

# Visual Grammar Analysis of Political Cartoons on Russia-Ukraine War

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## المستخلص:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة الوسائل البصرية، وكيفية إيصالها للمعنى ووجهات النظر والأيدولوجيات المختلفة حول الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية في 2022 من خلال الكارتون السياسي؛ ويعتمد البحث استخدام المنهج الوصفي، والتحليل الكيفي لعينة عشوائية طبقية لست من الرسوم الكاريكاتورية المنشورة عبر الانترنت لرسامين كاريكاتور من جنسيات مختلفة؛ وتستخدم الدراسة نظرية كريس وفان ليوين (Kress and van Leeuwen) (2006) حول قواعد التصميم المرئي، مع التركيز على دراسة الدالات التمثيلية والتفاعلية والتركيبية. ويخلص البحث إلى استخدام وتوظيف العديد من العناصر المرئية في الكاريكاتور السياسي محل الدراسة، كما أنها تسهم في توصيل المعنى وتعكس وجهات النظر المختلفة لرساميها التي نقلوها للجمهور حول الحرب الروسية الأوكرانية، ويظهر أنها تلعب دورا في الإقناع، كما أنها تقدم رسائل وأيدولوجيات مختلفة.

## Abstract

This study aims at investigating visual resources and how they communicate meanings and perspectives, and reflect ideologies in political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war 2022. It is a non-experimental qualitative research examining a stratified sampling of six caricatures published online by cartoonists of different nationalities. The study adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar; and the analysis is conducted based on the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. Finally, it has been found that multiple visual resources are employed in the investigated political cartoons. They communicate meanings, and reflect the cartoonists' different viewpoints on the

Russia-Ukraine war that are transmitted to the viewers. They show persuasive function. Moreover, they present different messages and ideologies.

**Keywords:** *Semiotics; Visual Grammar; Political Cartoons; Russia-Ukraine War*

## 1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has a historical background. Ukraine was governed by the Soviet Union until its dissolution in 1991; and it occurs between Russia and Europe (Fisher, 2014). The conflict began with a strife over the Crimea, a peninsula on the Russian-Ukrainian borders (Bebler, 2015; Fisher, 2014). Then, Russia invaded it on February 2014. In addition, the second invasion of Ukraine took place on February 24, 2022, led by the Russian President, Vladimir Putin.

The Russia-Ukraine war has been presented by Ukrainian, Russian, and international cartoonists in a number of newspapers, and cartoons websites. They communicated different messages and perspectives regarding it and its consequences. Furthermore, they have reflected different ideologies associated with it. Caricatures or cartoons are "portrayals" used to express concepts or events, or refer to individuals with the purpose of influencing persons or societies (Robingah, 2020). It is originally driven from the Italian word "carcase", which means to "exaggerate" (ALjrah et al., 2021). Cartoons are effective communication tools. They could be used by cartoonists to communicate meanings, opinions, beliefs, and values, deliver specific messages, and reflect ideologies or power relations. ALjrah et al. (2021) mention that media uses different types of cartoons, whether social, economic, or political, and visual communication to raise people's awareness, and even influence their preferences and opinions about issues of interest. He adds that visuals are challenging, and could have varied interpretations. He

has also discussed the persuasive function of cartoons. However, Wodak (2002) argues that it is still unidentified whether the media has an impact on people or vice versa. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) mention that mass media powers use the "visual language" to propagate certain images to prevail and dominate.

Thus, this study aims at investigating a number of selected international political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war that are published online. This is to identify the visual resources in these cartoons, and their employment to communicate meanings and perspectives to the viewers, and reflect certain ideologies.

## **2. Research Questions**

1. What are the visual modes of communication used in political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war 2022?
2. How do these visual resources communicate and reflect specific meanings, perspectives, and ideologies?

## **3. Review of the Literature**

El-Falaky (2019) has used Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar and the multimodal critical discourse approach (MCDA) to investigate political cartoons on the 25 January, 2011 and 30 June, 2013 revolutions published in Al-Ahram newspaper. She has found that these cartoons have been a reflection of social reality. They have also introduced a positive representation of both revolutions and their supporters.

Semotiuk (2019) has used MDA, and computer-based analysis (MAXQDA 2018) to examine different nationalities political cartoons published in 2014 and 2015 on the Russian-Ukrainian war. They focused on studying psychological and physical aspects. They also investigated verbal and visual humor. They have found transdisciplinary political cartoons contain multimodality features reflecting topicality, critical attitude, humor, satire, alienation and partiality.

Ahmed (2020) adopted Saussure's and Roland Barthes' theories of semiotic analysis to examine political cartoons published after the Egyptian Revolution on 25 January, 2011, focusing on the Egyptian presidential elections in 2018, in online newspapers, linguistically and visually. She has reported that visual images are powerful tools to communicate indirect messages, compared to language; and the newspapers used them to state their position regarding the elections and the pre-voting phase to the audience.

Furthermore, Abdulrazzaq (2022) has used Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar to examine cartoons published on Facebook that discuss the electricity problem in Iraq. He has reported that the cartoons have expressed and promoted awareness, ideas, beliefs, and ideologies on the social media.

Moreover, Al-Dala'ien et al. (2022) have examined political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war. They are published on the Facebook (from January to September 2022) by Arab Jordanian cartoonists, as neutral representatives of the Arab society. They are analyzed visually, verbally, and symbolically, adopting Barth's semiotic analysis. The researchers have concentrated on examining the visual resources compared to the verbal resources. They have revealed that "verbo-pictorial" caricatures are powerful tools regarding communicate meanings and messages.

Shahzad et al. (2023) have adopted MDA and Machine's (2007) to study verbal and visual resources reflecting political ideologies in a Pakistani newspaper printed in English (the Dawn). They have concluded that the cartoonists used visual resources to transfer their sociopolitical points of view to the audience. They also criticized viewpoints that oppose those of the readers.

