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The Art of Visual Disambiguation in Press Photography

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Abstract

Prashant Parikh, in *The Use of Language*, proposes a game theoretic model for analysing pictorial communication. He applies the model to artwork, but insists that its theoretical scope extends ‘to all visual representations, not just painting and installation’ but ‘to a child’s doodles...to architecture and photography and film’ (Parikh, 2001: 122). As a visual mode, photography, like paintings, doodles and diagrams, constitutes a worthy area of game theoretic exploration in Parikh’s view. The visual configuration of text and image, and in particular, the ideological effects of such multimodal tapestries, is also a prolific site of research within critical discourse analysis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 1996, 1998; Machin, 2007). Given that both game theoretic linguistics and critical discourse analysis are preoccupied with excavating visual language, this paper pits the two perspectives against each other and discusses the implications of such a theoretical clash. Parikh’s model of game theory and visual representation, and aspects of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s multimodal schema, are applied, not to artistic photography, but to press photography. This paper examines photographic representations of the Caledon Protest, a pivotal moment in the civil and political history of Northern Ireland in 1968, by the Northern Irish regional press. Following what was, in their view, an unjust and discriminatory eviction, the Catholic Goodfellow family were enraged by the subsequent state allocation of a neighbouring house to a 19-year-old Protestant single woman and they squatted at the dwelling in protest. A total of 49 regional newspapers in circulation at the time were consulted, each reporting coverage (or non-coverage) of the event across the province’s six counties. The paper explores ways in which Parikh’s model can be used to successfully disambiguate whether the Goodfellow family were depicted as ‘victims’ of housing discrimination, or as ‘criminals,’ guilty of squatting and illegal habitation.

Keywords: visual, regional press, photography, disambiguation, discrimination, multimodality, games

1. Introduction: A Game Theoretic Analysis of Art

Let us consider a 17th Century artwork by the Dutch painter Gerard ter Borch. The particular painting, entitled *The Gallant Conversation*, (also known as *The Paternal Admonition*) is currently housed at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, and may be viewed at the following URL: http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria_assets/SK-A-404?lang=en

The website provides the following narrative description of the painting:

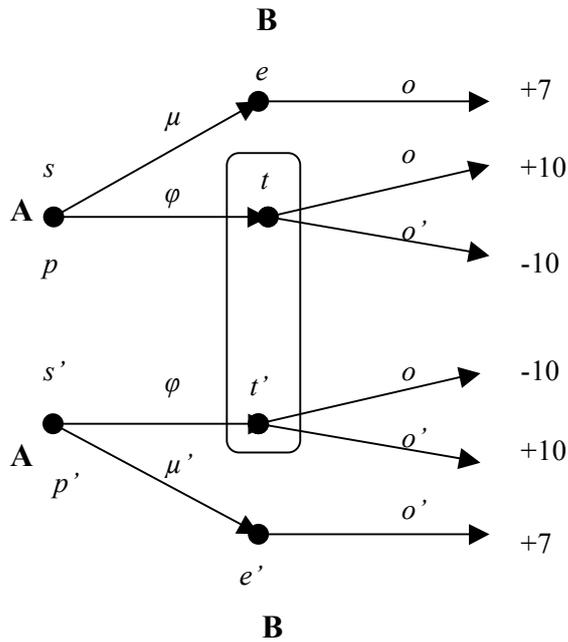
A young woman in a silver-grey dress is standing with her back to us, her head tilted slightly to one side as though cautiously looking at the man sitting on the chair. The man is trying to catch her eye; the older woman appears to want to keep out of the way: she is sipping her wine while staring into her glass. This is a strange situation; what exactly is going on?

What exactly *is* going on? This is a pivotal question that one may attempt to answer through exploitation of Kress and Van Leeuwens' (1996) methodology, outlined in their *Grammar of Visual Design*. The represented participants, namely the young lady, the older lady and the gentleman in the portrait are not looking at the viewer, and invite, rather than demand, our attention. The gaze of the intimate three is transfixed towards the centre of the room, the composition of the painting arranged in such a way as to suggest a division between centre and margin, which is strengthened even more by the use of colour and tonal contrast. The splashes of deep red could be suggesting romance, lust or anger; the silvery blue cold, frigidity or even virginity. The facial expression of the older lady in between the other actors looks sheepish and embarrassed, her eyes cast downwards from the viewer. The gentleman carries the attributes of wealth and prestige, with his long sword and gold waistcoat. The dog, to the bottom right of the portrait, is a reminder of the brutish reality of this domestic scene. The spectator is not sure what he should be doing inside that seventeenth century room, and upon close observation is forced to ask himself:

What is the nature of the relationship between the represented participants?

