Visual Communication and Language as a Subject of Research in Language-related Fields

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Abstract:

Visual communication at the dawn of the 21st Century persuades, informs and educates. In everyday life we perceive media to the large part as a social instrument or technological artefact, which addresses the presentation and mediation of information. In these terms we think of publishers, radio stations, internet providers, magazines, newspapers, books, blogs, paintings, photography, film videos, homepages and computer animation. This article explores the key theoretical areas in visual communication. It combines research orientation and professional practical contexts thus targeting the link between "theory and practice".
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Kee words: visual communication, media, language

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1. The emergence of a new field of research

The twentieth-century expansion of visual media revolutionized Western culture and communication practices. Cinema, television and later the Internet imposed new behavioral patterns, extending the borders of cultural activity. Visual media constituted their own cultural context, transforming the traditional relationship between the audience and cultural products.

The profound analysis of those changes required the introduction of new scientific methods and tools. Employing new ideas which could provide an appropriate background resulted eventually in the development of visual communication theory (Hrehová, 2009, s. 27-109). However, redefining fundamental concepts concerning culture, communication and language turned out to be a complex and a time-consuming process.

Visual communication tended to have been marginalized for years, as the majority of scholars have considered it to have a peripheral importance. At the very beginning even the collocation of visual and communication occurred to be artificial because the term communication seemed to concern only language.

The question whether the picture can convey a clear message or whether it is able to be an argument has become one of the most discussed issues. The findings of various scholars concerning this area used to differ significantly, ranging from the assumption that images cannot communicate anything except for feelings (e.g., Gombrich 1960, Goodman 1976) to the views indicating that images are able to produce an entirely intelligible message (e.g., Messaris, 1994, Kress and van Leeuven 1996, Noth 1996, Dillon1999). Although the majority of the contemporary theorists reject the idea that images are not able to communicate and deliver a message, some scholars point out that a picture should be accompanied by words in order to acquire a particular meaning (e.g., Barthes 1977, Fleming, 1996).

2. Semiotic attempts to characterize visual language

Two most acknowledged doctrines concerning signs were developed independently by American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce and Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure on the turn of the 19th century. Peirce and Saussure formulated their theories on divergent premises which resulted in two different sign models - a dyadic (composed of a signifier 'signifiant'- the form and the signified 'signifie' – the concept) and triadic one (consists of representamen, interpretant and object) (Chandler 2007, 13-42).

Peirce who was mainly a cognitive philosopher, perceived sings from the wide philosophical perspective, treating semiotics as an element of his theoretical inquiry. Saussure considered semiotics a social science and believed that his linguistic theory could be extended to all signs systems. Therefore, the most essential difference between those sign approa-

ches is the unequal status of language employed in both doctrines. For Peirce language was only an aspect of a sign in general, therefore it could not have properties which would be incorporated to all signs and signs systems, most of which were definitively not specific to the linguistic sign. Saussure regarded language as the most important signs system constituting other forms of signification (Chandler op., cit.).

2.1. Saussurian tradition

Sign theory developed by Saussure had a great impact on a modern social and cultural study. Semiotics revolutionized the European attitude toward culture and language and became an inspiration for new theories and disciplines. Employing language as a primary signs model facilitated the acknowledgment of a broad spectrum of social phenomena ranging from analyzing text to cultural and social practices. The imposing legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure embraces either works of semioticians for example Roland Barthes, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz or Julia Kristeva or linguists such as Louis Hjelmslev and Roman Jakobson. Furthermore, semiotics determined the anthropological works of Claude Levi-Strauss leading to an innovative approach - structuralism (often identified with semiotics). Saussurian thought influenced also psychoanalysis, shaping views of such an outstanding figure as Jacques Lacan.

