

How Colour Rhetoric is Used to Persuade: Chromatic Argumentation in Visual Statements

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Summary

Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the most ancient work exposing a technique to persuade, to promote adhesion by means of reasons that could be more or less logical or credible. In order to argue in favour or against something, it was necessary to employ a technique to find out 'what to say' (the appropriate arguments) and 'how to say' those ideas. The part of rhetoric dealing with the figures of discourse used to persuade (how to say) is called *elocutio*, in Latin. Many years ago, the analysis of rhetoric figures was extended and generalised to explain the aesthetic and creative uses of language, its poetic function. The deviations that appear in creative texts, as compared to the ordinary use of language, correspond to a large repertoire of rhetorical figures that the studies in poetics coined along centuries. Usually, it is considered that its field is 'poetics and figured speech'; however, these operations extend across all kinds of discourses and languages. Artistic images, painting, architecture, photography, caricature, cartoons, advertising and many other genres of visual production base their efficacy on the rhetorical use of visual signs. This paper analyses how the use of colour can be a privileged element to argue in a visual image. The values and connotations attributed to colour in the context of visual statements work as 'proof' in persuasive discourse. By this means, the use of rhetorical figures is not an end in itself; it is the visible correlation of the argumentation that works as an implicit frame in persuasion.

Introduction

In human activities, the strategies to satisfy the social need of convincing others are generated in the frame of languages. To make a child take a medicine, neighbours disposing of garbage in appropriate places, people electing a candidate as president or buying a product, are all very different actions; however, all of them have a common goal: to persuade. Furthermore, they coincide in attaining this by means of language, i.e. using resources that exclude physical violence.

This technique originated in Greece during the 5th century BC. Only in a democratic environment, where arguments deserve to be listened and debated, persuasive strategies could have been developed. Then, rhetoric evolved. But philosophers were concerned about the social relevance that rhetoric gained.

In *Gorgias*, Plato (380 BC) denounces this technique through Socrates' words; it was in detriment of the search for true knowledge and justice. He shows how when rhetoric arguments contend against mere veridical facts, it is highly probable that rhetoric (which does not need to rely on veridical but only on credible facts) wins:

'A marvel, indeed, Socrates, if you only knew how rhetoric comprehends and holds under her sway all the inferior arts. Let me offer you a striking example of this. On several occasions I have been with my brother Herodicus or some other physician to see one of his patients, who would not allow the physician to give him medicine, or apply a knife or hot iron to him; and I have persuaded him to do for me what he would not do for the physician just by the use of rhetoric. And I say that if a rhetorician and a physician were to go to any city, and had there to argue in the Ecclesia or any other assembly as to which of them should be elected state-physician, the physician would have no chance; but he who could speak would be chosen if he wished; and in a contest with a man of any other profession the rhetorician more than any one would have the power of getting himself chosen, for he can speak more persuasively to the multitude than any of them, and on any subject. Such is the nature and power of the art of rhetoric' [1].

As an example of this, there is a comic strip by the Argentine cartoonist Quino that shows the different ideas or arguments that the characters express visually symbolised in terms of different patterns (because the strip was published in a magazine in black and white). But we might add colour to the image in order to symbolise the ideas or arguments by chromatic differences (Figure 1). A group of people begin by thinking 'red', until a politician comes to speak to them and (presumably by means of rhetoric arguments) convinces the people about the 'green idea'. When he is alone, the cartoon indicates that he actually does not believe

