VISUAL STORYTELLING AND THE POLITICAL HERO IN THE AGE OF DIS-/MISINFORMATION: A CMDA APPROACH

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Abstract

This article examines the role of visual storytelling in the construction and manipulation of political heroism in the contemporary post-truth era, characterized by disinformation, misinformation, and highly polarized digital communication. Drawing on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and extending it to a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CMDA) framework, the study investigates how verbal and visual resources interact to frame political leaders as heroic figures and to shape public opinion. The analysis is grounded in the concepts of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, framing, positioning, and Intertextual Thematic Formations (ITFs), and foregrounds the ideological functions of master narratives, myths, and cultural archetypes. Focusing on two paradigmatic case studies from U.S. politics – the attempted assassination of Donald Trump in July 2024 and George W. Bush's self-legitimation during the War on Terror – the article shows how images and narratives are remediated across media platforms to monumentalize political leaders as resilient, divinely sanctioned, or morally righteous heroes. Through detailed multimodal readings of iconic photographs, media covers, political speeches, and historical artworks (notably Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People*), the study demonstrates how ideological positions are strategically naturalized, power asymmetries obscured, and boundaries between fact and fabrication blurred. The article argues that visual media do not merely document political events but actively construct reality by mobilizing emotional appeal, aestheticization, and moral polarization. By revealing how political storytelling exploits archetypal narrative structures and cultural myths such as the American Dream and American Exceptionalism, the study highlights the urgency of developing critical multimodal literacy as a key civic competence. Ultimately, the paper contributes to scholarship on political communication by showing how CMDA can expose the hidden mechanisms through which post-truth narratives legitimize power and manipulate collective belief.

1. Introduction

As the blurb of Philip Seargeant's (2022) *The Art of Political Storytelling* has it, in our post-truth[1] world "tapping into people's emotions has proved far more effective than rational argument – and […] the most powerful tool for manipulating emotions is

[1] The Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year 2016 was "post-truth" meaning "relating to, or denoting

a gripping narrative". In their capacity to give order to chaos and spot coherence in the fragmentation of everyday life, narratives shape human knowledge and give meaning to personal experiences (Schachtner 2020: 33):

> Narratives take place in the present, feed on the past, and point to the future. They encompass both individual and collective elements. […] As cultural practices and life forms in time and space, storytelling gains in importance for the I and the You in equal measure.

As Bruner (1990: 77) convincingly argues, narrative is "one of the most ubiquitous and powerful discourse forms in human communication", whose identifying features are:

a) "its inherent sequentiality" (*ibid.*: 43), which gives meaning to its constituents;

b) the fact that narrative "can be 'real' or 'imaginary' without loss of its power as a story" (*ibid.*: 44);

c) the fact that "it specializes in forging links between the exceptional and the ordinary" (*ibid.*: 47) inasmuch as "the function of a story is to find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern" (*ibid.*: 49); and finally,

d) dramatism, by which Bruner (*ibid.*: 50) means its focus on "deviations from the canonical that have moral consequences […whereby] stories must necessarily relate to what is morally valued".

But narrative is also a way of using verbal and non-verbal language "strategically", in the technical (military and geopolitical) sense, i.e. to "influence the attitudes and opinions of targeted audiences to shape their behaviour in order to advance interests or policies, or to achieve objectives" (Farwell 2012: xviii-xix). In our post-truth era, *disinformation* – i.e. information specifically fabricated (e.g. conspiracy theories or rumours) and intentionally designed to manipulate – abounds. Moreover, information is increasingly disintermediated, i.e. made accessible by virtually anybody through digital communication and social media platforms without the filter of gatekeepers (like journalists and, more generally, media industries), and thus potentially more subject, however accidentally, to becoming *misinformation*. A third, equally disquieting scenario occurs in the case of *malinformation*, which is based on reality (or truthful information) which is, however, used out of context, manipulated, or leaked to inflict harm on a person (e.g. as is the case with revenge porn), organization, or country[2].

Fake news and disinformation have always been the staple ingredients of traditional warfare, but are enormously amplified, normalized and legitimated in the context of highly polarized, disintermediated communication in the digital landscape (Sehl 2024), wherein information is typically confined within the controlled communicative

circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (https://global.oup.com/academic/content/word-of-the-year/?cc=it&lang=en&). See also Newman and Conrad (2024).

[2] See Wardle (2020) and Maci *et al.* (2024: 1-4) for a detailed discussion of the differences between disinformation, misinformation, malinformation, and fake news. See https://library.csi.cuny.edu/misinformation/mis-dis-mal for pedagogic tools and a guide to thinking critically about information sources developed by the Research Center at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism.

environment of information (or epistemic) bubbles and echo chambers[3] inhabited by like-minded people, with little or no access to platforms for fact-checking or debunking fake news. Besides, with the ever-increasing pervasiveness of the Internet and social media platforms, communication is increasingly multimodal, calling for new and more complex skills to interpret the synergic interplay of verbal and non-verbal meaning-making resources. The latter are constantly *remediated*[4], and consequently *resemiotized* (Iedema 2003: 41), across different contexts and platforms (Schachtner 2020: 21):

> Media change the forms and locations of narrating. […] Digital media are driving forward the deterritorialization of narrating, displacing experiences, interpretations, ideas, and values in the process.

