Visual Modes of Ethotic Argumentation: An Exploratory Inquiry

Ioana Grancea

Abstract: Ethotic arguments are defined as sequences of claims-and-reasons regarding speaker character, based on which the plausibility of speaker assertions can be questioned. This is an exploratory study concerning the role of visuals in ethotic arguing. In this paper, I bring together contributions from visual argumentation theory and from studies regarding various modes of construing an ethotic argument, in an attempt to offer an adequate account of the argumentative action of images in ethotic sequences of discourse. In the last section, I propose a case study which illustrates the argumentative action that visuals may perform in the ethotic genre of advertising.

Keywords: advertising, blending theory, ethotic arguments, visual arguments, visual rhetoric.

1. The Context of this Inquiry

Contemporary forms of public communication make extensive use of non-verbal elements such as photographs, drawings, videos, symbols, music, choreography, as a complement to their verbal component. The increasing availability and easy circulation of such materials online makes it more and more tempting for authors to incorporate them in a discourse that is meant to spread an idea among a large audience (Groarke 2013, 34-36). In the context of new media developments, that tend to diminish the cognitive ability to focus on a single discourse for long sequences of time (Carr 2010, 161-184), it seems more important than ever to master techniques of making a discourse engaging for the audience. Sometimes, nonverbal stimuli can answer this challenge, by the diversity they bring to a verbal discourse and by the artistry they often imply.

But accessibility and pressure-to-entertain are not the only reasons why contemporary authors use a wide range of nonverbal elements when they are trying to spread an idea. Multimodal communication is often employed with persuasive purposes, when authors are trying to influence the audience's attitude in a certain respect – for example, change their brand preferences, donate for a charity, (dis)trust a political candidate, volunteer for a helping program, or participate in a public protest. In such contexts, well-placed nonverbal elements can make a substantive contribution to the overall meaning of a discourse, change its argumentative route or expand its rhetorical action. In these situations they are attributed an *argumentative* function, a function that – by definition – transcends mere illustration or reiteration of an idea already expressed in the verbal mode (Blair 2015, 218). On this account of multimodal argumentation, the act of stating

a claim, as well as the act of presenting reasons and evidence for a claim, can be legitimately performed by means of various forms of 'discourse,' some of which are declarative sentences, while others include nonverbal elements (Groarke 2013, 34-36).

The present inquiry takes a special interest in visual modes of arguing for an idea (for an introduction to the study of visuals in argumentation, see Birdsell and Groarke 1996, 2006, Blair 2003, Roque 2009, Shelley 2003). I start with a premise, supported by many theorists in the field, that a responsible analysis of argumentative discourse should also take into account the possibility for visuals to advance an implicit claim and to provide reasons and evidence for it (Blair 2015, Groarke and Tindale 2012). I subscribe to the line of reasearch that analyzes contexts in which images are not a mere embellishment of argumentative discourse, but provide a substantive contribution to its meaning and argumentative architecture.

It must be said that the visual imagery one encounters on a daily basis does not seem to qualify for a meaningful message, much less an argument. Few mass-mediated images seem to help the nuanced understanding of a subject. Most of them seem to do quite the opposite: awake instincts and emotions or create an illusion of knowing something about a subject, while in reality leaving us in the dark about many aspects that are essential to that subject (Sartori 2006, 32-34). Images may falsify reality by presenting it in a distorted fashion, either by means of an unfair selection of the events to be captured on camera (Sartori 2006, 77-80) or through photo doctoring (Kobre 1995, 14-15, Wheeler and Gleason 1995, 8-12). Judging from a distance, the idea that images can participate in argumentative structures seems absurd, given their limits in conveying propositional content.

Yet, this kind of bird's eye view on the role of images makes itself guilty of the same shallowness it accuses images of. Without a close look on their rhetorical action understood in context, nothing responsible can be said about visuals as argumentative devices. The researchers who looked closely at instances of hybrid communication (usually, combinations of words and images) concluded that it often happens for the image to send a meaningful content without which the respective discourse would not convey the same message. In other words, if one took the image out of the hybrid structure, an essential part of that argument would be lost (Kjeldsen 2012, 242-250, Blair 2015, 217-218).

