

The Role of Visual Rhetoric in the Vegetarian Movement: “Meet Your Meat” Video of Animal Torture on the PETA Website

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Abstract: Images have the power to create natural representation of reality, vividness in human memory and have rhetorical effect. However, visual rhetoric can create positive and negative feeling to persuade people. Negative feelings can be designed to make emotional reactions and spark action. Consequently, humans will consider ways to deal with the negative and discomfort feelings. In this paper, the writer analyzes the connection between visual rhetoric and emotional appeal by examining the controversial PETA video “Meet your Meat”. The writer will use the visual rhetoric, emotions, and cognitive dissonance theory to analyze the video and increase the understanding about the human emotions, especially disgust and guilt.

Key words: visual rhetoric, emotion, rhetoric, disgust, guilt, cognitive dissonance.

Abstrak: Gambar memiliki kekuatan untuk menciptakan gambaran realitas yang alami, membuat kejelasan dalam ingatan manusia dan memiliki efek retorik. Namun, retorika visual dapat menciptakan perasaan positif dan negatif untuk membujuk orang. Perasaan negatif dapat dirancang untuk membuat reaksi emosional dan memicu tindakan. Akibatnya, manusia akan mempertimbangkan cara-cara untuk mengatasi perasaan-perasaan negatif dan ketidaknyamanan. Dalam tulisan ini, penulis akan menganalisis hubungan antara retorika visual dan daya tarik emosional dengan mengkaji video kontroversial PETA “Meet your Meat”. Penulis akan menggunakan teori retorika visual, emosi, dan disonansi kognitif untuk menganalisis video dan meningkatkan pemahaman tentang emosi manusia, terutama perasaan jijik dan rasa bersalah.

Kata kunci: retorika visual, emosi, retorika, jijik, bersalah, disonansi kognitif.

Mass media disseminates information to attract human attention using visual objects. Through the Renaissance, industrial civilization, and the high technological era, the *ocular-centric* (eye-center) wave grew rapidly (Jay, 1994). Carter Dickinson (1941) says, “Seeing is believing”. These words reflect the importance of visual object to make people believe in something. The visual artifacts, visual images, visual performances and other activities to “see”, “observe”, “look”,

and “watch” have conquered the US society (Olson, 2008).

Images provide human with considerable influence. Public images often function to disseminate message, or work in rhetorical ways. Visual rhetoric becomes influential because visual objects impact various human activities. Olson (2008:2) provides assumptions to comprehend visual rhetoric. He argues, “Words and images are oftentimes mixed together in rhetorically interesting

ways". Thus, the combinations of verbal and visual messages become a powerful strategy to create persuasive message.

In this paper, the writer examines the role of visual rhetoric in persuasion to articulate message and to direct attitude change mostly when the message's focal point connects with emotions. Using a sample of controversial video, the writer discusses how visual rhetoric can utilize emotional appeals to cause the negative feeling, which can then lead to actions. The controversial video entitled "Meet Your Meat", produced by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), is about the "under covered" investigation of animal cruelty. The video had 14.353.689 viewers on YouTube as of October 2011. The video shows many violations to animals such as images of an animal's throat open and blood flood over, piglets slammed to the floor, cows contaminated by bleeding skin diseases, a man stepping on a dying chicken, a living animal entering the killing machine, and tiny cages for all animals to live in until they are ready to be killed. The duration of the video is 11.36 minutes. The video maker used visual rhetoric to convey messages about vegetarianism and awareness of cruelty at animal farms.

This paper consists of three phases. First, the writer examines the power of image to create the natural representative of reality and the power visual rhetoric to create vividness in human memory. Second, the writer focuses to the power of emotion from the disturbance of cognition processes after receiving persuasive message (image and

verbal message). Those dissonances can create two possibilities of emotional appeal, which is guilt and disgust. The writer does not mean to close any other possibility. However, the writer takes the two main emotional appeals to understand how the combination of psychological emotion and social construction create standard on human behavior. Finally, the writer will apply the theories to inform the case study.

