SEMIOTIC INTERDEPENDENCE BETWEEN TEXT AND VISUAL IMAGE

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Abstract

Studies of communication and meaning evolve from Semiotics, a multidisciplinary science which adopts a philosophical approach that seeks to interpret messages in terms of their signs and patterns of symbolism. We live in a world of signs and we have no way of understanding anything except through signs and codes into which they are organized. A sign can be a word, a sound, a visual image etc. In other words, signs can mean anything we agree that they mean, and they can mean different things to different living organisms. At the same time, non-verbal signs can produce many complex symbols and hold multiple meanings. The study of Semiotics originated in a literary or linguistic context and has been expanding in a number of directions since the beginning of the 20th century. The essential breakthrough of Semiotics is to take linguistics as a model and apply linguistic concepts to other non-linguistic fields or "phenomena-texts" (for example a visual image) and not to language itself. The broadening concept of text and discourse encourages additional research into how visual communication operates to create meaning. The aim of our paper is to emphasize the semiotic interdependence between text and visual image, the analysis being focused on textual versus visual communication. Though visual images are quite different from linguistic texts, they are not wholly different, and many semioticians have sought parallels between the two media. Like texts, most visual images are composed of parts arranged in a certain way to signify and communicate. Usually, a visual image addresses us directly with its emotions and meaningfulness, while a word (text) works via intellect. Without visual images, an idea may be lost in a sea of words, while without words, an image may be lost to ambiguity. So, we may conclude that the combination of text and visual image has a higher communicative power that neither textual or visual communication singularly possesses.

