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Arguing Against Corporate Claims Visually and Multimodally: The Genre of Subvertisements

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Abstract: In this paper, we describe the conditions under which the manipulation of the verbal and the visual elements or of the visual elements alone in the genre of subvertisements can be considered as an act of objecting or rebutting in an implicit argumentative discussion. We thus consider the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of communication while paying serious attention to the interaction of semiotic modes in order to analyse a number of images produced by anti-consumerist groups such as Adbusters. We identify four different ways in which image-text relations or the visuals alone can cue an incongruity between the message of the original ad and the message of the subvertisement in such a way that the latter functions as an objection or rebuttal of the claim advanced by the original advertisement.

Keywords: critical reactions, negation, irony, multimodal argumentation, subvertisements

Introduction

Argumentation scholars studying multimodal discourse are faced with the criticism that visual representations cannot be said to negate (see Fleming 1996; Worth 1981). Negation is said to be one of the typical properties of linguistic systems of communication and one that is at the heart of any argumentative discussion, since a stated or anticipated difference of opinion is a necessary condition for argumentation to occur. While it is true that pictures have no explicit sign for negation (unless we are prepared to accept the “X” or (red) “/” line over an image as a visual rather than as a verbal sign), we argue that they can nevertheless be used to trigger inferences with negative conclusions. The critics of visual argumentation, we propose, assume a formal perspective of argument that fails to acknowledge the role that the context plays in the identification of the argumentative function of verbal and non-verbal modes. As Groarke (1996: 109–110) has remarked, the claim about the impossibility of visual negation overlooks the conventions “which allow the creator of an image to convey a negation by invoking visual symbols of negation, by juxtaposing incongruent images or incongruent images and words, or by obviously violating or inverting standard visual conventions.” He acknowledges that further work is required that pays attention to the genre and the context. This is the lead we follow in this paper.

How can the portrayal of incongruent images or incongruent images and words or of negatively evaluated images amount to an act of objecting to a claim previously advanced? The move from what is depicted to what is meant by depicting it and, what is more, to the interpretation of the argumentative intention of the agency that depicted it can be accounted for when one considers the cognitive and pragmatic aspects of communication while paying serious attention to the interaction of semiotic modes. In this paper we seek to describe under which conditions the interaction of the verbal and the visual elements or the visual elements alone can be considered as an act of objecting or rebutting in an implicit argumentative discussion.

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As a case in point, we analyse a series of images produced by anti-consumerist groups such as Adbusters.¹ The case of subvertisements is first of all a proof of the fact that those involved in these acts of so-called ‘brandalism’ or ‘culture jamming’ actually reconstruct a certain argument from the original advertisements, which most of the time is presented purely visually or through image-text combinations. This realisation counters the contention that images afford endlessly different interpretations and that it is thus impossible to attribute specific commitments to image makers. As will be demonstrated in this paper, subvertisements counter specific claims that are attributed to the original advertisements. Secondly, the close analysis of the image-text relations and the visual style of subvertisements shows that the makers of these multimodal artefacts exploit in a systematic way the affordances of both the verbal and the visual mode in their attempt to counter the argument of the original advertisement. While a number of scholars from communication studies and rhetoric have focused on campaigns of activist groups (e.g., Olson and Goodnight 1994) and more recently on the use of images in protesting (Delicath and Deluca 2003; Jones 2009; Atkinson 2003), no systematic attention has been paid to the ways image and text combine to put forward such argumentative moves as objecting and rebutting.

In the next section we briefly introduce the debate on visual argumentation and focus on the arguments of the critics concerning the impossibility of visuals to negate. In Section “Visual negation?” we discuss the proposals regarding the possibility of images to negate presented by scholars in the fields of visual communication and cognitive pragmatics. We argue that objecting and rebutting is a complex communicative act that involves more than just negating. Therefore in Section “Objecting and rebutting as communicative acts” we examine literature from argumentation studies regarding the acts of objecting and rebutting in order to consider the ways in which their insights can be further applied to multimodal communication. In Section “Subvertisements as multimodal acts of objecting to corporate claims” we present the analysis of a number of subvertisements found mainly on the website of the Adbusters group. We end with some conclusions and suggestions for further research.

On visual and multimodal argumentation

Since the late 1990s, when Birdsell and Groarke (1996) edited a special issue of the journal *Argumentation and Advocacy* on visual argument, the interest in what was then called “visual argument” has been growing steadily, as the number of papers in conferences on argumentation and rhetoric, articles in related academic journals, and book chapters testify (see Kjeldsen 2015; Groarke et al. 2016; Tseronis and Forceville forthcoming). Right from the start the idea of the possibility and actuality of visual argument met with scepticism if not downright rejection by some argumentation scholars.² Fleming (1996) and Johnson (2003) have raised questions about the possibility of visual images to argue and doubted the need for extending the concept of argument to cover cases where modes other than the verbal one are used.