Nevertheless, the potency of the semiotic approach, namely applying language as a primary frame of reference, obstructs any profound examination of the images and visual language. Saussure's theory of signs provides us with contextual framework and a set of methods applicable to textual analysis, however, it seems to be inadequate to explore complexity of the visual images and to elucidate a broad spectrum of mutual verbal and visual relationships. Although, a few semioticians attempted to formulate a visual theory based on language as a primary system, the significance of such works was rather marginal. Assuming that language and image are comparable structures Fernande Saint-Martin in her book "Semiotics of Visual Language" (1990) searched for an alphabet for images. French semiotician recognized visual elements parallel to letters and labeled them "coloremes", identifying a basic element of an image – color with the basic element of a language – letter.
Irving Biederman (1987) developed the theory of visual perception also based on the analogy between language and image. His article published in Psychological Review, presumed that similarly as language is composed of limited number of phonemes (44 for English and 55 for all the languages in the world) an image is constructed of parallel basic elements which the author called geometrical icons 'geons'. The main flaw of above-mentioned analyses is the simplification of the complex relations operating among various components of an image. Verbal and visual communications seem to function on different levels therefore recognizing parallel elements is impossible.

What is more visual language constitutes an autonomous mode of communication entirely independent to verbal language. Therefore, the attempts to identify some linguistic structures within pictures did not approach the deep understanding of the communicative dimension of an image.

2.2. Peircian tradition

The triadic concept of a sign facilitates the debate about the nature of a representation and leads to a complex analysis of an image. A great value of Peircean theory lies in the fact that the presence of one aspect of a sign does not exclude another one. Peirce was aware that a sign can have various properties at the some time, for example it can be either iconic or symbolic, obviously any other combination can occur. What is more, he realized that it was very difficult to find a pure sign with a clear-cut attribution. A map is a good example of this assumption, it is indexical because it shows the location, iconic because it depicts distances and symbolic because it uses conventional symbols for marking places. The classification of a sign depends on its particular application, consequently the sign is determined by the way in which it is used. This concept offers a ground for analyzing not only still images but also film or television, which is extremely important for contemporary discussion about image. Peirce himself devoted some of his writings to photography, indicating that a photograph is either icon or index. A photographic image is indexical because it is a physical manifestation of the light on photographic emulsion, thus all unedited photographic filmic images are indexes. Photograph is also iconic because it resembles what it depicts. For Peirce, the photograph was the evidence of the outside world which could appear parallel to the reality. Peirce identified the social importance of the pictures with their iconicity. However photographic and filmic images can be also symbolic because they refer to certain cultural texts. Although, Peirce was not acquainted with television, his theory is applicable to this medium. Film and television genre can be classified according to prevailing feature of a sign, for example documentary films and news programs are mostly indexical, however, dramas are symbolic because they refer to cultural texts and practices. In general, film and television use three kinds of signs: icon (sound and image), symbol (language) and index (film recording).

2.3. Toward a new semiotics of visual language.

Sol Worth was one of the first researchers who posed a fundamental question of how meaning is communicated through visual images. Being a filmmaker Worth initially devoted his inquiry into film. Gradually, the study was extended to other visual media. Worth was convinced that visual media were a form of communication, however, totally different than verbal language. In analyzing communicative dimension of the visual images Worth employed the semiotic approach. According to the semiotic model, the theorist recognized communication as "a social process, within context, in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred" (Worth 1981, 137). Therefore, the meaning is not an integral part of a sign, but rather a cultural construct. Social life and particularly communication is governed by cultural conventions (Hrehová, Poplawski, 2004, s. 389-397.). Those conventions impose the articulatory and interpretative strategies employed by both producer and interpreter of the message. In his most acknowledged paper "Pictures Can't Say Ain't" Worth specified the fundamental divergence between pictures and words. Worth states that although, pictures have form, structure, conventions and rules, they do not have grammar in the linguistic sense because they are not organized by clearly specified syntax and lexicon as words are. Therefore, a picture - pictorial sign cannot perform functions characteristic of a linguistic sign. As the title of above-mentioned paper implies a picture cannot make any negative statements. Moreover, pictures "cannot depict conditionals, counterfactuals, negatives, or past-future tenses. Neither can they make passive transformations, ask questions, or do a host of things that a verbal language is designed to do" (Worth 1981, p.163). Pictorial signs, being according to Worth symbolic events, created socially artifacts, constitute their own reality. In order to interpret this reality we must know the code - system of conventions used by producer to imply certain meaning.