What is the relationship between the represented participants and the interactive participants, i.e. the viewers of the painting?

Of course, Kress and Van Leeuwens' visual methodology is not the only one which can help us to answer these questions, so I now turn to an *alternative* methodology, namely the game theoretic model of visual communication proposed by Parikh (2001) in *The Use of Language*. Parikh (2001: 113) actually models the 'ambiguous situation' in this painting by Gerard ter Borch. The painting is critically regarded as ambiguous, as it is not known whether the two subjects in the painting - one male and two females - represent 'a domestic scene in which the daughter of the house, a young woman of exemplary virtue, is upbraided by her father, a gentle knight,' while the mother and wife of the two characters 'endeavors to hide her embarrassment behind a glass;' or, if they represent the events of an *alternative* situation, namely 'the interior of a brothel in which a young aspirant prostitute induces an interested customer to raise his price for her favors under the admiring gaze of the madame of the establishment.' Parikh models the scenario game theoretically as an extensive game of partial information, i.e. as a game in which the artist holds full and complete knowledge about which situation he is trying to represent, while the viewer only has partial information and is left to infer which of these situations – domestic scene or brothel - is the most likely. This game is illustrated in Figure 1.



- A : the artist (ter Borch) - located at the initial nodes
- B : the viewer/ interpreter - located at secondary nodes
- s : situation where A intends to transmit the man as a customer in a brothel
- s' : situation where A intends to transmit the man as a father
- p : the probability of situation s occurring
- p' : the probability of situation s' occurring
- φ : the visual action (brushstrokes)
- μ : the alternative visual action (in situation s)
- μ' : the alternative visual action (in situation s')
- o : the object/ entity of the man (as a customer)
- o' : the object/ entity of the man (as a father)
- t : disambiguation of the viewer/ interpreter (in situation s)
- t' : disambiguation of the viewer/ interpreter (in situation s')
- e : unambiguous interpretation of image by the viewer/ interpreter (in situation s)
- e' : unambiguous interpretation of image by the viewer/ interpreter (in situation s')

Numerical units: positive and negative 'payoff' or 'outcome' achieved by the viewer/ interpreter

Figure 1: The Complete (Annotated) Game of Partial Information Modeling Visual Representation in Gerard ter Borch's *The Paternal Admonition* (adapted from Parikh, 2001: 117)

Parikh (2001: 112) likens the steps involved in transmitting and receiving visual communication, to verbal information flow between speakers and hearers. A speaker A communicates a proposition (p) to a hearer B by producing an utterance (φ). Parikh argues that the same logic can be carried across to visual communication, so that an artist A can communicate a proposition (p) to a viewer B by producing a visual image (φ). Let us invent an utterance for the purposes of the present explanation, namely “*this is my father.*” For instance, if speaker A produces the utterance (φ) “*this is my father,*” then he is also communicating the truthful proposition that he has a father in the first place. There is also a strong possibility that the speaker’s father is standing in close proximity, and that he is introducing him to the hearer. However, there is also an equally likely possibility that the speaker is pointing to a photograph or drawing of his/her father. In this latter scenario, the speaker may also be an artist, A , who is able to represent/ communicate the physical entity of his father, the situation or event that he finds himself in, and the objects that surround him (o for shorthand) to a viewer B , by producing an image or series of images (φ). In this manner, utterances and images are analogous to each other, like the speaker/ artist and the hearer/ viewer. So, just as speakers communicate *meaning* in their propositions through articulated utterances, artists are also able to represent the meaning of objects by producing some visual action. Moreover, just as a hearer B interprets the utterance (φ) as conveying some proposition, a viewer B also interprets the visual image (φ) as a transmission of information about some object o . In other words, the stages involved in the communication, meaning transmission and interpretation of utterances and visual images run parallel to each other and may be analysed as such game theoretically. Parikh cites the *brush stroke* as a prototypical example of a visual action, and establishes the language L_v as ‘the set of [visual] choices available at any time.’