Fleming argues that the two-element structure of an argument, consisting of claim and support, cannot be conveyed in the visual mode. He further notes that while an image may serve as support for a claim conveyed in the verbal mode, it cannot be refuted, opposed, or negated, and thereby it cannot incur the obligation for justification that is inherent in the act of arguing: “A picture because it seems to have a closer material relationship with the represented world is therefore less available for opposition than language” (Fleming 1996: 17). Interestingly, Fleming acknowledges Hayakawa’s claim that “the only way to ‘negate’ an image is to compare it with others and put it in a context” (cited *ibid.*). But this is precisely what Fleming’s

¹ Most of the images we analyse were found on the website of Adbusters under the rubric ‘Spoof ads’ <https://www.adbusters.org/spoofads/> (last accessed 19 August 2017). The other images can be found online when searching the Internet for the terms ‘anti-advertisements,’ ‘subvertisements’ or ‘spoof ads.’

² For the most recent restatement of some of the criticisms and a proposal for addressing them without abandoning the project altogether, see Popa (2016).

position seems to ignore: the role that the context plays in allowing a reader/viewer to interpret a text (be it verbal, visual or other) as an argument for or against a claim.

Johnson (2003) endorses Fleming's arguments in further questioning the possibility of visual argumentation. He emphasizes the linguistic nature of argument, noting that the key argumentative notions of premise, conclusion, enthymeme and criticism, among others, are all necessarily verbal in character. According to him, in those cases that scholars speak of a visual argument "most of the essential work is done by words and text" (p.10). While for verbal arguments the choice of words, the syntax, as well as the style of the text can guide the analyst in recognizing that an argument is present and in identifying its components, there are no such clear clues for visual images. According to Johnson, the answers to the questions regarding the identification of the argument and its components in cases of visual communication depend on contextual, rather than visual, information.

In our view, both Johnson and Fleming overemphasize the linguistic nature of argument by contrasting the regularity and clarity that characterizes the linguistic code with the ambiguity and context dependency of non-verbal discourses. In doing so, they underestimate the context dependency that is a prerequisite for understanding utterances of natural language as well. They thus emphasize the formal aspects of the linguistic code, suggesting that linguistic meaning is identical to lexical meaning or grammar, thereby also suggesting that the argument is contained in the semantics and syntax of the sentence. Their views are typical of a logocentric view of communication whereby the linguistic system is considered as the only elaborate code that allows users to express causality, counterfactuality, conditionality, or spatiotemporal relations (Groarke 2007; Roque 2015).

This view neglects the fact that an image is a complex entity that results from various choices made with regard to composition, colour, perspective, etc. that also convey meaning apart from the meaning derived from the actual content of the picture (see Tseronis forthcoming). The fact that the meaning conveyed by an image cannot be evaluated in terms of truth conditions, unlike the case with the predicates and referents of verbal propositions, does not imply that images have no argumentative potential at all. While seemingly ambiguous, the meaning of the image is enormously constrained given the genre expectations that its use in a context evokes in a knowledgeable viewer. When we look closer at the ways in which viewers react to images produced in a certain context, we can conclude that they do attribute certain intentions to their makers and sometimes even take these images as forwarding a claim to which they may react critically. This is what happens in subvertisements.

Visual negation?

Scholars from the fields of visual communication, semiotics, and cognition have systematically paid attention to the non-verbal resources used to communicate meaning. As a matter of fact they have done so much earlier than argumentation scholars (see Barnhurst et al. 2004). One major issue of debate is the extent to which a language-inspired perspective can be applied to the analysis of visual communication. The question whether images can negate is a central one in this respect. Worth (1981) has argued that pictures cannot negate because by nature they present what is there, so they cannot deal with what is *not*. Countering Worth's views, scholars such as Giora et al. (2009) and Oversteegen and Schilperoord (2014) have explored the potential of visual symbols as well as of visual content to express negation or denial.