After two decades of argumentation theorists' effort to account for the role of visuals in argumentation, I intend to complete the emerging picture with a close analysis of an area of discourse that has received less attention, namely that of *visually-rendered ethotic arguments.* To be more specific, my exploration regards visual elements that can play a constitutive role in hybrid or multimodal discourses that are organized on the following structure:

> **X is probably Y because R1, R2, R3, …, Rn, which entitles one to assume that X's holding that C is worth/not worth taking seriously,**

where X is the author trying to persuade the audience of some claim C, Y is a character trait of X that may affect the audience's view on C, and R1, R2, R3, …, Rn are reasons provided for the audience to believe that X is probably Y.

It is this sense in which I use the term *ethotic argument,* building on the work of scholars that analyzed situations where the claim of an argument regards the character of the speaker (Brinton 1986, Walton 1999, Oldenburg and Leff 2009) and then becomes one of the reasons for another claim, saying that such character traits (should) affect the plausibility of the conclusions set forth by that person.

The purpose of this article is to look closely at messages that can be interpreted as instances of ethotic argumentation and are realized (partly or wholly) with visual means. The next section provides an overview of recent theoretical contributions regarding the use of visuals in argumentation.

2. Arguing with Pictures

What can visuals bring in argumentative contexts? One frequent answer regards the power of images to get the viewer *acquainted* with a subject. *Presence*, in rhetorical terms – the ability to bring the object of the discourse close to the audience by means of expressive speech and concrete examples. To exemplify this research direction, the work of Sarah McGrath argues for the inclusion of veridical images in contexts of moral deliberation, since they have the ability to offer vivid details that words are not always capable of expressing. For example, when discussing the acceptability of a practice from a moral point of view, people should be exposed to detailed imagery of that practice being enacted (McGrath 276-277, 285). The factual details that one may become aware of when seeing the image are not emotional distractions, but rationally-processed information, highly relevant for the decision one has to make about the moral acceptability of a practice. McGrath imposes a set of requirements on the use of images in deliberative contexts, one being that the images not be modified with the help of any post-production technology, and another one regarding the representativity of the images – the images should not portray exceptional situations where enactment of that practice is undertaken in conditions that make everything more dramatic. The legitimate images are those that represent regular instances of that practice.

Yet, in real instances of communication, images that purport to represent portions of reality raise serious difficulties when presented as arguments in a debate. The audience *knows* that technical developments have made it possible to alter photographs and video footage at one's will. Even if the photographs or the films presented are not modified, there will always be a great deal of skepticism surrounding them. In addition, the possibility for pre-production rhetorical choices may also raise suspicions about the ability of a visual argument to help viewers access reality: is the situation a set-up or a spontaneous recording of a

real event? Are we seeing actors or real persons? Are the images representative of the cause-and-effect relations that are important in that context or they just select what the author wanted us to see? These are questions that reflect common skepticism about images' ability to work as factual arguments or trustworthy evidence.

Apart from the ability of images to provide *presence* and *acquaint the audience* with a topic, researchers have proposed that images can advance implicit claims or give implicit reasons to an audience by means of the unexpected associations they make between their compositional elements. In such cases, the audience is stimulated to complete the message with the unspoken premises and then ponder on the ideas that they convey.