Another researcher of visual language - Paul Martin Lester argued that despite the apparent dominance of the visual media, visual communication is still considered in terms of the linguistic categories. Lester cited two principle reasons for which the linguists did not regard images as language. Firstly, there are not any visual equivalents for the letters. Secondly, there is not an identifiable visual syntax, organizing pictorial elements into a linear pattern.

The author believes, however, that the lack of those two structures does not signify that the visual images cannot convey a message, because the most important factor constituting either verbal or visual communication is the context. Context determines the meaning of a message regardless of its correctness, enabling us to understand, for example, an utterance which does not obey the syntactic rules. Since, the linguistic method does not provide an appropriate framework for the visual analyses Lester postulates employing a syntactic approach. According to the theorist, syntactics which examines the way signs are combined

to produce a message offers among other areas of semiotics namely, pragmatics and semantics the most appropriate perspective facilitating the recognition of a pictorial meaning. "Individual symbols within a picture have no precise alphabetic relationship, but when used in combination, meaning is found for an image through a traditional, discursive method" (Lester 1995, Internet source).

Lester's syntactic theory of visual communication is based on three assumptions:

1. "Mediated words and pictures have equal importance in the communication process.
2. As symbols with similar historical roots, mediated words and pictures are both symbolic representations.
3. Images are remembered by thinking about them in words" (Lester 1995).

Syntactic theory of visual communication assumes also that although there is not a visual alphabet a picture which is a collection of signs forms a language in the mind of its viewer.

What is more, pictures stay in mind much longer than words, for example, people tend to remember a newspaper photograph instead of its caption. Words and pictures are inseparably joined together, their amalgam constitutes the most powerful mode of communication. Paul Lester is convinced that the contemporary extensive production and distribution of images leads to granting verbal and visual communication an equal status. Visual culture formed on the basis of words and pictures has a chance to cross all borders and facilitate an understating of the diverse cultures.

Another stance represents Winfred Noth who in his article: "Can Picture Lie?" attempted to reconcile semiotic approach and visual analysis. The semiotician commences his considerations with the citation of Umberto Eco's definition of semiotics. According to Eco "semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign." (Eco cited in Noth, 1996) A sign being a substitution for something else is constituted by its ability to lie. According to Eco a sign which is not able to lie is also not able to convey the truth, and consequently is not able to signify at all. Noth wonders whether the manipulative power of pictorial messages results from the intrinsic ability to lie, characteristic of every sign. This perspective poses a number of fundamental questions. First of all, does a picture referring to the non-existent reality lie? Can we identify representing reality with conveying truth? Does the untrue pictorial statement created with the intention to deceive exist? Winfred Noth believes that semiotics extends a valuable tool to scrutinize such problems. Recognition of truth or lie in pictures requires semantic, syntactic and pragmatic analyses. "From a semantic point of view a true picture must be one which corresponds to the facts it depicts. From a syntactic point of view, it must be one which represents an object and conveys a predication about this object, and from pragmatic point of view there must be an intention to deceive on the part of the addresser of the pictorial message" (Noth 1996, 14). Noth's study proves that pictures can either assert or deceive regardless of the perspective employed. As far as semantics is concerned pictures particularly photographs, computer graphics and other modes of digital images can depict reality but they also provide a enormous opportunity to manipulation and deception. Pictures also perform semantic function, being a collec-

tion of sign they alike sentences have the prepositional structure enabling them to convey a statement. Moreover if a picture can be used to tell the truth it can be as well used to deceive. Visual statements are, however, different from verbal, the contextual clues which support them cannot be expressed in the same medium.

3. Visual language as an arbitrary system

The idea of the arbitrariness of the pictorial representation was firstly expressed by an outstanding art historian Erwin Panovsky in the 1920. In the essay "Perspective as Symbolic Form" (Panovski, cited in Messaris 1994, 4) Panovsky argued that linear perspective formulated in Renaissance is an arbitrary representational style - a "symbolic form" which does not depict real spatial relations but certain word view. Initially, this concept was marginalized since the history of art was perceived as a gradual process striving for perfection recognized as mimesis. Consequently, the development of linear perspective used to be identified with the greatest achievement of European painting. (This view on art prevails also today, almost every literate member of the Western society takes for granted the fact that linear perspective depicts ideally the depth.)