Giora et al. (2009: 2232) argue that in visual images, like in language, negation does not necessarily suggest discarding the negated element. In posters, ads, and works of art (unlike in traffic signs), visual markers of negation are not used to completely suppress the visual or verbal elements on which they are superimposed, but rather to invite the viewer to retain the negated object and deliberate upon it. This observation is particularly important for countering Fleming's and Johnson's criticisms of visual argumentation on the premise that visual images do not allow for opposition and discussion since they simply show something that is present and as such cannot be contested. When a marker of visual negation is used, as

Giora et al. observe, there are two possible paths: either a path of a contrastive reading whereby the negated information is suppressed and thereby replaced by an available contrasting concept ('not dangerous' – 'safe'), or a path that invites the reader/viewer to retain the negated information and to ponder it. Either path suggests that when such markers of negation are used, the image as a whole can be said to convey some form of refutation. The question remains of course how and under which conditions such visual elements can be identified as markers of negation. On one hand, there exist visuals with highly codified marks of negation, such as the road signs and the red line crossing an icon (see also Forceville and Clark 2014; Forceville and Kjeldsen forthcoming; for some discussion of such coded visuals), but, on the other hand, posters, paintings and photographs also employ creative ways to suggest such a negation/refutation as the authors' examples suggest. Giora et al., however, do not really go into detail about what the "visual markers of negation" look like. From their discussion of various examples it can be concluded that these may vary from crossed lines, lines superposing images, to marks of erasing. In the case of the subvertisements analysed below there is no explicit marker of negation superimposed on the verbal or visual elements of the image. It is the incongruity between what is depicted or what is written in the image and the viewer's knowledge of how the original ad looks like that activates such a negative reading of the image.

In a recent article, Oversteegen and Schilperoord (2014) focus on visual elements that are integral to the visual image and not superimposed, such as the salient omission of elements or of objects and actions that would normally have been expected to be present in the particular image. They (p. 93) conclude that there are two prerequisites for visually expressing a denial: (a) some encompassing whole 'F' must be expressed in the picture, and (b) some salient part x of F must be noticeably absent, but at the same time reconstructable (cf. the graphic operation of erasure of a highly salient attribute or entity from a depicted object or scene). In Oversteegen and Schilperoord's examples, however, the negated proposition, which the erased elements help to reconstruct, plays a part in the claim that the ad itself makes; not in relation to some other claim asserted outside of the ad. As such it does not become entirely clear why the authors chose to call this an instance of visual denial instead of visual negation. In the discussion part of their article, the authors point to the difference with verbal communication, where denial necessitates some previous utterance that expresses the opposite of what the following utterance negates. But they end up claiming that this is not possible in visual communication:

Even if we consider sequential visual language (comics) with an image depicting an entity x and a second one in which x is missing, viewers would not interpret the second image as denying the first one. [...] In sum, we can see no ground for deciding whether the cases discussed in this paper should be considered visual negation or visual denial. (2014: 103)

In our view, Oversteegen and Schilperoord insufficiently emphasize the fact that denial presupposes a certain dialogical/interactional situation. Such a dialogical situation is by definition presupposed in the case of subvertisements. There the incongruity is not actually depicted in the image, but activated in the mind of the viewer when processing the verbal and the visual elements of the image. In this case, it is not so much that the image allows viewers to notice an omission, as is the case with the advertisements that Oversteegen and Schilperoord analyse. Instead it is the expectations created by the genre of subvertisement and the viewer's background knowledge of the original ads that do that.

As the above discussion shows, it is not enough to argue that images can negate when one wants to show how images can be used to raise objections or even to rebut an argument. It is therefore necessary to consider the act of objecting and rebutting from an argumentation studies perspective.

Objecting and rebutting as communicative acts

Within argumentation studies, negation has been studied in connection to a number of concepts that describe the ways in which an argument or a claim can be attacked, objected to, or rebutted (e.g., Snoeck Henkemans 1992; Walton 2009; Krabbe 2007; Govier 2010; Krabbe and van Laar 2011). Questions that

interest argumentation scholars who have studied objections and rebuttals concern the target of the objection (whether it is the standpoint that is advanced, the arguments in support of it, or the inference relation between the two), the nature of the objection (whether the objection constitutes an argument for the opposite standpoint or can merely be considered as the expression of doubt, carrying no further consequences for the one advancing it), and the form of the objection (whether it is realized as a question or as a statement, whether it is a statement negating a proposition of the argument being attacked or a statement making an evaluation of it).

Govier (2010: 355), for example, uses the term ‘objection’ and distinguishes various types based on the target of the objection. She also proposes the term ‘counterconsiderations’ for describing those cases where the proponent him/herself concedes that there are arguments against his/her position. Walton (2009) distinguishes between ‘objections,’ ‘rebuttals,’ and ‘refutations.’ He uses the first term in a broader sense than Govier does to refer to any critical reaction an opponent may have. A ‘rebuttal,’ according to Walton, is an argument directed against a prior argument in order to show that the latter is open to doubt or not acceptable. A ‘refutation’ is a rebuttal that is successful in carrying out this aim. Krabbe and van Laar (2011: 200) make use of the generic term ‘critical reaction’ to describe all possible forms of critique in an argumentative exchange. Such a critique may concern “(expressions of) propositions, arguments, parts of arguments, and (the applications of) argument schemes, as well as those pertaining to arguers and institutional circumstances – criticisms which relate to such issues as understandability, admissibility, validity, appropriateness, reasonableness, consistency, timeliness and civility” (ibid.).

