

The De-Construction of Image, Text and Sound in Audio/Visual Communication: A Semiotic Analysis of Specific Cultural Examples

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present how multiple layers of meaning are constructed, coexist and interrelate between image, text and sound using specific audio/visual communication examples.

It will investigate this triangular relationship through a semiotic analysis of specific film stills from Alfred Hitchcock (1960) *Psycho*, Krzysztof Kieslowski (1993) *Three colors-Blue* and of selected work from a poster exhibition themed *Walking-27 graphistes de Europe* that took place at Paris airports in the summer of 2008 and was organized by CultureFrance.

The paper will also explore how these three elements are structured to portray connotative meanings and investigate how this overlapping influences interpretation. The paradigms of film stills and posters are drawn as samples to suggest a platform for semiotic analysis. When meaning is decoded, it usually exposes various hidden intentions of the designer/producer. This revelation contributes towards a conceptual communication, which is often intertextual; it does not only intrigue the curiosity of viewers for other possible interpretations, but it also enhances, broadens perception and rises the level of creativity in audio/visual communication.

In Hitchcock's film the text *eroika/hero* on vinyl is analysed in relationship with image and sound, and similarly in Kieslowski's film, a background sign text *au revoir a bientot/we meet again*. In the case of posters, specific images (iconic or symbolic), will be analysed in relationship with the airport sounds, texts used or heard randomly in the specific environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

Cultural productions are sometimes presented to viewers with information that might not be perceived at a first viewing, and only through a semiotic analysis, connotations and other hidden meanings reveal out of the richness and intelligence of some audio/visual work.

The viewer is not always in a position to depict and decode a 'predetermined' audio/visual setup whether is for art or an applied interpretation. This process requires analysis and knowledge of historical and semiotic theories that would facilitate the understanding of how signs are interpreted and interrelated in the context of audio-visual communication-even in the case when sound is on purpose absent from the scene.

In his essay *Heavy Rotation* Matthew Caley describes that not only films but also most cultural production like adverts, multi-media, graphic communication and much contemporary arts practice is a construct made up of Image/Text/Sound. That forms a triangle of inter-relation and each element of the triangle can not be separately delineated from each other as they merge, overlap and leak into each other (Caley & Lannin 2005). To portray these relationships, specific film stills and graphic communication posters are investigated under this scope, concerning at the same time psychoanalytic, cultural and intertextual theories on how interpretation of the spectator might be constructed. Caley further delineates:

Image-Filmic 'shot' or sequence of shots/stills. Specific objects/images within the above.
Text-Film script, dialogue/'original' source text or book, sub-titles/inter-titles/song-lyrics,
heard or inferred and Sound-Diegetic, non-diegetic sound: music, natural or substituted
sound. (Caley & Lannin 2005: 32)

Typography, being the visualization of verbal language is using-as already known in most western societies-symbolic images, the alphabet-letters learnt and considered as text.

2. IMAGE/TEXT/SOUND IN FILMS

Psycho (1960) is a landmark masterpiece, one of the classic movies in horror film history. Alfred Hitchcock is well known for pioneering in directing and editing techniques, a master of suspense, anxiety and horrifying film scenes. Often characterized as misogynist, women in his films are stabbed to death, strangled, dropped from bridges and church bells, oppressed by men or poisoned. Elegantly dressed and presented, they are independent, active, determined and more dynamic than men are; a behavior that is usually punished with death. This is happening not only on screen but spectators drawn in identification, voyeurism or fetishism (Metz 1975) are also punished for such 'misbehavior' when the protagonists are killed. Lacanian theories of the *mirror-stage* and any identifications of the viewer with characters in the film are interrupted with death. The same applies for spectators who get erotic or sexual pleasure by looking at Hitchcock's sexual women safely-without them been seen-voyeurism. With fetishism, of course, it depends on the erotic consideration with an object or part of a person and taken a step further as Bignell describes that the French theorist Christian Metz suggests:

Cinema involves fetishism because images of absent people or things are presented as if they were present...fetish objects are denoted in films when fascinating and desirable things are presented for the spectator's pleasure...(Bignell Jonathan 2002: 186)



FIG. 1 AND FIG. 2 FROM ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S *PSYCHO* (1960), UNIVERSAL, A PARAMOUNT RELEASE

A secretary, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) is hiding at a motel after taking for personal use, money that she was given to save, by her employer. There the motel's owner, Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) who is a psycho, trapped in a double personality, murders her. When Marion's sister Lila (Vera Miles) searches for her, she is secretly entering Norman's childhood room in his abandoned house above the motel. In the scene that follows, terrified and stressed, she looks at toys and sad teddy-bunnies, frozen in time, paralleling and reflecting Norman's stunted, fetishistic personality and obsession. As she stops her gaze at an old phonograph box and slowly begins to approach it, an interesting triangular relationship starts to appear; **Image**-78rpm record, Lila, (fig.1) and Norman's image connoted, **Text**-Premier, Beethoven's 3rd symphony Eroica, **Sound**-low profile classical violin music. This set-up is open to an intertextual interpretation of the word Erotica, Norman's love life/a blank book with no author or a title, when is picked up by Lila in the next scene (fig.2). The *Eroica* record, a paradigm of heroic symphony, is a visually found object present on screen, but never heard, paralleling Lila's determination and braveness as a hero who ignores the danger to be caught when she violates in a stranger's room. Beethoven had regretted for composing this symphony as homage to Napoleon Bonaparte and its textual presence, not heard but connoted in the film, might also allude to issues of betrayal or the having of second thoughts on decisions and actions that occur, but unfortunately can not be undone-murders or suicides.