Although, Panovsky's essay caused an uproar among theorists, theoretical revolution which refuted previous disciplinary matrix dominating the tradition of interpreting images took place 40 years later. In 1961 Ernst Hans Gombrich published an extremely prominent book on human perception entitled "Art and Illusion". The author described the history of pictorial representation from drawings in the caves at Lascaux to Impressionism as the myth of innocent eye. For Gombrich the eye is not innocent, our sight is formed by the culture which acquaints us with particular systems of representation and provides 'correct' interpretation. Understanding of a picture is not a result of identifying what the picture depicts but a consequence of recognizing its system of representation. Gombrich's theory (developed also in his subsequent book – The Image and the Eye [1982]) assumes that the resemblance of an image to reality is governed by cultural conventions and therefore pictorial interpretation requires some previous knowledge. Gombrich emphasizes the fact that every culture has different standards of realistic representations. The link between a picture and reality is arbitrary, people brought up in the diverse societies interpret the same picture differently because they are adopted to certain systems of representation. Therefore, a medieval book's illustration which appears to be artificial for the contemporary members of the Western culture used to be realistic for the medieval viewers.

The most intense critique of the resemblance theory of depiction presented Nelson Goodman in his book: Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols (Goodman 1976). Goodman premised his theory on the assumption that resemblance is exclusively a cultural convention based on current pictorial practices (Hrehová 2009). According to this

stance pictures are symbols in systems of representation in the same way as words and sentences are symbols in languages which signifies that pictures are as arbitrary as language. Since it is impossible to identify the fundamental rules governing the correspondence between pictures and their referents Goodman argues that in a picture "almost anything may stand for almost anything" (Goodman, cited in Lopes 1996, p.57). Every representation can be perceived as realistic, for example, if the culture considers it to be so. Similarly as sentences have meaning in language, pictures refer to something only within the specific symbol system. Consequently, a picture denotes its referent but also the entire symbolic system of representation.

Conventionalism has become a generally accepted theory, however, it does not seem to elucidate all relationships operating between an image and the outside world. Even if we reject the most extreme version of conventionalism (anything can stand for anything) and take for granted that a visual image is to some degree formed by cultural conventions, we have to admit that the pictures somehow resemble their referents. Otherwise, we wouldn't be able to recognize any visual images except those produced within our culture, which is not true. In addition, there are not any scientifically proved examples of people being not able to recognize a depicted object only because they were not acquainted with certain pictorial style. Descriptions of experiments conducted by initially missionaries or travelers and then anthropologists, provided evidence that people who had never had any experience with pictorial representation did encounter difficulty in figuring out the subjects of a picture. But, does it signify that the whole system of pictorial representations depends only on culture. The knowledge of pictorial conventions certainly enriches human perception but it is not indispensable to infer what the picture represents. Some visual conventions simply seem to be transparent to the majority of viewers.

Moreover, it is impossible not to notice that the relation between image and reality undergoes a metamorphosis. The spread of visual media resulted in not only in establishing a new mode of communication but also in constituting a new form of pictorial references. Visual images today, tend to represent other representations instead of the outside world. Images that we encounter most frequently, namely those used in the advertisements often emulate other images, for example, acknowledged film takes or old paintings. As Eduardo Neiva states: "Images act as surrogates of reality, without being reality itself; instead they are signs" (Neiva 1999, p.83).

4. Visual argumentation

The debate on image and language has stimulated an arduous discussion on visual argumentation. The question whether pictures can be arguments constituted the most significant issue related to this area. Despite some standpoints claiming that pictures cannot be

arguments or that pictures can function argumentatively only as support for linguistic claim (e.g. Fleming 1996), most theories reject this concept and concentrate attention on how visual images perform their argumentative function (e.g., Blair 1996, Birtsell, Groarke 1996, Shelley 1996). Although, the comprehensive visual argumentation theory has not been determined yet, various scientists attempted to recognize specific cases of the pictorial arguments.