Summarizing this far, the act of objecting or rebutting amounts to one party’s taking a critical distancing with respect to another party’s claim that has been previously advanced (or is likely to be advanced). The critical distancing could amount to stating that the claim of the other party is untenable or that the other party has no good grounds for maintaining the specific claim. Only if the objecting party advances reasons to support the objection can we talk about an attempt at rebutting the other party’s claim. If no reasons can be identified as support for the critical reaction of that party, we have only an objection. The question now becomes how such an act of objecting or rebutting can be carried out visually or multimodally. The question assumes that a communicative act, such as asserting a standpoint or rebutting a standpoint, need not be exclusively realized in only one semiotic mode, and, most importantly, that the (dominant) semiotic mode need not be the verbal mode (see Delicath and Deluca 2003). A communicative act is an act that employs all available semiotic means in order to communicate meaning in a given context, addressing a specific audience each time. By asking the above question, we are interested in studying both the cases in which verbal and visual elements can be combined in order to attack a standpoint or argument held as unsubstantiated, ambiguous, problematic, and the cases in which the two modes interact in order to convey a counterargument, namely an argument that shows why the standpoint or the argument under attack is questionable or untenable. The first would be instances of objection while the second would be instances of rebuttal.

As we commented in the previous section, it is not sufficient for a viewer to identify markers of negation superimposed on an image or to be alerted to a salient omission in order to interpret this image as an attempt at objecting to, or rebutting, a claim. What is additionally needed is a clear context of disagreement where the stating of a negation or of an omission can be interpreted as a critical reaction to some other claim. After all, it is not the property of negation or of omission as such that lies at the heart of the acts of objecting and rebutting; what is crucial is the property of incongruity. Incongruity can be established both between what is depicted in an image and the text that accompanies it; between different elements depicted in the image; and between what the image depicts and what the viewer had expected. The combination of the insights from the two studies that we briefly discuss below helps us to better explain how the visual mode alone or in combination with text can acquire the argumentative function of objecting or rebutting in a given situation.

Lake and Pickering (1998), who have analysed three documentary films on abortion, suggest a promising path for understanding visual arguments in a larger process of argumentation and thereby for

examining how different visual forms might be used to convey opinions that counter others in the public sphere. They describe the problem of refutation in visual argumentation as follows:

refutation of opposing claims is possible because propositions may negate each other. The problem of refutation in visual argumentation, then, occurs because even if pictures argue, they do not argue propositions. If images are not propositional, it is hard to imagine how they can employ the logic of negation upon which refutation traditionally lies. (1998: 10)

While it is true that refutation (the successful rebuttal of a claim) is hard to identify even in written monological discourse, let alone in visual communication, the attempt to rebut a claim or merely to object to one, as we argue in this paper, is not. The authors actually identify three strategies of ‘refutation’ that the makers of documentaries pro and contra abortion have employed in order to refute the claims of the opposing party: (a) dissection; (b) substitution; and (c) transformation.

The first strategy consists in breaking down an image into its component parts and using words to rebut the claims advanced, so technically this does not count as an act of visual refutation. The other two, however, suggest pertinent ways in which an image can be understood as an attempt to oppose or rebut claims that have been previously advanced. In the strategy of substitution, an image different from the original one is used, which either depicts the opposite situation or creates an association with opposite values than the ones conveyed in the discourse of the party under attack. In the strategy of transformation, the same image is used, but it is either altered or new elements are added to it. These two strategies are also identified in the subvertisements we analyse below: subvertisers either use a different image evoking opposite values compared to the original one or alter the original image. Refining Lake and Pickering’s account, we show that the incongruity can be conveyed in either of these cases by combining the verbal and the visual mode or by purely visual means.

