Women and Visual Rhetorical Strategies in Media Coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian War

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Abstract: *In this article we aim to analyze how the images that are used in the news coverage of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict contribute to the framing and to the representation of the female imaginary in terms of the role played in military conflicts. In our approach, we start from visual rhetoric, understood in the sense of the author's strategic choice to persuade or to influence the opinion of the potential target audience. Thus, divided into thematic categories (political, military, social and miscellaneous news), we have analyzed the images from the news selected from the Romanian mainstream media, more precisely the protagonists in these images, through the scheme proposed by David Machin, taking into account the individual or group representation, the roles they play and the techniques of image making. The visual rhetoric reinforces the journalistic discourse used in the news and highlights the fact that women are an active part of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, even if in the identified news the victimization or sexualization of the female figure occupies an important percentage.*

Keywords: *Russian-Ukrainian conflict; female imaginary; visual rhetoric; persuasion; Romanian media;*

1. Introduction

An essential role in the representation of the Russian-Ukrainian war in the Romanian media was played by the images accompanying the news which, through their rhetorical role, outline the conflict, reinforcing the assertions of the journalistic discourse. In addition to analysing the linguistic structures, the thematic approach and rhetorical strategies, the images also provide an overview of the social phenomena reflected in the media. One must recognize that "human culture is a visual culture" (Lilleker, Veneti, Jackson 1), therefore a large part of the subsidiary messages accompanying journalistic communications are conveyed through multimodal means, the meaning of which needs to be explored.

The aim of this article is to highlight the strategies of visual rhetoric used in the constitution of the female imaginary within this conflict, based on 76 news reports published between 24 February 2022 and 31 December 2022, on the following mainstream Romanian channels: hotnews.ro, stirileprotv.ro, libertatea.ro, stiripesurse.ro, romaniatv.net and digi24.ro, selected on the

popularity criterion according to the *Digital News Report 2022* published by *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. These news reports were selected from a corpus of 750 news reports, based on the occurrence of lexical indices referring to the female gender in the headline. In order to enhance the analysis, we have categorized this news in *political news*, *military news*, *social news*, and *miscellaneous news*. Starting from the selected news reports, we aim to analyse the rhetorical role of the images inserted in the news, looking at how the images are used for persuasive purposes, with the aim of framing public perception of the conflict in general, but also of the role of female social actors. Special emphasis will also be given to the representation of female identity, taking into account the role played in the conflict, the actions represented in the image, the social actors accompanying the social representatives of the image, with reference to the context in which the image is placed and the compositional techniques, based on the idea that visual rhetorics plays a major role in perpetuating gender inequalities within society.

2. Towards a visual rhetoric

According to the traditional definition,

> rhetoric has multiple meanings. For many, rhetoric is a matter of embellishment, insincere talk, and half-truths (Edwards et al. 2004; Leach 2000). Rhetoric also refers to the study of rhetoric as an academic discipline, the art of using rhetoric in writing or speech, and the use of language designed to influence an audience (Corbett 1999; Jasinski 2001). (Winton 159)

In other words, rhetoric is a means of embellishing speech and influencing the target audience through the strategic use of language. In *Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric*, Sonja K. Foss, Cindy L. Griffin distinguishes between traditional rhetoric and "invitational rhetoric" by the way in which the speaker positions himself or herself in relation to the audience. Thus, in traditional rhetoric "rhetors communicate the superiority of their positions and the deficiencies of those of the audience" (Foss, Griffin 6), while in "invitational" rhetoric "rhetors recognize the valuable contributions audience members can make to rhetors' own thinking and understanding" (Foss, Griffin 6). If these strategies are mainly used to emphasize the opposition of political discourses from a strategic point of view, within a rhetoric of war (Achter 79-94), military conflicts, due to the complexity of the broadcast channels used, call for a complex use of rhetoric, often detaching itself from the purely linguistic nature of the discourse. One such branch is visual rhetoric, the origins and terminology of which derive from the traditional rhetoric mentioned above.