IMAGE AS REPRESENTATION OF REALITY AND VISUAL RHETORIC

Since classical era, rhetoricians have argued that image or visual object has impacts to the audience. For example, the pre-renaissance period emphasized the use of visual objects to confirm the presence of power. As a common example, in the churches such as Basilica St. Peter in the Vatican, used fresco or wall painting, dialogue liturgy, and celebration as visual evidence of church's power to demand, validate, judge, even convert identity upon those who live in the surrounding area (Olson, 2008). Van Eck (2007) explained that European society used visual objects to create visual persuasion in the past. For example in art painting, the painter makes the image as real as possible to create the condition of *sine qua non*. This is a condition when an image can be identified as what is represented, resulting in a sense of living presence (Van Eck, 2007). Thus, the natural side of the image can evoke certain reality or imagination to be something that people can believe as truth and allow the communicator to deliver powerful message to the receiver.

Currently, the growth of technology and public interaction has focused on the optical power especially in meaning making process about the world (Ott & Dickinson, 2008). Those visual objects consist of cultural tradition of seeing and looking as well as the artifacts produced in various forms and media (Olson, 2008). People associate the visual object with expression, pleasure, and emotional response (Olson, 2008). This is the moment where visual rhetoric is noteworthy because visual rhetoric helps people to constitute the way they know, think, and behave (Olson, 2008). Visual rhetoric itself can be defined as “symbolic actions enacted primarily through visual means, made meaningful through culturally derived ways of looking, seeing, and endeavoring to influence diverse public” (Olson, 2008:2). Visual rhetoric also enables us to discriminate between various forms of purposive image such as the “commercial from the civic, propagandistic from democratic, sentimental from memorable” (Olson, 2008:2). Thus, visual rhetoric strengthens the human meaning making process through image.

Ott and Dickinson identified few principles concerning visual rhetoric: First, visual rhetoric is a mode of communication because it consists of meaningful signs, and depends on cultural context. Second, the eyes are the center of visual rhetoric activities, such as looking, seeing, and visualizing. Third, varieties of visual rhetoric are available to be discussed such as paintings, photographs, sculptures, buildings, films, and television programs

(2008:392). Also, according to Ott and Dickinson, scholars have three utmost concerns regarding visual rhetoric. One group focuses on public affairs to assess the civic role of public images. Another group focuses on theories of everyday life, to explore visual framing of daily life. Another group identifies the logic of visual image (2008:393). In this article, the writer addresses the issue of visual rhetoric by identifying the unique logic of visual imagery to influence audience. The writer considers the idea of making the connection between understanding image as a form of communication to identify the audience reception according to their experience and culture.

Gallagher et al (2011) argued that visual rhetoric has the element of *Enargeia/Enargia* (Vividness). *Enargeia* (*enargia*) is an aspect in classical rhetorical theory which emphasized the resemblance between paintings or the visual arts to rhetoric because it refers to the author’s competence to produce a vivid description, or to present evidence in the eyes of the audience (Gallagher, 2011). Cicero explained that *enargeia* make the image not speak but show, it involves “visual clarity, immediacy, *self-evidentia*, and strong emotional appeals” (Gallagher, 2011:30). An individual may feel confronted by the visual object and take it as a ‘disturbing’ experience, but another individual may enjoy the image. The audience emotional appeals depend on the application of the persuasive message.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE THEORY

As a persuasion research-based theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory (CDT) offers perspective on the role of disturbance in human cognitive processes. According to Festinger (1957), cognitive dissonance is a condition of human cognitive processes, when imbalance happens between the cognitions and ways of knowing, beliefs, and judgments. Festinger suggested that dissonance is an uncomfortable feeling that motivates people to take steps to reduce it (Turner, 2007). Brown (1965:584) also supported this argument by mentioning that “a state of cognitive dissonance is said to be state of psychological discomfort or tension which motivates efforts to achieve consonance. Dissonance is in the name of disequilibrium and consonance is in the name for equilibrium”.

According to Festinger (1957), there are four basic assumptions of CDT theory (a) people seek consistency in their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, (b) dissonance happens because of psychological inconsistencies (depends on the degree of importance for individual), (c) dissonance makes people feel uncomfortable, (d) dissonance motivates people to act in order to achieve consonance, reduce the uncomfortable feeling, and ultimately restore consistency. Festinger (1957) also argued about the idea of the magnitude of dissonance, or the degree of dissonance in every person. The magnitude of dissonance depends on the significance of the issue and effect of dissonance in every person.

