Visual Communication and Digital Culture - how to analyze?

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3 dangers in theory about and analysis of Visual Communication:

• To consider Visual Com and images as a sort of (inferior, vague, unprecise, non-) **verbal** communication

• To look for **quantifiable** or measurable distinct entities, units, elements (or even genres) within images and films

• To consider images and films as basically reproductions, copies or re-presentations of (pre-existing, profilmic) ”**reality”**
Shifting focus

Not just analysis and formal description of abstract “visual objects”: I want to limit the scope/importance of certain basic, traditional concepts from art theory, linguistics, and semiotics.

I want to move on to contextual analysis and interpretation of visual phenomena in terms of “communicative functions” (inspired by Jakobson): seeing the social/cultural use of images/photos/film/video/design.
Going from

• the ”Positivism” (or ”science” approach) that haunts us: looking for elements, something that can be quantified, measured, calculated, hard distinctions, sharp divisions of types, genres etc.

• And move on to a critical process of understanding and interpreting (visual) communication as situational/contextual: concepts and analytical tools are case-sensitive and must be used as floating/dynamic (changes with culture and history – this is the lesson of hermeneutics and dialectics.)
• Communication (visual) is not (just, or basically) a sending of distinct information or data packages between sender and receiver.

• Communication (visual) is about interacting, and this means that “sender” and “receiver” change/develop in the process and that the “text/visuals” involved are indistinct, they are floating and interpreted (experienced).

• Communication in not just about sharing info - don’t be naive - it is also about persuading, showing status and fighting for power, love or other benefits! (like re-establishing identity)
Don’t use – or, handle with care!

- Signifiant/signifié (Saussure)
- Transmission (Shannon and Weaver)
- Encode-decode (Hall)
- Language-reality (Plato – Wittgenstein etc)
- Subjective-objective (Positivist metaphysics!)
- Picture-reality (photo, documentary)(e.g. Nichols)
- Denotation-connotation (Barthes)
- Anchorage and Relay (Barthes)
- Index, icon, symbol (Peirce)
- Golden rule of thirds, fixed color-values (popular)
The myth of Math=Beauty?

\[ a + b \]

\( a + b \) is to \( a \) as \( a \) is to \( b \)
Denotation – Connotation?

- My cat, this cat, a pet, an animal?
- Sweat, scared, causes allergy, annoying?
- What is "denoted" – how do we know/agree?
Anchorage – Relay?

Queen Rania of Syria
Is it the picture or the word that really make up the meaning?

Adze
Charles S. Peirce

Three Types of Signs

- **Icon** - a sign that physically resembles what it stands for - a literal sign

- **Index** - a sign which implies some other object or event - an implied sign

- **Symbol** - a sign with a conventional or arbitrary relation to the signified - a learned sign
We don’t know what type of sign something is until we have interpreted what we see...and for that we do not use this distinction from Pierce.
Erwin Panofsky

Studies in Iconology: Humanist Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (1939)

• Pre-iconographic (recognize things)
• Iconographic (cultural understanding)
• Iconological (interpretation of intentions/ideology)

So, Panofsky suggests there are different steps in the process of interpretation
Perhaps: 1) Some men and a table 2) The Last Supper 3) Leonardo da Vinci stresses the individuality of the disciples?
OK, so I also propose a procedure or "method" - a way to structure your findings:

1. **First impressions** (what you immediately experience, observe, feel and think) *phenomenological approach*

2. **Descriptive analysis** of the different parts, elements and forms (the design): *analytical approach*
   Note the dominant elements and look also for the “unnoticed” but influential aspects/forms/features: turn up-side down, “alienate”, repeat, look for design and marks of intentions and preconceptions, go through the 5 senses, and both the horizontal aspect (development, story) and the vertical aspects (mood, montage). Use concepts from Rhetoric (e.g pathos, logos, ethos) and Jakobsons “communicative functions” (see later).

2. **Interpretation** of the visual phenomenon as a whole, its aim and “message”. Contextualize, draw in information from “outside” the text/image itself: *hermeneutic, critical, cultural approach*
“Method”

• The analysis is based on your observation and interpretation, but it can be repeated and discussed and refined with colleagues:

• Notice what stands out
• Always look for all functions
• What is most dominant?

Obs: no sharp distinctions/elements.
The context or situation is decisive for the meaning/function and interpretation
(an “isolated” picture of a cat means very little “in itself”-
Actually, we rarely meet an isolated picture – it’s an academic abstraction)
Section about Communication and Jakobson’s ”functions”:

“communicatio” means: Something about community, meeting and sharing

Communication is ”an interaction between persons” (not a ’transmission’ of data representing the world) and it can be about gaining power, status, relations, identity etc.

This interaction takes place by means of gestures, speech, drawings, writing, photo, video, sites, etc.

These ”products” are often referred to academically as ”texts” – and their form can be analyzed to reveal a content
Textus = loom weaving

Just like a woven fabric
a text, a film, a web-site, an exhibition can have:

- many threads and layers
- in many colors
- in two main dimensions

Mood

Time
Almost all media texts (products) have 2 dimensions - horizontal and vertical - that should be analyzed.