Therefore, in *The Gallant Conversation*, Parikh (2001: 113) labels the artist A as Gerard ter Borch, the viewer of the painting B and the male in the painting as the image φ . A produces the image φ (akin to an utterance) in order to represent o , i.e. the subject of the man, as either o (‘a customer for the prostitute’) or o' (‘a father’). Parikh equates successful representation by the artist with the former interpretation of the man as a customer in a brothel. The parallel and conflicting information states of the artist, as well as the interpretative choices open to the viewer, are captured on the game tree in

Figure 2. In the first information state (*situation s*) *A* intends ‘to transmit *o* the customer,’ while in situation *s'* ter Borch has the *opposite* intention ‘to transmit *o'* the parent.’ When *A* produces the visual action or brush stroke of φ in both information states *s* and *s'*, the viewer is then able to locate him/ herself at either *t* or *t'*, which represent the viewer’s inability to disambiguate between information states and gauge which of the two interpretations was originally intended by the artist. On the basis of ‘subjective probability,’ and contextual research and insights from ‘an art historian’s work’ Parikh (2001: 115) assumes that the more likely of these two alternatives is *o*, the customer. Therefore, if *A* has the intention of transmitting *o*, the customer, to the viewer, and this information transmission is interpreted as *o*, the brothel customer, then Player 2 (*B*) would achieve a payoff of +10. However, the payoff for *B* would be negative should he interpret the image of the man as a parent (*o'*) when the man as a customer (*o*) was the original intention.

Working along the branches of the game tree for the alternative scenario, and one notices that if *A* intends to transmit *o'*, the parent (in information state *s'*) and this transmission is interpreted by the viewer as *o*, the customer, then *B* accrues a payoff of negative 10, because of this miscommunication. On the other hand, *B* would receive a payoff of +10 if he correctly interprets *o'*, the parent, as being the meaning communicated by *A* in situation *s'*.

At this stage in the game, Parikh (2001: 116) acknowledges the rational and strategically interdependent thinking of *A* and *B* - the fact that ‘*B* needs to consider what *A* might have painted but chose not to’ (author’s own emphasis). In other words, *A* could have articulated a different brush stroke; he could have painted the visual image μ rather than φ , yielding two different information states of μ and μ' . This alternative reckoning is also depicted on the game tree. In μ (part of situation *s*), *A* transmits the meaning of the man as customer (*o*) in an unambiguous way (perhaps through additional brushstrokes of the man exchanging money with the women to signify that he is in a brothel). In painting μ' (part of situation *s'*), the man is represented unambiguously as a parent - perhaps through the pictorial addition of another object or entity to clarify their paternal relationship. At *e* and *e'*, there is no ambiguity concerning how the viewer of the painting should interpret the painting. The ‘picture’ is much more

straightforward in this case, and a positive payoff of 7 is won by *B* if he correctly interprets *o* as relating to the customer and *o'* as relating to the parent. Parikh arrives at the figure of 7 'because μ and μ' are not aesthetically as desirable as φ '. In summary, the game of partial information between artist and viewer in Figure 2 or $g(\varphi)$, 'is constructed from [*A* and *B*'s] shared knowledge of $m(\varphi)$ ' i.e. the meaning function where ' $m(\varphi) = \{o, o'\}$ and $m(\mu) = \{o\}$ ' (see Parikh, 2001: 114). Parikh's game theoretic modeling of the intratextual dynamics between text-producer (the artist) and text-consumer (the viewer) adds yet another layer to the expansion of our critical linguistic toolkit.