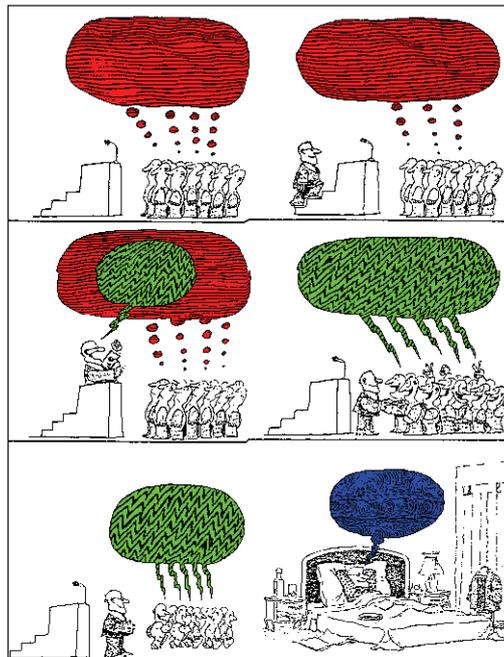


Figure 1 Rhetorical arguments need to be just veridical, not true; even, it is not necessary that the utterer believes in his arguments to convince others (comic strip by the Argentine cartoonist Quino, with colour added to symbolise the different arguments or beliefs)

in 'green' but in 'blue', so that we conclude that the 'green argument' was only a means to manipulate the people.

The tradition of classical rhetoric techniques was finally put forward in an organic way in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (350 BC). The rhetorical way should be followed in five steps: *inventio*, *dispositio*, *elocutio*, *memoria* and *actio*. To argue in favour or against something it is necessary to find 'what to say', i.e. the appropriate arguments (*inventio*). Later, these ideas are to be organised (*dispositio*) and their best way of expression (*elocutio*) found. This part of rhetoric deals with the figures of speech used to persuade, with the 'how to say' part. Once the discourse has the definitive form, all its parts and expressions must be memorised (*memoria*) and, finally, the discourse is to be represented in front of the audience, putting it in action (*actio*) [2].

Colour as Persuasive Argument in Visual Statements

When the argumentation appears in visual statements, the two last steps (memory and action) are dispensed with. Of the five parts in which rhetoric is organised, we are only considering the first one (*inventio*), in order to show how certain chromatic choices may have a persuasive effect. Colour can be a privileged element to 'argue' in a visual image. The values and connotations attributed to colour work as 'proof' in persuasive reasoning. In this way, the use of rhetoric is not an end in itself but the visible correlation of the argumentation that works as a hidden, implicit, frame. It is in the *inventio* part where the utterer of a persuasive visual discourse takes the first step, discovering the chromatic arguments and proposing a pseudo-logical reasoning in which colour appears in the premises and bears a conclusion. In a later step, *elocutio* (how to say), the use of colour finds a correlation with the use of rhetorical figures, in this case generated by a particular, intentional and often transgressive use of colour. Rhetorical figures exhibit a conceptual or formal shift produced in a statement with the aim of making the reader or observer grasp a meaning that is beyond the literal meaning.

In Western culture, we share associations of ideas or beliefs about colours: 'rose/pink for girls, blue for boys'; 'green is natural, natural is better'; 'black is sinister'; 'black is elegant'; 'white is clean, aseptic'; 'white is neutral'; 'red is alerting, excites vision'; 'red indicates danger'; 'red is vital, passionate'; 'red is joy'. We can recognise these chromatic arguments from which the persuasive visual images are nurtured. In spite of the fact that they are widespread accepted ideas, they are neither strictly true nor false. The coexistence of contradictory ideas about the same colour shows the paradoxical character of these asserts, which acquire positive or negative values according to the context.

This is possible because the statements generated by the rhetoric machine are based on a logic that – differently from scientific logic – does not rely on truths but on credible arguments, values or presuppositions accepted by the addressees. The domain of the rhetoric technique is not the scientific knowledge; it is the *doxa*, the common opinion, what is reasonable without the mediation of a valid demonstration. Precisely, the *doxa* is closer to common sense than to truth or falsity in the logical sense.

The rhetorical use of colour, then, is based upon premises that are shared by a social group – in this sense, rhetoric departs also from artistic subjectivity. This 'ideology' comes from beliefs about human perception, from metonymical associations (red with blood, black with night, green with forest, etc.), as well as from metaphorical or symbolic links. The memory of a culture associates certain colours to war, birth or death, purity, festivities, divinities, political emblems, nationalities, etc. And all these are sources that nurture the chromatic arguments.

