

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.

More specifically, the Russian imperial discourse consists of myths and stereotypes long deployed in the description of Ukraine that are still broadly accepted as “scientific truths’ and/or common knowledge” (Ryabchuk 2010, p. 12) and aim at its cultural undermining and political subordination. These tropes, which have also been central in the development of Western colonialist discourse in the last five hundred years, construct both the land and its people as “good empire-building material” (Shandrij 2001, p. 7). Like any colonized land, Ukraine has been portrayed as beautiful (terms like “natural paradise”, “second Italy” or “Russia’s Italy”, a “garden of Eden” or an “Arcadia” evoke an exotic land with warm climate and lush vegetation) but wild, or semi-wild, and populated by primitive communities. Terms like “backwardness”, “arrested development”, “anachronistic place”, “still in a state of nature”, “close to the soil” and “singing and dancing Little Russia” indeed hint at a characterization of Ukraine and Ukrainians as an archaic and underdeveloped version of the Russian self (Shandrij 2001, p. 76). Another powerful trope long used in the description of Ukraine is that of the “fertile Ukraine”. Ukrainians were blessed with a remarkably fertile soil which, however, was largely unexploited because populated by idle and immature people who, unless driven, are not capable of hard work (Shandrij 2001, p. 79). As I will show in Section 3, these tropes can be detected in the five rhetorical images I examine.

3. Analysis and Discussion

In this section, I analyze, classify and interpret each of the five rhetorical images from my corpus using the “step-wise” procedure outlined in Section 1. I selected these five images because, within my wider corpus of 30 images, I deem them as highly representative of the first-hour reaction to Russia’s invasion: Ukraine is a country at peace which poses no threat to anybody. They were all posted as stories (which means that they were visible for 24 hours only) by the professional tennis player Elina Svitolina on her official (public) Instagram account 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”.

A step-by-step dissection of the Instagram story in Figure 1 based on Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s procedure (Table 1) results in what follows:



Figure 1.

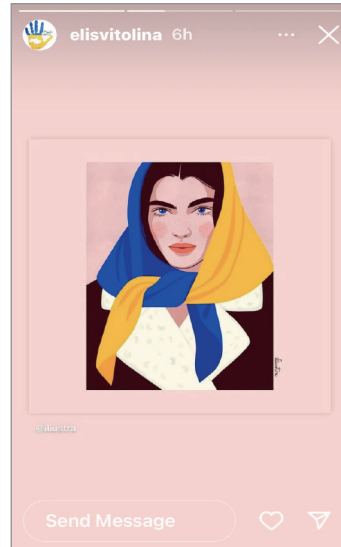


Figure 2.



Figure 3.

Step 1 – Topic:

Step 2 – Expression:

Step 3 – Conceptualization:

Ukrainian wheat fields

a) Incongruity: desert

b) Replacement: wheat field (desert replaces wheat field)

c) Result: desert is wheat field

Desert stands for Ukrainian wheat fields (relying on adequate historical colonial knowledge, the desert jus-

	tifies colonial conquest because perceived as abandoned and desolate)
	Metaphor: Ukraine is colonial land
Step 4 – Communication:	Ukraine is a land of conquest for Russia

Figure 1 displays an empty yellow expanse that looks like a wheat field and a clear blue sky with a heart-shaped cloud. It is a peaceful landscape in the sense of pleasant, restful, and quiet (and in the sense of conflict-free). Taken at face value, this image predicates the standpoint of the core topic of these images: Ukraine is a country at peace which poses no threat to anybody. This photograph, by the Italian photographer and graphic designer Paolo Pettigiani, is titled “The Long Pursuit of Peace” and he posted it on his official Instagram account on February 25, 2022, the day after the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the hashtags #Ukraine, #StandWithUkraine, #StopWar. This post was almost immediately shared by art-of-travel.ua, an Instagram community (the name is visible in the bottom-left corner of the photograph) whose goal is to promote tourism in Ukraine. This is where Elina Svitolina found this photograph.

