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Portrayals of Ukraine on Instagram

The Perils of a “Meekness” Frame

Cecilia Boggio

Introduction

“Instagram”, a blend word derived by combining “instant camera” and “telegram”, is a photo and video sharing social networking service. It allows users to upload media content in the form of posts, stories or highlights¹ that can be edited with filters and organized by hashtags and geographical tagging. These posts, stories and highlights can be shared publicly or with preapproved followers and the latter can “like” them and comment on them. Given the prominence that the war against Ukraine has had from the very beginning, stories posted about it by Ukrainian public figures started appearing regularly. Professional athletes, especially soccer and basketball players, tennis players and track-and-field athletes who have made Ukraine famous on the international scene in recent years, were the first public figures to take a stand against the Russian invasion of their country. They immediately turned to social media to make the world aware of what was happening. The stories posted on the official (public) Instagram account of one athlete in particular, Elina Svitolina², Ukraine’s most decorated tennis player ever, started to catch my attention, to the point that I decided to save them. Overall, I collected 30 stories in the form of “static visuals” (Steen 2018, p. viii): either pictures or still frame captures which Elina Svi-

1. On an Instagram account, a “post” is a photo or short video that remains visible on a user’s profile, a “story” is a photo or a video that can be viewed for 24 hours only, and a “highlight” is a story or a collection of stories that users choose to post on their profile permanently.

2. Elina Svitolina (born in Odessa on September 12, 1994) reached a career-high ranking of number 3 in the World Tennis Tour in singles (September 2017) becoming the first Ukrainian woman to reach the top 10 in the WTA ranking. She was also a bronze medalist at the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo. After taking a career hiatus and giving birth to her first child in October 2022, she returned to the World Tennis Tour in March 2023. Her successful comeback led her to finish the 2023 season in the top 25 of the World Tennis Tour ranking. Moreover, since June 7, 2022, she is one of the ambassadors of United24, the official fundraising platform of Ukraine launched by President Volodymyr Zelensky.

tolina posted on Instagram within the first 37 days of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, i.e., between February 24, 2022, the day Russia first launched its attack on Ukrainian territory, and April 3, 2022, the day in which international media began publishing photographic and video evidence of the "Bucha massacre". After the mass murder of more than 400 Ukrainian civilians and prisoners of war by the Russian Armed Forces during the fight for and occupation of the town of Bucha³, her Instagram posts and stories took different directions and perspectives which, though undoubtedly interesting, are beyond the scope of this study.

During the period under consideration, most of these "static visuals" are rhetorical images meant to represent Ukraine as a country at peace, a country which poses no threat to anybody. Their dominant colors are blue and yellow, the colors of the Ukrainian flag, which are metaphorically used to refer to the blue and pristine Ukrainian skies and to the golden vast wheat fields that cover much of the country⁴. These images were clearly meant as an answer to the claim made by the Russian propaganda that invading Ukraine was a defensive move to save Russia from destruction from the West. Drawing on postcolonial theorist Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) as well as the postcolonial discourses of representation, identity and agency that built on these highly influential works, the aim of my study is to advance an alternative interpretation of these images. More specifically, I examine them through Said's "postcolonial lens" (Said 1978, p. 23) which helps bring into focus the loss of power, identity, and culture of a group of people when it is dominated by a conquering force. According to Said, the lens of post-colonialism helps focalize attention on the false image of the "Orient" fabricated by the West as the primitive "Other" in contrast with the civilized West. The term "Orient", or "East", initially used by Said, a Palestinian-American, to refer to the Arab Muslim areas in the Middle East, has been later broadened by postcolonial studies to include a diversity of geographical, racial, and cultural contexts and histories. Hence, nowadays, it refers to a large and somewhat loosely defined geographical area that includes not only the Middle East but also the African continent, Southeast Asia and Central and Latin America, and which has been seen as the West's weak and inferior partner. In recent years, the "Orient" as a cultural construct has been taken also be-