Modes of Argumentative Reasoning

Argumentative reasoning is based on the three logical modes: *deduction* and *induction* (classical logic), plus *abduction* (see Table 1). Charles Sanders Peirce shows how every argument is composed of three propositions: *case*, *result* and *rule*, which produce the three figures in three permutations [3].

The argumentative logic may adopt a deductive form (exposing a reasoning), an inductive form (giving examples and models to imitate), or an abductive form (showing a feature that belongs to a case). In this paper, we will develop the three modes of argumentation, showing the use of colours that more frequently appear in these cases: white, black, red and green. Why these four colours? Because they are the colours that first appear as colour names in all languages, according to Berlin and Kay [4]. And also, because these colours have multiple and even opponent meanings in different cultures, and for this reason provide many arguments to persuade.

Table 1 Three logical modes of argumentation, with the examples given by Peirce [3]

<u>Deduction:</u>	Rule:	All the beans from this bag are white	(General rule)
	Case:	These beans are from this bag	(Particular case)
	Result:	These beans are white	(Particular result)
<u>Induction:</u>	Case:	These beans are from this bag	(Particular case)
	Result:	These beans are white	(Particular result)
	Rule:	All the beans from this bag are white	(General rule)
<u>Abduction:</u>	Rule:	All the beans from this bag are white	(General rule)
	Result:	These beans are white	(Particular result)
	Case:	These beans are from this bag	(Particular case)

Deductive reasoning (enthymeme)

When there is no straightforward primary identification in front of the image, but a more sophisticated and mediated way of arriving at the comprehension of the message, this will surely be a deduction. This reasoning is similar to the syllogism, the best-known form of deduction, used as a method of scientific knowledge. Beyond the field of science, the use of deduction as a persuasive method (enthymeme) appears in many fields, such as journalistic, advertising, politic, or pedagogical argumentation, parliamentary debate, court deliberation, religious pray, military harangue or just daily life argumentation. The enthymematic reasoning does not intend to confirm the truth of certain assertions but to persuade an audience about the proposed arguments. The premises are credible statements, only presumably true. These presuppositions are beliefs that in some circumstances would admit the contrary. This demonstrates that they are not absolute truths even when they are not falsities in *stricto sensu*. The scheme is:

- Rule: all X are P (omitted)
- Case: A is X
- Result: A is P .

In the enthymematic argumentation, the rule is usually omitted in the statement, because it relies on the fact that these rules are presupposed and shared by the addressees. Let's see some examples.

In the advertising of Figure 2, there is a white empty space above the product. The legend on top reads (in Spanish), 'This is the only page of the magazine that will not become yellowish with time'. In this case:

- The rule, which is not shown explicitly, is that incorruptible white (without a yellowish tinge) stands for perfect cleaning
- The case shown is that the product, Odol, stands for incorruptible whiteness
- Result: Odol is synonymous with perfect teeth cleaning.

Figure 3 is an image produced in 1966 by the designer Cristos Gianakos, which circulated during the campaigns against the Vietnam War. The USA flag has a black rectangle instead of the blue field with the stars. The small text at the bottom reads, 'Send our boys home'. So here we have:

- Omitted rule is: black means war = death
- The shown case is: the USA flag appears black, replacing the stars
- The result: the USA government promoted the Vietnam war = death.



Figure 2 (left) Enthymematic reasoning in an advertising, using white (advertising issued in Argentina)

Figure 3 (below) Enthymematic reasoning in a campaign, using black (Cristos Gianakos, *Send Our Boys Home*, 1966, offset lithograph, 31.1 × 43.2 cm; Museum of Modern Art, New York)