Such 'blank spaces' left intentionally in the argumentative architecure of the discourse may work in a variety of ways. If the audience is interested in the message, the fact that the images suggest and evoke (rather than state in an explicit manner) will be a reason for engagement. The spectator will try to fill in the gaps, in an attempt to justify the association that is proposed between (apparently) incongruent elements. In other words, they will perform an inferential process, based on what they see, to decipher the meaning of the rhetorical figure that is presented (Phillips and McQuarrie 2004, 114-128; Scott and Vargas 2007, 344-353, McQuarrie and Mick 2003, 583-586). This cognitive process does not necessarily imply the production of full-length explicit propositions, among which the spectator draws logical connections by using appropriate language (Roque 2015, 178-184); instead, it often consists in the attribution of (novel) semantic associations to the idea, cause, course of action that is the object of the argumentative act, such as doing X stands for Y value, therefore we should support X, given that we agree that Y is important. The audience can feel enthusiasm, passivity or even disagreement with the ideas that emerge when they finish the ad-hoc analysis of the association proposed by the image, but the point is that – in many cases – they get a specific, well-articulated idea about the object of the discourse, and that they get it through a pictorial element, not (exclusively) by means of words.

On the other hand, if the audience is only peripherally attending to the content of the images – for example, not trying to understand what they convey, but reading a corporate report that includes images besides a lot of verbal text – images may help create an atmosphere, set a certain tone of the discourse and, in some cases, even convey an implicit message that may come to be associated with the arguments developed in the textual part (Hollerer et al 2013, 151-161).

Jan Kjeldsen identifies the basis for the possibility of visual argumentation in their ability for semantic condensation (Kjeldsen 2012, 241). Explaining that he draws on psychoanalytical accounts of humour, dream work and cartoons, Kjeldsen defines condensation as "concentration of different ideas into one." The term itself could have been replaced with "blending," used both in cognitive and rhetorical studies that investigate the associative patterns of the mind

(Fauconnier and Turner 2002, 113-138) and their discursive applications (Grancea 2013, 73-87).

But beyond controversies over the choice of term, Kjeldsen offers a valuable direction in this area of study, with his emphasis on images' ability to create – with persuasive purposes – semantic connections between cognitive items that are not necessarily connected in reality. This *blend* itself is often an implicit argument: images that put together characters, settings, objects belonging to different cognitive domains always have a *target, a reference point* that belongs to reality and that is relevant for the object of the argumentative act (an idea, an attitude, or a course of action that the audience is expected to find appealing, interesting, worthwhile, desirable and so on). The implicit statement about the target-element may work as a *rhetorical stimulus*. This term is introduced by Anthony Blair to describe that element of a discourse that raises an eyebrow, invites controversy, awakens the interest for closer analysis and motivates a high level of engagement with a discourse (Blair 2015, 230-233). This approach is echoed by Kjeldsen's account of the argumentative action of pictures, that he characterizes as a „rhetorical enthymematic process in which something is condensed or omitted, and, as a consequence, it is up to the spectator to provide the unspoken premises" (Kjeldsen 2012, 240).

Kjeldsen also addresses the use of visuals in *ethotic argumentation*. He proposes an interesting interpretation on both brand ethos and advertising argumentation, by stating that the artful execution of an advertisement can become basis for a claim about the brand sponsoring that advertisement: the (team behind the) brand may be perceived as sharing the wit, artistry, humour or intelligence that emanate from the advertisement (Kjeldsen 2012, 250).

The idea is quite common in the advertising world, although I assume few people have framed it in terms of ethotic argumentation. For example, the creative director of advertising agency Saatchi and Saatchi Australia warns that "if your commercials are stupid, people will assume your brand is stupid too" (Newman 2006, 111). Shaping brand preference by means of creative advertising is a well-known strategy in the field of marketing. In many cases, there is almost nothing relevant to be said about product qualities in order to differentiate a branded product from its competitors, since many categories are highly homogeneous in this respect. Therefore, the battle moves on the ground of marketing communication. *Brand personality* comes in: a set of strategies employed by practitioners to build a *brand ethos*, a voice of an implied author that is common to all the commercials belonging to a brand.

