

Syncretic Strategies of Production of Meaning in Videoclips: Relations Between Forms of Expression and Content in the Analysis of Britney Spears' «If You Seek Amy»

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Abstract

This article intends to discuss the syncretic strategies of production of meaning in the videoclip «If You Seek Amy», performed by Britney Spears and directed by Jake Nava. The methodology applied in our analysis is inspired by Greimas' proposals on meaning and Hjelmslev's discussions about syncretism, here divided into six types: a) fusion of the 1st species, when categories of content are homologous to categories of expression of different instances of substance; b) fusion of the 2nd species, when the comutation between categories of content and expression is suspended due to the neutralization of either one of them; c) isomorphic fusion, when figures of expression that belong to different instances of substance present compatible or similar forms, independently of any homologies with categories of content; d) implication of the 1st species, when there is the momentary hierarchical ascendancy of the figures of expression of a particular instance of substance with respect to the others in terms of establishing homologies with categories of content; e) implication of the 2nd species, when a particular semiotics seems to assume permanently the instance of enunciate, while the others would assume the instance of enunciated enunciation; f) implication of the 3rd species, when the instance of enunciate shifts from one particular semiotics to another; Our target is to study how the verbal, visual and sound instances of an audiovisual text as a videoclip are articulated to produce the effects of unity, cohesion and coherence, and also to identify its most relevant rhetorical tools. Our methodology focuses on the relations between form of expression and form of content. Thus, although emphasis is given to the semiotization of figures of expression and to the discursive level of the plane of content, the other levels of analysis — and consequently the entire concept of generative path — are depicted as an indispensable perspective to the understanding of the relations created among the various semiotics that compose the videoclip.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although the *videoclip* or *music video* has long been consolidated as a particular and quite influential gender of audiovisual production, its peculiarities in terms of how it articulates simultaneously different languages to produce meaning in a syncretic context have seldom received the due attention from scholars. Far from the prestige acquired by other audiovisual genders such as cinema and avant-garde video presentations, videoclips are often ignored or looked at with some kind of condescendence, for its relationship with mass media and commercial music would deserve no more than that.

Nonetheless, were videoclips really a more simplistic 3-to-4-minutes-long minor branch of audiovisual productions, even so they should rather be considered with a much more careful regard. After all, its so-called simplicity would invite researchers to consider at least two most interesting questions that would here appear in less complex — and thus more analyzable contexts — than in its more noble counterparts.

The first question is the core itself of the production of a videoclip, and involves the aesthetical, rhetorical and linguistical issues of the intersemiotical translation from the original song to the videoclip format. The second one regards an even more theoretical approach, which can be summarized by a single interrogation quite related to the previous topic: what kind of coercion can figures of expression exert on the plane of content? The term «coercion» is used here not to point a deterministic relation by whom content would be completely subordinated to some categories of expression, but rather to indicate the presence of similar relations (e.g.: opposition, gradation etc) organizing categories of both planes. The semiotization of such relations — and not of categories themselves — seems to pervade the different levels of the generative path, producing effects of meaning that often can be converted into rhetoric figures such as antithesis, gradation, hyperbole etc.

If such processes do occur in the intersemiotic translation that conducts the conversion of a song into a videoclip, the most immediate — and maybe also interesting — consequence is that we will have to deal from now on with the fact that a rhythmical-melodical structure may exert over other languages of a syncretic context some much more subtle and less evident kinds of coercion than the prosodic issues and rhythmical movements traditionally taken into account. This possibly new perspective of analysis, which definitely requires a semiotic approach to be fully investigated, is the main subject to be discussed in the present article.

2. ANALYSIS

The corpus of our analysis is the song «If U Seek Amy», produced by Max Martin and performed by American pop singer Britney Spears, released as the sixth song of her album *Circus* on November 28th, 2008 and as videoclip on March 10th, 2009. On January 27th, 2009 the song was discussed in American TV show «Kelly's Court», where anchor Megyn Kelly accused it of obscenity and proposed the suspension of its broadcasting because of its use of double sense — especially for the fact that the title «If You Seek Amy» actually sounds like the spelling of the expression «f-u-c-k me». The video released a bit less than two months later starts and

finishes with an anchor repeating some of the phrases used by Kelly as much as the program's visual style, in an obvious reference to the polemics it aroused.