Narrative, development over time

Mood, quality, dynamics

What about a photo (snapshot)? Does it have a narrative (time-) aspect?
In verbal language
(- from linguistics)

A man walked down the street and he was shot.

A clown hurried along on the pavement and he was killed.
Communication is an interaction by means of “texts”

Person \[\text{“text”}\] Person

Sender \[\rightarrow\] “text” \[\leftarrow\] Receiver

speech – writing – images – sites – film – hypertext

(sites and expositions)

Production
Content analysis
Reception analysis
Content analysis is only looking at the “text”

The form of the text is (our guide) to the content

Inversely: when creating a “text” (media product) we “translate” content (our intentions or message) to form
Content analysis:

What is being said!

Analysis of the form:

The specific design and features of the text (the media product) that scholars, and in principle everybody, can note are present and active

Reception research:

What is being heard!

Investigating the reaction of the audience:

A specific target groups actual reaction, understanding and use of a text (a media product)
Text-analysis “translates” between form and content

• Communication planning (and creativity) demands understanding how content (a subject, a message) can be shown by means of form and features in a media product

• Investigating reception demands a certain understanding of the content, the elements and features that are to be tested

• The results and data from reception research are in themselves texts – and they must therefore be analyzed and interpreted: text-analysis again😊
But can we analyze so many different types of texts with the same tools?

speech – writing – sites – film – new digital

Body
Gestures
Mimics
Voice
Language

Language
fonts
lay-out
color
punctuation

Framing
Color
Focus
Light
Depth

Camera moves
Editing/cuts
Music
Sound
Visual effects

All of it plus
composition
Rooms/paths
Navigation
interaction

And all of the other new media and their specific forms and features?

This is where we need Aristotle & Roman Jakobson
General tools of communication analysis:

Rhetoric: Types of appeal (Aristotle) logos, ethos, pathos
(Why: to win in court, be social, be deliberative!)

Phenomenological interpretation of Roman Jakobson: types of communicative functions:
emotive, referential, conative, phatic, poetic and meta-communicative

They knew that communication is not about copies of reality – but this is the ‘positivism’ that still haunts us!
Roman Jakobson’s first model
(what is needed for communication to take place?)

Context

Adresser  Message  Adressee

Contact
Code

Note that “Message” is ambiguous here – “Text” would have made it more clear
Roman Jakobson’s second model
we are now going into the message (text) of the first model to see what it ”points at”- what functions does it (it’s part) have?

Referential

Emotive  Poetic  Conative

Phatic

Metalingual*

* I rename this as “Meta-communicative” hereafter in order to apply it to all sorts of media texts, also non-verbal ones
Communication is much more than an exchange of true or false statements (descriptive propositions, information, facts)

Whenever we communicate we are in principle doing 6 things:

We show something about ourselves  *emotive function*  SYMPTOM

We are talking about something (topic, the world)  *referential*  SYMBOL

We are trying to influence whoever we adress  *conative*  SIGNAL

We are showing how we relate to each other  *phatic*  SOCIAL

We are toying with language and design options  *poetic*  SENSUOUS

We are commenting on the act itself  *meta-communicative*  SYSTEMIC
## The six communicative functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>SYMBOL</th>
<th>SIGNAL</th>
<th>SYMPTOM</th>
<th>SOCIAL</th>
<th>SENSUAL</th>
<th>SYSTEMIC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Referential</td>
<td>The temperature here is 25°</td>
<td>Open the window!</td>
<td>Gosh, I am feeling hot.</td>
<td>Hello, anyone here?</td>
<td>In Spain the rain fails mainly on the plains</td>
<td>This is an example of a comment on the meta-level.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The six communicative functions can be found also in "visuals": pictures, film, tv, and web-sites

**Referential**

The image deals with a subject, and issue.

**Conative**

The image is trying to persuade you or making you do something.

**Emotive**

The image is expressive, revealing something about (the mood) of the (implied) sender.

**Phatic**

The image is establishing or maintaining contact between sender and receiver.

**Poetic**

The image has aesthetic qualities, form and style is predominant.

**Meta-comm**

The image has meta-comments or references to itself.
6 communicative functions – ready at hand

Me: the thumb  *emotive*
That: index  *referential*
!@!!”: the long  *conative*
Us: the ring  *phatic*
Playing: little  *poetic*

About it all: the whole hand  *meta-communicative*
What follows are different Pictures to be analyzed and interpreted – what will you say here?
Just to make it a bit more lively...
Hans Holbein (y), the ambassadors, 1533
David, approx. 1801-05
I Nature Calling, H&M's naturlige skønhedsserie, finder du et bredt udvalg af produkter, der kan nydes med hele kroppen. Og naturligvis til priser, der tager sig smukt ud på ethvert skønhedsbudget.

1893 by Edward Munch
Picasso, 1937
References


• See more on: [http://www.henrikjuel.dk/](http://www.henrikjuel.dk/)

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