3. Bucha is a town about 30 kilometers northwest of Ukraine's capital, Kiev.

4. In 2021, Ukraine produced about 33m tonnes of wheat, of which it exported about 20m tonnes, making it one of the largest producers of wheat in Europe and the sixth-largest exporter of wheat globally (Harvey, Butler 2022, p. 3).

yond the above-mentioned traditional colonial countries. Tlostanova, for instance, extends it to the unconventional imperial-colonial histories of Eastern Europe (2019, p. 165)⁵. She claims that, within this geographical and geopolitical region, the “West-East”/“us-them” dichotomy that arises from the interaction of the colonizer and the colonized and is typical of Western colonialism has also characterized the relationship between the Russian Czarist and Soviet empires, and this “colonial matrix” (Tlostanova 2019, p. 167) is far from being a matter of the past.

From this perspective, the figurative “peace frame” used to describe Ukraine in the images I analyze may indeed end up reshaping the message it wants to convey in a rather misleading way. In more specific terms, by bringing to the fore, through the lens of postcolonialism, the visual incongruities in these rhetorical images the intended “peace frame” may give way to a dangerous “meekness frame”, that is a standpoint from which Russia is the West (the colonizer) and Ukraine is the Orient/East (the colonized). This standpoint inevitably reactivates some of the main Russian imperial myths about Ukraine and Ukrainians that developed in the early eighteenth century, became pervasive during the Russian Empire and continued to shape attitudes toward Ukrainians well into the twentieth century, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of Communism. Starting from these premises and drawing from frame analysis, cognitive linguistics and semiotics and postcolonial theory, in this study I analyze five representative Instagram stories from my corpus which I believe highlight their potential to dangerously legitimize Ukraine as Russia’s colonial land.

1. Theoretical Framework

The investigation I carry out integrates two different research fields, namely, frame analysis (Goffman 1974; Entman 1993; Giora 2003; Casadio 2009; Gibbs 2012; Burgers, Konijn, Steen 2016; Wicke, Bolognesi 2021) and cognitive linguistics and semiotics (Cornell Way 1991; Forceville 2002; Bolognesi 2017; Schilperood 2018; Šorm, Steen 2018; Bolognesi, Despot, Brdar 2019; Stampoulidis, Bolognesi 2019). In cognitive linguistics and semiotics, framing is an important concept as public and social media

5. Eastern Europe, as defined by the United Nations Statistics Division (UNSD), includes the countries of Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russian Federation, and Slovakia, as well as the republics of Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine.

discourse are often analyzed in terms of “frames”. In these disciplines, a frame is commonly defined as a selection of aspects of a perceived reality, which, taken together, make a standpoint, or perspective, from which a topic can be seen (Wicke, Bolognesi 2021, p. 4). Within this definition of framing, figurative language may contribute greatly to establish a standpoint on a given topic. My investigation applies framing to a non-linguistic mode of expression, i.e., rhetorical images in Instagram stories, and intends to be a further, though small, contribution to the research that scholars in cognitive linguistics and semiotics have developed in recent years. This research strand stems from the belief that we can examine the visual incongruities (Stampoulidis, Bolognesi 2023, p. 6) arising from the interplay of source domain and target domain in visual metaphors, and rhetorical images in general, in the same way we examine the linguistic incongruities, the “violations of semantic constraints” (Cornell Way 1991, p. 130), in verbal metaphors.