If one supposes that the claim of an ad is always "buy this product," then this is a classical example of a peripheral route to persuasion, which is by definition not led by argument quality. Yet, if we understand that the discourse is about shaping brand preference, then brand ethos and style gain relevance for the claim being advanced – which may sound like this: "given that this brand supports a worldview that you share, perhaps it is worth investing in this brand instead of

its competitors (given that you know you need a product in this category and are certain that all competitive brands are similar in terms of quality and price)," which turns out to be different from the *non sequitur* that it seemed to be at first sight.

Although he has approached the notion of ethotic argumentation in the aforementioned article about the argumentative dimension of pictorial advertising, Kjeldsen does not go too far in exploring the contribution of visuals in advancing either an ethotic claim or the reasons that support it. This is why I feel it is worth going further in this direction. Apart from this, Kjeldsen seems to relate *ethotic arguments* to aspects of *elocutio*, in classical rhetorical terms: they are treated as meta-arguments, judgments regarding the stylistic quality of a discourse. But I believe it is worth looking at the *inventio* level of the discourse, analyzing cases when ethotic arguments are constitutive to the discourse.

3. Ethos as Subject of a Claim

Ethotic arguments are classically defined as the offering of reasons to support a certain view on an author's character (either positive or negative). The perception thus formed is supposed to affect the plausibility of the ideas set forth by the respective author (Brinton 1986, 246, Walton 1999, 183).

There are two directions of ethotic arguing. One of them takes the form of an *ad hominem* argument, defined as the use of personal attack "to criticize or refute an argument that has been put forward by the person who is the subject of the attack" (Walton 1999, 183-184). One may be questioning a speaker's veracity, prudence, perception, cognitive skills or morals, and from that point, advance conclusions about the plausibility of the claims and reasons advanced by the speaker. The *ad hominem* argument is often included in the 'list of fallacies,' because attack on a person may be nothing more than an opponent's attempt to distract audience attention from one's own failure to respond with adequate counterarguments. In other words, it often qualifies as a remark that is not relevant to the point of the discussion. But in certain cases the use of an *ad hominem* argument may be justified, especially when the speaker qualities that are questioned are essential for the assessment of the ideas that the speaker supports (Walton 1999, 185).

Another form of ethotic argumentation is the *pro homine* argument (Groarke and Tindale 2012, 308), that consists in bringing arguments for speaker credibility, such as openness to re-assess prior commitments in light of new evidence, qualified knowledge of a subject, impartial attitude, respect and sincere collaboration in the process of deliberation, consistency between declared values, conversational attitudes and real-life behaviour (Walton 1999, 197).

Construing a certain *ethos* often means stimulating audience identification with the author and creating a sense of communion that is a necessary condition for the success of any act of argumentation (Perelman and Tyteca 2012, 26-40). For this purpose, an author may provide reasons that enforce a perceived

similarity with the audience, or that confirm author's genuine interest and empathy towards the audience's problems. Do these cases qualify for the inclusion in the class called 'ethotic arguments?' Given that they do not deal with credibility issues per se, and that they are expressions of self-presentation, we may be tempted to give a negative answer. We may label them as 'pathos' appeals and then send them in the 'peripheral stimuli' box, where we place those elements of a discourse that do not affect the central argumentative route. But a closer look on their argumentative action indicates that the same conditional influence is in place here as it is in the classical ethotic arguments.

Building on the current understanding of argumentation as referring both to propositional attitudes and practical reasoning (Roque 2015, 191-192), I tend to give an affirmative answer to the question above: I believe these cases are instances of ethotic arguing. Anthony Blair emphasizes the fact that arguments are not always attempts *to change* audience's mind with respect to an idea by *proving* that idea to be plausible (Anthony Blair 2015, 222). A larger and more inclusive view of arguments would be more realistic: sometimes they are related to identification, deliberation about the course of action that is desirable in the future of a community, or even the re-affirmation of shared values that brought a group together in the first place and that need a refreshment of legitimacy within the same group. This may lead us to wonder if credibility is the *only* important dimension of speaker character in all cases. I am inclined to say that ethotic arguments include any references to the character of the speaker that are supported with reasons, and are then put in a relation with the argumentative point of the discourse. The relevance of this connection will become subject to evaluation, after identifying the context of the discourse, its genre and its general purpose. Walton acknowledges the need for evaluation standards that are appropriate to the genre and domain of the discourse in which the ethotic argument appears (Walton 1999, 185-186).