2. The Art of Press Photography

Although photographic images do not contain brush strokes, they do contain many other compositional elements, and are put together through a careful assemblage of focus, colour, lighting and zoom. Photographers, like painters, portray objects and human subjects by selecting from a palette of visual images at their disposal. From the perspective of the multimodal critical discourse analyst, the preference for one visual choice over another within the visual action set has significant ideological repercussions. It is therefore argued that it should be theoretically possible to transpose Parikh's model onto the type of data of interest to the multimodal critical discourse analyst, and in the present study I focus on press photography published in print media. So, I began to look for a suitable 'newsworthy' event in order to test out my application, and decided upon the 1968 Caledon Protest, a pivotal moment in the civil and political history of Northern Ireland. First, some background information on this event. On the 19th June 1968, a catholic family with three young children, headed by Mrs Gildernew, were evicted from their home in Caledon, Co. Tyrone (Northern Ireland). The family squatted at the dwelling to protest against what was, in their view, an unjust eviction based on religious discrimination by the mainly protestant County council. The 'squat' was publicised not only in regional publications but also on television, the media coverage anticipating the civil rights marches in Northern Ireland (Dungannon and Derry) that were to follow in a matter of months. Irish Nationalist Member of Parliament for East Tyrone, Austin Currie, also took part in this 'squatting' protest at

No. 9, Kinnard Park, enraged by the subsequent allocation of a neighbouring house to a 19-year old unmarried woman named Miss Emily Beattie.

In order to investigate the extent of the discursive representation of this newsworthy event in the regional print media, I consulted 50 newspapers (mainly weeklies) in circulation at the time. There are 15 publications covering the Co. Antrim and Belfast area; 7 newspapers from Co. Armagh; 11 newspapers from Co. Down; 3 from Co. Fermanagh; 4 from Co. Londonderry and 9 regional newspapers from Co. Tyrone. This reflects the synchronic distributional spread of publications across the province in 1968. The vast majority of the newspapers are weeklies (45/49) and as such, coverage of this particular event was recorded anywhere between 1-7 days post-18th June. All newspapers were therefore checked for relevant coverage of *the Caledon Protest* in the period between 19th and 27th June 1968. No daily, weekly or monthly publications were excluded from the study except annual reviews, periodicals, gazettes, newsletters etc. designed for the readership of an exclusive set of individuals. The purpose of honing in on the regional press was to accumulate a snapshot of the type of information the general public across Northern Ireland were exposed to at that particular historical moment; and to build up a layered account of the complex network of games being played intertextually between different publications.

In sifting through the numerous publications, the regional newspapers were noted for their use of press photography depicting the events of the Caledon Protest. The majority of the newspapers (45) chose not to cover the protest to any degree. Various newspapers chose to publish the same photograph but provided different accompanying captions to describe the action taking place *in* the photograph. Take, for instance, the photograph in Figure 2 of Mrs. Gildernew, mother of Mrs. Goodfellow as she lies strewn across the pavement having been evicted from the house in Kinnard Park. This picture, taken from the *Tyrone Courier* (19th June) also appeared in the *Belfast News Letter* (19th June) and the *Armagh Guardian* (20th June). Underneath the photograph are the captions describing the action from each of these three newspapers.



Tyrone Courier: MRS. J. GILDERNEW

Belfast News Letter: EVICTION: (Above) - Mrs. James Gildernew, lying in the back yard after she was evicted by bailiffs.

Armagh Guardian: Mrs. Gildernew after being dragged from the house.

Figure 2: Mrs Gildernew: A Pictorial Representation (1)

3. A Game Theoretic Approach to Analysing Press Photography

The notion of ‘successful’ representation by the photographer in Figure 2 is not certain, but it is assumed here that Mrs Gildernew’s status as victim is the more likely option, given the position of her body across the ground, and the look of pain and anguish on her face. Other objects, such as a child’s pram, also lie strewn across the ground, again reinforcing the idea that the artist’s intention to convey Mrs Gildernew as a victim of discrimination, rather than an agent of crime, seems more viable in the case of this particular press photograph. Let us now consider ‘what *A might have [photographed] but chose not to*’ (author’s own emphasis; see Parikh, 2001: 116). In other words, *A could* have taken a different photograph of Mrs Gildernew; he *could* have represented her in a different light, from a different angle, with a different camera shot. Indeed, this

is the case in Figure 3 overleaf, as Mrs Gildernew is photographed attempting to regain entrance to the disputed house through a broken panel in the back door.



Armagh Guardian: Mrs. Gildernew attempts to re-gain entrance.