Since its emergence, theorists of visual rhetoric have been confronted with the problem of multiple meanings in defining the field, some of which are mentioned by Ioana-Adina Grancea in *Dimensiunea retorică a imaginii publicitare*. A first acceptation considered by the author to be inaccurate is that visual rhetoric can represent "any form of message that is addressed predominantly to the eye" (Grancea 40). The second acceptation refers to "the totality of the figures of speech that appear in a visual discourse" (Grancea 40), and

> a third acceptation given to the phrase *visual rhetoric* is related to the selection that any image imposes on the empirical datum it represents, a selection guided by the author's intentions, by the way in which he or she wishes to present that reality. (Grancea 41)

Whether narrowing or broadening the scope of visual rhetoric, an attempt has been made to find common elements of all these theories, and these are presented by Brian L. Ott and Greg Dickinson in *Visual Rhetoric and/ as Critical Pedagogy:*

> (1) Visual rhetoric is a *meaningful* set of visible signs and therefore a mode of communication. (2) Visual rhetoric is rooted in looking, seeing, and visualizing. (...) (3) While the forms of visual rhetoric vary widely, from paintings and photographs to sculptures and buildings to films and television, they are human constructions and indulgences. (Ott, Dickinson 392)

One can see that, *in extenso*, regardless of the critical orientations presented, the image is perceived as an aggregation of choices made by the creator of the image, which have a persuasive intent. These strategic choices concern the context of the visual discourse, the rhetorical genre, the target audience and the symbols used. Starting from these techniques, we shall analyse how journalistic discourse, divided into thematic categories (political, military, social and general news), integrates images in the representation of female actors in the Russian-Ukrainian war.

3. The visual rhetoric in selected Romanian media: the Russian-Ukrainian war

3.1 The visual rhetoric in the political news

The analysed category of political news includes female representatives of Romanian and international politics, such as Simona Cojocaru, Diana Șoșoaca, Maria Zaharova, Maia Sandu and Giorgia Meloni. These female

politicians were selected based on the relevance and frequency criteria. The journalistic discourse in these news stories is centred either on a rhetoric of protest or on an "invitational" rhetoric, accompanied by representative images of the women politicians. The social actors in these images will be analysed through the grid proposed by David Machin in the chapter *Multimodal analysis of photography of the Iraq occupation* in the volume *Discourse, War and Terrorism*, as follows: representations of social actors (individual or group representations; roles fulfilled; biological and cultural traits), and techniques of image making (frame, colour, arrangement of elements).

In terms of representations of social actors, individualization is achieved when the image is centred on a single person, capturing close shots of that person, to highlight the defining features that differentiate her from the group. In contrast, collective representations "can be realized by plurality or by means of mass nouns or nouns denoting a group of people (e.g. clan, militia, terrorists). We can immediately see the ideological effect of this where, instead of individuals who might have specific motivations, we are dealing with anonymous groups" (Ledin, Machin 48). Although these modes of creating the image seem to be mutually exclusive, David Machin and Per Ledin nevertheless point out that "Individualization and collectivization can occur at the same time for the people depicted" (Ledin, Machin 49), because the individual can be a symbol of the collectivity through the cultural component, and singular, individualizing elements can be inserted into collective images. These elements refer, in particular, to the cultural or biological component, which facilitates fitting into certain identity, ethnic or socio-professional patterns.

David Machin, quoting Halliday, mentions the following variants of the roles played by social agents: material, behavioural, mental, verbal, relational and existential (Machin 313). However, in a later paper edited with Per Ledin, he restricts these processes to four, which we shall use throughout this article:

> Emotional processes: this is where moods are indexed by facial expression.
> Mental processes: this is where we are encouraged to think about the internal state of the person as coded by facial expression and posture.
> Verbal processes: this is where people are depicted as communicating.
> Material processes: this is where it is indexed that concrete actions with outcomes are being undertaken. (Ledin, Machin 59)

Again, these roles often overlap in an image, illustrating the complexity of rhetorical interpretation, but the focus should be on the role that takes precedence, as it mirrors the essence of the visual message.

Moving on to the techniques of image creation, we shall focus in particular on the elements that make up the frame, the colours used and the arrangement of social actors in the foreground and in the background. These technical aspects play a very important role in the framing of public opinion, because "Visuals thus affect us emotionally, awakening an array of linked ideas and perceptions stored in our subconscious" (Lilleker, Veneti, Jackson 3). In the images found in the news about the Russian-Ukrainian war, public opinion is influenced in particular by the detailed outlining or blurring of the background, by the contrasting use of bright colours or pale tones depending on the aspects to be highlighted and, last but not least, close-up or distant shots may suggest an insight into the intimacy of the horrors of war or a detachment from them.