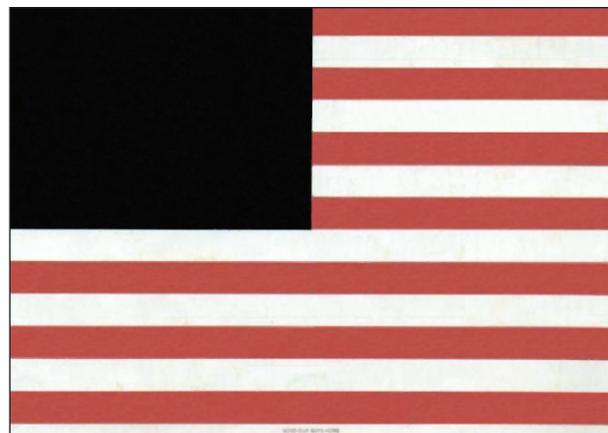


Figure 4 is an example of enthymematic use of red. The image of Che Guevara appears in red over the map of Latin America (poster by designer Elena Serrano, 1968):

- Omitted rule is: red is a symbol of communist revolution
- Case: the image is red
- Result: the image spreads revolutionary ideas.

In Figure 5, we have another example with red, but while the previous one (Figure 4) intended to promote adhesion, or a positive reaction, in this one red is clearly endorsed with a negative meaning. The German anti-Bolshevik propaganda poster produced in 1919 by Rudi Feld, reads, 'The danger of Bolshevism'.

- Rule (omitted): the colour red is associated with blood and death
- Case: Bolshevism is symbolised by re
- Result: Bolshevism is death.

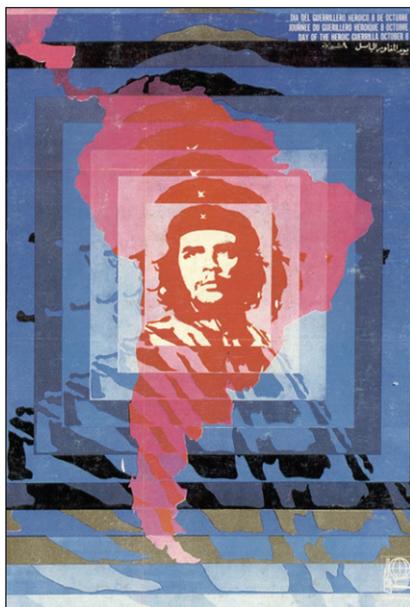


Figure 4 (left) Enthymematic reasoning using red (Elena Serrano, *Day of the Heroic Guerrilla*, 1968, offset print, 49.5 × 34.5 cm; publisher: OSPAAAL)

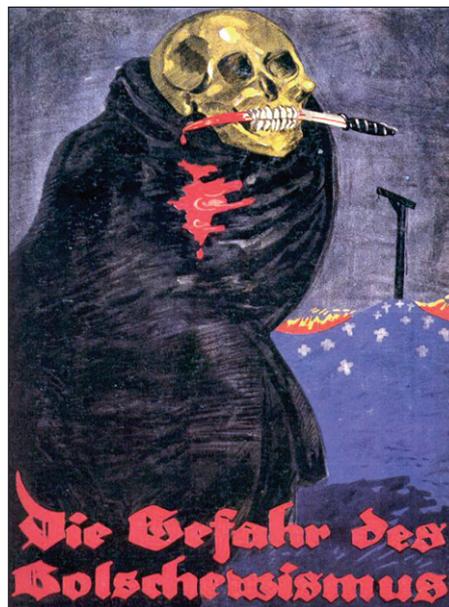


Figure 5 (right) Enthymematic reasoning using red with a negative value (Rudi Feld, 1919, *Die Gefahr des Bolschewismus*, Berlin, photolithograph on paper, 94.5 × 69 cm)

Finally, an example of visual enthymeme using the colour green in an advertising of unleaded gasoline (Figure 6). The main legend reads, ‘A step towards future’.

- Rule (omitted): green is ecology, balance with nature
- Case: the footprints of the Esso tiger are green
- Result: Esso unleaded gasoline is ecological, maintains the natural balance.



Figure 6 Enthymematic reasoning using green (advertising issued in Argentina)

Induction, the value of the example

A particular kind of example is the *imago*, a known and socially representative image that bears the values intended to promote. For instance, when in 1985 the monetary sign *Austral* was created in Argentina, the unity (the 1 Austral bill), which at that moment was in parity 1 to 1 with the US dollar, was green, such as the *imago* that the Austral intended to evoke.