As revealed, most semiotic and visual research has focused on examining political cartoons on social issues, revolutions, or elections. Obviously, there is less research concerned with studying

political cartoons on wars. Moreover, there is a gap regarding studying political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war 2022, in specific, from different perspectives, based on visual grammar analysis. Therefore, the researcher adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's theory of visual grammar (2006) to analyze a number of selected international political cartoons on Russia-Ukraine war to reveal varied meaning interpretations, messages, attitudes, and ideologies.

#### **4. Methodology and Theoretical Framework**

This is a descriptive non-experimental qualitative research. A stratified random sampling is used to select two sets of political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war 2022 introduced by different nationalities during the first year of the war (from February to October). The first set holds Russia responsible for the war; and the second set depicts the role played by the U.S.A and the NATO in instigating the war. Moreover, in order to identify and examine the visual aspects in the cartoons and their contribution to interpreting meanings and reflecting attitudes, and ideologies, the theoretical framework design of the present study is based on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2006).

Kress and van Leeuwen are pioneers in the field of visual grammar. They have used it to examine semiotic and visual resources in light of social semiotics (in a specific context). They view the visual structure as related to specific social aspects and ideologies. Social means the processes and strategies people use to communicate and deliver cultural notions, attitudes, opinions, or power relations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Social visual semiotics is used for communication; it employs visual resources to impact social practices and ideologies to be legitimized (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In addition, the media uses semiotic and visual resources to address current events and issues, communicate meanings or affect

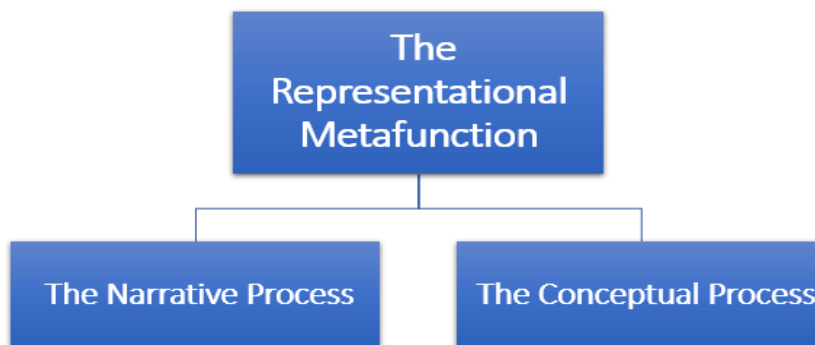
opinions. Visual resources include colors, shapes, lines, facial expressions, gestures, etc.

#### 4.1 Visual Grammar

The visual grammar theory is introduced by Kress and van Leeuwen. It is based on Halliday's systematic functional grammar. Halliday's theory is a linguistic one concerned with language; it discusses three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual; these metafunctions are called representational, interactive, and compositional, respectively, by Kress and van Leeuwen in their visual grammar model (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

##### 4.1.1 The Representational Metafunction

It consists of two main processes: the narrative process, and the conceptual process, as shown in Figure (1).



**Fig. 1** *The Representational Metafunction*

##### 4.1.1.1 The Narrative Process

The narrative process narrates a story via visuals. Kress & van Leeuwen (2006) classifies it into six sub processes: action process, reactional process, speech and mental process, circumstances, conversion process and geometrical symbolism. They add that it contains participant/s, and vector, which is connected to the participant. The vector describes an action, such as the verb in language; and the actor is commonly the most remarkable object in the image based on, for example, its size, color, and location (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), there are two action processes: The first is transactional that has actor, vector, and goal; and the other is non-transactional that has actor and vector, or vector and goal (event). Furthermore, they add that there are two reactional processes: The first is transactional including reactor, vector, and phenomenon; and the second is non-transactional without a phenomenon. In such processes, the reactor has to be human, or could have eye contact to create a vector.

They also refer to a third process called the speech and mental process that consists of a senser or speaker and a thought or dialogue balloon, respectively. Fourth, they mention the conversion process, which refers to natural events or processes, where the participant is called relay and acts as a goal and an actor for different actions.

Fifth, they refer to the circumstances process as a secondary process with secondary participants called circumstances, whose removal would not impact the core concept of the narrative image; but it might lead to a loss of details and related information. They also add that this process has three types: location, mean, and accompaniment. Sixth, the geometrical symbolism process includes "only a vector, indicating directionality by means of an 'infinity' sign, rather than by means of an arrowhead" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

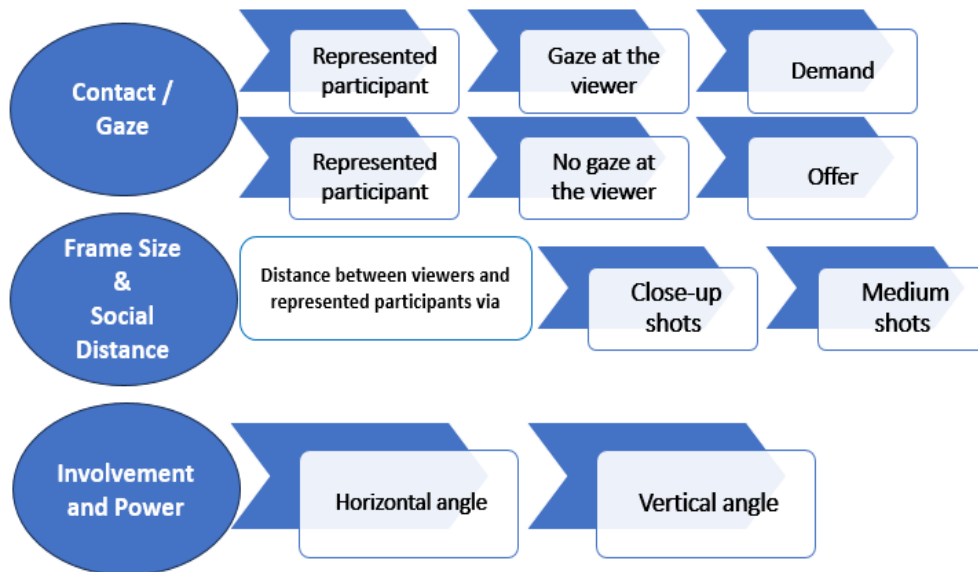
#### **4.1.1.2 The Conceptual Process**

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the conceptual process includes the classification, symbolic, and analytical categories; and they describe them as follows: First, the classification process has a "taxonomy" relationship between the participants; there is "the superordinate" and various "subordinates". Second, the conceptual analytical process is found in drawings, maps, and low modality photos. The relationship between

participants in such process is a "part-whole" one, where the whole is the carrier, and the parts are the "possessive attributes" selected to be presented. Third, the conceptual symbolic process focuses on the participant's entity or the intended meaning. It might be a symbolic attributive process with two participants: the carrier with the set identity, and the symbolic attributes which contain the meaning; or a symbolic suggestive process, with the carrier only.