Such deterritorialization and displacement may go as far as veritable *détournement* (rerouting), which often involves "culture jamming", a strategy that "strip[s] away the usual symbolism associated with certain images, icons, logos, and labels in order to undermine hyperreal narratives of the good(s) life [i.e. capitalism]" (Moser 2023: 201). Such is the case, for instance, with the various remediations and reroutings of the Statue of Liberty to stigmatize and subvert the hyperreal "invasion" metanarrative justifying numerous crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Trump administration (Moser 2025: 8). Among these reroutings is Judith de Leeuw's 2025 mural in Roubaix, France (Figure 1a), remindful of Gee Vaucher's 1989 gouache and pencil on paper "Oh, America" (Figure 1b) – originally commissioned for the cover of the 1989 Tackhead album *Friendly as a Hand Grenade*[5] – which was repurposed and resemiotized when it went viral on social media as an anti-Trump meme in the aftermath of the 2016 (and, then again, 2024) presidential election and was even reproduced on the *Daily Mirror* front page (Figure 1c).

In such a fluid context, not only has journalism been increasingly shifting towards image centricity (Stöckl 2020), but the manipulation of public debate and public opinion has become a tangible and constant threat, especially so in the light of Meta's recent decision to "stop using third-party fact-checkers [to curtail the spread of misinformation across its social media apps] and instead rely on users to add notes to posts" (Isaac

[3] "An epistemic bubble is a social epistemic structure [of community formation] in which some relevant voices have been excluded through omission. Epistemic bubbles can form with no ill intent […], but when we also use [them] as sources of news, then we impose on ourselves a narrowed and self-reinforcing epistemic filter, which leaves out contrary views and illegitimately inflates our epistemic self-confidence. An echo chamber, on the other hand, is a social epistemic structure in which other relevant voices have been actively discredited" (Nguyen 2020: 142) and which fosters not only the polarization of opinions but, most importantly, the spreading of misinformation and disinformation.

[4] In Bolter and Grusin's (1999) terms, remediation is the transposition and consequent re-construal, at a metalevel of storytelling, of the original "voices" through a different medium, including the affordances that have arisen with social media as a news- and opinion-making source. Borrowing Bolter's (2000: 62) words, "remediation operates according to two representational strategies. The first, which is 'transparent immediacy', attempts to erase or conceal the process of remediation by making the medium invisible. Linear-perspective painting since the Renaissance, most photography, and the Hollywood film style all pursue transparent immediacy. The second strategy, which is 'hypermediacy', calls attention to the process of remediation by acknowledging or highlighting the medium itself". See also Vasta (2023a: 10-11, 356-363 *et passim*).

[5] See https://thehippiesnowwearblack.org.uk/2016/11/10/gee-vauchers-oh-america-daily-mirror-front-page.



Figure 1. a) "The Statue of Liberty's Silent Protest" (2025); b) "Oh America" (1989); c) Daily Mirror front page (Nov. 10, 2016)



Figure 2. A Russian protester arrested in Nizhny Novgorod for showing a blank sign (*La Repubblica*, Instagram post, March 13, 2022)

and Schleifer 2025). Similarly, as Myers (2025) points out in his *New York Times* article, Meta is "turn[ing] a blind eye to a flood of low-quality or deceptive content, spam and in some cases outright fraud" spread by companies that were among the top political advertisers on Facebook through thousands of AI-generated videos, scams and fabricated Facebook feeds of politicians and White House officials, among whom Myers includes Bernie Sanders and Karoline Leavitt.

It appears, therefore, vital to take on a critical stance, in both propaganda and fair practices of consensus-raising, towards the interplay of different visual-verbal narratives (with images – even blank images, as in Figure 2 – and/or silence often speaking louder than words) used to reinforce, or conversely dismantle, public opinion's perceptions of some given events and actions: in these respects, Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA, e.g. Caldas-Coulthard and Coulthard 2023; Fairclough 2001, 2003; Hodge and Kress 1993; van Dijk 2008) and the notion of "framing" (Bateson 1972; Goffman 1974, 1981; Gordon and Tannen 2023; van Dijk 2023), or "positioning" (Davies and Harré 1990; Vasta and Caldas Coulthard 2009), appear to be particularly fitting when extended to the study of multimodal (viz. visual) storytelling, especially so in political and photojournalistic discourse

(e.g. Dahmen and Thomson 2026; Machin and Polzer 2015; White 2014) and in the context of digital communication and remediation.