In pursuing these aspects in political news about women, we need to keep in mind that "rhetorical interpretation is concerned with what we are entitled to think about the sender, about the receiver, according to the conventions and context of discourse, which we need to know" (Grancea 93). In the political news images analysed, two sides stand out: Romanian women politicians and foreign women politicians. In the first category, Romanian women politicians are individualized, and Diana Șoșoacă is a particular case, being presented both singularly and as an exponent of the collectivity through her traditional Romanian clothing and the symbols of the country: the Romanian flag and the Romanian Constitution. As for the situations in which she finds herself, it is worth noting the predominance of a *verbal process*, accompanied by an *emotional process*, which denotes the fact that she is a vocal person, whose facial expressions demonstrate a firm position in conveying the message. The frame of the photos is both official (the Chamber of Deputies) and edited (ruins of war-damaged buildings), and both are accompanied by the figure of Vladimir Putin. In a *post-photography era*, "manipulated photographs have become a ubiquitous form of political communication" (Messaris 24), and the fact that Diana Șoșoacă is a controversial political figure, conveying a questionable message, is also evident from the contrast with Simone Cojocaru's photograph.

Figure 1. Women politicians in Romania

Maia Sandu, the President of the Republic of Moldova, is the foreign political figure who appears in official meetings with the Romanian president and the Ukrainian president. As these are official meetings, she represents the interests of her country and is captured in a *material process*, as these actions have a specific purpose, which is to receive assurances from foreign policy. The frame captured is specific to official visits, the political figures in the images are positioned next to the national symbols of the countries they represent, emphasizing the importance of alliances between the European countries. Apart from Maia Sandu, the other two politicians appear in a singular position in the images and are rendered through a *verbal process* or *mental process*, the background of the images being limited to abstract aspects that simulate identity. The presence in the foreground of the two symbolizes the role of spokesperson of national interests, their discourse being a firm one.


Figure 2. Women politicians from abroad

In general, the analysed images of female politicians fit into the ten fundamental roles that visual rhetoric plays in the political space: "they serve as arguments, have an agenda setting function, dramatize policy, aid in emotional appeals, build the candidate's image, create identification, connect to societal symbols, transport the audience, and add ambiguity" (Schill 122). Thus, images both supplement and reinforce the arguments in support of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict or, on the contrary, condemn it, depending on national affiliation and the interests pursued. At the same time, journalistic discourse on political issues aims to highlight military conflicts by exposing the audience to representatives of the countries involved in the war or affected by it, creating empathy or outrage among them. The images help to simplify the messages conveyed and, together with the headlines, create a first impact on the readers, to whom they hold their attention, by portraying politics, which can be identified by the non-verbal communication present in the images, the recurrent use of national symbols and the ambiguity attached to the actions presented.

3.2 The visual rhetoric in the military news

If political news is mostly symbolism-oriented, a *material and verbal process*, military news captures the actors mostly in an *emotional process*, aiming to influence public perception of the atrocities of war. Thus, starting from the premise that "the most effective rhetorical devices and tropes are often visual in nature" (Champagne, Pietarinen 209), the transmission of the ideologies behind the war is primarily achieved through images depicting the victims of war and portraying women in the role of military combatants, ready to defend their country or, on the contrary, ready to fight for ending the conflict. "Images are an important site through which ideologies, as systems of belief, are produced" (Sturken, Cartwright 37), and this can be clearly seen in the military news analysed. Since they are numerous and diverse in their representations, we shall focus our analysis on three techniques used in these photographs with the aim of persuasion: *collectivization, anonymization and none representation*, and for this we selected three representative images found in the news about the Russian-Ukrainian war.
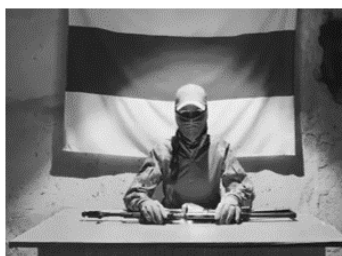
(3.1)   (3.2)   (3.3)

*Figure 3. Women in military news (*collectivization – anonymization – none representation*)*