Trois couleurs: Bleu (1993) is the first of Krzysztof Kieślowski film trilogy named after the three French-flag colors that represent the three French revolutionary ideals. *Blue* is for Liberty followed by *White* for Equality and *Red* for Fraternity. Three stories are happening at the same time and they are visually and sometimes through specific sounds, interrelated around these three themes. Liberty for *Trois couleurs: Bleu* is not about political or social freedom. It deals with the human straggle for emotional and sentimental release; Julie (Juliette Binoche) loses her husband, an acclaimed European composer and her young daughter in a car accident. The film's theme of liberty manifests in Julie's attempt to start a new life free of personal commitments, belongings grief and love. Music is very important throughout the film and often

played as a signifier to represent her dead husband. Julie intends to spiritually commit suicide by isolating her self from the world and live completely independently, anonymously and in solitude in the Paris. Despite her intentions, people from her former and present life intrude with their own needs even though the audiovisual signs in her environment continuously remind her of the loss of her family.



FIG. 3 AND FIG. 4 FROM KRZYSZTOF KIEŚŁOWSKI'S *TROIS COULEURS: BLEU* (1993), MK2 PRODUCTIONS

In one of the scenes, that she is seating in a Parisian coffee shop, trying to free herself from sentimental connections, a friend comes along intruding in her world. In a while, a street musician is playing with his flute a piece that diverts both attentions. The sound of it is very similar-almost the same-with the compositions of her dead husband. It seems that everywhere she goes something always reminds her of him. This on going coming-back situation is emphasized within a metaphorical triangular structure of **Image**; street musician/street people, coffee shop door (fig.3) **Text**; Aurevoir/goodbye, A bientôt/see you soon again **Sound**; flute music very similar and very familiar with her husband's. The text, a bientôt, re-confirms to the spectators and to Julie that what they see and listen, will be repeated and will be seen again. Music, image and text are the elements metaphorically collaborating to portray Julie's straggle to release and break free from her family's tragic memories. This is also evident in the scene that follows (fig.4) where, in a metaphorical context again, she spends some time watching her sugar cube slowly filled with coffee as if its her sweet life/dolce vita that changed from sweet-white to bitter-dark brown in a very sudden manner.

3. IMAGE/TEXT/SOUND IN GRAPHIC COMMUNICATION/POSTERS

To celebrate the European cultural season as well as France taking over the presidency of the European Union in July 2008, Aéroports de Paris and Culturesfrance mounted a special poster exhibition in the Paris-CDG and Paris-Orly terminals, curated by Philippe Apeloig. The exhibition entitled *27 graphistes pour l'Europe* (27 graphic designers for Europe) invited 27 European graphic designers to design one poster each, under the theme *Walking*. Colors for typography-text and image were limited to the two EU flag colors plus one of free on the designer's choice.



FIG. 5 INVITATION OF 27 *GRAPHISTES POUR L'EUROPE* POSTER EXHIBITION, JULY-AUGUST 2008
AT PARIS AIRPORTS, ORGANIZED BY CULTUREFRANCE-[HTTP://WWW.EU2008.FR/](http://www.eu2008.fr/)

A poster, as a medium of communication with historical references and influences has always been a creative typographic challenge. With a plethora of theoretical and visual references on the concept of *walking*, all the final interpretations have succeeded in satisfying the requirements of the brief. What is striking about these posters is the context of their exposure, the Paris airports.



FIG. 6 GREEK ENTRY POSTER BY DIMITRIS KARAIKOS, *WALKING*, 27 *GRAPHISTES POUR L'EUROPE*
POSTER EXHIBITION, JULY-AUGUST 2008 AT PARIS AIRPORTS, ORGANIZED BY CULTUREFRANCE-[HTTP://WWW.EU2008.FR/](http://www.eu2008.fr/)

The triangular relationship of **image**; imagery photographed or drawn **text**; typography and random texts from the surround environment, like passenger conversations, announcements etc and **sound**; footsteps, walking, music, noises etc. Like in films, an image is interpreted differently when is accompanied by sound than if it was seen in mute, posters also fall in the same category.

Regardless of the presence or not of typography on the posters, the viewers inevitably combine the text and the sounds heard or inferred from their surroundings to interpret the work.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Image, text and sound in the visual arts take many different forms and a semiotic approach exposes how these three elements collaborate and interrelate to construct meaning. The text that appears in posters or other audiovisual work can be categorized and examined under the scope of historical, political and social references. It can define sacred texts, literature, abstract forms or social matters.

Sound can have a hidden impact on interpretation. It may transform into a visual form but with a different signified than its acoustical. An image might have unlimited interpretations but in relationship with text and sound it can be limited to the intention of the maker or the free interpretation of the viewer.

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