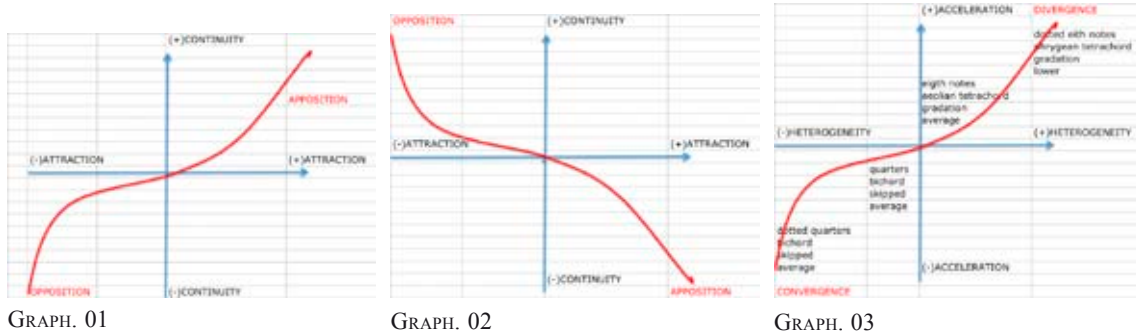
The initial question we will approach regards nevertheless linguistic and structural rather than sociological and cultural issues. Musical patterns often present inner relations such as direct and inverted, gradated and syncopated presentations; besides, identities and alterities are established, as much as intensifications and distensions, concentration and dispersion. Such categories can be aspectualized and thus pervade the organization of the text as a whole, establishing homologies both within the plane of expression and with categories of content. In case such relations were limited to the most superficial strata of the musical language, there would be no special reason for their presence in the intersemiotic translation of the original song. But if they somehow assume a central role in the process of generation of meaning, permeating different levels of the generative path, so their presence might as well be expected in more complex syncretic environments for the expression of an equivalent message both in its intelligible and sensitive fields.

Let us consider the initial phrase of the song, which corresponds both to its introduction and to an *ostinato* present almost in the whole extent of the music. It is formed by two semi-phrases, each one consisting on skipping (1st half) or gradated (2nd half) 3^{rds} :

	3rds	
P.E.	ascending skipping	descending stepping
P.C.	syncope discontinuity	gradation continuity

The figure above shows some of the main categories that organize the plane of expression in these initial bars and the homologies established with their counterparts in the plane of content. So, when we take into account the intervals of 3^{rds}, we notice an opposition between their ascendance by skipping in the first semi-phrase and their descendance by stepping in the second part. This relation in the plane of expression is homologous to the opposition between syncope and gradation and between discontinuity and continuity in the plane of content. Thus, the relations between the two columns can be understood according to two valencial axes (Zilberberg & Fontanille, 1998): attraction and continuity. Here, negative attraction (repulsion/opposition) and negative continuity (discontinuity) imply the symmetrical opposition in form (e.g.: ascendant and descendent modulations) between the left and right categories in each line; positive attraction (apposition) and continuity are on the other hand assigned to the shared semantic traces presented nonetheless in different degrees of intensity/proximity (e.g.: skipping and stepping 3^{rds}) in the right and left categories, as can be seen in Graphics 01.

Let us now examine the audiovisual enunciation of that musical phrase. Its first incidence in the videoclip takes place at 00:06,4, with the camera travelling from a bathroom (first semi-phrase) where two women are sitting (one of them dressing her long socks) to a living room (second semi-phrase) with a man and two women also dressing up. The overall situation indicates the end of a sex party. In its second incidence, at 00:13,9, the first semi-phrase is



accompanied by the camera cut to a girl sleeping in the floor of the living room followed by a second cut to an already dressed walking man looking at her, while the second semi-phrase is reached by a camera travelling followed by a close into Britney Spear’s face.

The question now is to discuss whether the new categories installed by the audiovisual enunciation can be homologated with those detected in the musical instance and, if yes, whether they present the same valencial properties described above.