#### 4.1.2 The Interactive Metafunction

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the interactive metafunction is concerned with the relationship between the image producer and the viewer, which is most commonly an indirect one. They add that in this process an interaction occurs between the represented participant in the image (created by the producer), and the interactive participant (the viewer), via a number of elements including contact, frame size and social distance, perspectives, and involvement and power. Figure 2 illustrates and summarizes these elements.



**Fig. 2** *Summary of the Interactive Metafunction*



#### **4.1.2.1 Contact**

It refers to the contact, via gaze or gesture, that happens between the viewer and the represented participant (human or not). The direct contact is called a demand image; on the other hand, the indirect or absent one is called an offer image, where there is no interaction between them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

#### **4.1.2.2 Frame Size and Social Distance**

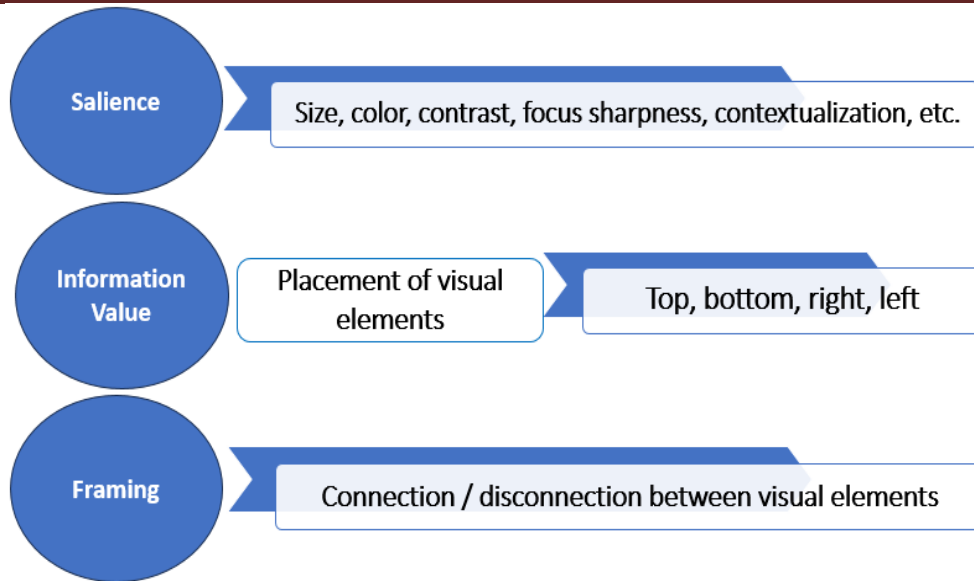
Frame size includes close-up, medium, or long shots, which engage or detach the viewers from the represented participants, suggesting relationship or social distance between them (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Close-up shots are from face to shoulder; medium shots are from face to waist; and long or wide shots are of the whole body (Dise, 2016).

#### **4.1.2.3 Involvement and Power**

It is where horizontal and vertical angles are employed to achieve interactive purpose between the represented participant and the viewer. The capture could be from below eye-level (low angle), above eye-level (high angle), or same eye-level angle; they reflect power of the represented participant over the viewer, power of the viewer, and equality / neutral effect, respectively (Dise, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2016; Sobrino, 2017).

#### **4.1.3 The Compositional Metafunction**

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) state that the compositional metafunction considers the entire meaning of the image via combining the representational and interactive elements. It is concerned with investigating visual resources such as salience, information value, and framing. Figure (3) displays a summary of the compositional metafunction.



**Fig. 3** *Summary of the Compositional Metafunction*

#### 4.1.3.1 Salience of visual aspects

It could be realized via eye-catchy visual resources in the image, such as colors, size, placement of objects (at the foreground or background), sharpness of focus, and contextualization (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The degrees of salience include different sizes; saturated to desaturated colors; full brightness to less brightness; high to low modality; contextualization (detailed to non-detailed background), etc. (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

#### 4.1.3.2 Information Value

It tackles meaning interpretation, and the value related to placement of visual objects: to the right (new information); to the left (given information); on the top (ideal); to the bottom (real); in the center (core information); or at margins (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

#### 4.1.3.3 Framing

It represents the connection or disconnection between the visual aspects depending on the existence or absence of "framing devices", which are realized via horizontal and vertical lines, empty

spaces, similarities, or dissimilarities of shapes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006).

## **5. Data Analysis and Findings**

The cartoons are classified into two categories. The first set of cartoons (three) are against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and addresses Russia as being primarily responsible for the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022. The second set (three) shows the U.S.A and the NATO as the instigators of this war.

### **5.1 Cartoons against the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022**

#### **5.1.1 Cartoon 1**

Fig. 4 shows cartoon 1 entitled “Hard bite”, published on the Cagle Cartoons website, by the Slovakian cartoonist, Martin Sutovec. This cartoon depicts a bear, symbolizing Russia, biting a brick painted with the colors of the Ukrainian flag, representing Ukraine.

##### **5.1.1.1 The Representational Metafunction**

Two representational narrative processes are detected in this cartoon. First, a transactional action process including the bear as an actor; its hands holding the brick with the colors of the Ukrainian flag as a gesture-vector; and the brick as the goal. This process refers to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and its attempts to take it over. Second, there is a non-transactional reactional process, where the bear is a reactor; his gaze is a vector; and the phenomenon is unseen, and left for the audience's predictions.