Another interesting point from Festinger (1957) is about the dissonance relation, which he defined as the amount of dissonance cognitions relative to the amount of cognitive dissonance. Thus, the degree of consonance and dissonance will create various reactions in the level of cognition. The reactions will create coping strategies from individual towards the issue which discomforting their cognition (Benoit, 2000). The coping strategies are (1) individual has the possibility to change their behavior to reduce the dissonance factors, (2) individual can ignore or avoid the issue, (3) individual may deny the negative factors and increase their consonance with positive argumentation, (4) individual may use new factors and blame this factor instead of changing their behavior, or projection, (5) bolstering, or individual introduce several other influential factors that obscure the inconsistency, (6) individual disassociates the factors by admitting the less negative impact and denies the more negative relationship, which then contrasting the effect, (7) transcendence, or where individual focus on broader and abstract issue to minimize the connection (Benoit, 2000).

Those reactions also can continue to other human psychological process such as emotions. The writer argues that emotions in the context of language refer to the human processes of feeling and thought which also influenced by situations or social constructions around them. Nabi (2003) argued that emotion exists within human nature especially connected with the mental condition and, reactions to certain

stimuli (action, cause, or other matter). Nabi (2003) also argued that emotions are temporary but sometimes intense to some external stimuli.

Emotions can lead into the state of willingness. Emotions also involve perception to an object or event, and then human connect the perception to the previous emotional experience. This process will influence future perception, cognition, and behavior (Nabi, 2003). Thus, the emotions that appear now may have a connection with previous experience or previous perception. The writer takes disgust feeling and guilt as the samples. The reason is that, these two negative emotions often have a function to persuade the audience, especially to create dissonance in human cognitive process (Rozin and Fallon, 1987; Ausubel, 1995). These emotions also related closely to psychological process and the social construction.

DISGUST

According to Rozin and Fallon (1987), disgust is a basic sense, but it also depends on the social construction. The arousal of disgust can be caused by either organically or psychologically spoiled such as foods, products, or other actions (Rozein, Haidt & Mc Caulet, 1993). Some researchers found out that disgust can create nauseous feeling and can encourage individual who experience disgust to turn away from the object or defend against the object (Izard, 1993). However, the cultural construction of disgust could also be meant as a defense mechanism of body, soul, and

social norm (Izard, 1993).

Nabi (1998) in her research on message-induced animal experimentation argued that a negative correlation exists between disgust appeals and attitude change. Hutcherson (2011) supported this argument by suggesting that an individual who feels disgust toward a certain object will tend to avoid it, however, he also realized the possibility of an individual reducing the risk to expose the disgusting object.

GUILT

Guilt is a psychological feeling, which connects strongly with social construction and culture. Ausubel (1995) explained that guilt is also a tool for cultural survival since it works as a personal watchdog within an individual, to keep his or her behavior in line with the moral values in the society. Again according to Ausubel (1995), guilt creates negative feelings, which make individuals assess their behavior with their moral value, and try to conform to this moral value in order to reduce the guilt.

Ausubel argued that guilt may appear under several conditions. Developmental conditions include (a) the individual needs to admit certain standards of right and wrong or good and bad as his or her own, (b) individual also need to adopt the obligation of regulating his or her behavior to conform whatever standards he or she has, (c) individual must possess adequate self-critical capability to distinguish when an inconsistency between behavior and internalized values occurs. Ausubel also argued that guilt relies on both internal

and external sanctions. Gaylin (1979) suggested that guilt can give human signals when human violate his or her standard of behavior which individual personally decide to commit to do it.

The guilty feeling will give personal alarm that indicates human may fail to achieve the ideal personal standard. Wolman (1973) also described guilt as a feeling connected with the manifestation of negative emotions when we inconsistently negate moral, social or ethical principle. If torturing a baby animal, such as piglet can be considered unethical to a personal standard, then the guilt feeling can appear.