What is now still needed is an understanding of incongruity not only as pertaining to the elements of the image, but also as pertaining to the relation of the image with the viewer’s own background knowledge and expectations. A phenomenon where this type of incongruity plays a crucial role is irony. Professional photographer and linguist Scott (2004) has recourse to relevance theory’s account of irony to explain how certain photographs can succeed in showing one thing yet mean another. An important criterion for irony, according to Scott, is the simultaneous presentation of a world view and the critical distancing from it: “once echoic mention has been successfully identified, evidence of the photographer’s attitude needs to be established. An echoic mention without attendant attitude qualifies as simple allusion, homage or intertextuality rather than irony” (pp. 51–52). It is these two components, the echoic mention component and the critical component that we consider important for the identification of the act of objection or rebuttal in subvertisements as well. The most frequent examples of irony in photography discussed by Scott are cases where the photo’s caption provides the proposition which is echoed while the content of the photo and its contrast with the verbal text signal the photographer’s evaluative attitude. However, as Scott (2004: 38) observes, incongruity need not be exclusively identified between two conflicting elements within an image or between the image and its caption “but may occur between the world as depicted in an image and the disruption it causes our prior world view and preconceptions.”

In short, objecting or rebutting presupposes that there are two claims, positions or states of affairs which can be recovered from the multimodal document in one way or another. The choices made regarding what is depicted, and how, should make clear to the viewer who is the other party and what is their claim as well as what the critical distancing from that claim amounts to. The incongruity between the content or the form of the verbal and the visual modes draws the viewer’s attention to the incongruity between the two positions and thereby helps him/her to recognize the critical reaction that the maker of the image raises to the opponent party. Knowledge of the conventions of the specific genre of communication is necessary for recovering both the position that is being echoically referenced and the critical reaction to it. In the following section we analyse posters that belong to the genre of subvertisements.

Subvertisements as multimodal acts of objecting to corporate claims

Subvertising, according to Wikipedia, refers to the practice of making spoofs or parodies of corporate and political advertisements.³ Subvertisements may take the form of a new image or an alteration to an existing image or icon. Various protest groups and individuals, as well as artists and graffiti makers adopt this practice.⁴ Adbusters is probably the best-known group in subvertising. It is a not-for-profit, anti-consumerist and pro-environment organization founded in 1989 in Vancouver, Canada. It has launched numerous international campaigns, including Buy Nothing Day, TV Turnoff Week and Occupy Wall Street, and is known for “subvertisements” spoofing popular advertisements.⁵

Because subvertisements work not merely by referencing the original source in one way or another but, more importantly, by taking a critical stance towards it, they can be understood as constituting critical reactions that counter-argue the messages of the original commercial ads (Atkinson 2003). For an understanding of subvertisements that corresponds with the presumed intention of their makers, it is therefore necessary to realize that these are anti-ads. Subverters rely on the audience’s awareness of the genre conventions of the original ad and the claims it makes, namely ‘Buy product X’ and ‘Product X has desirable features’ (see Pollaroli and Rocci 2015: 163–164; Forceville 1996: 104). As soon as an audience recognizes a subvertisement as such, these claims turn into ‘Do not buy product X’, ‘The products of this brand are not good’, or ‘The brand is not a good brand’. In making these claims, subverters address their audience as critical citizens and not as potential buyers of certain products. Subverters may produce an anti-ad by manipulating any of the three constitutive elements of the original ad (a combination thereof or all three): the brand logo, the text of the original ad, or the image used in it. In order to be effective, the subvertisement does not only need to recover in the viewer’s mind the original ad or ad campaign, it also helps if the context of access is similar to that of the real ads – for instance on billboards or in pre-designed slots in TV-programmes.⁶

In the subvertisements discussed below, found mainly on the Adbusters website, the reference to the original ad is cued either in the verbal caption, or in the visuals, or in their combination. In the same way, the incongruity between the original ad and the subvertisement is cued either in the visuals, or in the verbal caption, or in their combination. We thus group the subvertisements under the following four categories:

- a) Verbal-visual incongruity, where the verbal caption is identical to (or only slightly different from) the caption of the original ad while the visual content is incongruous. In Lake and Pickering’s terms this is a case of substitution of the visual element of the original ad.
- b) Visual-verbal incongruity, where the visual is identical to the original ad but the verbal text is manipulated in a way that is incongruous with the claim of the original ad. Although this possibility is not discussed by Lake and Pickering, using their terms it would count as a case of substitution of the verbal element of the original ad.
- c) Verbal-visual manipulation conveying incongruity, where both the verbal elements and the visual ones are transformed while they remain partly reminiscent of the original ad. In Lake and Pickering’s terms, this is a case of transformation.
- d) Visual manipulation, where the referencing to the original and the incongruity are both exclusively cued in the visual mode (visual form, visual style, composition, etc.). Although this possibility is not discussed by Lake and Pickering, using their terms it would also count as a case of transformation.

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subvertising>, last accessed 14 February 2017.

⁴ A simple search in google images with the term ‘subvertising’ yields a great number of examples from a variety of sources and countries.