There are anti-tobacco campaigns that, without mentioning brands, use the colours of Marlboro as a chromatic *imago* in order to denounce the damage made by tobacco and tobacco ads. Chromatic exemplification is often used in visual statements, for instance in advertising where the argument is related to the quality of a product: redness and glossy appearance (strawberries, apples, tomatoes); blue related to freshness and lightness (mineral water, light cigarettes and other light products). These are cases where colour offers a proof to verify (rhetorically) the quality of the advertised product. The scheme is:

- Case: *A* is an example of *X*
- Result: *A* is *P* (particular of identification)
- Rule: all *X* are *P*.

Now some cases are given. The colour white, in the semantic meaning of emptiness, becomes an argumentation through an example in Figure 7, a poster by the Swiss designer Christopher Martin Hofstetter, 1977. The text reads, ‘Germany 1930–1939: Suppression, Assimilation, Exile’.

- The reasoning shows a particular case: this family is an example of those who have lost some members
- This is seen by the result: white (empty) spaces on the wall
- The reasoning ends with a general rule coming from the *doxa*: all families who lose some members feel an emptiness forever. Then, if my family would have been victim of this tragedy, we would feel the same emptiness. This promotes the personal identification with the *exemplum*.

Figure 8 is an example with the use of black, a poster issued in the 1920s in Great Britain by the socialist and pacifist organisation called ‘No more war’.



Figure 7 (left)
Inductive reasoning in the mode of exemplum, using white (Christopher Martin Hofstetter, 1977, *Deutschland 1930-1939, Verbot Anpassung Exil*, offset lithograph, 127 × 89.5 cm; printer: Lichtdruck AG, Dielsdorf, Switzerland and Offset-Repro AG; Museum of Modern Art, New York)

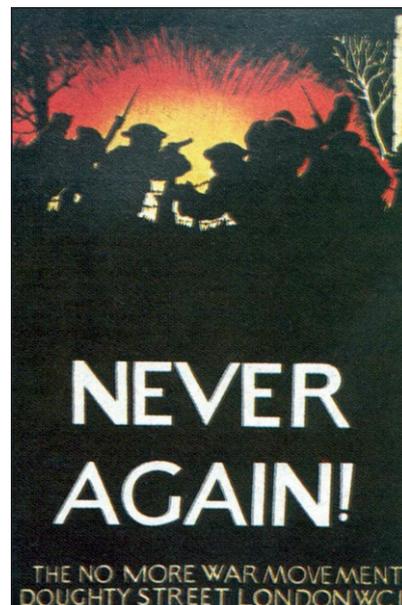


Figure 8 (right)
Inductive reasoning in the mode of exemplum, using black

- Case: this scene is an example of World War I
- Result: this scene is black (meaning death)
- Rule: every war conveys death, and should be avoided in the future.

Figure 9 is an *imago* that uses red in an advertising:

- Case: Paloma Picasso is an example of seductive, passionate woman
- Result: Paloma Picasso wears red
- Rule: if we all want to be seductive, passionate women, we must wear red (and Paloma Picasso perfume).

Finally, an *exemplum* with the use of green (Figure 10):

- Case: the healthy forest is an example of life.
- Result: the healthy forest is green.
- Rule: if we adhere to life, we must adopt 'green' policies.

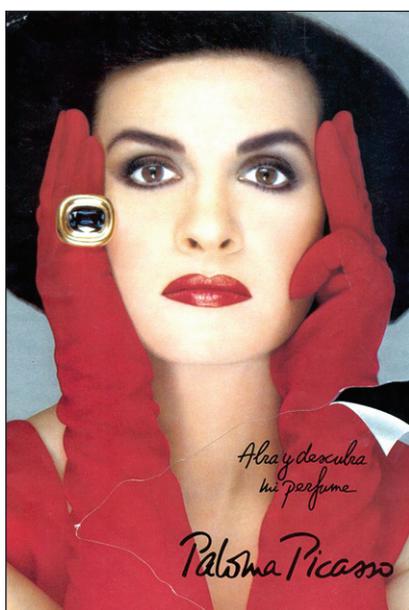


Figure 9 Inductive reasoning in the mode of *imago*, using red (advertising issued in Argentina)