THE JUSTIFICATION OF CONTROVERSY FROM PETA

“Every day in countries around the world, animals are fighting for their lives. They are enslaved, beaten, and kept in chains to make them perform for humans’ ‘entertainment’; they are mutilated and confined to tiny cages so that we can kill them and eat them; they are burned, blinded, poisoned, and cut up alive in the name of ‘science’; they are electrocuted, strangled, and skinned alive so that people can parade around in their coats; and worse”- PETA.

The writer considers applying the theories in visual rhetoric and emotions to inform a case study from the controversial organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA). PETA is an animal rights organization that is working to send a message and spark public action regarding animal rights. However, sometimes PETA creates controversy through their actions. They do this because they believe that controversial demonstrations enable them to create more opportunities to disseminate their missions to society. The organization

realizes that media do not consider animal suffering as an important issue. Thus, debate and discussion about animal rights have minor exposure.

PETA (2011) mentions that it is sometimes necessary to shake people up in order to initiate discussion, debate, questioning of the status quo, and, of course, action. Thus, we try to make our actions colorful and controversial, thereby grabbing headlines around the world and spreading the message of kindness to animals to thousands -sometimes millions- of people (Why does PETA use controversial tactics?). In this statement, PETA gave valuable insight to their reason for creating public discussion. PETA considered that public dialogue and awareness on animal rights is a need, and PETA could be considered open to any possibility of debate, discussion, and argumentation to problematize the status quo, however, PETA also expects action towards animal rights.

THE VISUAL RHETORIC AND EMOTIONS IN “MEET YOUR MEAT”

The “Meet Your Meat” video serves as an example of a natural image. The narrator claims the video as an “undercover” investigation video of animal torture in the meat industry. The images in the video seem real. The video maker uses a shaking picture which indicated it was an amateur video or from hidden camera. The video seem more as a gathering of evidence in the reality. The video producers want to emphasize the idea of *sine qua non* or natural look of animal slaughtering to picture the reality show.

The visual object is not the real object. It is just the representation of the real object. It is an illustration of what is “real”, according to the producer of visual object. The “Meet Your Meat” video is the representation of real treatment in the meat industry. One of the techniques to persuade the audience is by providing detailed information in the video. The narrator of the video becomes the main interpreter of the “reality show”, as he gives direction to the audience about what to think, and how to think. Such as when he mentions, “The piglet ears are cut off without pain killer” or “The chicken is killed in the machine without pain killer”. Those words lead the audience to imagine of having a painful experience without opium to reduce the pain. The narrator of “Meet Your Meat” leads the audience to imagine the pain of animal farms by connecting it to human life and providing details to make people not only see and hear but also imagine the pain. This detailed narration which visually and verbally appears in the “Meet your Meat” video created *energeia* or the illusion of life (Van Eck, 2007).

In the “Meet Your Meat” video, the combination of images and words will create suitable moments within the audience perspective. The audience can see, for example, when the narrator says, “Some of them die because of starvation some of them become a cripple for growing so large, so fast, that their legs cannot stand their weight, which make them unable to reach food.” While the narrator describes, the audience can see the image of a chicken when it is unable to walk and finally dying, with other chickens stepping

on it. The combination of words from the narrator and the images allow the audience to create meaning from the video.

The imagery used various ways to inform, show, and eventually persuades people to follow PETA’s “objective.” The emotional arousal also appears because of the disturbing images, such as when the narrator describes that the chicken live in small cages with thousands of others; some have died in heart attack, stress, and starvation. During the narration, the video shows a man lashing the chicken to death. The video also shows the slaughtering process of chicken and portrays the blood flowing from their throat while they are still conscious. This brutal action leads into a dissonance in human brain likely creates an uncomfortable feeling in the audience. PETA tried to cause cognitive dissonance and hope to direct them to deal with that dissonance. At the end of the video, the narrator directs the audience to be a vegetarian for the better life of animals and their own health. This is how the narrator provides the solution for the audience to deal with dissonance they have felt during the video.

In the coping strategies of individual to reduce the dissonance, the writer argues that the visual rhetoric of “Meet Your Meat” video try to change the audience to be a vegetarian as an answer to cope with the dissonance images and audio. However, PETA also does not anticipate the possibility of other coping strategy, and even open the possibility of projection from individual to blame farm industry and warn the audience to watch the video.