##### **5.1.1.2 Interactive Metafunction**

The contact between the represented participant (the bear) and the viewers is absent, producing offer image. Moreover, a close-up shot is presented of the bear concentrating on his facial expressions of astonishment and pain. Ukraine has not been an easy target for Russia; it is resisting back causing losses to the Russians

represented via details including the bear's broken teeth, drops of sweat, sore eyes, and shocked gaze. Additionally, there is same eye-level capture of the bear that reflects neutral effect to the audience; it seems directing them not to get engaged or affected by the bear's suffering. On the contrary, above eye-level capture is presented of the brick. It seems to reflect Ukraine's weakness to the viewers, and arise their sympathy with Ukraine.

#### **5.1.1.3 The Compositional Metafunction,**

The bear is the most salient visual aspect in the image due to its big size, which could be reflecting Russia's power, and imperialistic ideology in Ukraine. Moreover, the colors are significantly employed. The brick is painted with saturated blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag. The red color is used for the sore eyes and the blood from the bear's broken teeth, representing Russia's suffering due to the Ukrainian resistance. There is also blood scattered on the brick that might be referring to Ukrainian casualties because of the war. Furthermore, the helmet refers to the Russian soldiers; and the 5-pointed red star on it is the same found on the Kermlin's Spasskaya Tower. Mite (2002) has discussed that the "red five-point star" is a symbol of the Red Army of the old Soviet Union; and he has expressed his concern that Russian tries to restore it indicates a "nostalgia for Soviet imperial might". Thus, this star might reflect Russian imperialism represented via attempts to control previous Soviet countries, such as Ukraine.

Contextualization does not include a lot of details. The background is in the desaturated white color to attract the viewer's attention to the bear and the brick. Additionally, the placement of objects shows information value. The brick (with the blood) to the left is a representation of given information that this war caused casualties among the Ukrainians. On the other hand, the bear, with its facial expressions, to the right represents new information about Ukraine's resistance that shocked and exhausted Russia. Finally,

this cartoon reflects on Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the unexpected Ukrainian resistance.

### 5.1.2 Cartoon 2

Fig. 5 displays cartoon 2 entitled "Putin world hunger", published on the Cagle Cartoons website. It is by the American cartoonist, Ed Wexler. Vladimir Putin, the Russian President, is presented as a hungry man setting to a dining table, and preparing to have the world, and Ukraine, for his meal.

#### 5.1.2.1 Representational Metafunction

Two narrative transactional processes are found in the cartoon. First, a reactional process has Putin as the reactor, Putin's gaze at the globe on the plate as a vector, and the globe, including Ukraine, as the phenomenon. Second, there is an action process, where Putin is an actor; his gesture adding salt to the globe is a vector, and the globe (with Ukraine) is the goal. The processes express Putin's greed and intention to take over the whole world starting with Ukraine.

#### 5.1.2.2 Interactive Metafunction

It is an offer image where the contact is absent between Putin and the viewers. It appears to present Putin trying to satisfy his greed and ambition to control the world as if no one is watching him. A medium shot of Putin is introduced (head to waist), and the dining table hides the remaining part of his body, to draw some attention to the other visual aspects in the cartoon. Furthermore, there is a below eye-level capture of Putin, who is looking down towards the globe, which reflects his power. There is also a high angle capture of the globe/Ukraine. This reflects fear, and might be interpreted as a threat that in case of Ukraine's defeat, the whole world would be subject to Putin's greed.

### 5.1.2.3 Compositional Metafunction

Putin is the most salient visual aspect since he is presented in size bigger than all the other figures including the globe. This is low modality image, in comparison to reality, since the globe is bigger than one man. This seems to reflect Putin's imperialistic ideology represented via a desire to control the world. There are also no details at the background. This focuses the viewers' attention on the core idea of the cartoon via the image of Putin, dining table, and the globe/Ukraine served plate.

The use of colors, placement of objects, and framing are highly significant in this image. The colors of the Ukrainian flag (blue and yellow) are used for the globe instead of the usual green and blue colors. This delivers a message that the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the beginning, and the whole world is facing the same threat. This idea is emphasized by adding the Ukrainian flag on the globe map. Moreover, saturated blue and yellow colors are used, while most of the other colors in the picture are less saturated. Besides, the desaturated white color is used to outline and frame Putin's body and the globe. This contributes to drawing the attention to Putin's threat to Ukraine and the globe.

There is also the dividing line separating Putin's body and the table detaching them from each other. On the contrary, the table, plate, and globe are attached via the same round shape. This could be interpreted as Putin is still unable to achieve his goals. Additionally, the globe/Ukraine is placed to the left (given information), while Putin is placed to the right introducing his ambitions as new information.

### 5.1.3 Cartoon 3

Fig. 6 introduces cartoon 3 entitled "Stop the rashist demon raining down death!", by the Ukrainian cartoonist, [Serhiy Kolyada](#). It is published online in the Ukrainian Newspaper in English Language, the Kyiv Post. This cartoon refers to Putin as a "demon"

in the image and the title. In addition, a hand, with two bracelets in its arm in blue and yellow, is attempting to stop him.

#### **5.1.3.1 Representational Metafunction**

Five narrative processes are detected in this cartoon: Four main and one minor. First, Putin is actor; the vector is the teeth-rockets falling from his mouth on Ukraine on the map (goal) causing explosions and destruction in a transactional action process. Second, there is a non-transactional action process that has Putin as actor; his hand in attacking position as gesture-vector, and the goal is unseen. Third, non-transactional reactional process exists, where Putin is reactor, his gaze is vector, and the phenomenon is absent. However, the absent goals and phenomena of the above processes could be the absent actor in the next non-transactional event action process that includes Putin as goal, the hand holding him as gesture-vector. Since there are bracelets with the Ukrainian flag colors in this hand's arm, the absent goal, phenomenon, actor, respectively, is predicted to be Ukraine. Thus, the cartoon reflects Putin's aggressive attack over Ukraine, where he is actor and reactor in three processes. It also sheds light on the Ukrainians' attempt to resist, where Ukraine was referred to via an absent actor.