I interpret the five rhetorical images from my corpus of Instagram stories following Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s “step-wise” procedure for the identification and interpretation of visual metaphors (2019, p. 9) which is informed by Šorm and Steen’s VISMIP (2018). Even though my investigation is not as detailed as the one Stampoulidis and Bolognesi perform, their “toolkit” for the qualitative analysis of rhetorical images and their classification into truly metaphorical images and broadly rhetorical images (e.g., metonymy, synecdoche and personification) is the theoretical point of departure of my analysis⁶. This “step-wise” procedure revolves around two initial assumptions. The first assumption is that in each image it is possible to identify a core topic, that is a frame or standpoint that makes the viewers see the “literal” or surface-level topic treated by the image. In my Instagram stories this is the “peace frame” mentioned in the Introduction, a topic that the viewers can understand simply by having some contextual and socio-cultural knowledge of the issue the image addresses, i.e., the Russia-Ukraine crisis. The second assumption is that any rhetorical image displays at least one visual incongruity, an unexpected element that triggers the viewers’ attention and stimulates them to start working on the disentanglement of such incongruity, that is on the construction of a rhetorical meaning of that image. I claim that there is an

6. The corpus of Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s empirical investigation is made up of 50 street artworks related to the sociopolitical, financial and austerity crisis within Greece and the EU since 2008 and the migrant/refugee crisis since 2015 in the city of Athens. For more about their research see Stampoulidis, Bolognesi (2019) and Stampoulidis, Bolognesi, Zlatev (2019).

incongruous element in each of the five images I analyze, and that it is precisely this incongruous element that prompts a re-framing of the core topic, i.e., Ukraine is a country at peace, a re-framing which may make the viewers see those same images from a dangerous standpoint, i.e., Ukraine is colonial land.

The “step-wise” procedure is structured in four steps: Topic, Expression, Conceptualization and Communication. In the first step the core topic of the image is ascertained; in the second step the incongruous element is identified; in the third step the perceptual incongruity is analyzed to determine whether it results from the introduction of an alien conceptual domain into the dominant conceptual domain of the image (Fois 2023, p. 143); in the fourth step the resulting metaphor is interpreted according to a new frame or standpoint. These four steps are explained in detail in Table 1.

Table 1. *The “step-wise” procedure for the identification of visual metaphors.*

Steps	Actions
Step 1: Topic	Determine the core topic treated by the image.
Step 2: Expression	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Identify the element that is incongruous when contrasted to the core topic outlined in Step 1. b. Retrieve the replacing element that would restore the expected pictorial scenario (X replaces Y).
Step 3: Conceptualization	Test whether the content of the elements identified in Step 2 (X and Y) is cross-domain. If so, the rhetorical image is a metaphor.
Step 4: Communication	Formulate the pragmatic message that explains the overall interpretation of the metaphor.

According to this procedure, for an image to be classified as metaphor, it needs to stimulate the viewer to construct a rhetorical meaning at the dimension of Conceptualization (Step 3) as this is where the identification and analysis of the compared metaphor terms – source and target domain – takes place. As I will demonstrate in Section 3, images may display visual incongruities that stimulate the viewer to construct rhetorical meanings also at the dimension of Expression (Step 2) but, in this case, they remain broadly rhetorical images because they are not metaphorical at the dimen-

sion of Conceptualization (Step 3). This is because the metaphor terms do not belong to different domains. Simply put, the “candidate metaphors” given by Step 2 do not evolve into “metaphors” in Step 3 (Stampoulidis, Bolognesi 2019, p. 15). In Section 3, I apply the “step-wise” procedure just described to the five images from my corpus. However, to be able to detect their visual incongruities and interpret their expressive, conceptual, and communicative dimensions (Steps 2, 3 and 4) accordingly, an overview of Ukrainian history from a postcolonial perspective is necessary. The following section provides such an overview.