⁵ Information collected from the official website of the Adbusters group, <http://adbusters.org/>, last accessed 14 February 2017.

⁶ With the increasing use of the Internet and social media by companies to address potential customers, protest groups have also adapted their means of contacting their public through online social networks (see Brunner and Deluca 2016).

Verbal-visual incongruity

In the subvertisements of this group (Figures 1–3) it is the text/logo that establishes the echoic reference to the original ad while the image of the original has been substituted by one that evokes negative associations.

Figure 1: Marlboro cigarettes spoof, 1993, artist unknown.

Figure 2: Obsession perfume spoof. Photographer: Nancy Bleck.

Figure 3: GAP clothing spoof, 1993. Concept: Christopher Corbett.

In the subvertisement of the Marlboro country ad (Figure 1), it is the phrase “Marlboro Country” that establishes the echoic reference to the original campaign characterized by its focus on the open and wild landscape and not so much on the cowboys in it. In Figure 1, the picture of a cemetery under snow with a horse grazing next to a tomb is incongruent with the expectations that the use of the phrase “Marlboro Country” creates. Here the lack of any verbal element would make it hard for the viewer to relate the image of the horse in the snow-cast cemetery to the images of snow cast landscapes in the Marlboro country original ads. The combination of the image with the logo in fact suggests that Marlboro country is a place where the protagonist of the original cigarette ad has eventually died, presumably from cancer. The picture presents a situation which provides a counter-argument, namely that smoking is lethal. The irony as it were is image-based (see Scott 2004), whereby the image and the associations it brings with it are used to subvert the positive values associated with the Marlboro Country logo which accompanied the scenic mountainous or river side landscapes in the original ads. The Marlboro Country subvertisement contradicts the positive image that the original advertisements create, by giving an alternative view and by uncovering aspects of the advertised product that for evident reasons the original ads would downplay or refuse to present.

The same technique of substituting the original image, but retaining the original text, has been applied in the anti-ad series ‘Obsession for men/women’ (Figure 2). In the original campaign for the eponymous perfume, well-built bodies of men and women models such as Kate Moss appear in alluring poses. The subverted image depicts a woman leaning over the toilet in what seems to be an attempt to vomit or a moment after vomiting. The typographic imitation of the brand text and the style (black and white photo) serves to establish the echoic reference to the original ad. At the same time the photo immediately brings to mind the stories about young women, already working in the fashion business or aspiring to do so, who are subjected to strict diets or even suffering from anorexia. The image goes against the glamorous and appealing image of the women and men depicted in the original ads of the Obsession campaign by showing the downside of the fashion industry. As a result, the subvertisers suggest a redefinition of the word “obsession,” identifying it with the urge to have a sculpted body for men or to be slender for women, thereby objecting to a certain mentality promoted by the original ads, namely the focus on slender bodies for women and sculpted bodies for men.

The third example comes from the anti-ad for GAP khaki trousers (Figure 3).⁷ In the original campaign ‘who wore khakis?’, black and white pictures of famous personalities such as Jack Kerouac and Miles Davis were accompanied by the phrase “X wore khakis” followed by the GAP logo. How is it that we take this subvertisement to function as a rebuttal of the argument of the original? In the original ad, the claim could not have been made clear without the combination of the logo with the phrase and the picture of a famous personality. Having merely a picture of a famous personality with the logo of the brand would not make clear what is being advertised. Alternatively, having just the assertion “X wore khakis” and the picture of a famous personality without the logo of the ad would be counterproductive for the specific brand. The photo of an iconic person wearing khakis acts like a proof for the assertion made and, at the same time, as an argument from authority for the advertisement’s claim: “... so *you* should wear GAP khakis, too” when combined with the logo of the brand.

In the subvertisement, keeping the design of the original series and the assertion “X wore khakis” but substituting the image is crucial. Here a photo of Hitler is used with the phrase ‘Hitler wore khakis’ and the GAP logo. The composition as a whole functions as a straightforward counter-argument to the argument from authority used in the original campaign. In the anti-ad, a negatively valued personality, Hitler, is presented who also wore khakis, as did the positively valued personalities that the original campaign chose to present. The assertion that Hitler wore khakis and the visual proof that he did attack the argument scheme that the original campaign employed, by suggesting that there is nothing intrinsic in the value of the personalities who wore this garment that can be transferred to the value of the garment as such. The

⁷ The image appeared originally in an opinion article by journalist Christopher Corbett (*Los Angeles Times*, 5 September 1993, see for the text http://articles.latimes.com/1993-09-05/opinion/op-32104_1_khakis, last accessed 20 February 2017). As a result of Corbett’s parody of the GAP ads, the company cancelled its current advertising in *The Los Angeles Times Magazine*.

subvertisement also ends up showing the absurdity of the title of the particular campaign, by extending the list of those who shared the preference for khaki garments to other famous personalities who are most negatively valued.