The fifth process is a minor non-transitional action process. The three arrows in red are vectors directed towards Ukraine located on the map, the goal. The actor is absent and left to the viewer's imagination. However, it could be predicted to be Putin, the Russian army, or the Kremlin presented at the background with the well-known five-pointed red star on the top of its tower.

#### **5.1.3.2 Interactive Metafunction**

There is no contact between Putin and the viewers. They are detached. Additionally, Putin is presented via a long shot where he appears as a demon obtaining the body of a wolverine, and the face of a vampire. Moreover, there is below eye-level capture of Putin,

who is looking down to anonymous object. In contrast, there is a high angle capture of the hand. This represents Russia as the powerful party, and Ukraine as the weak party. It also reflects a sense of threat and fear to the viewer.

### 5.1.3.3 Compositional Metafunction

Putin is the most salient visual aspect in the image. It is introduced in big size, and placed at the foreground. This refers to him as the cause behind the destruction took place in Ukraine as a result of the Russia-Ukraine war. On the other hand, there is low modality represented via the size of the hand which is bigger than Putin's face resembling the Ukrainian resistance. Furthermore, both Putin and the hand are placed in the center of the image to draw the viewers' attention to the Russia-Ukraine war as the main theme of the cartoon.

In addition, colors play an essential role in this cartoon. There are the highly saturated blue and red colors of the Russia flag pinned to Putin's suit. In contrast, the same colors are used for Putin's suit, but faded and in less saturation, contributing to emphasizing the monster's image. However, the saturated bright red color is used for the tie in reference to blood and death. It is also used for the arrows to indicate dangerousness. Moreover, the colors of the explosions are in saturated yellow making it lively, and seems to engage the viewers with the destruction caused in Ukraine. The blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag are saturated giving focus and power to Ukraine through its resistance. Besides, there is the use of the black and orange ribbon, which refers to St. George's Ribbon symbolizing the Soviet's red army victory in World War II over the Germans; and the Z form of it is "a symbol of the Russian military and used by supporters of Russia in the 2022-Russia-Ukraine war ([MacFarquhar](#), 2022; [Schechter](#), 2023). In contrast, since the cartoon is depicting Putin as destroying Ukraine; the cartoonist might have used it to highlight his imperialistic ideology.



Additionally, there is a detailed contextualization used in this image: the foggy bloody red background; the complete moon, indicating the wolverine's transformation; and the Kremlin's tower. Moreover, a framing device is employed via the horizontal edge line separating Putin and the table, where the map of Ukraine is placed. This may indicate that it is still difficult for Putin to defeat Ukraine and win the war.

## **5.2 Cartoons showing the U.S.A and NATO as instigators of the Russia-Ukraine war 2022**

### **5.2.1 Cartoon 4**

The cartoon in Fig. 7 is by the Chinese cartoonist, Liu Rui; and it is published in the Global Times newspaper online. It is entitled "Security or instability?" It displays that the U.S.A caused the break out of the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022 via encouraging the NATO expansion, and exploiting the conflicts between Russia and Ukraine.

#### **5.2.1.1. Representational Metafunction**

There is a narrative transactional action process. Uncle Sam, who is representative of the U.S.A, and its ideology towards the war, is the actor. Besides, the bomb is the goal, and Uncle Sam's hand gesture throwing the lighter after he lit his cigarette is the vector. The cartoon implies that the U.S.A seems to use the NATO, and make use of the Russia-Ukraine conflicts to instigate the Russia-Ukraine war.

#### **5.2.1.2 Interactive Mtafunction,**

The contact between Uncle Sam and the viewers is absent, producing an offer image. Moreover, there is a long shot of Uncle Sam that allows observing all the other objects in the image including the NATO-expansion-lighter and the conflicts-bomb. Uncle Sam seems to be walking at the background to hide in the shadows after he has completed his mission and thrown the lighter

on the bomb. This could be interpreted as that America is the main driver behind the Russia-Ukraine war despite it declares its support for Ukraine and opposition to the Russia invasion to Ukraine. The U.S.A announced that it will not fight Russia for Ukraine to avoid the confrontation between Russia and the NATO; however, it considers providing assistance for Ukraine and imposing sanctions on Russia "defensive modes" (Vaishya, 2022). Additionally, there is a low angle capture of Uncle Sam's gesture throwing the lighter on the boom, and the lighter in the middle between them. It shows the power of the U.S.A, and that it controls the NATO, and the eruption of the Russia-Ukraine war.

### 5.2.1.3 Compositional Metafunction

Salience plays a significant role in this image. Uncle Sam is represented in size bigger than the lighter emphasizing that America is controlling the NATO, and the war event. The lighter and the bomb are in bright and highly saturated colors blue (with the NATO logo) and red (reflecting danger), while Uncle Sam (wearing clothes with the American flag colors) is in less saturated colors. This reflects that the attention is drawn to the NATO expansion and the known Russia-Ukraine conflicts as the causes behind the war. The NATO appears as a medium; and the U.S.A is driving the war behind the scenes. This is also reflected via placement of objects that show information value. Uncle Sam is at the background to the left (new information), the lighter is in the center, and the conflicts-bomb is at the foreground to the right (given information).

### 5.2.2 Cartoon 5

Fig. 8 displays cartoon 5 entitled "Incurable disease". It is by the Chinese cartoonist, Cai Meng, and published in the China Daily, an English-Language Chinese newspaper. It presents an ill man, laying on a hospital bed, and being supplied with blood to recover and survive.

### 5.2.2.1 Representational Metafunction

Two narrative processes are identified in this cartoon. First, there is a transactional reactional process, where the reactor is the NATO-ill-man; his eye-line resembles the vector; and the phenomenon is the full blood bag, representing the Russia-Ukraine war. Second, a non-transactional reactional process is taking place inside the photo frame of Uncle Sam. He is the reactor; the vector is his eye-line; and the phenomenon is absent and left to the viewer's imagination engaging them in the process.