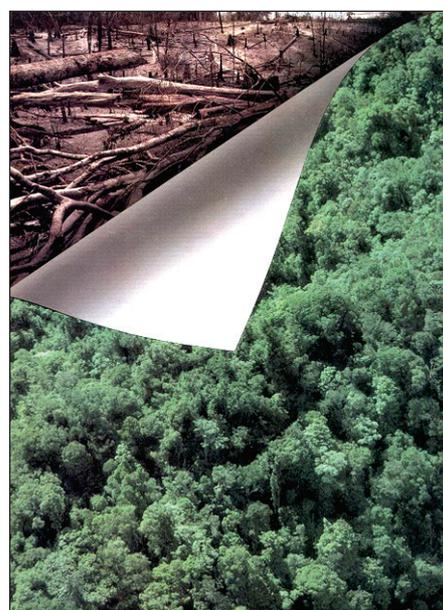


Figure 10 Inductive reasoning in the mode of *exemplum*, using green

Intuition and hunch, basis for the abductive inference

The abductive inference is posterior to Aristotelic logic; it is an inferential mode that, strictly speaking, lacks the value of truth [5]. However, it is very useful in the production of new hypotheses in a context of discovery. The persuasion that appeals to an abductive reasoning proposes an inferential leap between a feature that is shown as a particular case, and a general rule underneath that is recognised by the interpreter. The intuition shortens the way to the comprehension, even when its veracity is more fragile, because the reasoning allows formulating a general conclusion from a particular situation. The general model is as follows:

- Rule: all X are P
- Result: A has the feature P
- Case: A is likely to be X .

Figure 11 is a poster for a public campaign that uses white as a mode of abductive reasoning.

- Rule: cocaine (white) ‘splits’ the subject leaving voids (white spaces) in his brain and personality
- Result: this person is split in two parts, with white voids
- Case: this person consumes cocaine; we should not.

An anti-smoking campaign made in 1991 by the atelier of fine arts College Brizeaux, in the town of Quimper, France, reads ‘Advertising kills’ (Figure 12). The reasoning is driven as follows:

- Rule: death is black
- Result: the real content of Marlboro is black
- Case: Marlboro (the cigarette manufacturer) advertises death.

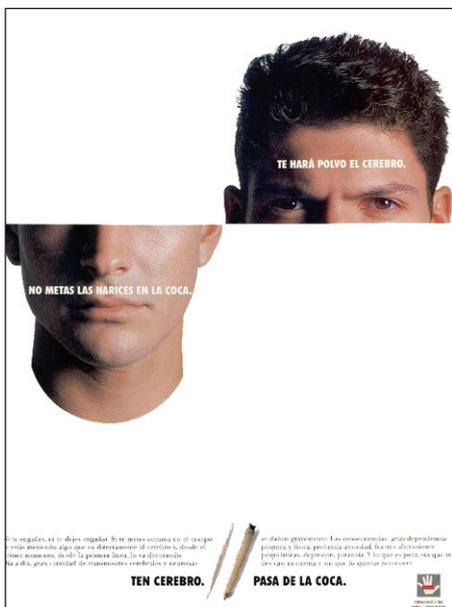


Figure 11 Abductive reasoning using white (advertising issued in Argentina)



Figure 12 Abductive reasoning using black (poster created by Alain Le Querrec, 1991, *La Pub Tue*, in Quimper, France)



Figure 13 Abductive reasoning using red [poster published in 1986/87 in Great Britain; David Bailey (photographer), Yellowhammer Advertising Co. Ltd (advertising agency), Lynx, UK (publisher); Victoria & Albert Museum]

The advertising for public well-being in Figure 13 denounces the human cruelty and foolishness in the act of consuming animal furs to make coats. The argumentation relies on the chromatic feature that looks disturbing in the elegant scene: the red blood trail left by the coat of the model.