2. Historical Postcolonial Background

There is a long history of colonial relations between Russia and Ukraine. To put it in Spivak’s terms, the former, the hegemonic group, has treated the latter as a subaltern group – a subgroup – of its nation for centuries (Landry, MacLean 1996, p. 164). The Russian-Ukrainian asymmetric relations over the centuries have been compared to the relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday, the two main characters in Daniel Defoe’s novel *Robinson Crusoe* (Ryabchuck 2010, p. 89). Crusoe, an Englishman, says that he “loves” Friday, the savage whom he saves from being eaten by cannibals. However, he loves him only as long as Friday follows the rules of the game established by Crusoe, accepts colonial subordination – he calls Crusoe “master” – and does not question the superiority of Crusoe and his culture. Crusoe describes their relationship like that of “a child to a father” (Defoe 1719, p. 176) and, as soon as Friday dares to rebel – to declare himself equal to Crusoe – he becomes Crusoe’s most hated enemy.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the discourse of imperial dominance of Russia over Ukraine, exemplified by the relationship between Crusoe and Friday, goes back a long time. It starts to emerge in all the spheres where the dominant discourse, the discourse of the hegemonic group, is traditionally produced and enforced – literature, the arts, the media, and the educational system – at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Then, it spreads during the Russian Czarist Empire (1721-1917), it continues when Ukraine becomes one of the republics of the Soviet Union in 1922 and remains in existence until 1991, the year in which Ukraine becomes an independent country. Moreover, during the Second World War, while part of the Soviet Union, Ukraine becomes a colonial territory also for Nazi Germany. After the invasion of the Soviet Union by

Germany and many of its Axis allies in 1941⁷, Hitler puts into action Nazi Germany's ideological goal of conquering the western Soviet Union (today's Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) to repopulate it with Germans. At that time, Hitler is desperately looking for fertile land to settle German surplus population. He finds it in Ukraine; besides having a lot of space for agricultural use, the country has unrivaled natural resources (stone, wood, straw, produce, grain, and livestock) and, not an irrelevant detail, is in immediate proximity to the Reich (Shkandrij 2001, p. 23). According to Nazi Germany's propaganda, this bountiful "near abroad" or "contiguous colony" is also inhabited by a population that can be easily subjugated and ruled as Ukrainians are "a docile and peace-loving group" whose nature stems from their "tranquil-tolerant blood elements" (Shkandrij 2001, p. 27). This means that, first, the population can be easily subjugated and ruled and then, given their calm – if not indolent – disposition, that their land, which requires little effort to yield a crop because remarkably fertile, can be adequately exploited by more industrious people that can make it produce much higher yields.

The above alleged characteristics of Ukraine and Ukrainians exploited by Nazi Germany's propaganda to justify Operation Barbarossa in 1941 did not come out of the blue. They drew from the repertoire of myths and stereotypes that were already deep-rooted in imperial and Soviet propaganda, and did not disappear after Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. As Snyder has recently maintained, Ukraine has lived in the shadow of the Russian empire for centuries and Russian aims in Ukraine have always been colonial (2022, p. 1). As a matter of fact, many believe that the premise of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is indeed still colonial: denying that Ukraine is a "real" country to subordinate it to a larger Russian Empire⁸.

7. This operation was, not by chance, code-named "Unternehmen Barbarossa" in German ("Operation Barbarossa") after Frederick Barbarossa, the 12th-century Holy Roman emperor and German king.

8. This colonial premise has been central to Russia's view of Ukraine at least since the beginning of the 18th century. It is rooted in the belief that Ukraine is rightfully a part of Russia, and that an independent Ukraine presents a fundamental challenge to Russian prosperity. Suffice it to say that during the Great Northern War (1700-1721) with the Swedish Empire, Russia's Tsar, Peter the Great (1682-1725), recognized that Cossack and Ukrainian aspirations for independence threatened Russia's ability to consolidate its political and economic power. A few decades later, Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia (1762-1796), continued this process following the Russo-Turkish War (1768-1774), encouraging immigration into Ukraine, and especially to Crimea, to replace the predominantly Turkish population. Following the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Empire in 1783, part of Eastern Ukraine was renamed "New Russia" and populated by both Ukrainians and Russians. Through this process of "Russification" (Snyder 2022, p. 12), the Ukrainian language was suppressed in this area with Russian language and culture strongly promoted.