In its analysis of visual storytelling across cultures, the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 outlines the Critical Multimodal Discourse analytical approach to, and objectives of, the investigation, identifying two key research questions: firstly, how the political hero's identity and role is constructed multimodally and monumentalized ideologically through the workings of intertextuality and interdiscursivity; secondly, how the political hero's self-legitimization as a superempowered protector of the Nation is sustained and normalized through the fabrication of truth, which can only be unveiled by critical multimodal discourse analysis. In these respects, Section 3 discusses three archetypal, interlinked examples taken from different cultures, highlighting recurrent archetypes and master narratives. Section 4 addresses the second research question by investigating a paradigmatic example of the workings of verbal allusions and visual propaganda. Finally, but by no means less importantly, Section 5 highlights the pedagogical and cross-cultural implications of critical multimodal competence as a key civic competence.

2. Methodological approach and scope of the analysis

In Fowler's (1996: 4) definition,

> CDA insists that all representation is mediated, moulded by the value-systems that are ingrained in the [verbal and visual meaning-making resources] used for representation; it challenges common sense by pointing out that something could have been represented some other way with a very different significance. This is not, in fact, simply a question of 'distortion' or 'bias': there is not necessarily any true reality that can be unveiled by critical practice, there are simply relatively varying representations.

In other words, CDA "investigate[s] which options are chosen in which institutional and social contexts, and why these choices should have been taken up, what interests are served by them, and what purposes achieved" (van Leeuwen 1996: 43). More specifically, a CDA-oriented approach tends to prioritize two crucial constructs:

a) the "ideological complex", i.e. "a deeply contradictory set of versions of reality whose contradictions are intrinsic to […] manag[ing…] the competing interests [the locutor is] trying to satisfy" (Hodge and Kress 1993: 157): this is manifested in discourse, for instance, by euphemistic/dysphemistic uses of language (or images, for that matter), like juxtaposing the "collateral damage" caused by "our" missiles and the "civilian casualties" caused by "theirs" (*ibid.*: 162);

b) the "ideological square", i.e. "an in-group/out-group polarization which emphasizes Our good things and Their bad things, and de-emphasizes (mitigates, or even hides) Our bad things and Their good things" (van Dijk 2008: 130)[6]. Such polarization is the norm in social media communication contexts.

[6] For a reappraisal of this construct within the wider, more flexible notions of "interactions in discourse" and "clusters of ideologies", see van Dijk 2024. For an analysis of the workings of the ideological square with specific reference to misinformation discourse on social media, see Hamdi 2024.

Against this backdrop, and banking on the well-attested view that "multimodal communication is just as capable of distorting or misrepresenting power relationships and enacting social inequalities as verbal language is now accepted to be" (Bateman 2019: 531), the present paper will carry out a Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis – i.e. a critical analysis of multimodal discourse, henceforth CMDA[7] – to investigate:

a) how specific Intertextual Thematic Formations (henceforth, ITFs) – i.e. "a community's recurrent saids and dones, [as well as] the semiotic resources for saying and doing" (Lemke 1988: 32) – and strategies of visual-verbal (re)framing are used to construct heteroglossic relations of alliance and opposition (*ibid.*: 40, 48 *et passim*) and to underpin the political hero's identity, positioning, and mission; and, consequently, how the political hero's identity performance and journey/mission – as detailed, for instance, in Campbell (2008) – are monumentalized by invoking specific master narratives (Bamberg 2005)[8], viz. that of the 'celebration-of-stability/[self-]celebration' (Vasta 2001; 2023a), or 'coronation' (Dayan and Katz 1992);

b) how myths, cultural constructs (viz. the American Dream and American Exceptionalism[9]) and fabricated truths are manipulated not simply to promote and/or perform political identities but, more importantly, to shape and manipulate public opinion – in other words, how disinformation and polarized ('us' v. 'them', i.e. 'good' v. 'bad'/'order' v. 'disorder') narratives are used in visual storytelling as a propaganda weapon, for example in order to deny historical truths or rewrite controversial facts (e.g. Black slavery, war outcomes, or Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs).

As regards the first research question, the focus will be on the workings of intertextuality and interdiscursivity (Fairclough 1995: 134) in the media's visual-verbal ideological construction of the identity and role of the political hero – here, Donald Trump, with specific reference to his attempted assassination on July 14, 2024, and G.W. Bush, in his management of the 2003 Gulf War, as, respectively, "the chosen" and "the decider": this strategy consists in visually and/or verbally inscribing or invoking, through explicit or implicit intertextual references to cultural *topoi* and artifacts, positive Affect or Judgement[10] (Martin and White 2005) concerning the positionings and roles of the political hero – as "the revolutionary", "the rebel", or "the insurgent", as the case may

[7] As opposed to MCDA, where the emphasis is on "multimodal work in critical discourse studies" (Machin 2016: 322; see also Machin 2013), or on "doing critical discourse studies with multimodality" (Ledin and Machin 2019: 497).

[8] Master narratives are "pre-existent (or transhistorical) sociocultural forms of interpretation" (Bamberg 2005) which are embedded in, and rely on narrative systems, made up of story forms, scripts/schemata, and archetypes (e.g. the hero and the villain), and which "provide a pattern for cultural life and social structure, and create a framework for communication about what people are expected to do in certain situations" (Halverson *et al.* 2011: 7).