### 5.2.2.2 Interactive Metafunction

There is an offer image produced since there is no contact between the NATO-ill-man and the audience. On the other hand, there is a demand image resulting from the contact between Uncle Sam and the viewers, who seems to be looking to them; and there is also a close-up shot of him. This causes an interaction between him and the viewers, which might be a reminder that the U.S.A plays a role in the Russia-Ukraine war. In addition, there is a long shot of the ill man that allows focusing on the surrounding details that contribute to interpreting the meaning of the picture.

After the cold war ended and the Soviet Union split, the NATO has participated in multiple military operations in, for example, Afghanistan, Yugoslavia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Libya (Masters, 2012). The four empty blood bags seem to be referring to these wars, since they are labelled with the word "WAR", and the fifth blood bag resembles the current Russia-Ukraine war started on February 2022. Additionally, gloomy desaturated colors are used for the foggy background that reflects a sense of the destruction caused by these wars. Moreover, there is a high angle capture of the photo frames of Uncle Sam and the Kremlin. This might be a reference to the old struggle between them since they were previously the most powerful nations in the world.

However, in the image, they seem to be replaced by the NATO that is at the viewer's same eye-level indicating equality.

### 5.2.2.3 Compositional Metafunction

The NATO-ill-man is the most salient figure. It is the biggest in size, and placed in the middle of the picture. He is the main theme, with focus on the main role he has played in the previous wars and the 2022-Russia-Ukraine war. Additionally, most of the colors used are desaturated, or of low saturation and brightness (white, blue, purple). The flowers are wilted and colored in faded yellow, purple, and green colors. This contributes to reflecting gloominess and death related to wars. On the other hand, the last blood bag is in highly saturated red color referring to the recent ongoing Russia-Ukraine war that occurred almost a month before this cartoon was published. The two photos of Uncle Sam and the Kremlin are framed. Both of them are dull and blurred, which might be referring to the past cold war between the U.S.A and the Soviet Union as the most powerful nations at this time, and to the NATO replacing them.

### 5.2.3 Cartoon 6

Fig. 9 presents a cartoon with no title published on the Iranian Tasnim News Agency English website. The cartoon introduces three main characters: a bear, representing Russia, and two men representing the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, and the NATO.

#### 5.2.3.1 Representational Metafunction

Three narrative processes are found in this cartoon. First, one transactional reactional process includes the bear, which seems thinking about attacking Zelenskyy, as a reactor, his eye contact as vector, and Zelenskyy as phenomenon. There is also a non-transactional reactional process. Zelenskyy (reactor) is looking at (vector) anonymous phenomenon desperately seeking to be rescued from the bear. The last narrative process is a transactional one. The actor is the NATO-man, adding spices (gesture-vector) to

Zelenskyy (goal) preparing him as a meal for the bear. This could reflect the role played by the NATO in provoking Russia to attack Ukraine, causing the Russia-Ukraine war in 2022.

### **5.2.3.2 Interactive Metafunction**

There is no contact between any of the three characters and the audience. Thus, these are three offer images introduced via the three narrative processes. Moreover, there are long shots of the three figures enabling the audience to have a holistic view of them, the relationship between them, and the surrounding details. The placement of the major visual aspects is meaningful. The NATO-man is presented at the foreground from low angle, indicating its power, and also responsibility for the eruption of the war. The NATO seems scarifying Ukraine to achieve its ambitions. Zelenskyy is shown in the middle from high level angle, reflecting weakness and fear since Ukraine has been subject to the attack. Furthermore, the bear is at the background at same-eye level reflecting neutral effect on the viewer. It also seems to deliver the message that it was not Russia that took the initiation to start the war, and it was incited by the NATO.

### **5.2.3.3 Compositional Metafunction**

The three characters in the cartoon are drawn in almost the same big size, in reference to them as the main participants in the Russia-Ukraine war. Saturated light blue color is used for the suit of the NATO-man with the NATO logo on it to identify him, and golden color for his hair. In contrast, less saturated dark blue and beige colors are used for Zelenskyy's suit and the bear, respectively. This could be emphasizing the NATO's responsibility for the war event. The background of the image does not give detailed contextualization and the desaturated white color of the snow is dominant. This focuses the viewers' attention on the three characters and their relation to the Russia-Ukraine war. Moreover,

it seems that the bear was wandering in its natural snowy environment with no attacking intent until it was provoked by the existence of Zelenskyy and the NATO's actions. Additionally, some tree leaves are colored in high saturated green color, and others are into yellow and brown colors, expressing the decaying process occurred as a result of the war.

Furthermore, the bear is placed to the left indicating that it is "given" information Russia is attacking Ukraine. On the contrary, the NATO-man on the tree to the right delivers new information that the NATO is the cause behind the Russia-Ukraine war. Zelenskyy is in the center of the image since Ukraine is where the war is taking place. Regarding framing, there is the tree branch drawn in horizontal line that seems to be separating between Zelenskyy and the NATO-man sitting on it secured from the bear. Besides, the long vertical line of the tree could be reflecting that after the NATO instigated the war, it left Ukraine alone facing Russia and suffering the consequences of the war. On the other hand, there are no framing devices used at the snow background. This could be indicating the geographical location of Russia and Ukraine that were both included in the Soviet Union before its dissolution. It could also mean that no near end is predicted for the Russia-Ukraine war since the NATO keeps encouraging it to fulfill its imperialistic expansionist goals and ambitions.

## **6. Discussion and Conclusion**

This study is concerned with examining the visual semiotic resources employed in the selected political cartoons on the 2022-Russia-Ukraine war adopting Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of visual grammar. The analysis is done based on the representational, interactive and compositional metafunctions.

The answer to the first research question "what are the visual modes of communication used in political cartoons on the Russia-Ukraine war?" is answered as follows: There are varied visual

resources employed in the examined cartoons including eye-contact, gestures, facial expressions, shots, angles, salience via sizes, colors and contextualization, placement of objects, and framing devices.