Key words: Semiotics, communication, meaning, text, visual image

Semiotics is the study of signs and semioticians are particularly concerned with the theme of representation. Studying Semiotics can assist us to become more aware of the mediating role of signs and of the roles played by ourselves and others in constructing social reality. It can make us less likely to take reality for granted as something which is wholly independent of human interpretation. Exploring semiotic perspectives, we may come to realize that information or meaning is not "contained" in the world or in books, computers or audio-visual media. Meaning is not transmitted to us, we actually create it according to a complex interplay of codes or conventions of which we are normally unaware. Becoming aware of such codes is both inherently fascinating and intellectually empowering. Through experience and experimentation, we continually increase our understanding of the visual world and how we are influenced by it.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Human communication has existed for about 30000 years. In the beginning of recorded history, the vast majority of what was communicated was not text based. Textual communication has been with us in one form or another for only 3700 years. Usually, people think using pictures. Seeing comes before words: the child looks and recognizes before he/she can speak. Studies show that the old saying "seeing is believing" is mostly true. The interdependence between text and visual image has been differently approached during the time. From Aristotle who considered poetry and painting as arts based on imitation, passing through Horace's ut pictura poesis or thematic resemblance in the Renaissance or Classicism, literature (text) and visual image (visual arts) have been perceived as "sister arts". With the invention of tools like Gutenberg's movable type printing press in 1450, text took central stage. Graphics (visual images) were too costly to include. As printing costs dropped graphics soon resurfaced and their frequency was rising, so culture itself moved from textual to visual literacy. The research
of Gunther Kress (professor of English and Education at the School of Education, University of London) confirms this change over. (Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, 1996). As an example, Kress compares science textbooks from 1936 and 1988 showing that textbooks have progressed from a majority of texts to a majority of graphics (visual images). The change isn’t limited to textbooks and newspapers. Signs, maps, instructions, icons, packaging sell products, warn of possible hazards, and give visual direction when words alone are not sufficient. More and more professions that rely heavily on communication and persuasion are embracing visuals as a tool of choice. Of course, we know that what we see can be manipulated but the point is that images (visuals) are persuasive. In our times images have become tools used to elicit specific and planned emotional reactions in the people who see them. Visuals are not only excellent communicators but also quickly affect us psychologically and physiologically. What we see has a profound effect on what we do, how we feel, and who we are. According to scientists, psychologists, great thinkers and researchers from around the world talking with pictures (visual images) is one of the fastest ways to communicate with and motivate people. Visual images are more communicative and memorable and are digested 60,000 times faster than text. More importantly, pictures instantly evoke an emotional response, which is proven to significantly influence all decision making. Studies have shown that visuals increase our power to persuade by 43%. In his essay, Rhetoric of the Image, published in 1964, Roland Barthes attempts to “submit” the image to a spectral analysis of the messages it may contain by turning to the advertising image, an image which, he argues, draws from “signs [that] are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading”, and which therefore is more “frank” and explicit in the information it conveys. Barthes wishes to use this clarity to move toward a clearer conception of how the image (and its linguistic attendants) produces signification. He turns to a particular advertising image, one in which a mesh grocery bag lies on the table; its contents: beautiful, fresh vegetables and a box of pasta displaying a brand name. This image is designed to incite us to buy the pasta and it attempts to do this by signifying on several levels information that will provoke desire. Rhetoric of the Image focuses on commercials since they contain a highly condensed image that aims for maximum efficiency in transferring its message. Commercials have to get their message across in 30 seconds and they therefore employ highly charged and intensive images in order to convince us to buy this or that product. Therefore, for Barthes, commercials are a very convenient medium in which to explore the way ideologies are reflected in visual images. Commercials have to be able to speak in a conventional language, use conventional terminology and transmit its message very fast, and therefore they provide access to conventional ideologies of their time. Barthes proceeds by breaking the system of signification into three parts, that of the linguistic message, the coded iconic message, and the noncoded iconic message. The linguistic message—the Italian name that appears on the package of pasta—itself operates on two levels: denotational, or pointing directly to the name of the company, and connotational, by signifying what Barthes refers to as “Italianicity.” The coded iconic message is the totality of all of the messages that are connoted by the image itself: those of freshness, of plenty, of Italianicity (in the yellow, green, and red of the tomato and peppers), and of a certain still-life aesthetics. The noncoded iconic message is simply the literal “what it is” of the photograph, the vegetables and sack and pasta that we “see” when we look at the image. After articulating the three levels of signification, Barthes pursues another question: “What are the functions of the linguistic message with regard to the (twofold) iconic message?” and he comes up with two such functions: anchorage and relay. With anchorage, “the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image...remote-control[ing] him towards a meaning chosen in advance". In a system of relay, “text...and image stand in a complementary relationship...and the unity of the message is realized at [the] level of the story. In addition to these modes of analysis, Barthes argues that attention must be paid to the composition of an image as a signifying complex and to the naturalizing role played in photography, where the exact replication of reality "naturalizes the symbolic message...innocent[ing] the semantic artifice of connotation".