[9] The literature on the American Dream, as well as on the related key notions of American Exceptionalism, enshrined in the Puritan Jeremiad, and of what Sacvan Bercovitch (2012: 68 *et passim*) refers to as "sacred secularization", is virtually boundless: sociolinguistic (viz. SFL- and CDA-oriented) studies, in Italy and abroad, besides Bayley and Miller's (1993) seminal volume, are, e.g., Ross (1991: 22-50); Miller 2006; and Vasta (2023a: 48-51, 170-174, 270 *et passim*).

[10] In Martin and White's (2005: 42-61) Appraisal Theory, Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are resources for evaluating the system of Attitude in terms of, respectively: feelings and emotions like in/security, un/happiness, dis/inclination; social behaviour, esteemed or sanctioned with reference to normality, capacity, tenacity, veracity and propriety; evaluation of things and artifacts, assessed in terms of impact, quality, balance, composition, reaction and valuation. For the distinction between directly *inscribed* vs implicitly *invoked* meanings, see Martin and White 2005: 61-68, and Footnote 16 below.

be –, who is pursuing a noble/sacred mission in the name of a superior, legitimizing entity (here, God) or universally shared values (here, Liberty).

As regards the second research question, the analysis will highlight the manipulation of public opinion to construct relations of alliance and opposition[11] to normalize and impose 'new' (anti- or counter-) narratives (Bamberg 2004) over dominant (or master-) narratives. This is done by shaping and creating alternative frames and contexts for interpretation in which the boundaries between truth and fake news may easily be blurred and in which "ideological common sense" (Fairclough 2001: 84) is naturalized and legitimated in order to sustain power asymmetries, as well as to distort, marginalize or even silence minority voices.

"Politics is [inherently and] increasingly a textual practice" (Jones 2005: 18), a multimodal and co-creative process of meaning-making which, in the discursive context of US politics, is ideologically rooted in the sociocultural tradition of the American Dream. For our present purposes – i.e. the investigation of myths and fabricated truths to promote and/or perform political identities, not simply to shape but to manipulate public opinion –, and within the limits of a research article, we shall frame the American Dream against the backdrop of American Exceptionalism and with reference to the two paradigmatic cases of D.J. Trump and G.W. Bush.

3. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity in the post-truth era: monumentalizing the political leader

As a preliminary consideration in the analysis of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, it must be noted that master narratives (and related story forms, frames, scripts and archetypes) typically sustain and nourish what has been referred to above as ITFs, i.e. common ways of speaking of the same things in the same manner; at the same time, ITFs may be challenged – in the community's languaging practices as one of the building blocks of identity performance (see Vasta 2023b) – by counter- or anti-narratives (Bamberg 2004) resisting and/or reversing the dominant ideological status quo.

The world-famous *Time* cover of Figure 3a (left) reproduces a fragment from a photo by Associated Press photographer Evan Vucci, who captured Donald Trump moments after surviving the assassination attempt on July 14, in the heat of the 2024 presidential race (see the subheadline "Former president survives shooting with nation on edge"). On the right (Figure 3b) is the equally iconic *Newsweek* extra edition cover portraying 'the mother of all attacks', i.e. 9/11, which was framed as, and indeed was, the first attack on America's homeland in peacetime history and a sign that, on that day, 'the world has changed'. What is remarkable, from an intertextual and interdiscursive perspective, is that the ITF of 'Attack on X'/'X under attack' is not underpinned, in both cases, by the vulnerability master narrative, as would be natural to assume under the circumstances, and especially so in Trump's case since, if an attack is mounted against a would-be president, America itself is under attack, again: in actual fact, what

[11] This is akin to the distinction between alignment and disalignment (or alienation) in the Appraisal system of Engagement (Martin and White 2005: 95). For a thorough analysis of G.W. Bush's discourse strategies of Engagement with specific reference to the speech he gave to the UN on September 12, 2002 to persuade his hearers to wage war against Iraq, see Miller 2004.



Figure 3. Same ITF, different ideological orientations (3a. resilience versus 3b. vulnerability)

emerges from the *Time* cover, at both verbal and non-verbal levels, is vulnerability's counter-narrative, i.e. resilience – ultimately nourishing Trump's 'self-celebration' as 'the chosen', a *topos* to which we shall return shortly.

At the verbal level, apart from the word "attack" itself, the most evident allusion to 9/11 in the subheadline of Figure 3a is the idea that "the nation [is] on edge". Once more, after 9/11, America risks becoming inward-looking, and focused on its domestic vulnerability; but precisely because: a) the nation needs reassurance in the face of danger; and b) fighting against America's vulnerability is what underpins Trump's MAGA campaign message, which risks backfiring in the present circumstances (inasmuch as Trump metonymically was, and might be again, America itself), the attack needs to be reframed as the hero's successful display of resilience in the face of trial, while his "surviv[ing] shooting" is the hero's victory, namely the reason for monumentalizing the political leader.