PETA wants the audience to change behavior, for example, by saying, "Please, choose vegetarianism. Do it for the animal. Do it for the environment, and do it for your health. Check the website for vegetarian kit". This is one of the argumentation of PETA to persuade the audience to be a vegetarian. The narrator also mentions in the beginning, "Millions of compassionate people leave meat of their plates for good". While he says that, the image project the chicken in the cage and look suffer. The opening statement help to convey briefly of what will the video show and what is their final message. This is intriguing because, instead of letting the audience find out the message at the end, they introduce their main objective in the beginning. Another example is when the narrator says "What you are about to see is beyond your nightmare", and the video shows images of chickens in the cage and a man lashes the chicken to death. The very beginning of the video also indicates the 'warning' from PETA about what will they show in video. This introduction opens the violation content of the video and opens the possibility of choices to avoid the video for the audience. I argue that this strategy will allow the audience to decide whether they want to continue the video or not. PETA do not force the audience to understand their message at the end, but PETA give options for the audience if they want to deal with the dissonance using avoidance, and decide not to see the rest of the video.

Using the words "a PETA investigation" and "this undercover video shows

the standard method of gathering chickens for slaughter", PETA wants to prevent the denial strategies from the audience to reduce the dissonance. The pressure on the words "inescapable reality" also avoid the possibility if the audience justify their behaviors by saying that the video is not real or just a modification technique by PETA. The narrator also mentions, "If you are drinking milk, you are supporting this severe life". When the narrator says that sentence, the video shows the image of a cattle live in a small cage to produce milk for human. He also mentions, "The chicken cannot even spread one wing for thirty four hours just to produce one egg". This technique shows how PETA wants to reduce the possibility of an excuse to cope the dissonance. For example, when the audience says, "I just eat one egg, I just eat a little bit of meat, or I just drink milk". PETA emphasizes that a small number of food or drink will influence the whole system of animal farm cruelty. For example, even only one egg, it makes chicken have to be in severe condition for thirty four hours.

However, PETA opens possibility of projection to cope the strategy. Instead of changing behavior, audience may blame the industry and eat "farmer's market" with their ethical treatment to animal. Audience may argue that they do not know how unethical the modern farm industry is; thus, it becomes a justification to eat meat but from more ethical farm, such as organic product or farmer's market. In the video, PETA keeps blaming the industry, by mentioning, "profit to the company" or emphasizing the

farm industry system in every section. At the end, the narrator shows images of animal such as chickens and piglets running away in a large green yard of animal farm; thus, the animals are still in the farm but bigger. The animal can freely run and live. He says, "Please, think about what you see. Every time we sit down to eat we make a choice". These images are inconsistent with their idea of vegetarianism, because it will open the justification argument to eat meat but from a different farm that give freedom to animal. The ending of the video seems anti-climax towards their idea on stop consuming the whole dairy product such as milk, eggs, and meat, by showing the natural life of animal that still life in farm. However, if PETA's objective is for treating animal in more ethical way, then consuming farmer's market product which let the animal live freely before consuming them will be justifiable for PETA. If the audiences project that the discomfort feeling they have is because of industrial farm, and they decide to "push" action to this industry to be more ethical, then this is also a win-win solution for PETA. Thus, in this video, PETA encourages the vegetarianism, but also open the possibility of the audience to eat the meat in more ethical farms, and push the audience to do action towards the industrial farm.