Moreover, the answer to the second research question: " How do these visual resources communicate and reflect specific meanings, perspectives, and ideologies?" is answered as follows:

There are two cartoon categories examined. The first one includes three cartoons (Figures 4, 5, and 6) referring to the aggressive Russian invasion of Ukraine and that Russia has full responsibility for the break out of the war. In these cartoons, there are eight representational narrative processes where the bear is actor and reactor, and Ukraine a goal; Putin is actor 3 times, reactor twice, and goal to absent actor once. Moreover, Ukraine is goal three times, and phenomenon once. This interpretation emphasizes Russia' aggressive attack of Ukraine, and Ukraine's attempts to resist. This is clarified in Fig. 10.

Moreover, the detected visual elements in relation to the interactive and compositional metafunctions have reflected the cartoonists' perspectives towards the Russia-Ukraine war, and communicated them to the viewers. They have also emphasized Russia's imperialistic ideology reflected via describing its aggressive attack on Ukraine, and desire to take over the world. It is worth mentioning that cartoons one and two are by Slovakian and American cartoonists, respectively, whose countries are members of the NATO, and Slovakia is another previous Soviet Union country. Furthermore, cartoon 3 is by a Ukrainian cartoonist. In addition, the way the visual elements introduced and communicated messages and meaning seems to have persuasive function through the type of interaction it creates with the audience via the use of salience, contact, shots, angles, placement of objects, and framing, for instance.

The second category of the cartoons includes three cartoons (Figures 7, 8, and 9). They depict the U.S.A and the NATO as prime drivers of the Russia-Ukraine war. There are six representational narrative processes identified where Uncle Sam (the U.S.A)/NATO are actors and reactors four times; bear (Russia) is reactor once; items referring to Ukraine are goals/Phenomena 4 times; and Ukraine is reactor once. This is illustrated in Fig. 11.

Furthermore, the visual aspects identified and investigated based on the interactive and compositional metafunctions has contributed to expressing the cartoonists' viewpoints on the Russia-Ukraine war and communicated them to the viewers. They have also reflected the U.S.A and the NATO's ideologies regarding intimidating and utilizing the Russia-Ukraine war to achieve benefits and ambitions. Russia was depicted in the last cartoon as provoked by the NATO to attack Ukraine, and not as the main cause of the war. It is noteworthy that these cartoons are published in two Chinese online newspapers and one Iranian. China is known for its support for Russia. It also provides Russia with financial support to confront the sanctions imposed on it by the U.S.A and western countries due to the Russia-Ukraine war (Chiou, 2022). Additionally, the visual elements have shown a persuasive function since they have significantly delivered specific meanings and messages to the viewers through, for example, salience, contact, shots, angles, placement of objects, and framing.

Finally, the results of the study agree with Ahmed (2020) who has reported that visual images employed in political cartoons are efficient in communicating implicit meanings and messages. They also align with Abdulrazzaq (2022) who has used visual grammar to analyze political cartoons, and revealed that they express specific ideas and ideologies. The findings also go along with those of Shahzad et al. (2023) who have stated that cartoonists use visual resources to transfer their view points to the audience;

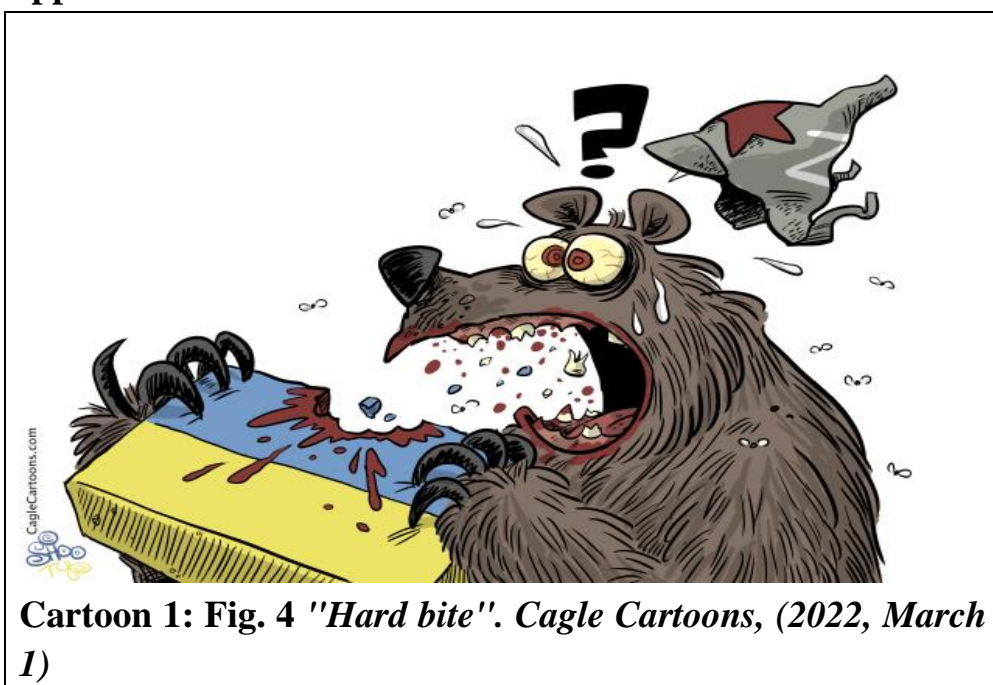


and ALjrah et al. (2021) who have discussed the persuasive function of the cartoons.

## 7. Recommendations for Further Research

The political cartoons selected for analysis are published during the first year of the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war. Thus, we suggest that political cartoons published during preceding time could be examined and compared in further research from other semiotic perspectives.