On the non-verbal plane, with blood on his face and ear, his fist raised in the air, Trump stands in defiance, 'towering' against the sky and metaphorically and literally propped up by his bodyguards. The masterly multimodal orchestration[12] in Figure 4a identifies a triangle (or, more specifically, a human pyramid), whose vertex coincides with the ideal point of contact between Trump's fist and the US flag, and which can be defined (in Kress and van Leeuwen's 2006 terms) as a double triptych (identified by the two horizontal and the two vertical lines). Such an orchestration constructs Trump as

[12] I.e. "the process of assembling/organizing/designing a plurality of signs into a particular configuration to form a coherent arrangement", with an emphasis on the 'semiotic harmony' of the resultant ensembles and their 'aptness' to "meet the rhetor's [or text organizer's] interests" (Kress 2010: 162). On text-image relations, see also Bateman 2014 and Baldry and Thibault 2006.

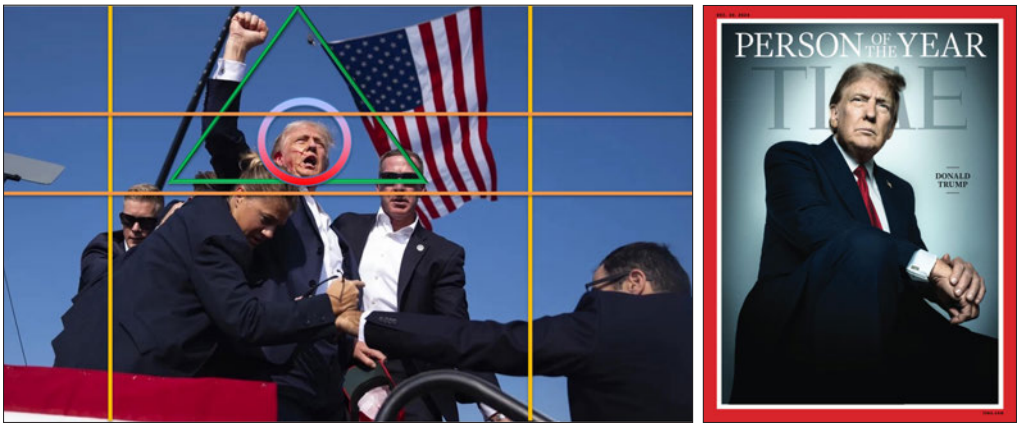

Figure 4. a) The multimodal orchestration of Trump's "mission"; b) Trump's (self-)celebration

the Mediator (in the circle) between the ontological space of the Ideal, or symbolic information (i.e. the victory gesture and the US flag) and that of the Real information, represented by the concrete threat and the bodyguards' effort to protect the hero against that threat. Furthermore, constructing Trump as the Reacter in a 'non-transactional reaction' – whereby "an eyeline vector emanates from […] the Reacter, but does not point at another participant" (*ibid.*: 74), let alone the viewer – transforms the visual, at the interpersonal level of discourse, into an "offer", rather than a "demand picture" (*ibid.*: 119-124)[13], one that should be beheld in awe as a result of the low camera angle placing the viewer in a hierarchically inferior position. This is also the case, incidentally, with the self-celebratory image on the cover of *Time* magazine of Dec. 30, 2024, featuring Trump as "Person of the Year" (Figure 4b).

Vucci's photograph – shared, remediated across different channels and platforms and instantly iconic – was immediately appropriated by political allies and opponents alike. For critics, it was stagecraft, or spectacle – calculated, theatrical, and disturbing in its resonance with authoritarian imagery. For supporters, it became visual proof of near-martyrdom, a Christ-like survival, a heroic leader who bleeds for his Nation and has been saved to fulfil a sacred mission, as Trump himself was to declare solemnly[14] in his Inaugural Address of January 20, 2025, which he called "Liberation Day".

Be that as it may, in the history of visual culture, certain images transcend documentation and become emblems, i.e. tools in the shaping of collective memory and national myths. The analogies between Vucci's photograph and Géricault's 1819 *Raft*

[13] In Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006: 250) terms, "'demand' pictures [are those] from which represented participants address the viewer directly with their gaze and 'want something from the viewer', and 'offer' pictures [are those] which position the viewer as an observer only, and offer the represented participants as 'information' to be taken in by the viewer".

[14] "Over the past eight years, I have been tested and challenged more than any other president in our 250-year history. […] Those who wish to stop our cause have tried to take my freedom and indeed to take my life. […] An assassin's bullet ripped through my ear, but I felt then, and believe even more so now, that my life was saved for a reason. I was saved by God to make America great again" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BNArBr_J8mA; quotes at 6'13", 6'31", and 6'43", respectively).



Figure 5. a) Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819); b) Delacroix's *Liberty Guides the People* (1830); c) Attempted assassination of Trump (Vucci, 2024, Associated Press)

of the Medusa (Figure 5a), on the one hand, and Eugène Delacroix's 1830 romantic painting *Liberty Guides the People* (Figure 5b), on the other, are striking and offer a powerful lens through which to examine the intertextual ties within, and consequent manipulability of, master narratives.