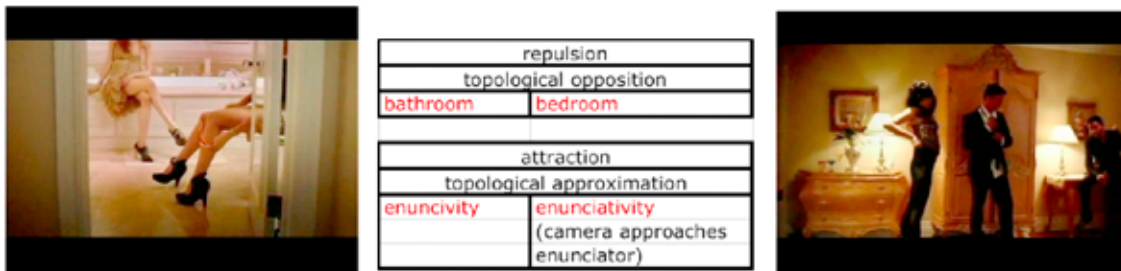


FIG. 02

We can see by the table in Fig.02 that not only can we homologate the first musical semi-phrase with the bathroom and the second with the living room, but also the relations of opposition (between the two topologies) and approximation (from an enuncive to an enunciative space) keep here their validity.

Verifying now the second incidence of the same phrase, we find:

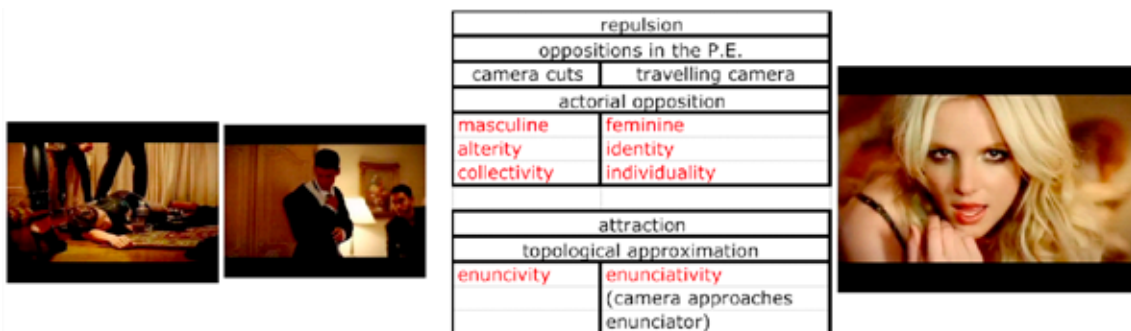


FIG. 03

The oppositions (repulsion) here appear in multiple forms: in the plane of expression, the camera syntax shifts from cuts (discontinuity) in the first semi-phrase to travelling (continuity) in the second one; in the plane of content, actoriality opposes the preeminence of masculine figures, collectivity (multiple actors) and alterity in the first half to the feminine enunciator that installs her exclusive (she is alone) identity and individuality in the second one. On the other hand, attraction is stated by the camera movement that comes closer and closer to the singer and by the general process of topological and actorial discretization that installs the enunciative instance of the videoclip.

We notice therefore that the relations between the axes of continuity and attraction presented in Graph.01 are valid not only for the homologies between categories of expression and content restricted to the musical instance of the discourse. On the contrary, they are equally valid for the first two audiovisual enunciations of that phrase, ruling thus also the relations established between categories of expression and content belonging to the visual instance of the syncretic text. As far as the study of syncretism is concerned, we can define an **isomorphic fusion** as the situation where figures of expression that belong to different instances of substance present compatible or similar forms, independently of any homologies with categories of content (Monteiro, 2009, p.297). Besides the present isomorphic fusion, the homologies established between categories of expression and content correspond to a **fusion of the 1st species**, in which categories of content are homologous to categories of expression of different instances of substance (Monteiro, 2009, p.296).

Let us consider now two more of the 3 other incidences of that initial phrase in the videoclip. At 02:38,1, the camera shows a corridor with half-dressed men and women in the first semi-phrase; in the second one, we see the singer getting out of a door dressed like a 1960's well behaved housemaid walking towards the travelling camera, with a cut closer in the 4th F note. At 02:45,5, the first semi-phrase shows the singer upstairs walking towards the travelling camera and followed by a male entourage, while in the second part a cut shows her in plongé going downstairs and a second cut at the 3rd F note shows her in contre-plongé followed now by a mixed (male and female) group.