As explained in Section 1, any rhetorical image displays at least an incongruous element that may catch the viewers’ attention and stimulate them to start disentangling it. Here, the visual incongruity that triggers this “decoding effect” is the desert as, at a closer and more careful look, the viewers come to the realization that what appears to be a wheat field is, indeed, a sandy desert where there is even a tumbleweed. How do we interpret this visual incongruity? From a conceptual point of view, the visual incongruity lies in the comparison between elements or entities – desert and wheat field – that belong to different conceptual domains. From the point of view of framing – with an interpretive effort which relies on an adequate historical colonial knowledge – in the conceptualization “desert stands for wheat field” lies the potential of this image as a reframing tool that can legitimize Ukraine has as colonial land. Why? Because the (post)colonial viewpoint brings to the fore one of the imperial myths described in Section 2, the myth of the “fertile Ukraine”. Even though in the collective imaginary the desert is exactly the opposite of fertile and cultivated land, from a European colonial perspective, “desert” is the Sahara Desert, which is synonymous with Africa, and the perception of the African continent as a “desert”, a *desertum* according to its original Latin meaning of “abandoned, desolate”, in the 19th century was used to provide convenient justifications for the colonial conquest of the

African continent (Boggio 2003, p. 281); Africa was an empty and arid space, which had been asleep for centuries because nobody ever took care of it, awaiting only the arrival of Europeans to make it fertile, to awaken it into activity, progress, and civilization⁹. So, from a colonial perspective, there is no doubt an analogy between the Ukrainian wheat fields and a sandy desert.

Among the five rhetorical images I analyze, only Figure 1 can be identified as a truly visual metaphor. This is because, going back to Table 1 (Section 1), at the level of Expression (Step 2), the comparison between 2a) and 2b) is across elements which belong to different conceptual domains. For this reason, at the level of Conceptualization (Step 3) this comparison evolves into metaphor. The next four rhetorical images I analyze display incongruities as well. However, since the comparison between (2a) and (2b) at level of Expression is not across elements from different conceptual domains, the replacement (X replaces Y) shown in Table 1 does not happen. For this reason, these images do not evolve into metaphors and, therefore, they can only be classified as broadly rhetorical images, namely, personification (Figures 2 and 3) and metonymy (Figures 4 and 5).

A step-by-step dissection of Figure 2 based on Stampoulidis and Bolognesi's procedure (Table 1) results in what follows:

Step 1 – Topic:	Ukrainian woman
Step 2 – Expression:	a) Incongruity: width of shoulders b) Replacement: X c) Result: (stereo)typical agrarian body
Step 3 – Conceptualization:	The rhetorical effect is achieved by using personification: Ukraine is represented as a strong peasant woman (relying on adequate historical colonial knowledge, her disproportionate broad shoulders make her a fulsome peasant woman and, thus,

9. An example of how the African desert has been seen through the lens of Western colonialism is the Italian colonization of North and East Africa in the early 19th century. It was intended to be an “agrarian colonization” because there was the perception of the African space as a land to be appropriated and mastered through agriculture by Italian settlers. These settlers were described by the colonial propaganda as “soldier-peasants” or “soldier-colonists”, who conquer the African desert with weapons and then till its soil with plows to make it fertile (Boggio 2003, p. 280).

an equation is made between the fertility of the peasant body and the land itself)

Step 4 – Communication: Ukraine is fertile land

Once again, from the standpoint that focuses on the “literal” surface-level topic treated by the image, the drawing of a peasant woman displayed in Figure 2 is meant to be a peace message¹⁰. She is still, composed, she is not shy – she is looking in the eyes of the viewers – but, at the same time, she does not have a threatening look. The scarf she wears around her head, which has the colors of the Ukrainian flag, makes her look like a peasant woman. Besides her face, what is visible of her body is hidden under a black and white dress, or coat, and the yellow and blue scarf. The only exposed part of her body, her face, looks attractive – she has black hair, pale skin, blue eyes, and her red lips stand out – and she looks in the eyes of her viewers with dignity, sobriety, and composure. What does make us say that this is another instance of the imperial myth of the “fertile Ukraine”? What is the incongruous visual element that, with an interpretive effort, makes us realize the potential of this image to allow for a change of frame, from “peace frame” to “meekness frame”, which can dangerously legitimize Ukraine as colonial land? I claim that the incongruity is the lack of proportion between her head and her shoulders. In cinematic terms, this is a medium-close up shot (i.e., a shot displaying the subject from just above the head to just below the chest) but, because her shoulders are very wide, they are partially outside of the frame. The width of her shoulders makes her a typical “agrarian body” of Soviet and Fascist propaganda (Pinkus 1995, p. 116). Unlike urban bodies, which were often portrayed as reduced and geometrized, agrarian bodies always exhibited solidity and mass because an equation was made by the fertility of the peasant body and the earth itself. So, from a colonial standpoint, in this rhetorical image there is analogy between the body of the young peasant woman and the fertile land of Ukraine.