As opposed to the technique of individualization, *collectivization* is intended to create the idea of unity in the struggle for common goals, to emphasize belonging to a particular culture and to convey the need for solidarity at crossroads. The image selected (3.1) shows that all the Ukrainian female military combatants wear the colours of the Ukrainian flag on their uniforms and flowers in their hair as a symbol of identity. This scene contrasts with the majority of shots taken during the war, because the perfect order of the image contradicts the chaos and fear that have grown up around the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, and behind it lies the very ideology that is intended to be conveyed, that of national dignity and the invincible power of Ukraine in the face of Russia. It is not the image of atrocities that is meant to be conveyed, but the image of order and beauty of Ukrainian women, of their courage to fight to restore peace. Decontextualized by the absence of the necessary background to spatially place the image and the representation of the female combatants from behind surprises and intrigues the viewer. In this regard, David Machin emphasizes that in visual rhetoric it is very important both what is represented and what is omitted. In this case, by omitting the introduction of actual details about the war, by placing the image out of context, and by using bright, warm tones, a false perception of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict is created, possibly with the persuasive aim of convincing as many citizens as possible to support military causes either by enlisting or by other means. The image conveys the idea that war is peace, and the symbol of the flower, interwoven with the colours of the Ukrainian flag, bring into focus the need for unity for a common cause.

The images in which the depicted figures are anonymized are also interesting, as one can see in the selected photograph (3.2). This technique occurs when "people are represented but their identity is somehow unclear or uncertain" (Ledin, Machin 52), as in the case of this woman representing the Freedom of Russia Legion, who hides her true identity behind a mask. Her identity is revealed only through the central elements that accompany her portrait: the flag, the weapon and the hostile environment in which she finds herself. The flag behind her is a symbol of anti-war protests in Russia, which reveals the true intentions of the female figure presented. The gun positioned in front of her suggests her determination and desire to actively engage in the war against her fellow countrymen, while the basement she is in, identified by the background details, suggests the struggle against Putin's law and the fear of not being captured. The whole image is dominated by an ideology of fear, woven around the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, carefully masked by the

symbols presented and the structural minimalism, which creates the impression of cognitive domination of the opponents.

Finally, Per Ledin and David Machin point out that "it is crucial if someone is not represented in an image" (Ledin, Machin 53), as it can be seen in image 3.3. Although the news accompanying this visual representation is centred on a woman who "was a captive in the hell of Azovstal" (*stiripesurse.ro*) and who managed to regain her freedom, the focus is on the little girl born by her, identified only by the bracelet on her wrist. In a culture of war, everything is dehumanized, silenced, including visual representations, which tend to associate human figures with symbols. What is the message behind this photograph? None other than Volodimir Zelensky's message on the birth of the little girl: "I sincerely congratulate Maryana from the bottom of my heart and wish the girls all the best - peace and victory. This is yet another proof that life always triumphs over all evil. And evil under the Russian flag is no exception to this rule. Now all our necessary state structures are working hard to help our liberated fighters. Medical, social, legal aid... Treatment, rehabilitation, restoring documents, bank cards, housing, etc.,' says the Ukrainian leader" (*stiripesurse.ro*). The image thus becomes a means of transmitting the Ukrainian ideology in face of the war: victory belongs to Ukraine, freedom is a given identity, and life triumphs regardless of circumstances. Thus, this technique of *none representation* only serves to emphasize the subsidiary messages behind the Russo-Ukrainian war and to bring forward the values promoted by each nation.

3.3 The visual rhetoric in the social news

In the category of social news, the topics dealt with mainly refer to the difficulties of daily life, the sexual abuses caused by the conflict, but also to acts of philanthropy and protest involving women. Referring to specific advertising theory, it is noted that "even in messages containing a social message, the aim is either to highlight the problem or to illustrate the solution proposed by the organization in question. How much of all the important aspects is visualizable in both respects? Very little. Therefore, the image may simply be an invitation to pay more attention to that issue, to consider more seriously the solutions proposed by that organization" (Grancea 64). Thus, *Figure 4* shows that the journalistic discourse uses images to bring to the surface the suffering caused by war, advocating for focusing attention on the conflict and on the issues affecting the population not actively participating in the war. Being depicted as an exponent of the collectivity, Nadia fulfils an *emotional process*, evident in the mimicry that denotes helplessness, pain and a cry for help. The frame of the photograph is blurred to emphasize the image of the suffering woman, but analysed without the text in the news, it is very difficult to grasp the reason for Nadia's suffering. This is made clear in the

headline itself: "The 'kamikaze women' of Balaklia, who worked the land under bullets to avoid starvation", the image is just a way of highlighting the daily hardships caused by the military conflict.