The homologies between categories of expression and content present at the incidence at 02:38,1 can be summarized by the scheme:



FIG. 04

Once more the categorical antipodes in the two melodic semi-phrases are homologous to relevant oppositions both in the visual instance of the plane of expression and in the plane of content as a whole: if the second semi-phrase emphasizes individually the identity of the female actor of enunciation in contraposition to her male entourage, the first one stresses the collective mixed group of anonymous men and women; besides these actorial contrapositions, there is also the topological contrast between the zooming out from the scene in the first semi-phrase and the zooming in towards the singer in its second part. A most interesting matter nonetheless appears in the visual instance of the plane of expression: instead of the correspondence between the discontinuity of the first semi-phrase and the camera cuts as seen before, the situation here is precisely reversed: the musical discontinuity in the two first bars is homologous to the continuity of the travelling zoom out, whereas the continuity in the following bars is homologous to the camera cuts zooming in. Thus, there is still a categorical opposition that splits categories of expression of the two semi-phrases both in the musical and visual instances; nevertheless, the semantic trace of approximation in the visual instance appears no longer related to continuity, but rather to discontinuity, generating an effect of *acceleration* of proximity, thus announcing the main sanction where the final chorus will sing «Love me, hate me, say what you want about me, but all of the boys and all of the girls are begging to If (F) you (U) seek (CK) Amy (ME)». Therefore, the **isomorphic fusion** was kept here — but not the fusion of the 1st species. We define an **implication of the 1st species** as the situation in which there is the momentary hierarchical ascendance of the figures of expression of a particular instance of substance with respect to the others in terms of establishing homologies with categories of content. As the opposition between the categories of content *mixture x polarization* is homologous to the opposition between *travelling x cuts*, and both *mixture* and *travelling* present a semantic trace of continuity opposed to the discontinuity of *cuts/polarity*, the visual figures of expression assume at that point a superior hierarchical statute with respect to their musical counterparts, where the homologies between categories of expression and content are preserved in form but neutralized in substance. In this context, the relations described in Graphics 01 were reverted, and can thus be summarized by the scheme shown in Graphics 02.

On the other hand, the relations we find at 02:45,5 present a rather different contour:

PLANE OF EXPRESSION			
musical figures of expression			
skipping	stepping		
visual figures of expression			
travelling camera	camera cuts		
contre-plongé	plongé/contre-plongé		
A.P.	G.P/A.P.		
PLANE OF CONTENT			
DISCONTINUITY	CONTINUITY		
Actoriality			
polarization	mixture		
Topology			
upstairs	downstairs		
closer to initial scene	closer to final scene		
remoteness	proximity		

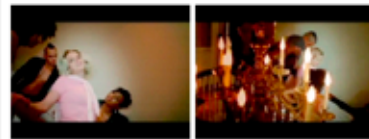
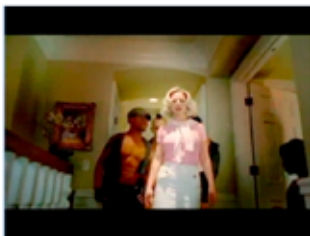


FIG. 05

Once more, the isomorphic fusion is clearly organizing the figures of expression both in the musical and visual instances. Visual oppositions are established by the dichotomies *travelling camera x camera cuts*, *contre-plongé x plongé/contre-plongé* and *American Plan x General Plan/American Plan* — all of them clearly homologated to *continuity x discontinuity*. On the other hand, we find in the plane of content equally interesting dichotomies opposing the *gender polarization* between the female dancer and her male entourage in the first semi-phrase to the general *mixture* of sexes in the second semi-phrase, as much as the topological *upstairs x downstairs* and *closer to initial scene x closer to final scene* oppositions.

As we have emphasized before, figures of expression in the musical instance indicate an homology between the first and second melodic semi-phrases and the categories of content of discontinuity and continuity, respectively. Nevertheless, now as at 02:38,1, we have seen that although figures of expression related to the visual instance can also be homologated to continuity and discontinuity as categories of content, their homology is exactly opposed to the one we find in the musical instance.