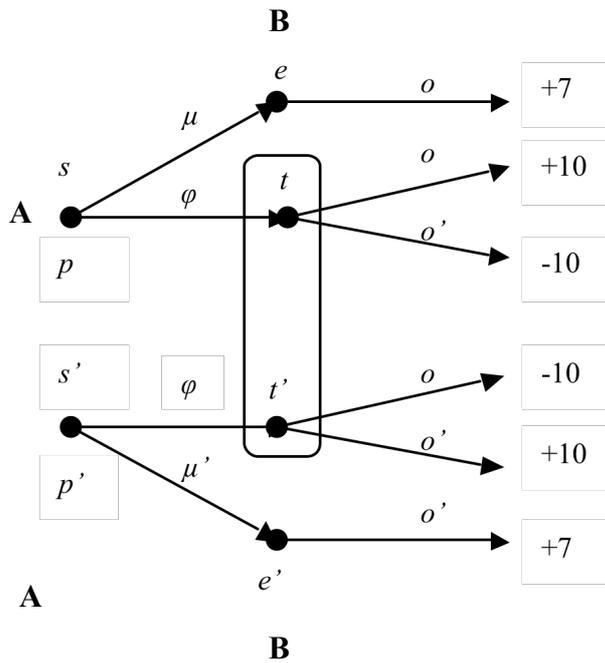
Belfast News Letter: Having been evicted twice, Mrs. James Gildernew, mother of Mrs. Goodfellow, tries to gain admittance through a broken panel in the back door.

Figure 3: Mrs Gildernew: A Pictorial Representation (2)

In this unique image, the reader is not exposed to the emotions on Mrs Gildernew's face. Instead, she is depicted in an action shot, and it becomes rather more difficult to discern whether or not she is being painted as a victim or as a criminal. The photograph

was originally published in the *Armagh Guardian* and the *Belfast News Letter*. Her body is positioned halfway through the panel in the back door to the squat-house, with only her skirt and legs on display. The *Armagh Guardian* describes Mrs. Gildernew's actions with an active construction as she 'attempts to re-gain entrance,' without any mention of the illegality of her conduct. The *Belfast News Letter* is more elaborative, and introduces 'Mrs. James Gildernew' with a subordinate clause ('having been evicted twice'). The *Belfast News Letter*, like the *Armagh Guardian*, describes Mrs. Gildernew as a doer in the active process of trying 'to gain admittance,' and provides circumstantial information about this coup 'through a panel in the back door.' Like Figure 2, two very different responses to the same photograph are provided by the *Belfast News Letter* and the *Armagh Guardian* in Figure 3.

As such, this 'alternative' visual image slots into the role of μ - it is an alternative to φ . Of the two photographs, Figure 2 is the more 'realistic' depiction. Mrs Gildernew is clearly being represented in unambiguous terms as the victim of a discriminatory attack. It is Figure 3 that is presented more ambiguously by the artist-photographer, and readers are left wondering whether they should interpret the figure as a victim or as a criminal. We can model this ambiguous situation as a game of partial information, just as Parikh has done for the ter Borch painting in Figure 1. For a breakdown of this new game being played between the newspaper photographer and the newspaper readers, I refer you to Figure 4.



- A*: the newspaper photographer(s) of images in Figures 2 and 3 - located at the initial nodes
- B*: the readers of *Tyrone Courier*, *Belfast News Letter* and *Armagh Guardian* – located at secondary nodes
- s*: situation where *A* intends to transmit Mrs Gildernew as a victim of housing discrimination
- s'*: situation where *A* intends to transmit Mrs Gildernew as a criminal/ intruder
- p*: the probability of situation *s* occurring
- p'*: the probability of situation *s'* occurring
- φ : the visual action (camera shot in Figure 3)
- μ : the alternative visual action (camera shot in Figure 2 - in situation *s*)
- μ' : the alternative visual action (camera shot in Figure 2 - in situation *s'*)
- o*: the object/ entity of Mrs Gildernew (as a victim)
- o'*: the object/ entity of Mrs Gildernew (as a criminal/ intruder)
- t*: disambiguation of the viewer/ interpreter (in situation *s*)
- t'*: disambiguation of the viewer/ interpreter (in situation *s'*)
- e*: unambiguous/ realistic interpretation of image by the viewer/ interpreter (in situation *s*)
- e'*: unambiguous/ realistic interpretation of image by the viewer/ interpreter (in situation *s'*)