Visual-verbal incongruity

The subvertisements presented in Figures 4 and 5 below use the classic photo of the cowboys riding their horses that has become iconic of Marlboro cigarettes, but dispense with the original Marlboro logo. Instead the sentence “I miss my lung, Bob,” “Bob, I’ve got emphysema” or “Bob, I’ve got cancer” appears in the middle of the picture, as if it were uttered by one cowboy addressing the other. Tellingly, the font and size of the letters mimic those of the Marlboro logo (see Figure 1 above). But if the text were missing, the photo would still be identified as one from the Marlboro cigarettes campaign. It is thereby primarily the photo that provides the echoic mention to the original campaign.⁸

Figure 4: Marlboro cigarettes spoof, 1998, California Department of Health Services.

Figure 5: Marlboro cigarettes spoof, 1998, California Department of Health Services.

Unlike the subvertisements discussed in the other three groups, in these examples it is the verbal element that provides the incongruity and flouts the expectations of the viewers, thereby carrying the rebutting function of the whole image.⁹ The important role that the verbal mode plays in the Marlboro cowboys subvertisements to rebut the claims made by the original tobacco ads is further highlighted by the addition

⁸ Following Lake and Pickering’s terminology, this could be described both as an instance of substituting the verbal element of the original ad and of transforming the image of the original ad by reframing it with a different caption.

⁹ This strategy is also most frequently used in cases of so-called ‘billboard vandalism’ where the subvertisers add words or phrases, or remove letters or words from the printed poster in order to parody it.

of a text banner in the right hand bottom corner that reads: “Tobacco kills – don’t be duped. It should not be advertized, glamorized or subsidized. WORLD NO TOBACCO DAY 31 MAY.” This is an instance of word-based irony, in Scott’s (2004) terms, where the text in the image subverts the positive associations triggered by the picture. It is important to emphasize, however, that the rebuttal of the original ad’s message would not have been possible without keeping the picture of the famous Marlboro cowboys, because it establishes the reference to the original ad and thereby helps identify the target of the rebuttal.

Verbal-visual manipulation conveying incongruity

In the Joe Chemo anti-ad series (see Figure 6), a new visual is produced from scratch, spoofing the character Joe Camel that was introduced in the original Camel cigarette ads in the late 1980s. While the original image is transformed, the echoic reference to the original is retained by keeping the main character of the original ads, using similar colouring schemes and the same fonts for the altered logo.

Figure 6: Joe Chemo spoofs, 1996. Concept: Scott Plous; illustrations: Ron Turner.

In the subvertisement campaign, Joe Camel is re-introduced as Joe Chemo (almost a homophone), and is presented in a hospital suffering the consequences of having smoked cigarettes, namely undergoing chemo therapy and eventually dying. Even more eloquently than the Marlboro Country anti-ad in Figure 1, the contrast between a before and an after state becomes evident by developing the narrative that the introduction of the Joe Camel character in the original ads had created. In the original ads, Joe Camel was presented in a number of activities smoking a cigarette. In the anti-ad version, the anthropomorphic camel is represented in hospital, evidently weakened, old, and tired, in strong contrast with the image of the healthy and in-good-spirits mascot of the original ads. The image of Joe Camel hospitalized serves the same function as the image of the cemetery with the iconic horse of the Marlboro cowboy in Figure 1, namely of an argument from negative consequences for a claim ‘Smoking kills’ or ‘Smoking causes health problems.’ Nevertheless, as this ad was not produced in the context of an official anti-tobacco campaign, unlike the Marlboro cowboys subvertisements in Figures 4 and 5, it functions as a rebuttal of a more general and implicit claim behind most of the tobacco ads, which relates smoking to a carefree and adventurous type of life, neglecting to present or allude to the dangers related to this habit. In this view, the function of the Joe Chemo anti-ads is to challenge the unexpressed premise concerning positive values that underlies the original ads.¹⁰

The anti-ads for Absolut vodka (Figure 7) also propose a completely new image constructed with recognizable elements typical of the original Absolut ads. Unlike the original ads, however, the subverted ads depict situations that illustrate the negative consequences of alcohol consumption.

¹⁰ This rebutting function of the image is further supported by the text in the right hand corner at the bottom, which reads: “The surgeon general warns that smoking is a frequent cause of wasted potential and fatal regret.”

Figure 7: Absolute vodka spoofs, 1996–2000, various artists.