The writer argues that an individual can change their action during the process because of the process of argumentation by social construction or their own personal experience. This is the reason why Jarcho et al (2010) also argued that the term of attitude change in cognitive dissonance

process is relatively slow process (not automatic), involve reflective processes after the decisions making process. Jarcho mentioned that during post-decision, individual will re-assess their decision, which occurs many minutes after an individual take a decision. However, many researchers still optimist and suggested that the bigger conflict of persuasion message with self-relevance, the more it will lead to greater attitude change (Aronson, 1968). Here, the writer can argue that in the "Meet Your Meat" video, dissonance is a construction of the individual, and will create different outcomes of dissonance depends on a) the dissonance relation or whether the video has relevancy to their life, values, or culture. For example, if the audience is vegetarian, perhaps the dissonance will strengthen their belief in vegetarianism. However, probably for an audience whose culture or country already have strict rules on how to kill and treat animals ethically, they will have more justification to eat meat because they can deny that the life of animal in their community is not the same as what they see in the video, (b) the degree of the issue is related to the audience's life. For example, if the audience has experience in seeing animal torture, and slaughter, perhaps the image on the video will not shock them; thus they do not feel too much dissonance. However, for the audience who did not know and see animal slaughter process for the first time, it might shock them and disturb them, (c) the action necessary to overcome the dissonance will vary on the magnitude of dissonance

(Festinger, 1957). Thus, the action from the audience to deal with the dissonance could be following the direction of the narrator to be a vegetarian, turn off the video or avoid watching it, also continue eating meat after they can justify themselves with various forms of personal argumentation.

In the “Meet Your Meat” video, the narrator describes how the man chops off the cattle’s thorn without pain killer; sometimes the people use electric metal to move the cows. Cattle or cow with injuries such as, eyes cancer can be included as healthy animals for consumption. He claims that 100.000 cows were unable to walk to the slaughtering place. “Hamburgers are made from these dairy cows”, said the narrator while the video shows a cow is dying. This video appeals to disgust, since cattle are animals for human consumption. The writer argues that disgust depends on the construction process of individual. The writer argues that disgust can lead into the feeling of rejection towards the object, but it does not mean it will simultaneously change someone’s behavior. This can have two possibilities: first, the perception of disgust to the video or to the meat. If the disgust justifies the video as a disgusting visual object then the audience can simply avoid the video, but they still eat the meat. However, if the audience perceives the meat as the source of disgust, the audience would support actions related to meat, for example, avoiding eating meat or continuing to eat meat but only organic, and other various possible actions.

The last session of the “Meet Your

Meat” video focuses on the torture of pigs and piglets. The narrator explains that the pigs lived in the tiny cages and cannot move during their entire life. Sometimes the pigs go insane because they cannot move nor have any activity. The small pigs suffered too. The narrator says that the man chopped off the ears of piglets without pain killer. While the narrator explains, the video shows the small piglet run from ‘evil’ human hands that want to cut their ears. The sound of the piglet cry painfully also strengthens the illustration of animal torture and finally the man chopped off the pig’s ear. Lastly, the narrator says, “Please, choose vegetarian for the animal”, while a pig is hanging in the slaughtering place with flowing blood and floundering. The image on the video may create guilt, for example, when the video showed the pain of small piglet. The feeling of guilt could be a powerful mechanism that prevents individuals from transgressing and motivates individuals to rectify their transgressions (Keltner, 1995). However, the writer also argues that the guilt effect depends on the context of individual standard. Coulter and Pinto (1995) argued that comparable message manipulations may create different levels of guilt, depending on the context in which individual used to assess certain issue or visual object.

CONCLUSION

The video of PETA has illustrated the idea of power and image. In visual rhetoric perspective, this video has created a disturbance in audience cognition but also vivid memory and persuasion message

at the same time. Through the combination of verbal messages and images which is intertwined in the video, PETA wanted to offer emotional attachment to the audience with their concerns. Through the audio and visual information, the audience can have a different interpretation, justification, and coping strategy. Here, I argued that the narrator as a verbal message communicator mainly plays the role to direct the interpretation of images to the audience. Using visual rhetoric, PETA want to change their audience behavior, but PETA also open if the audience to avoid the message at the beginning and the audience can project other possibility of action other than vegetarianism.

Nabi (1998) argued that emotions can be theorized as frames permeated into messages that endorse the selected pieces of information over others and consequently embolden diverse problem definition as an effect of interpretations and or treatment recommendations. The selected information from PETA video provides the possibility of disgust to the video or the meat. PETA also has selected images that make the audience evaluate their standard of behavior in choosing meal. However, the use of visual rhetoric for emotional appeal may lead not only into awareness on the issue and action, but also rejection and personal coping strategy.

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