A step-by-step dissection of Figure 3 based on Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s procedure (Table 1) results in what follows:

10. The signature @ilustra in the bottom-left corner of the drawing belongs to the Lithuanian artist and graphic designer Simona Statkevičienė.

Step 1 – Topic:	Ukrainian woman
Step 2 – Expression:	a) Incongruity: <i>anime</i> character b) Replacement: X c) Result: a non-threatening, meek, backward young woman in need of guidance
Step 3 – Conceptualization:	The rhetorical effect is achieved by using personification: Ukraine is represented as an anime-style female character (relying on an adequate historical colonial knowledge, an equation is made between her condition of inferiority and the space she inhabits which is beautiful but arrested in time)
Step 4 – Communication:	Ukraine is an anachronistic space

Figure 3 shows a Ukrainian young woman drawn as an *anime* character, wearing traditional Ukrainian clothing¹¹. She is wearing a blouse whose frontal part and sleeves are embroidered with threads of red, a large belt with an intricate embroidery, and a necklace made of red beads. The predominance of red is because, in Ukrainian culture, this color traditionally symbolizes love, joy and positive energy. She is also wearing a “vinók” (the word for “wreath” in Ukrainian), a flower and ribbons-woven headpiece which symbolizes purity and fertility and was traditionally worn by young women eligible for marriage during Spring festivals. The flowers and ribbons of the wreath are yellow and blue, the colors of the Ukrainian flag. With the usual interpretive effort which relies on an adequate historical colonial knowledge, in this woman’s attire we may observe an “orientalist” representation of Ukraine as she looks different, peculiar, in other words exotic. In this rhetorical image, however, the incongruity does not lie so much in the woman’s attire. Rather, the visual incongruity that makes us realize the potential of this image to allow for a change of frame, from “peace frame” to “meekness frame”, which can dangerously legitimize Ukraine as colonial land is the fact that the woman looks like an *anime* character¹².

11. The signature @olga.borodai.art in the bottom-left corner of the drawing belongs to the Ukrainian graphic designer Olga Borodai who lives and works in Kiev.

12. *Anime* is a style of Japanese film and television animation. It draws focus to the face, especially

She has a small nose, large eyes with very defined eyelashes, amply rosy cheeks, lightly defined lips and clasped hands in the front below the belt, definitely a subservient gesture. Moreover, differently from adult *anime* characters who have tapered chins, she has a round face, and this “chubbiness”, so to speak, is usually associated with a young – pre-teen or teen-age – *anime* character. Hence, this shy, submissive and backward young woman is a personification of Ukraine as a beautiful young country which, however, has not progressed and needs a firm hand to guide it.



Figure 4.



Figure 5.

A step-by-step dissection of Figures 4 and 5 based on Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s procedure (Table 1) results in what follows:

the eyes, to effectively show emotion. So, the highest detail in an *anime* character is the face whereas the rest of the body is drawn very simplistically.

Step 1 – Topic:	Ukraine
Step 2 – Expression:	a) Incongruity: metonymic conceptualization b) Replacement: X c) Result: unspoiled and idyllic
Step 3 – Conceptualization:	The rhetorical effect is achieved by using a metonymy (part-whole relationship): Ukraine is portrayed as an Eden, an Arcadia. However, this unspoiled and idyllic landscape implies a condition of immobility that is further corroborated by the verbal text (relying on an adequate historical colonial knowledge, a land described as a natural paradise offers itself to colonial conquest as it is beautiful, fruitful, and still unexploited, i.e., it is a virgin land)
Step 4 – Communication:	Ukraine is a natural paradise