Firstly, Delacroix's painting in itself recalls the classically-inspired pyramidal composition of the "human wave" also found in Géricault's masterpiece, which illustrates a makeshift raft carrying 150 people after the wreck of a French ship, but reverses it, on the interpersonal plane, by opting for a frontal, not backside, view which enhances the viewer's engagement as an observer, not simply of the event but also of the represented participants' attitudes. As a good case in point of sheer misinformation, Delacroix's painting was not a depiction of the 1789 Revolution in France, as is commonly misbelieved, but, even more tellingly for our present purposes, that of "the three-day uprising of July 1830 when Parisians took to the streets to defend their freedoms – that of the press in particular – from the tyrannical rule of Charles X" (https://www.louvre.fr/en/explore/visitor-trails/the-louvre-s-masterpieces/romanticism-topicality-sensuality). "Liberty", a mythical embodiment of freedom, is outrageously[15] personified as a sensual, bare-breasted woman of the people, holding the tricolour flag and a bayonet rifle, who steps over the bodies of the fallen as she leads forward "the people", made up of individuals from all walks of life and social classes. This perfect blend of documentary and symbolic elements serves to sustain the master narrative of a popular uprising not as a moment of chaos, but as a glorious, righteous struggle for liberty. In the painter's artistic remediation and consequent reframing (viz. 'romanticizing') of the historical event, violence and chaos are elevated into virtue and heroism, thus producing an "ideological complex" (Hodge and Kress 1993).

However, the parallels with Delacroix in Evan Vucci's iconic picture are not limited to compositional, iconographic features. Both images are saturated with symbolic potential. Both feature a protagonist framed as the embodiment of a cause and the

[15] "When it was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1831, Delacroix's painting scandalized both the public and critics […mainly because] the woman's physical appearance […] incorporated elements of heightened realism […] – for example, the hair under her arms. In the conventional classicist and academic representation of the nude, rigorously idealized, body hair was prohibited; at most, a hint of pubic hair was tolerated in male nudes. […] Liberty was described as 'disgusting', an 'ignoble woman', a 'Venus of the streets', and was compared to […] one of those 'shameless peripatetics whose swarms in the evening cover the boulevards'" (my own translation from https://www.artesvelata.it/liberta-guida-popolo-delacroix/).

personification of resistance and stamina. And crucially, both are open to manipulation. In Delacroix's time, the painting, originally inspired by a contemporary event, contributed to the romantic myth of the French revolution, even though the political outcomes were far less idealistic. Vucci's photograph, though journalistic, instantly entered the realm of myth-making. Within hours, it was remediated and reframed into memes, propaganda posters, and patriotic tributes. Like Delacroix's *Liberty*, whose fortunes have transcended its original context and transformed it into the epitome of every legitimate demand for freedom and equality, the image of Trump became more than an image – it became a narrative device, at least for those who exploited the underlying ideological complex and transformed violent disruption into patriotism so as to monumentalize the man and glorify survival.

Pieces of art or photographs, appearing in print, electronic, or digital media become iconic when (Hariman and Lucaites 2007: 27):

> [they] are widely recognized and remembered, are understood to be representations of historically significant events, activate strong emotional identification or response, and are reproduced across a range of genres, media, or topics.

In other words, any such visual text (in its synergic interplay with the verbal discourses within, and about it) becomes iconic when it "has transgressed the parameters of its initial making, function, context and meaning" (Kemp 2012: 3) and it serves to decode reality, i.e. when reality imitates art, and not vice versa. Such is the case not just with Vucci's shot of the attempted assassination, but also with another photograph (see Figure 6) which went viral on the Internet in 2018: it portrays a twenty-year-old guy named Aed Abu Amro who, unlike 208 young boys like him, survived the 13th attempt by Palestinians at forcing the Gaza blockade imposed by Israel. Being perceptually the most salient participant in the visual composition, as a result of central position, chromatic contrast and agentive role, the boy is undoubtedly remindful, in posture and half-nakedness, of Delacroix's *Liberty*, conveying the same universal feeling of rebellion against the denial and usurpation of rights. And, although positive feelings (Affect: +security) and moral esteem (Judgement: t- +propriety) are, respectively, visually inscribed and invoked as token (t)[16] in the image, we contend that the everlasting impact of this visual piece of news does not reside exclusively in the ideologically noble, yet martyr-like attempt to enforce liberty from a disadvantaged, objectively inferior position – or, borrowing Bednarek and Caple's (2017: 107-133) taxonomy, in its values of "positivity" (i.e. heroism), "personalization" (i.e. the singling-out of the main protagonist), and "superlativeness" (i.e. the large impact and scope of the event). Rather, the image's impact is also a function of its "aesthetic appeal", i.e. the construction of this event and its protagonist as "beautiful", inasmuch as visual "composition creates tension and stimulates the eye to resolve the potential imbalance between […] differently weighted elements in the frame […] resulting [in] dynamic asymmetry" (Bednarek and Caple 2017: 110).

[16] In Martin and White's (2005: 75-76) Appraisal Theory, a "token" of appraisal (tagged "t") is a stretch of text which evokes, instead of explicitly inscribing in the text itself, a certain meaning, evaluation or response in a community.