Various lines of reasoning and argumentative techniques can be used for this purpose. For example, Oldenburg and Leff discuss the use of anecdotes in political discourse and conclude that an important rhetorical function of anecdotes is that of stimulating identification of the candidate with the audience (Oldenburg and Leff 2009, 4), while providing an argument for the whole of a candidate's character and values.

For instance, when recounting meetings with ordinary people, Hillary Clinton and George Bush not only provide (weak) evidentiary arguments on behalf of their policy positions, but – more importantly – they attempt to shape their own image in the audience's mind: Hillary Clinton presents herself as a fighter for better health care in the US, and George Bush as a caring person who encourages Americans to stand for freedom, no matter what the costs are. Bush's recounting a meeting with the widow of a fallen soldier can thus be interpreted as an ethotic argument: it shows his caring for individual suffering of Americans who were directly involved in the war on terror. He (publicly) remembers being

touched by the personal story of this woman, praying with her, as well as reflecting with her at the greatness of fighting for freedom and give your life in the name of such a high value.

Similarly, Clinton's cause of helping invisible Americans is illustrated by three meeting she recounts, all of which show the urgent need for better health care in the US. A mother with cancer that worries about the future of her children, a soldier worried about the destiny of his friends and a child worried about his family being able to make ends meet after a severe reduction of his mother's wage – are all instances of the invisible Americans that Clinton fights for. Her meetings with these people are evoked in the context of her attempt to persuade her supporters that the (then) presidential candidate Obama will continue this fight, the fight which motivated their support for her. She maintains the fighter ethos, even as she retreats from the competition and asks her supporters to vote for Obama: to remain coherent, she presents herself as a fighter not on her own behalf, but on behalf on the invisible Americans. Just like the people she met and whose stories she shared with the audience, she is more preoccupied about the well-being of others than that of her own.

In the next section, I will bring in three case studies that illustrate the working of visual modes in ethotic argumentation and discuss a path to find adequate criteria for their assessment.

4. Case Study: Amateur-like Film Shots of Happy Moments Used to Promote an *Unbanklike* Bank

The case study I propose offers a fresh look on a series video commercials that I interpret as having ethotic purposes. I will explain the basis for my interpretation and then look at the function that the flow of images fulfills in the ethotic sequence of argumentation.

As already mentioned in the previous section, context and genre need to be correctly identified before assessing the relevance that an ethotic argument may have for the upper-level claim advanced in a discourse. This means that getting familiar with the perspective of the team that created the ads is a condition for the success in this kind of analysis. Without backstage information about campaign purpose and strategy, the risk of interpretive abuse is high.

Instead of interviewing advertising practitioners myself, I use their own public confessions about the work they did for their clients. The book I count on for this purpose is written by Pat Fallon and Fred Senn and is called *Juicing the Orange. How to Turn Creativity into a Powerful Business Advantage* (2006). It recounts in an extensive manner some of the experiences with clients of their advertising agency (Fallon Worldwide), providing the exact details that are needed in order to understand the context in which those campaigns were created: what kind of research had been undertaken before the campaign and with what results, what the character traits of the target audience were, and what the content of the creative brief was – the creative brief being the strategic document that is

addressed to the creative department and that includes the key messages that the campaign has to send as well as a consumer insight that justified the expected impact of these messages.

Obviously, video commercials are just one component of an advertising campaign, so it is not legitimate to attribute all effects to them. But a golden rule of the field is that a campaign needs to be based on a single message that is conveyed through various platforms, and that all components of a campaign need to have unitary style, atmosphere, and tone. In other words, it is not an abuse to suppose that the strategy behind the campaign is one and the same with the strategy behind the video commercial, that the target audience of the campaign is the same as that of the video spot, and so on. The case I choose to focus on is their campaign for City Bank, with the central message being "Life is more than money. Live richly."