Figure 4: The Caledon Protester – Mrs Gildernew Playing in a Game of Partial Information

In situation s , A has the intention to transmit o (victim), while in situation s' A has the opposite intention to transmit o' (the criminal). In snapping Mrs Gildernew at this specific historical moment - φ in both information states s and s' - it becomes the job of the newspaper readership to then interpret the image accordingly, and locate themselves at either t or t' . Therefore, if one assumes that A intends to transmit o , and represent Mrs Gildernew as the victim of a discriminatory attack by bailiffs, and the reader *also* interprets this information transmission as o , the victim, then Player 2 (B) would achieve a positive payoff of +10. However, the payoff for B would be negative should he interpret the image of Mrs Gildernew as criminal (o') when Mrs Gildernew as victim (o) was the original intention. Moving along the branches of the game tree for the alternative scenario, one can observe that should A transmit o' (i.e. criminal) in information state s' , and the reader interprets this as the alternative meaning transmission of o (i.e. victim), then B would lose with a negative payoff of minus 10. On the other hand, B would receive a positive payoff of plus 10 if he were to correctly interpret o' (criminal) as the precise meaning communicated by A in situation s' .

Parikh (2001: 117) identifies the Pareto-Nash equilibrium solution to the particular game sketched in Figure 6.8 as $\langle \varphi, o \rangle$. This is the same as saying that the optimal solution, the best course of action for both players, is for A to locate himself in situation s (i.e. where he intends to represent Mrs Gildernew as a victim of housing discrimination), for A to produce the visual action φ (the camera shot in Figure 4), and for B to then interpret this visual action as o , i.e. representing Mrs Gildernew as a victim. This would yield a positive payoff of +10. This particular model appears to be suggesting then, that the optimal course of action for both players is for A to *represent* and for B to *interpret* Mrs Gildernew as a victim of housing discrimination. But A and B also win if A intends to represent Mrs Gildernew as a criminal, and B then correctly interprets this visual representation of Gildernew as a criminal. In both these situations, both A and B 'win' 10 points. However, photographs like the one in Figure 3 work *because* of their ambiguity. The fact that the viewer of the press photograph is unable to successfully disambiguate which of the situations (criminal or victim) the artist locates himself in, works in favour of the ideology of the newspapers. The viewer does not lose

by being unable to disambiguate the goings on in the picture, but rather he is held in visual purgatory. This is a situation the newspapers can take full advantage of. These game theoretic linguistic findings appear to square with the general research objectives of critical discourse analysts, who attempt to expose social, political and cultural discrimination and elucidate how such inequality manifests itself through the visual, as much as the textual medium. The photographs in Figures 2 and 3 are both reproduced in 2/3 of the regional newspapers surveyed (*Belfast News Letter* and *Armagh Guardian*). The producers of these two publications therefore express a preference for publishing *more* than just one representation of Mrs Gildernew; they *prefer* to show her from two different perspectives. On the other hand, the *Tyrone Courier* only publish Figure 2. For the *Tyrone Courier*, Figure 3 is the ‘alternative’ pictorial representation which the producers of the paper could have chosen to publish but chose not to. The *Belfast News Letter* and *Armagh Guardian* both publish these two photographs, and all three newspapers publish Figure 2.

4. Conclusion

Parikh’s game theoretic model of visual communication ‘works’ in helping multimodal critical discourse analysts to disambiguate the textual and discourse practices manifest between artists and viewers in paintings and photographs, and may extend to other types of imagery from doodles to diagrams. However, the model should not be used *instead* of Kress and Van Leeuwen’s methodology, indeed, a combined approach seems to be the most fruitful. Moreover, the numerical units representing the positive or negative outcome to be accrued by the artist/ photographer and the viewer do not seem to necessarily ‘square’ with social and cultural reality. One must also bear in mind that because newspaper data is presently being analysed (not a gallery painting) other aspects of visual and textual presentation and composition, such as page layout, require careful, albeit parallel treatment.

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