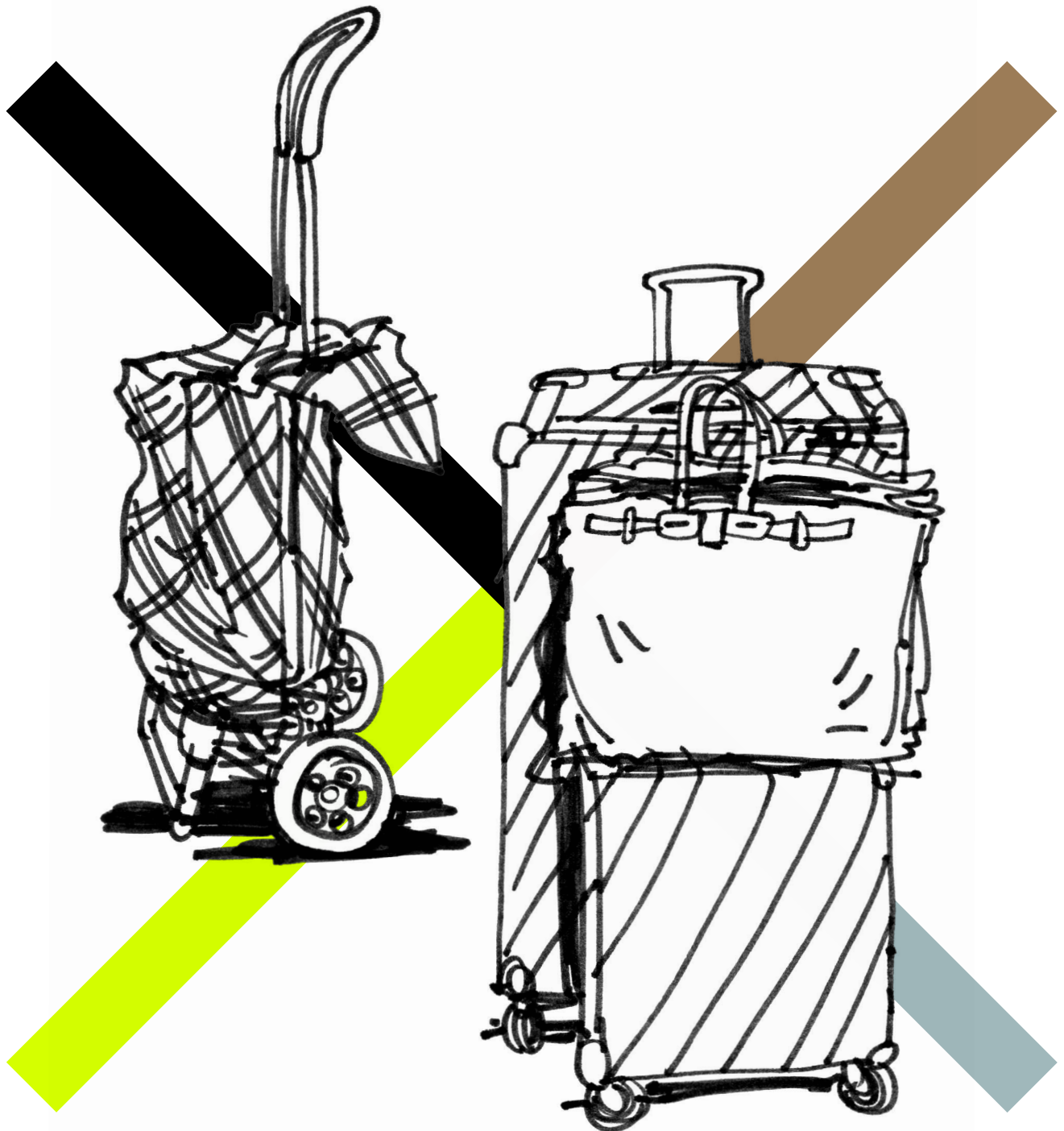
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# The Polyphonic Object



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# Menno Reijven and Emma van Bijnen (argumentation/rhetoric)



## Visual Rhetoric in a Genre Painting

The title of the work 'Genre Painting' (*Genrestuk*) by Albert Blitz is a standard term used to describe *paintings about everyday settings of modest citizens* (e.g. Aono 2011, p. 15) by which the spectator is reminded of the difference between undesirable and correct behavior (de Vries 2005, 109). As such, a genre

piece is not idealized but ideological in nature, proposing injunctive norms. As ideology and proposed morals are important aspects of genre paintings, they are interesting to analyze from a visual rhetoric and argumentation perspective. When doing so, we discover that a few visual contrasts are being exploited by Albert Blitz that firmly place this painting in

another genre, maybe even more so than that of a ‘genre painting’...