In 1999, City Bank launched a series of video commercials that seemed to be irrelevant for the category of services that the brand was competing in[1].

It seemed unusual (to say the least) for a bank ad to spell on the screen "life is more than money. Live richly." The most predictable reaction would be wonder: how come a financial institution, built around the circulation of money, can be suitable for the public delivery of such piece of wisdom? Yet, given the wide range of emotion-oriented texts that consumers are exposed to on a regular basis, perhaps the text itself would be acceptable if it had been accompanied by images portraying the warmth that the bank employees are willing to show to their clients. This might have given viewers an interpretive key: this bank takes care of its clients, and this is why it states that money is not all there is to life. Consumer satisfaction, leading to brand loyalty, is more important than short-term financial gains. Supportive employees, user-friendly services, comfort for the bank customers – any of these cues would have helped the verbal component seem more acceptable in its position as brand self-presentation.

But the images did not point to any type of employee behaviour, or bank service, or brand promise for that matter. No politeness. No friendly policy. No loyalty program. Then what did the visuals contain? Obviously looking as if they were taken by amateurs, the images presented ordinary people spending precious moments together. No apparent connection to bank services. No trace of a professional hand in realizing the technical part of these videos.

In one of the commercials, the camera rests for a long time on a young boy who is learning to fly a kite. We only see his moves, repetead again and again with slight variation, and we can feel how focused he is. We concentrate, too, trying to figure out if he will manage to fly the kite. The single camera angle includes the boy and the sky, the boy and the kite, the kite and the sky, and then a white cloud

on the sky. A monotone point of view, same angle – a technique rarely seen in professional videos. Yet, despite the stillness and lack of action, the word 'boring' does not come to mind. We are involved, we want to see the rest of the picture, we want to see his reaction when he flies the kite. It almost makes us feel as if we are the ones filming, as if we are on vacation with someone close and try to catch a moment on camera. The peaceful atmosphere is accompanied by the joy of discovery – which is only suggested visually, no descriptive words being used. The constant look at the sky that is forced upon viewers by the camera angle also suggests freedom, the courage to aim high, as well as a silent force within, pushing the boy (and us) beyond limits – that quiet feeling of transcendence that we sometimes experience when being in a state of flow.

Then another kite appears: we only see the hands of the other person – we assume he is a father or an uncle or perhaps an elder brother, but certainly he is the one teaching the boy to fly the kite. Then we are given a long-shot of the two figures, accompanied by the two kites which seem to be dancing and revolving around them, creating the only trace of dynamism in this video. A ritual dance, almost, given the harmony and perfect coordination between the two playful kites.

No words are spoken. No voice-over is delivering the message. The verbal component consists only of text written on the screen at the end of the spot, saying:

> The things you remember most
>
> Aren't things.
>
> There's more to life than money.
>
> City. Live richly.

The lack of a voice-over helps maintain the *ethos* of the spot. The implied author of this commercial seems to be *respectful* towards the intimate nature of the experiences shared by the two characters. We are given privileged access to it, but we are implicitly required the same stillness. We are invited to turn inwards in order to make sense of the experience these two people share. On the outside, there is nothing spectacular, no powerful stimuli that would suggest a child's enthusiasm, no narrator telling us what to make of it – this would destroy the beauty of the moment by pointing to it in an explicit manner. No seller-buyer tone is allowed in this poem. No authorial instructions are given. As if we read a page of a novel, we are introduced in the private world of two characters. Although in this case no one describes in words how they feel or what they experience, we grasp their inner state from the images. Everything is so still, and we are not to disturb the stillness – perhaps the stillness is an expression of one's wanting such moments not to end, one's desire to stop time and keep the flow moment ongoing, hold on to the ones we love, keep the kites dancing around us.