## Appendix





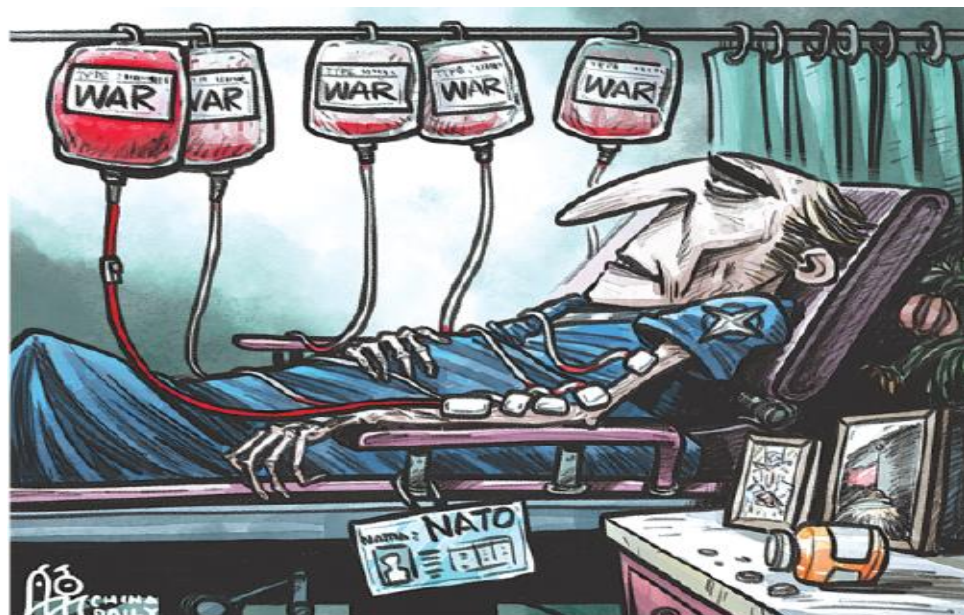
**Cartoon 2: Fig. 5** "Putin world hunger". Cagle Cartoons, (2022, March 14)



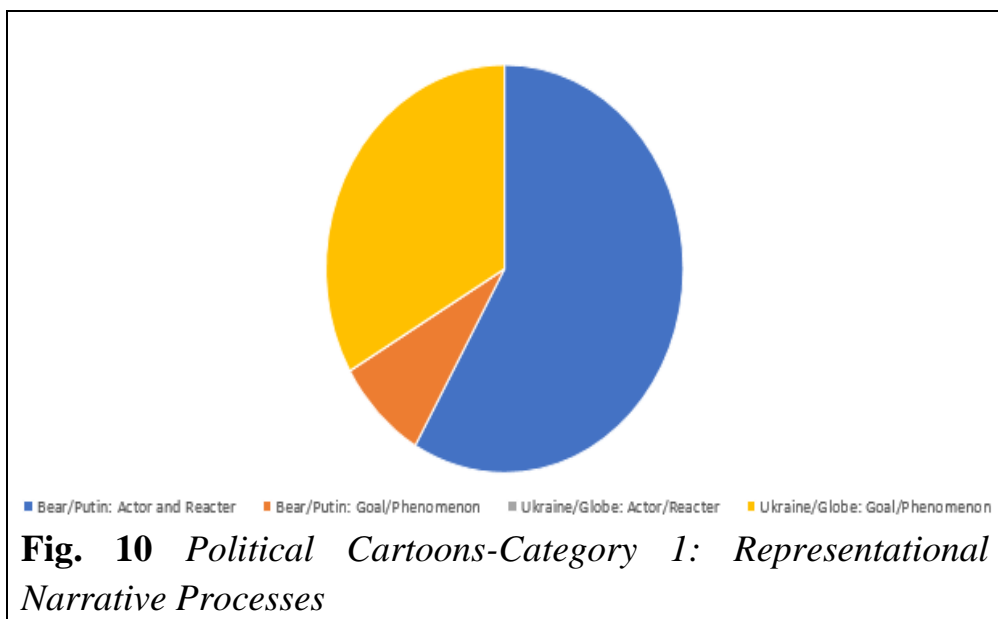
**Cartoon 3: Fig. 6** "Stop the rashist demon raining down death!" Kyiv Post, (2022, October 11)



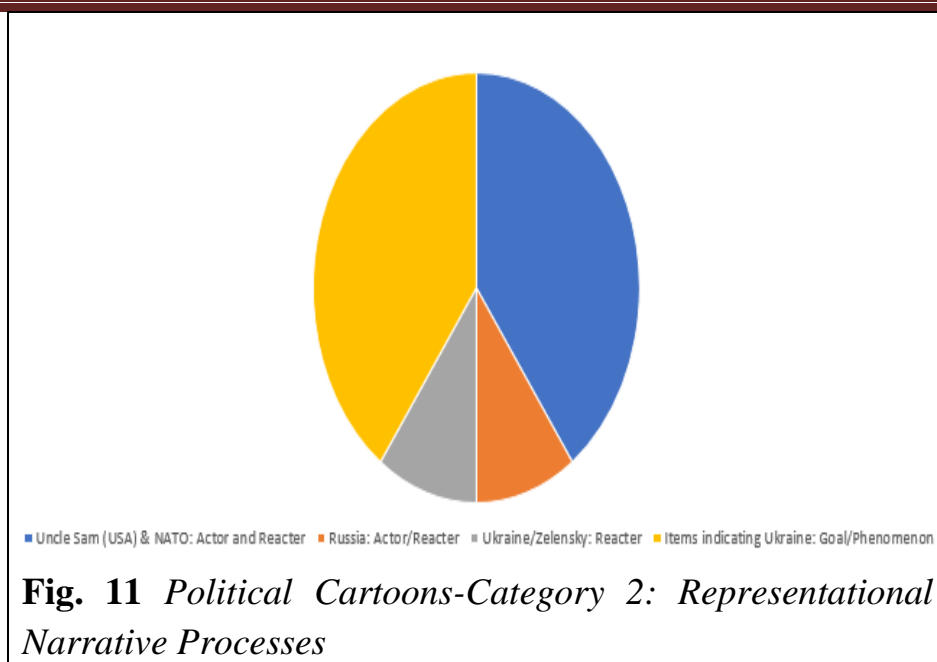
**Cartoon 4: Fig. 7** "Security or instability?" *Global Times*, (2022, February 27)



**Cartoon 5: Fig. 8** "Incurable disease". *China Daily*, (2022, March 28)







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