First, is this really an everyday setting? A calm and composed dinner while flames are raging in the background? The construction of the metro line was considered catastrophic by the residents of the *Nieuwmarkt* neighborhood. There were riots and violent protests, but the neighborhood was not *literally* on fire. The raging fire (and its destructive properties) seemingly represents the neighborhood’s then state, from the perspective of the locals. As such, we can consider the flaming background for the politicians’ casual dinner to be a visual metaphor, in which properties of the source domain are visually projected onto the goal domain (Šorm and Steen 2018, 48). In this case: the raging fire (source domain) and the *Nieuwmarkt* (goal domain).

For the locals, this situation was certainly not their everyday; instead, they considered it an unacceptable disruption of their everyday lives. So, for whom is this an *everyday setting*? Like the painted fire, the mayor and alderman were destroying the neighborhood, and according to the locals, these politicians did not even care. The painting shows no emotional response or sign of regret; the mayor and alderman have turned their backs to the destruction and are carrying on with their dinner. Being part of a ‘*genrestuk*’, this apparently is everyday practice for these politicians.

Second, given the importance of this genre in portraying ordinary peoples’ everyday lives, which are generally represented by unknown figures (see e.g. Johns 1991), it should be noted that the painting foregrounds *two prominent local labor politicians* instead. The use of formal wear such as suits points to the technocratic nature of the local politicians in charge, which contrasts with the typical modest citizen in a genre painting (Aono 2011, 15). Both the mayor and alderman were labor

politicians; people who supposedly would stand with and for ‘the people’. To show them, in formal attire eating a fancy meal with wine, while a neighborhood is burning (and of which the flames were lit by them) is an *ironic* use of this genre. They are technocrats, distinct from the local people; they caused destruction, and they could not care less. Overall, the selected contrast and visual metaphor clearly conveys the artist’s critical stance towards the local government, presenting the undesirable behavior by the politicians befitting the ‘genre painting’.

### Reconstructing Visual Argumentation

In argumentation theoretical terms, Blitz is taking a stance on the issue and presents argumentation in support (see e.g. van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004; 2016, for more on argumentation theory). The standpoint advanced by Blitz is that ‘the behavior by the politicians should be negatively evaluated’, which is then defended by the fact that the plans were bad (‘the extension of the Amsterdam subway was a bad plan’) and that the government did not even care (‘the labor politicians did not care about the consequences’). These premises are both defended by the visual *décor*. Specifically, that the plans are bad is supported by the visual metaphor of the neighborhood on fire (the metro line has destroyed the city like a fire), while the second premise is indexed by the mayor and alderman casually eating their luxurious dinner, looking like uncaring technocrats: they are unbothered by the fire that is destroying everything they ought to protect.

In short, the painting is an explicit critique on the local government, presented by means of visual argumentation with identifiable premises. This painting represents a skilled instance of visual rhetoric; metaphors, contrasts and indexes are used to establish meaning and delineate the possible inferences



that can be drawn from the painting. The only verbal phrase ‘a genre piece’ does not contain any premises, although it does initiate a cascade of inferences which result in the possibility to reconstruct the argumentation.

### Genre Painting or Political Cartoon?

The visual rhetorical and argumentative reconstruction suggests a mixture of a genre painting with that of an *editorial cartoon*, as Blitz clearly makes a multimodal (i.e. visual and verbal) political point by means of the tension between the visual argumentation and the verbal title. Although it indeed shows undesirable behavior and a clear ideology (de Vries 2005), befitting of the ‘genre painting’, the contrasts and visual metaphor point towards a rhetorical genre: *the political cartoon* (sub-genre of the editorial cartoon). Such cartoons are a known genre used to comment on political events or discourses by means of satire, caricature, or irony (see e.g., Dugalich 2018). This satirical commentary is usually done multimodally (visually and verbally) and often includes a visual metaphor (see e.g., Schilperoord and Maes 2009), as is the case in the ‘Genrestuk’ by Albert Blitz.

In short, a close analysis reveals how this painting is argumentative and contributes to a discussion in the public sphere. By playing with genre conventions and contrasts, a deeper message is being created. The painting has been produced as a political message: a critical reflection of the *state of affairs*. This suggests it is not a ‘genre painting’ in which the everyday lives of ordinary people are depicted through anonymous characters that represent larger communities (see e.g. Johns 1991), but instead something alike a political cartoon in which the behaviors of two painted (and known) politicians are being condemned by means of contrasts and metaphors.

For the research fields of rhetoric and argumentation, this painting offers some

interesting insights as well. The painting reveals there are deeper underlying structures to the rhetoric in paintings, and cultural artifacts in general. Specifically, this example presents a beautiful prototypical example clarifying the possibilities of visual rhetoric and the importance of the study of art as (possible) persuasive communication.

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