In another video commercials of the same campaign, we see grandma and grandpa singing together in a courtyard. They are similarly being filmed from one

camera angle, without any move of the camera. We watch their little performance with tenderness, wondering who is attending it. No answer is given, since the camera does not move. At the end, no applause is given, and we may assume that nobody was actually attending. Perhaps they did it for the fun of it. Unlike the emphatic silence in the first video I analyzed, in this one the two characters speak a bit – about the verses of the song grandpa forgot. Again, no one says anything about the bank. Only the text appearing on the screen re-affirms that life is more than money and blends this message with the City Bank logo.

In yet another spot (the one actually mentioned in the book), a young dad keeps spinning around his young son for the entire length of the video. We spin with them, and nothing else happens. No spoken words, again. We only see the happy face of the child and are left to think that a way to feel rich is to count your blessings – a suggestion made by the text appearing on the screen, blended predictably with the same message about life being more than money 'signed' by Citi Bank.

What are we to make of these commercials? Perhaps they are a reminder that what we remember most, what counts most, is not dependent on material values, but on the beautiful experiences we share with the people we hold dear. On this account, the scenes of the video could be interpreted as evidence for the claim "life is more than money." But given the context of this campaign, it is difficult to accept this as a claim to be argued for in front of the audience. In fact, the research undertaken before the campaign identified the target audience with a group of 'balance-seekers,' people who were not keen on money and were generally satisfied with a modest way of living, but who were hoping to have enough money when special occasions arose in their family – a wedding, a trip, a broken roof, a medical treatment that is needed (for more on the psychographic profile of the target audience that the campaign was envisaging, cf. Fallon and Senn 25-32). In other words, these people already felt that "life is more than money." This message was strategically built to mirror the viewpoints they were expressing in the focus-groups organized before the campaign.

Then perhaps the message can be translated into an invitation to spend more money in order to be able to sustain your loved ones in their special moments – for example, being able to buy a beautiful new dress to your wife on her birthday and thus feel that you "live richly." But this account, though plausible because we are dealing with a bank commercial, is hard to maintain: the filmed events suggest how happy one can be without much money. These videos would do quite well if they had been used in a social campaign showing alternative ways to spend without spending (much) money – 'low-budget options for spending wonderful times' seems to be the implicit message of these episodes. This may explain the low-budget production as well – the purportedly amateur style of the videos and the choice of only one setting in all the videos, no camera move, nothing spectacular. In this manner, the content as well as the execution of the video spots points to low-cost options. So, the second interpretation must be cancelled too.

The third interpretation, the one that I find most believable, is that these images work as ethotic arguments: they build a brand personality for City. In fact, at the beginning of their collaboration, the agency members had received an unusual brief from City's brand managers: their mission was to turn City into an "unbanklike" brand (Fallon and Senn 2006, 23-25). A brand that would distance itself – through its communication strategies – from all category clichés used in bank commercials. A brand that would compete on equal foot with Disney and Coke. A brand that would be perceived as providing services adapted to consumer needs and wishes, needs and wishes that they understand and respect. *Ethos* was basically written all over the client brief, although probably with a different terminology. Having clarified that, what argumentative architecture are we to attribute to this series of commercials? Do visuals have a role in this construction?

The typical genre expectation is that a commercial offer reasons for buying a product or service (Kjeldsen 2012, 243). 'Reasons for buying' may mean two different things, which in turn imply two different persuasive routes. One consists of explaining how the branded product or service answers a current problem of the audience, a need or a wish they may have. Here, it is important to give arguments that enforce the claim that this brand can help. The cause-and-effect relationship is often suggested, and the brand is presented as having a good effect. But the City Bank commercial does not seem to fit in this category. If we translated the message using this interpretive key, saying "if you want special moments with your family, like the ones we show in these videos, City Bank can help," it does not make much sense. These images are not to be seen as evidence of the effects produced by City Bank services.