Figure 6. Mustafa Hassouna's shot of Aed Abu Amro protesting against Israel's blockade of Gaza (2018, Anadolu Agency) *

* https://www.lemonde.fr/photo/article/2018/10/26/la-photo-d-un-manifestant-a-gaza-devient-une-icone_5375063_4789037.html. Note that *Le Monde* article explicitly remarks the resemblance with Delacroix's *La Liberté guidant le peuple* and mentions another viral photo recalling the same masterpiece, by Martin Argyroglo who shot people in Paris on January 11, 2016, who protested against the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo and the Hyper Cacher store.

To draw a provisional conclusion from the intertextual and interdiscursive analysis of the above works of art – whether paintings, photographs, statues, murals, or drawings (typically remediated through blogs, Instagram posts, and the like, as "semiotic aggregates"[17]) –, it is worth stressing, once again, that visual media does not simply reflect reality; it constructs it, overcoming cross-cultural barriers by appealing to universal archetypes and values. Through composition, symbolism, and emotional charge, such images offer the illusion of clarity and moral certainty. They give shape to events that are often chaotic, contradictory, and unresolved, and political actors can appropriate these images to sustain ideologies, craft myths of heroism, or rewrite the terms of victimhood and triumph. Ultimately, both Delacroix's *Liberty* and Vucci's photograph function as master narratives in visual form. But just as Delacroix's liberty was never a real woman, Trump's heroic defiance may be a carefully orchestrated performance. The power of such images lies not in their accuracy, but in their ability to persuade, very often at an unconscious (viz. emotional or aesthetic) level, especially in the post-truth

[17] Semiotic aggregates are formed by "the intersections of multiple discourses and the interaction order in particular places […and they are] a result of centripetal forces of aggregation including discourse aggregation" (Scollon and Scollon 2003: 167-168). We may consider, for instance, the Statue of Liberty as a semiotic aggregate of political, activist, subversive, intimate/affective discourses, which are recontextualized in such a way as to "transform the original social practices in accordance with the goals and values of the recontextualizing practices of [political] agents and their [voters]" (Baldry and Thibault 2006: 213).

era where, as the above-mentioned Oxford Dictionaries definition of this term has it, "objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief".

The next section will briefly investigate a specific form of belief, i.e. faith in the superempowered presidency of G.W. Bush, used as a propaganda and self-legitimization weapon.

4. Faith and post-truth: self-legitimization and propaganda

Naturally, as Pulitzer Prize winner Ron Suskind wrote in *The New York Times* in 2004 à propos of G.W. Bush's "imperial presidency" (Jeffords 2012: 75) and his framing of the War on Terror as a crusade:

> The faith-based presidency is a with-us-or-against-us model that has been enormously effective at, among other things, keeping the workings and temperament of the Bush White House a kind of state secret. [...] One key feature of the faith-based presidency [is that] open dialogue, based on facts, is not seen as something of inherent value. It may, in fact, create doubt, which undercuts faith. It could result in a loss of confidence in the decision-maker and, just as important, by the decision-maker.

And, a few weeks before Bush's Address at the Cincinnati Museum Center – in which the President described the conflict as a war between "those governed by fear" who "want to destroy our wealth and freedoms", and those on the side of freedom, and which paved the way for the October 2002 Congressional vote authorizing him to wage war on Iraq in 2003 –, while quoting a senior adviser to Bush whom he met in the summer of 2002, Suskind (2004) reports him saying:

> guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality – judiciously, as you will – we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do".

This is the perfect definition of "post-truth" as applied to public (viz. foreign) policy "creating [its] own reality" and, more specifically, to a situation where, confronted with the President's evident crisis of legitimacy well before 9/11 (Miller 2002), public opinion had to be reassured and guided in the face of an unprecedented, unmanageable threat, i.e. terrorism[18]. As argued at length elsewhere (Vasta 2016: 204), "banking on the nation's mounting state of fear and uncertainty, which his Administration had greatly

[18] "The crisis of the 9/11 attacks was artfully constructed through news accounts […] that future survival would depend on giving up many basic civil liberties [under the 2001 Patriot Act] – including the denial of habeas corpus [i.e. holding suspects without due process]. These messages were folded into the crime-related discourse of fear which implied that caring and safety are expressed as more control, including surveillance" (Altheide 2007: 288).

favoured, [G.W. Bush] constructs himself as 'the decider' and as the nation's father figure who protects and defends the American people against fear" and consequently frames a polarization between the evil, unpredictable and untrackable Terrorist and the superempowered President leading the Nation, as Commander-in-Chief, to defeat the Terrorist. This is what van Leeuwen[19] would call (self-)legitimization by authorization, which also feeds on mythopoesis.