- We start from an implicit rule (general premise): to kill animals unnecessarily is a criminal act of low intelligence
- What is shown in the visual image is the particular result: the red colour falling from the coat is an index of blood, of killing animals.
- The case that can be concluded is that to wear fur coats implies killing animals, cruelty, foolishness and lack of humanity.

In the advertising for menthol cigarette brand Kool (Figure 14), the image shows a large green surface that ‘perspires’ water drops, where the word ‘kool’ is visible. Packaging and brand have identical colour. The abductive reasoning is based on the dominant green. We can imagine a chain of reasoning:

- Rule: all fresh stuff are green
- Result: Kool is green
- Case: Kool is fresh.

And,

- Rule: mint is vegetal = natural
- Result: Kool is natural
- Case: Kool has mint.

Finally,

- Rule: natural (green) is better than artificial
- Result: Kool is better or less harmful than other cigarettes
- Case: Kool has something natural = green.

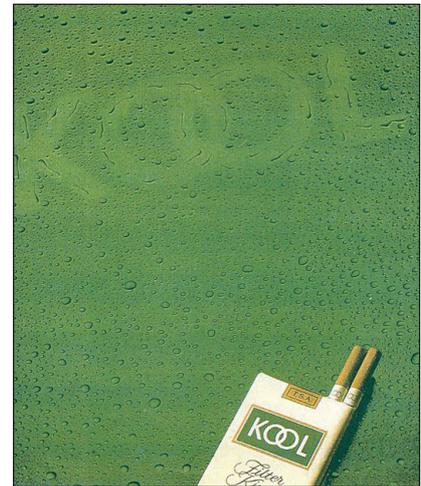


Figure 14 Abductive reasoning using green

Conclusion

Culture of the audience is reflected in the messages addressed to it

The example shown in Figure 13 evokes, by opposition, images of glamorous actress and models enfolded in sumptuous fur coats, symbols of beauty, elegance and power. It is evident that in Figure 13 the general premise is trustworthy (and, thus, valid), and more persuasive today than some decades ago. The value of preserving animal species is part of the present orthodoxy (corpus of ‘politically correct’ ideas and values). Thus, this message finds a fertile ground in an audience for whom the care for ecology is a preferred value.

The subtitle of this concluding section comes from a reflection by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca [6], who in their treatise on argumentation say that every social environment could be characterised by its dominant opinions, by its non-discussed convictions, by its premises that are admitted without hesitation. These conceptions make part of its culture, and every speaker who wants to persuade an audience must adapt to it. Then, in addition to remind us that it is not possible to really persuade with ideas foreign to the referential or ideological frame of the public, as Aristotle already noted, ‘rhetoric is also a source where its ideology and culture can be uncovered’. Finally, in order to exercise the phantom of media manipulation through the

rhetoric technique, we can assert – paraphrasing Jacques Aumont [7] – that the argument and its addressee are alike (Footnote 1), this is the necessary self-imposed limit of rhetoric, and also the horizon for its efficacy.

Here we use another cartoon by Quino, where we have added colour again, to exemplify this situation (Figure 15). A group of ladies is inclined to think in ‘green terms’ (nature, trees, birds, etc.), so that the discourse of the poet has a good effect on them, because of their mutual affinity. But to the man seated on the right, who probably does not like poetry and has a more materialistic way of thinking, or even is jealous about the effect that the poet is causing on the ladies, the same discourse provokes a negative effect (he only thinks of chopping up the trees, and probably of the poet too). Thus, for rhetorical arguments to have the desired effect, we have to count with some previous predisposition of the audience, and we have to ‘touch its chord’.



Figure 15 A cartoon by Quino, with colour added, exemplifying the concept that the argument and its addressee are alike

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7. J Aumont, *L'image* (Paris: Nathan, 1990); Spanish translation, *La imagen* (Barcelona: Paidós, 1991), section I.3.

Footnote 1 Aumont's original phrase is, 'the image and the spectator are alike', which accounts for the functioning of the projective phenomena of the observers in front of visual statements