The other approach to the 'reasons to buy' theme in commercials is to offer a reason for brand preference. As outlined in Section 2 of this article, in categories where offers of competitors are largely similar, preference may be shaped by the ethos one infuses a brand with. Brand ethos needs to cover all aspects of a business: if one is to start building a brand personality, consistency is one of the most important ingredients. In the present case, if the images suggest that City *treasures* its clients, and finds them so wonderful that they are worth an entire campaign honouring them, their lifestyle and their view on the world, then City better be consistent with that message in all brand touchpoints. The employees, the program, the atmosphere in the bank, the notifications received from the bank – all need to express the same tone of communication. Otherwise, *brand ethos* falls apart. In other words, building brand ethos does not mean a rhetorical move that attributes human traits to products and services in order to display creativity and draw attention in a cluttered environment. *Brand ethos* means that an overarching concept aligns all the activities of that brand. The interesting aspect is that brand ethos is, in fact, a mirror of consumer ethos – as uncovered in the qualitative research undertaken before a campaign is set. This is how the rhetorical action of visuals might be explained in this case, too.

The images chosen by City Bank stimulate audience identification with the characters and the lifestyle choices they make. This idea is supported by the audience characterization provided in the book (31-32). Thus, interpreted as an ethotic argument, these images express City's communion with the audience: they see the world with the same eyes.

City love their clients enough to dedicate entire episodes to them, as an act of reverence towards their charming way of making life count. City is not engaged in an act of selling, as no remark is made about bank services. City is offering a visual poem on how beautiful their clients' lifestyles are, and how inspiring they can be for anyone who needs remembering that life is more than money.

It is important to note that any of these claims would have sounded ridiculous when spelled out in an explicit verbal discourse. In a poetic one, they could have perhaps been included, but perhaps with high losses on the level of clarity. The visuals function as a middle-ground solution, from this point of view: they imply, they evoke, they suggest, thus relieving us from the harshness of an explicit verbal discourse. At the same time, they are more transparent and more accessible than a poetic verbal discourse would have been in this case. These images transport the viewers, they enchant the viewers and, most importantly, they mirror viewers' values and thus perform an argumentative function for the implicit claim "City is a brand that treasures its clients and their values, and shapes its offer accordingly." Even the mode of realization of the videos confirms this idea: clients come first, not the bank. And yes, definitely 'unbanklike.'

5. Concluding Remarks

My case study analysis seems to confirm that visuals have a special role in advancing implicit claims, which turned out to be important for the efficacy of ethotic arguments in advertising. These images were clearly used to form a 'mirror' cognitive space, one of the four forms of *blended* spaces theorized by Fauconnier and Turner (2002). To be more specific, City Bank – a brand belonging to one cognitive domain – was blended with images of typical clients engaged in beautiful moments that needed little or no financial support – obviously belonging to a different cognitive domain. Typical for 'mirror blends' is the fact the organizing frame of one of the two items that enter the blend becomes the organizing frame of the blend. In this case, it was the theme of unpretentious choices that make our life more beautiful that became the organizing frame of the blend. This theme had emerged in discussions with members of the target audience long before the campaign was set. City's presence in the blend was given different interpretations in the case study I presented, but only one fulfilled the basic requirements of honest interpretation: that all the elements of the discourse be intelligible in the interpretive key that is proposed. My conclusion was that City's ethos is the subject of this discourse and that images play a distinctive role in providing reasons for the audience to approve of that ethos.

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By looking closely at the ethotic argumentation developed by Fallon practitioners in the name of City Bank (the implied author), I tend to believe that a verbal reconstruction of the argument is not necessary for meaning to be effectively communicated. This is because the audience that is targeted by this message may want to enter the rhetorical game, may want to treat City as the author and not as the object of the discourse and, more importantly, may agree to attribute certain personality traits to the bank that dared to go this far in charming them with an unconventional mode of communication.

As I have announced from the beginning, this paper is an exploration in uncharted territory. I invite theorists from both lines of research – both visual rhetoric and ethotic argumentation – to contribute in this direction.

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