Figures 4 and 5 are still frame captures from TikTok posted on Elina Svitolina's Instagram profile as stories. The three rhetorical images I have so far analyzed recall the myth of Ukraine as colonial land (Figure 1), the myth of the fertile Ukraine (Figure 2) and the myth of Ukraine as anachronistic space (Figure 3). The rhetorical images in Figures 4 and 5 recall yet another popular imperial myth. These images are meant to show two beautiful and peaceful (in the sense of pleasant, restful, and quiet as well as conflict-free) Ukrainian landscapes. Ukraine has a varied geography which spans from its vast wheat fields, its forests and steppe, its prairies, its river canyons, and its Black Sea shores. These physical characteristics have spurred the myth of Ukraine as a natural paradise, an Eden, an Arcadia, that is a beautiful, fruitful, and still unspoiled land. Interestingly, in 19th century travel accounts, Ukraine was often described as a "second Italy" or as "Russia's Italy", terms that evoke a land with a warm climate and lush vegetation. What is the incongruous perceptual element that, with an interpretive effort, makes us realize the potential of these images as reframing tools that can dangerously legitimize Ukraine as colonial land? I claim it is the metonymic conceptualization of Ukraine as unspoiled and idyllic land. These idyllic landscapes – snapshots of Ukraine as a natural paradise – entail a condition

of immobility as well as passivity that the verbal text in Ukrainian, which appears, though in slightly different versions, in both images and translates into English as “I want it just like this” in Figure 4 and “Just like this” in Figure 5, further uphold. Such a land, the quintessential virgin land, offers itself to colonial conquest and exploitation.

Conclusions

The above analysis, classification and interpretation of the five rhetorical images from my corpus of Instagram stories, which is informed by frame analysis, Stampoulidis and Bolognesi’s “step-wise” procedure for the identification and interpretation of visual metaphor, and postcolonial theory, confirms that the discourse of imperial dominance about Ukraine has not disappeared after Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. Far from it. The inception of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in the month of February 2022 made some of the most common imperial/colonial myths and stereotypes about Ukraine resurface in a subtle but consistent way.

The analysis also demonstrates that the figurative “peace frame” used to describe Ukraine in these images may end up reshaping the message it wants to convey in a misleading way. More specifically, I show that 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”. This frame, or standpoint, reactivates some of the main Russian 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 and twenty-first centuries. These myths have all too often contributed to undermine, marginalize, both culturally and politically, the “real” Ukraine in favor of the “virtual” Ukraine that exists in the Russian historic imagination (Ryabchuk 2010, p. 9).

However, postcolonial scholars – and to be fair, anybody who is willing to put on a postcolonial lens – may note that, ingrained in the “meekness frame”, there is an even greater peril than the one that legitimizes Ukraine as colonial land. It is the peril of reinforcing the much investigated and criticized attitude of the colonized of accepting and internalizing the negative “stereotypes-cum-self-images” (Ryabchuk 2010, p. 10) imposed upon them by the colonizer. This dangerous attitude has been well described by scholars of postcolonial theory such as Said, Anderson and Spivak. The subaltern group

assimilates the whole system of alien, “mythical” images of itself created by the hegemonic group and, therefore, starts performing the role assigned to it by the colonizer (Grabowicz 1995, p. 4). Interestingly, Boym sees the above-mentioned attitude of the colonized playing a crucial role in her notion of “restorative nostalgia” (2001, p. 49). A historical rather than an individual emotion, restorative nostalgia is often triggered by a sudden and unexpected social and/or political disruption. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 can indeed be seen as an upsetting event that may have triggered, in the people who experienced it, a moment of “restorative nostalgia”, a type of nostalgia whose main narrative plot is the restoration of origins by means of a return to historical and cultural symbols, and even to deep-rooted myths and stereotypes, which automatically implies continuity with the past. To put it differently, the rhetoric of continuity with the past triggered by a sudden sense of loss of community and social cohesion unconsciously builds on conservative traditions and values as well as negative myths and stereotypes (Boym 2001, p. 42). I believe that my analysis, classification and interpretation of the five “stories” posted by the professional tennis player Elina Svitolina on her Instagram profile bring to the fore precisely this moment of restorative nostalgia, of “self-Orientalization” (Kovacevic 2008, p. 10), in other words, an initial disorientation and sense of insecurity during which the domesticated and marginalized “virtual” Ukraine long portrayed by the Russian imperial/colonial discourse resurfaced.