A remarkable source of the articles relating to visual argumentation represents the discussion published in "Argumentation and Advocacy" journal. The debate was initiated by the David Fleming's article "Can pictures be arguments" in 1996. A great controversy surrounding this article resulted in a series of publications contesting the premises of Fleming's theory.

David Fleming asserts that the term "argument' cannot be applied in reference to pictures, because a picture lacks a two - part structure consists of a 'claim' and a 'support', constituting an argument. Moreover, a picture does not produce an assertion and evidence, which are the integral elements of the verbal argument. According to Fleming a picture "makes no claim which can be contested, doubted, or otherwise improved by others. If I oppose the "position" you articulate in a picture, you can simply deny that your picture ever articulated that, or any other position" (Fleming 1996, p.13). This standpoint has been strongly discussed because it implies visual message it is not able to produce any statement. Consequently, Fleming believes that a picture must be translated into language or accompanied by the verbal caption in order to produce a meaning. Therefore, a picture can function as an argument only as a support for linguistic claim, which entirely determines a picture.

Anthony Blair in his article "The possibility and actuality of visual arguments" argues with the theory offered by David Flaming. Blair emphasis the persuasive power of the visual images, maintaining that photographs, movies or works of art are much more influential than verbal statements. Blair claims that the property of an argument should not be confined to the linguistics or verbal aspects. Stressing the distinction between verbal and visual communication the theorist indicates that visual communication operates autonomously. Although, verbal and visual communication produce the meanings differently, the interpretation of the visual images can be as precisely as the interpretation of the verbal expressions because visual arguments expressed visually perform their argumentative function on the basis of nonlinguistic factors. Therefore, a picture can be translated into language but it is not necessary to understand it. Obviously, not all visual images, similarly as linguistic claims share the argumentative function. According to Blair a visual image is an argument if the viewers are able to identify its premises and its intended conclusions. Some of the works of art satisfy this conditions for example the bas-reliefs illustrating the Last Judgment situated on the tympanums above doorways in many Gothic cathedrals whose message assures that "if you are a sinner you will be condemn for ever" is clear and comprehensible. As far as advertisements, television programs and movies are concern Blair

believes that the character of visual arguments do not differ significantly from the verbal because all of them are supposed to change our beliefs or attitudes. They employ similar kinds of persuasion.

David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke in the article "Toward a theory of visual argument" also assess critically the main assumption of David Fleming's theory which states that visual images are ambiguous, unclear and less precise than words. The authors argue that visual images can be vague but it does not distinguish them from words and sentences which can also be abstruse. Birdsell and Groarke claim that in some cases it is the visual image that constitutes the meaning for example, the visual elements of the poster which make it eligible. Moreover, the art of propaganda or the political cartoon prove that visual meaning can be very clear and determine. The authors stress the importance of context, which influences either verbal or visual communication. They outline three kinds of context significant to visual language. Immediate visual context (the relation of an image to other images with which it is associated); Immediate verbal context (the relation of images to the verbal texts in which they are embedded); Visual culture perceived as (a set of "cultural conventions of vision" representing either our ways of seeing or changes of them) (Bridsel, Groarke 1996, p.35). Visual culture serves as a background for particular visual texts. Therefore, a real analyze of visual argumentation should: recognize the internal elements of a visual image, understand the specific context and employ an adequate visual perspective