Indeed, in the context of polarized narratives, self-legitimization cannot stand without "othering/otherization", i.e. the process of "constructing, or imagining a demonized image of 'them', or the Other [lacking the qualities that define 'us', or the Self], and thus supporting an idealized image of 'us', or the Self" (Holliday 2011: 69). This strategy, of paramount importance in mythopoetic narratives which reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions, is particularly evident in G.W. Bush's Announcement of Operation Enduring Freedom, on Oct. 7, 2001 (https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/10/20011007-8.html), when he stated:

> I'm speaking to you today from the Treaty Room of the White House, a place where American Presidents have worked for peace. We're a peaceful nation. Yet, as we have learned, so suddenly and so tragically, there can be no peace in a world of sudden terror. In the face of today's new threat, the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it. We did not ask for this mission, but we will fulfil it […]. We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to live and raise their children free from fear.

Appealing to what Graham *et al.* (2004) identify as: a legitimate power source which is external to the orator (here, the White House); the historical importance and values of the national culture under attack ("American presidents have worked for peace. We're a peaceful nation"); the construction of an antagonistic ("yet") evil Other ("a world of sudden terror", "those who threaten [peace]"); and the need for unification typical of 'call to arms' speeches ("we will fulfil [this mission]"), the President enacts the ITF of war-as-a-logically-necessary-pathway-to-peace ("the only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it"), which underpins the ITF of war-as-a-morally-corrective-measure ("we defend [not only] our precious freedoms"), imbued with evident religious overtones ("mission"), which not only legitimizes, but broadens the scope of the action beyond national boundaries ("[but also] the freedom of people everywhere")[20].

Going back to the faith-based presidency of G.W. Bush as "the decider", the same discursive practices as inscribed in the "Bush doctrine" and in the "Securitization model" (Buzan *et al.* 1998) to sanction a pre-emptive military posture (Dunmire 2011; Vasta and Martorana 2018) dominate the justification for Gulf War II: what has become notorious as an evident piece of disinformation, i.e. Saddam Hussein's possession of WMDs, was discursively constructed as ideological common ground – particularly in

[19] In van Leeuwen's (2007: 92) definition, authorization is "legitimation by reference to the authority of tradition, custom and law, and of persons in whom some institutional authority is vested"; moral evaluation is "legitimation by (often very oblique) reference to value systems"; rationalization is "legitimation by reference to the goals and uses of institutionalized social action, and to the knowledge society has constructed to endow them with cognitive validity"; and mythopoesis is "legitimation conveyed through narratives whose outcomes reward legitimate actions and punish non-legitimate actions".

[20] For more examples and a thorough analysis of these and other ITFs at work in legitimating war discourse, see Vasta 2016, 2023b. See also Podvornaia 2013.



Figure 7. Screenshot from the televised address by President G.W. Bush aboard the aircraft carrier *USS Abraham Lincoln* on May 1, 2003

the above-mentioned landmark speech of Oct. 7, 2002 at the Cincinnati Museum Center[21] – and used for propaganda purposes, i.e. to sustain the need for a maximally rapid and effective resolution of the conflict. Among the extremely embarrassing consequences of such propaganda is the one epitomized in Figure 7: "In front of a now-infamous banner on the carrier's bridge reading 'Mission Accomplished,' President Bush declared victory before the United States and Iraq had yet to experience the fullest extent of that war, which began three months earlier in March 2003"[22] and would be the fifth longest in American history.

Despite the fact that the banner allegedly referred to the crew's 10 months' deployment, the longest since the Vietnam War, and that US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld took care to remove any use of the phrase "Mission Accomplished" in the speech itself, when Bush stated that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed", critics of the war accused the photo-op to be propaganda, i.e. a symbol of the Bush administration's unrealistic goals and perceptions of the conflict. The multimodal mismatch between the banner and the core message that the Bush Administration had intended to convey produced the exact opposite narrative and a communicative short circuit which ultimately backfired.

[21] For a detailed linguistic account of how the possession of WMDs was artfully constructed as given, shared information so as to by-pass negotiation on the legitimacy of military intervention in Iraq in 2003, see Vasta 2004: 128-132.

[22] https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2023/05/04/mission-accomplished-was-a-massive-fail-but-it-was-just-the-beginning/. See also https://millercenter.org/americas-war-in-iraq/mission-accomplished-moment.

5. Conclusion

If the above discussion has achieved its intended purpose, I think I can safely state that developing critical multimodal literacy to contextualize disputable or 'alternative facts' – so as to challenge, fact-check and debunk fake news, prejudice and disinformation – has become a key civic competence. More specifically, a critical understanding of how master narratives and archetypal structures of political storytelling are used to tap into people's emotions, shared values and traditions is essential to gain useful insights into the workings of institutional and social media discourse, hopefully with a view to harnessing potentially manipulative practices.

Critical Multimodal Discourse Analysis benefits from the study of master narrative as a central pivot connecting, over different time spans, different theoretical perspectives, different text genres and their multimodal orchestration, while incorporating the key notion of intertextuality. In every political act, narrative and storytelling are of paramount significance and so the notions of master- and counternarrative are key to reconstructing the hero's and heroine's mythological journey, which is hidden but always present: CDA and all the more so, in the digital age, CMDA allows what is hidden to become visible and open to public debate.

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