References

- Anderson B. (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso, London-New York.
- Boggio C. (2003), “Black Shirts/Black Skins: Fascist Italy’s Colonial Anxieties and ‘Lo squadrone bianco’”, in Palumbo P. (ed.) *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles.
- Boym S. (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia*, Basic Books, New York.
- Bolognesi M. (2017), “Conceptual Metaphors and Metaphorical Expressions in Images”, in Baicchi A., Pinelli E. (eds), *Cognitive Modelling in Language and Discourse across Cultures*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, pp. 367-383.
- Bolognesi M., Despot K., Brdar M. (eds) (2019), *Metaphor and Metonymy in the Digital Age. Building Repositories of Figurative Language: Methods, Risks, and Challenges*, Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam.

- Burgers C., Konijn E.A., Steen G.J. (2016), *Figurative Framing: Shaping Public Discourse Through Metaphor, Hyperbole, and Irony*, «Communication Theory», 26 (4), pp. 410-430.
- Casadio C. (2009), *Effetto "framing": come inquadrriamo il mondo con le metafore*, «PARADIGMI», vol. 1, pp. 55-68.
- Cornell Way E. (1991), *Knowledge Representation and Metaphor*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht.
- Defoe D. (2012), *Robinson Crusoe*, Penguin, London (1st ed. 1719).
- Entman R.M. (1993), *Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm*, «Journal of Communication», 43 (4), pp. 51-58.
- Fois E. (2023), *Visual Metaphors in Intersemiotic Translation: Oscar Zarate's 'Othello'*, «Quaderni del CIRM», 2, pp. 139-156.
- Forceville C. (2002), *The Identification of Target and Source in Pictorial Metaphors*, «Journal of Pragmatics», 34 (1), pp. 1-14.
- Gibbs R.W. Jr, Colston H.L. (2012), *Interpreting figurative meaning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Giora R. (2003), *On our Mind: Salience, Context, and Figurative Language*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Goffman E. (1974), *Frame Analysis*, Free Press, New York.
- Grabowicz O. (1995), *The Legacy of Colonialism and Communism in Ukraine: Some Key Issues*, «Perspectives on Contemporary Ukraine», 2 (2), pp. 2-6.
- Harvey F., Butler S. (6 May 2022), *Ukraine's Wheat Harvest May Fall by 35%, Raising Fears of Global Shortage*, «The Guardian», 3.
- Kovacevic N. (2008), *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Landry D., MacLean G. (eds) (1996), *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, Routledge, New York-London.
- Pinkus K. (1995), *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under Fascism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis-London.
- Ryabchuk M. (2010), *The Ukrainian "Friday" and the Russian "Robinson": The Uneasy Advent of Postcoloniality*, «Canadian-American Slavic Studies», 44 (1-2), pp. 7-24.
- Said E. (1978), *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- Said E. (1994), *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage Books, New York.
- Schilperoord J. (2018), "Ways with Pictures: Visual Incongruities and Metaphor", in Steen G.J. (ed.), *Visual Metaphor. Structure and Process*, Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, pp. 11-46.
- Shkandrij M. (2001), *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Quebec City.
- Snyder T. (April 28, 2022), *The War in Ukraine is a Colonial War*, «The New Yorker», pp. 10-14.

- Šorm E., Steen G.J. (2018), "VISMIP: Towards a Method for Visual Metaphor Identification", in Steen G.J. (ed.), *Visual Metaphor. Structure and Process*, Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, pp. 47-87.
- Stampoulidis G., Bolognesi M. (2019), *Bringing Metaphors Back to the Streets: A Corpus-based Study for the Identification and Interpretation of Rhetorical Figures in Street Art*, «Visual Communication», 22 (2), pp. 1-23.
- Stampoulidis G., Bolognesi M., Zlatev J. (2019), *A Cognitive Semiotic Exploration of Metaphors in Greek Street Art*, «Cognitive Semiotics», 12 (1), article n. 20192008, pp. 1-20.
- Steen G.J. (ed.) (2018), *Visual Metaphor. Structure and Process*, Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, pp. 47-87.
- Tlostanova M. (2019), "The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option, and the Post-socialist Intervention", in Albrecht M. (ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, Routledge, London-New York.
- United24, <https://u24.gov.ua> (Last consulted: December 19, 2023).
- Wicke P., Bolognesi M. (2021), *Covid-19 Discourse on Twitter: How the Topics, Sentiments, Subjectivity, and Figurative Frames Changed Over Time*, «Frontiers in Communication», 6, article n. 651997, pp. 1-20.