Nevertheless, the situation here is quite different from the previous incidence. What we find now is not simply the superposition of the homologies established by a certain semiotics with respect to the others (implication of the 1st species), for the semantic trace of accelerated approximation built at 02:38,1 by the homology between the second terms of the categorical oppositions *travelling x cutting camera* and *enuncivity x enunciativity* are invoked by the camera cuts of the second semi-phrase. So, we will define a **polyphonic implication** as the situation when a certain homology between categories of expression and content established in a text is invoked by one or more of its semiotics while the others establish different homologies. Thus, while the polyphonic implication will rule the role of the visual figures of expression with respect to the dichotomy *remoteness x proximity*, the visual figures of content represented by the antipodes *polarization x mixture* follow the same *discontinuity x continuity* opposition that opposes the musical figures of expression of the first and second semi-phrases.

The only incidence of the melodic structure presented in Fig.01 that has not yet been considered so far is the one that takes place at 01:05,8. Before discussing it, however, it is very convenient to make some considerations regarding the chorus of the song in its first and second incidences, that take place respectively at 00:50,9 and 00:58,3, therefore just before the remaining incidence of the introductory theme.



dotted quarters	quarters	eighth notes	dotted eighth notes
bichord	bichord	aeolian tetrachord	phrygian tetrachord
skipped	skipped	gradation	gradation
average	average	average	lower

FIG. 06

If the analysis of 3rds has shown us the most pertinent relations that organized figures of expression in the introductory section, here it is the 4th interval that reveals us the invariations and variations that regulate the paradigm and syntax of musical figures of expression. Thus, in terms of the scansion of that interval, the first semi-phrase shows it in its skipped form, while in the second one it appears in its gradated form. The region — from A3 to E3 — is the same everywhere but in the very last bar, where it reaches the lower register from D3 to A2. Finally, as far as durations are concerned, a gradual acceleration can be detected through each bar, from the dotted-quarters dominated beginning to the dotted-or-not-dotted eighths that rule the last bar. Thus, in terms of valencial axes, we can organize variations according to the parameters of heterogeneity and acceleration, both increasing from left to right. The consequent effect of meaning is a path that conducts from *convergence*, here understood as a reiteration of established parameters, to *divergence*, meaning the rupture of previous isotopies (see Graph.03). It is important to notice that the most important ruptures take place precisely at the very last bar, where the subdivision in 3 changes to a subdivision in 2 with the dotted eighths, the predominating Aeolian mode is substituted by a sudden Phrygian mode, and the melodic range from A3 to E3 is finally expanded down to low A2 — all these features indicating a divergence with respect to the previous isotopic parameters.

3. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The kind of properties we have analyzed and discussed in the present article are by no means an exclusive attribute of the corpus we have studied. On the contrary, such phenomena appear quite commonly in videoclips in particular and in syncretic texts in general, what is a strong evidence that the form of expression can and does exert coercions over the way we perceive content both in its form and substance. At least in the case of intersemiotic translations as the one we have analyzed here, the form of expression in fact seems to shape not only the form of expression of other semiotics but also the form of its content by means of the homologies established between categories of both planes. Such homologies correspond to the semi-symbolic relations between categories of content and expression that are established and suspended throughout a text, creating the effect Hjelmslev defines as syncretism (Hjelmslev, 1968).

Syncretism can therefore be classified into different kinds of fusion and implication, and each of them provides the text with powerful rhetoric tools that act both in its intelligible and sensitive domains. Thus, the isomorphic fusion proves to be an invaluable tool to provide sensitive cohesion and coherence to a syncretic text compounded by different semiotics, as the fusion of the 1st species is able to do the same as far as the intelligible dimension is concerned. On the one hand, the implication of the 1st species establishes a temporary prevalence of a semiotics with respect to the others, organizing an hierarchy of categories which is vital to avoid that the abundance of sensitive stimulations, something not only essential to but even the richness itself of syncretic texts, can result in the prevalence of sensations upon meaning. On the other hand, resources as the polyphonic implication fully explore the richness of syncretic texts allowing the different semiotics that take part into the syncretic enunciation to present simultaneously different, complementary or sometimes even contradictory aspects of the enun-