Again, the echoic reference is not only ensured by the visual variation on the original design, but also by the repetition of the “Absolut X” slogan, albeit altered, underneath it. The verbal alteration concerns the use of the English word ‘absolute’ instead of ‘Absolut’, the original name of the brand, followed by words such as ‘AA,’ ‘End,’ ‘Hangover’ and ‘Impotence’¹¹ instead of the positively associated, feel-good words or place names from the original campaign. The combination of the altered slogan with the altered image of the iconic bottle simultaneously cues the reference to the original ads and the critical distancing from them, thereby flaunting the negative consequences of alcohol consumption (death or social stigma) that counter the claims about carefree and joyful life made in the original ads.

Visual manipulation conveying incongruity

In the last group of subvertisements (Figures 8–10) we categorize images whose visuals (colour, composition, and depicted elements) reference the original ad while at the same time they have been altered in such a way that they convey the critical distancing from the original. Compared to the subvertisements discussed in the other three groups these are the only ones where the rebuttal is conveyed purely visually.

The text appearing in Figure 8, “Proud sponsor of human rights abuses in Qatar,” and the text in Figure 9, “Proudly supporting the human rights abuses of World Cup 2022,” could have been omitted without confusing the viewer about the rebutting function of the specific subvertisements. Understanding the argumentative force of the three subvertisements presupposes recognizing the mainly visual brand logos that have been manipulated: McDonald’s, Coca Cola, and BP.¹² In addition, it requires recruiting background knowledge such as that whips are typically used to discipline slaves, that handcuffs are used for prisoners, and that holding a gun to the head of a person whose hands appear to be tied behind his back suggest imminent execution. In Figure 10 the black figured shadows are actually a direct reference to the iconic photo by Eddie Adams of Gen. Nhuyen Ngoc Loan killing a Viet Cong suspect on a street of Saigon in 1968. The visuals (partially supported by text in Figures 8 and 9) thus strongly suggest the claim that the companies portrayed bear responsibility for suppressing people or supporting regimes that do so.

¹¹ Interestingly, the image of the anti-ad ‘Absolut Impotence’ retains the original spelling of the vodka’s name.

¹² For a discussion of other subverted BP logos, see Fuoli (2016).

Figure 8: McDonald's spoof, image found on the Internet.

Figure 9: Coca Cola spoof, image found on the Internet.

Figure 10: BP-Vietnam spoof, image found on the Internet.

Concluding remarks

While it is true that no purely visual element exists which can depict negation, we have in this paper demonstrated that there are creative ways to use visuals, alone or in combination with text, to mount a critical reaction. Based on literature that discusses visual means of communicating negation, we have explored the ways in which visual and multimodal discourses exploit genre conventions in a dialogical context of disagreement in order to object to, or rebut, a claim previously advanced. We have focused our study on the genre of subvertisements employed by protest groups and active artists in order to criticize corporate and political advertisements. To be effective, subvertisements do not merely have to echoically mention, in one way or another, the original source, but they also need to make clear the nature of the critical distancing from the original message by either advancing an alternative claim

(objection) or by providing reasons for the criticisms (rebuttal). By analysing a number of subvertisements we have identified four ways in which the incongruity between the content or the form of the verbal and the visual modes draws the viewer's attention to the incongruity between the two positions and thereby helps him/her to recognize the critical reaction put forward. While there is no explicit marker of negation superimposed on the verbal or visual elements of the image, the reference to the original ad cued by the verbal or the visual mode in combination with the visual-verbal incongruities and the viewer's background knowledge results in the interpretation of the subvertisement as a critical reaction to the message of the original ad.

We trust our insights not only contribute to research on multimodal argumentation, but also to studies on multimodal communication and cognition. To the first, we have provided a systematic study of a specific genre of argumentative discourse where images and word-image texts function as a multimodal act of objection or rebuttal. To the second, we have shown the importance of considering the intertextual framework in which visual and multimodal messages are interpreted, and the role that genre conventions play in opening up or limiting the choices for creativity.

The question when visual or visual-text incongruities must be interpreted as objections to, or even rebuttals of, argumentative claims deserves sustained attention from both argumentation and multimodality scholars. Such attention must begin by charting the possible relations between images and words (Bateman 2014). Moreover, incongruities created by the combination of other modes also deserve further attention (for some ideas, see Forceville 2013). While we have only briefly touched upon the connection between the acts of objecting and rebutting and the ways irony in verbal and visual communication works, we propose that visual and multimodal manifestations of a range of tropes have the potential to be used argumentatively in a variety of media (for ideas, see Tseronis and Forceville forthcoming).

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Bionotes

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