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

What Barthes is essentially trying to do in Rhetoric of the Image is to examine and understand the messages that images contain, and the extent to which they take part in creating an ideological worldview. That is to say, Barthes is asking how ideologically charged are images and transmit an educational message to society. In his essay Barthes works along the lines of two theoretical distinctions: connotation and denotation, and the internal relations of the sign between the signifier and the signified. The signified, according to Barthes, has two levels of meaning: the denotational and the connotational. The denotation is the dictionary meaning of the sign/word and it detonates something in the real world. The connotation is the interpretative association that comes with the sign and is something which is culturally and context dependant. For Barthes connotation is a higher level of interpretation, and he assumes that being a
part of the same culture involves having similar connotations to certain signs. The rhetoric, the repetition of images in commercials, is determined according to Barthes by the sum of meanings yielded by the signs which compose the code and are in the image with ideology tying them together into a coherent utterance. In conclusion, in *Rhetoric of the Image* Roland Barthes is arguing that "natural" reality is not essentially encrypted or encoded but rather that it is its reproduction is a visual image that codes it and enforces cultural meaning upon it. Visual mediums are perceived as portraying reality while in fact they are constructing it. Language, when it is written, as opposed to when it is spoken, is realised as a physical and graphic substance in a given space. In this sense, language can be treated as a visual entity. Thus when one looks at an advertisement which consists of both visual images and verbal captions, both elements (regardless of the type of medium: visual or verbal) come into the viewer’s eye as a visual entity, as a block of visual material and a block of language as text. The visual, whether as image or as a block of language has semantic impact on that initial level: the viewer goes on to read the visual and recognise the linguistic meaning of the verbal captions. At the next level of analysis, the visual and the verbal are each treated in terms of their own "semantics" the semantics of the visual as image and semantics of the verbal as linguistic message. Visual communication is more ubiquitous than ever before. Visual images may do what texts alone cannot do. They quickly affect us both cognitively and emotionally. As mentioned before, visual communication contains image aspects. The interpretation of images is subjective and to understand the depth of meaning, or multiple meanings, communicated in an image requires analysis. As Paul Martin Lester has pointed out, in *Visual Communication: Images with Messages*, (2002), visual images may be analysed from six major perspectives: personal, historical, technical, ethical, cultural, semiotic. Personal perspective is when a viewer has an opinion about an image based on his or her personal thoughts. This might be sometimes in conflict with cultural values. Historical perspective refers to the quality of the image which through the times has been changed, because of the use of different (new) media. When speaking about technical perspective we mean that the view of an image is influenced by the use of lights, position and the presentation of the image. From ethical perspective, the maker of the image, the viewer and the image itself must be responsible morally and ethically to the image. As far as the cultural perspective is concerned, symbolization is an important definition for this perspective. Cultural perspective involves identity of symbols and can also be seen as the semiotic perspective. Visual texts or images are an important area of analysis for semioticians and particularly for scholars working with intensive forms such as advertising and television because images are a central part of our mass communication.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Within semiotics there is a debate between the amount to which the meaning of visual images can be shared and understood in themselves, or if their meaning is instead based on some prior verbal knowledge. As we have seen, in his essay *Rhetoric of the Image*, Roland Barthes argues that images, and their symbolic meanings, are always contingent upon verbal text. Barthes claims that in order to reach the shared meaning, verbal text must enforce the visual with evidence. While Barthes says that the image can come first, without the text, the visual alone is too ambiguous. Kress and Theo van Leeuwen oppose Barthes opinion of semiotics in their book *Reading Images*. (1996). They do not believe that text is unimportant but simply that visual images can accomplish the same message and meaning that text can, but perhaps in a different way. Surrounded with symbols, images and various signs, human beings has always strived to signify them and utilized for communication. The meaning comes out of an interaction between message and its reader (audience). While handling a text, one must consider not only its components but also the relation between those components. All the impressions it has created and the techniques used for creating such impressions as well. When the images urge us to react, we are aware of its effect upon us, which is resulted from myths, ideologies, and connotations embedded in the images. Only through a sophisticated analysis, the hidden meaning may be discovered. Visual semiotics deconstructs the communicative visuals in its attempt to attain the meaning. Most signs operate on several levels—iconic as well as symbolic and/or indexical, which suggests that visual semiotic analysis may be addressing a hierarchy of meaning in addition to categories and components of meaning. What is commonly called a message is in fact a text whose content is a multilevelled discourse. Visuals expedite and increase our level of communication. They increase comprehension, recollection and retention. Visual clues help us decode texts and attract attention to information or direct attention increasing the likelihood that the audience will remember. Visual images enhance or affect
emotions and attitudes. They engage our imagination and heighten our creative thinking by stimulating other areas of our brain (which in turn leads to a more profound and accurate understanding of the presented material). It is no secret that emotions influence decision-making. Visual images help create „brand identity”. At the same time visuals paint the picture of who the adviser is, what they stand for, and how the audience may benefit. Visual images sell because of their ability to influence. Words and how they’re gathered on a page have a visual aspect of their own, but they may also interact with non-discursive images such as drawings, paintings, photographs, or moving pictures. Most advertisements, for instance, use some combination of text and visuals to promote a product for service. While visual rhetoric is not entirely new, the subject of visual rhetoric is becoming increasingly important, especially since we are constantly inundated with images and also since images can serve as rhetorical proofs.

REFERENCES