Cameron Shelley the author of "Rhetorical and demonstrative modes of visual argument" (1996) analyzing the depictions of the well-acknowledged March of progress, which was supposed to show the evolutionary progress from monkey to man, emphasizes that it is much easier to demonstrate this process visually than describe it verbally. Shelley points out that visual mental imagery plays an immense role in the scientific formation of the hypotheses because visualization impacts other cognitive processes shaping their characters. A detailed examination of the divergent illustrations representing the "March of progress" has proved that those depictions perform as the visual arguments. Shelley distinguishes two modes of visual argument: rhetorical mainly correlated with verbal thinking, and demonstrative which employs visual thinking. Rhetorical visual arguments comport with verbal arguments and represent a wide variety of visual realizations depicting premises not conclusions. Although, those visual presentations do not depict conclusions they denote them. The interpretation of rhetorical arguments requires specific knowledge and the non-visual associations. Demonstrative visual arguments do not encompass any verbal structures, they represent a narrow range of visual realizations depicting both premises and conclusions. Those visual presentations literally portray the process of deriving conclusions. This dichotomy, as its author states, is not supposed to organize pictures into two distinct groups (there are pictures employing both modes), but to characterize the nature of visual argument and determine how they are applied to convey a message to viewer.

Cara A. Finnegan in the paper "The naturalistic enthymeme and visual argument: photographic representation in the "Skull Controversy" (2001) postulates comprehensive

examination of the context in which visual arguments occur in order to understand "how visual culture influences the perceived argumentative capacity of images" (Finnegan 2001, p.121). The starting point for the reflections is so called the skull controversy – an American public discussion on a photograph of a cow's skull taken in South Dakota in the spring of 1936. The photograph was ordered by the Resettlement Administration in the sixth year of the Depression and coinciding with it the great drought. This photograph, rapidly gained a symbolic status representing drought, hunger despair etc. The fierce controversy was caused by the publication alleging the author artistic manipulation. Finnegan is convinced that the origin of the controversy is a deeply-rooted belief that photographs are an ideal reflection of reality. This conviction constitutes a profoundly influential but often unconscious argumentative potential of the photographs. The author of this paper notices that we believe in the reality depicted on the photograph, questioning it only being told it is fake. Finnegan names this process 'naturalistic enthymeme' and characterizes it as "potent, but ultimately vulnerable form of visual argument" (Finnegan 2001, p.122). Therefore, in the study of visual argument concerning realistic forms such as photography, television news or documentary films, the norms and conventions governing them should be analyzed as the major factors constituting their argumentative potential. Although, the skull controversy took place almost seventy years ago, a form of visual argument described as 'naturalistic enthymeme' tends to prevail today. Most people still identify a photograph with a purely naturalistic depiction of reality, a document of the truth which should be devoid of any aesthetic interpretation.

The discussion about visual argumentation has not been concluded yet. So far, no one has discovered the clear-cut features determining visual argument. Nevertheless, the assumption that a picture cannot form statements or function as an argument depreciates the idea of visual communication.

The skepticism toward visual communication expressed by many scholars seems to result, in my opinion, from a long tradition of identifying images with primitive modes of communication. Apparently, a short history of visual dominancy has not thought us to trust in images yet. After all, the world of our grandparents belonged to the realm of the written words.

Conclusions

The dominance of visual genres over contemporary communication practices is a relatively new phenomenon. The role and functions of visual communication and language are a much debated issue among theoreticians. Although, it is widely acknowledged that images perform important role in today's culture, views concerning this subject are strongly polarized.

Visual communication tends to be either marginalized or demonized. Opinions diverge between those who claim that images can only serve as support for linguistic claims, and those who, on the contrary, believe that image always prevails over verbal language. Although, those two stances seem to be extreme, they both express the deeply-rooted attachment to the tradition of identifying language with the most important sign system constituting our humanity. Consequently, the development of visual media is perceived as leading to the oversimplification and impoverishment of the cultural practices. The absence of a conceptual framework does not assist in the profound understanding of visual communication either.

The redefinition of the basic concepts concerning images seems to be the only solution to the 'pictorial impasse'. Most theorist perceive Peircean semiotics as the alternative to produce a new visual theory. "The option is a triadic conceptual scheme program that redefines image making and what was considered imitation of reality" (Neiva 1999, p.75).

A triadic model of a sign recognizes not only a complex relations operating within a picture but also fundamental relationship between a picture and the reality. Moreover, semiotic doctrine formulated by Peirce was the only one that succeeded in clarifying the shift in the pictorial references resulting from mass production of the visual images.

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