Figure 4: Women and everyday life during the Russian-Ukrainian war
Nadia, 72, talks about the 6-month Russian occupation of Verbivka village

The predominant theme in the category of social news is the sexual abuse of Ukrainian women by Russian soldiers, but it should be noted that journalists use metaphorical images in their discourse, where the women who suffered these horrific experiences cannot be individualized. The strong-weak opposition makes its presence felt in military conflicts because "the circumstances of war forcefully highlight human vulnerability, but the media's presentation of this vulnerability tends to be gendered. The media generally depict women as recipients of suffering, as beings acted upon by hegemonic forces which render them agentless" (Chetty 38). Painted as a symbol of vulnerability, women are neither exponents of individuality nor of collectivity, because the focus is not on the social actors but on the phenomena depicted, characterized by an *emotional process*. The black and white or dark-coloured images are intended to visually expose the irreparable physical and psychological suffering caused by sexual violence, both in general and during wars.

Figure 5: Women and sexual abuse during the Russian-Ukrainian war

Women, during conflicts, are often portrayed as victims, an aspect also captured by Adhis Chetty in his study *Media Images of Women during War: Vehicles of Patriarchy's Agenda?*: "Hence, the dominant image that women

and children lack the capacity to rebel, resist and shape their own history, persists in the media and news reports and are reflective of a discourse of silent agentless women suspended in a historical, social and economic vacuum" (Chetty 39). This erroneous perception of women's lack of capacity to rebel is evidenced in the Romanian media in the news reports on the protests in Russia against the invasion of Ukraine. Figure 6 shows the courage of the Russian protester in front of the police officer who tries to stop her from protesting. The woman is shown in the foreground, being individualized and presented in opposition to the police officer, representative of the collectivity by the professional category she represents. A *verbal process* is present in the image, the woman verbalizes her dissatisfaction and expresses her point of view regarding the situation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and at the same time a *material process* can be observed, as the actions taken by her result in possible legal consequences. Through the use of a close framing an effect of veracity is achieved, arousing solidarity and a desire to act among the readers. This image, along with others depicting the woman as a protester, highlights the fact that stereotypes about women's inability to rebel are being dismantled.

Figure 6: Women and protests against the Russian-Ukrainian war

3.4   Visual rhetoric in the miscellaneous news

The general news category includes, in particular, images in which female beauty is emphasized through physical features, as well as appearances of famous people expressing their views on the military conflict. In contrast to the atrocities of war, these news reports surprise and intrigue the public by demystifying the gravity of military acts. The focus is shifted from the role that women play in the war to their physical appearance, which is seen as a benchmark of femininity. A representative figure often found in this category is Olena Zelenska, the wife of the Ukrainian president, presented as a passive agent in the war, a symbol of femininity through her physical beauty and the moral support she gave to her husband.

Figure 7: Various news: Olena Zelenska

As one can see in *Figure 7*, Olena Zelenska is shown with her husband, and the tender gestures between them highlight the moral values they promote, focusing on the family nucleus. In this context, the ideology behind these images also emerges, that in crisis situations it is very important to be able to count on the support of those close to you. The image of wife is complemented by that of a model of feminine beauty who, from the shadow, offers support to those involved in the war. This can be seen in her nonverbal language, which conveys that she stands by the Ukrainian people. Olena Zelenska shows an *emotional process*, and the context in the images shows the duality of the military conflict that transforms the ordinary everyday life into a battlefield.

4. Conclusions

The analysis of the news published on the Russian-Ukrainian war reinforces the idea that "The proliferation and dominance of the media radically transform society and the possibilities for human interaction within in, according to Baudrillard" (Foss, Foss, Trapp 312). Through the subsidiary message conveyed and the ideologies hidden behind the linguistic and visual signs, the news manages to awaken in readers a form of civic engagement with their fellow countrymen. In this context of military conflicts, the importance of visual rhetoric in persuading the public must be emphasized all the more, as highlighted in the thematic analysis undertaken throughout the article. The images complement the message conveyed, mirroring political, social and military realities.

The analysis of the visual rhetoric in the analysed news reports highlighted the following aspects: the women are actively present in the war, both in politics and directly on the front, despite the stereotypes that associate women with passivity. Essentially, the visual rhetoric of media reinforces traditional stereotypes about women's role in the public life and perpetuates gender inequality within society. Female identity is, however, revealed in the images analysed, especially in the category of social and general news, in the role of victim and valorised by emphasizing physical beauty. The visual rhetoric helps to shape the image of women in military conflicts, as they are depicted in the images analysed, in particular as representatives of the collectivity, emotionally involved in the war. Thus, the female identity

becomes an exponent of the Ukrainian and Russian collectivity, a symbol of the struggle for freedom.

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