ciate. Equally effective as a tool to explore the unique resources of syncretism is the fusion of the 2nd species, which takes place when the comutation between categories of content and expression of the syncretic text is suspended due to the neutralization of either one of them. Such fusion is able, for example, to reinforce the sensitive dimension of the syncretic text by temporarily neutralizing its intelligible features and thus promoting its sensorial rhetoric tools and their intrinsic power of making-be, making-feel and making-believe — what is precisely the case of the only incidence (at 01:05,8) of the introductory musical phrase we had not discussed until this moment.

The corpus we have just analyzed provides us not only with interesting examples of the resources available in the syncretic enunciation, but also with a glance on how meaning is produced and structured in such texts. For example, the musical opposition between Aeolian and Phrygian modes that appears in the last bar of the chorus is homologous to other related categorical dichotomies organizing the text as a whole: *presence* x *absence* of the *ostinato* as a background structure; the antipodal relation between the descending 4th and the descending *inverted-4th* (5th) as main structural intervals of the opposing sections, and finally, the formal opposition itself between the *Chorus* and the *Bridge*.

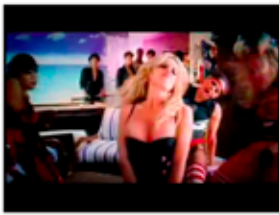

		
	Musical categories of expression	
Sections	Chorus	Bridge
Main intervals	desc. 4th	desc. inverted-4th [5th]
Modes	Phrygian	Aeolian
Polyphonic structure	ostinato	non-ostinato
	Visual categories of expression	
Lighting	indirect light	direct light
	Macroform	
Parts	videoclip	news
	Categories of content	
Discursive level	dissolute woman	well-behaved housemaid
Narrative level	to be	to seem
Profound level	nature	culture

FIG. 07

In terms of visual categories of expression, that same dichotomy is homologated to the opposition between *indirect* and *direct* lighting. As far as categories of content are concerned, the same antipodes are related to the discursive actorial opposition between the *dissolute woman* and the *well-behaved housemaid* that compound the two faces of the protagonist; in the narrative level, to the opposition between *to-be* (dissolute) and *to-seem* (respectable); in the profound level, the classical dichotomy between *nature* x *culture* that is convoked to the theme of a disphoric and uncontrolled savage nature that seems-to-be, but in fact is-not, tamed.

It is important to notice that the same dichotomies can be related to the macroform opposition between the *to-be* implicit in the *videoclip* section and the *to-seem* in the *news* prologue and epilogue of the film as a whole.

The most interesting aspect of the influence of the form of expression in the process of meaning seems to be the ways by which it establishes correspondences with categories of content. In Fig.07, we have seen the homology between *Phrygian x Aeolian* and *to-be x to-seem*. How arbitrary such a relation in fact is? The ambiguity between the two modes is provoked by the omission of the B in the A minor diatonic hexachord which prevails in most of the song, uncovering thus the manifestation of its 2nd degree as B — in accordance with the main harmonic structure, as the housemaid who fits society's moral — or Bb — a hidden note in contrast with harmony, as the dissolute girl hiding her orgies behind the walls of her house. In most of the times in which the Phrygian mode appears, at the last bar of the Chorus, the visual instance will be marked by a high density of cuts and by images of the pelvic region of men or women being shown as the singer pronounces the phrase (all of the boys and all of the girls are) «begging to If (F) you (U) seek (CK) Amy(ME)». Any possibility of ambiguity of the mondegreen is thus solved by the visual instance of the enunciation pointing to choreographic metonyms of sex relations. These tensions between enunciation and enunciate are responsible for effects of meaning such as irony and cynicism, generating thus as its most important effect the theme of *hypocrisy* — not restricted at all to the private life of the housemaid character, since the main actorial enunciative *débrayage* is broken by the news anchor, raising thus the simple *Phrygian x Aeolian* opposition to establish homologies with more general social and cultural dichotomies such as the *public x private* debate or the *entertainment x criticism* dilemma that permeates the aesthetics and the social function of present day mass media productions.

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