

Semiotic Applications on TV Images

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Abstract: *This article focuses on cultural representation and intercultural communications and looks at how they work in action, using the idea of semiotics as a starting point. Semiotics is the key term in this discourse; it is used extensively in media courses and media practice.*

Keywords: *semiotics, visual language, television, culture, globalization.*

Context

Media is playing an important role in global activities. Contemporary context places a duty on journalists to understand the public and capture global media tastes. It is a challenge for journalists to choose content that is truthful and adheres to professional guidelines.

This article focuses on three main issues including:

- Global media represents the world to us, and us to the world through TV pictures.
- Despite global reach, understanding local conditions is still crucial for media and TV industry.
- Skills in intercultural communications are vital for anyone wanting to work in TV industry.

The idea of semiotics is used as a starting point. Journalists are probably already familiar with the term; it is used extensively in high school media courses and is a staple for first year media units. To put it simply, semiotics is the practice of studying communication by deconstructing the signs and symbols on which it is based.



*A capture screen of Ranh giới TV documentary
(Source: Ranh giới Documentary on VTV1 special, VTV1, 8/9/2001)*

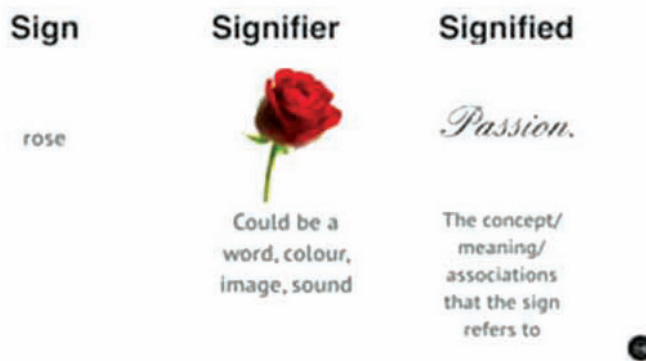
Semiotics is especially powerful for studying visual communication, such as the image above. Let's start with some basic questions:

- Where was it taken?
- Where was it published?
- What was the intent of the reporter/journalist?

It doesn't take long for people to start talking about "Ukraine war", "environmental pollution" and "LGBT". The reasons for this are clear - the visual language of the image (ie. its semiotics) works to tell a story and our knowledge of similar images we've seen in the past fills in the gaps.

Semiotic basics

The first formal study on signs was presented by the Swiss semiologist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). Firstly, semiotics focuses on arbitrary relationship between signifier (the thing that is doing the representing) and signified (that which is represented). This is most easily understood in terms of language, which is where semiotics begin. We give things names so that we all know what we are referring to. For example, "the house", "the car", "people" etc. We know this because the same thing has different signifiers in different languages, but they all refer to the same thing. Take the word "Rose" for example.

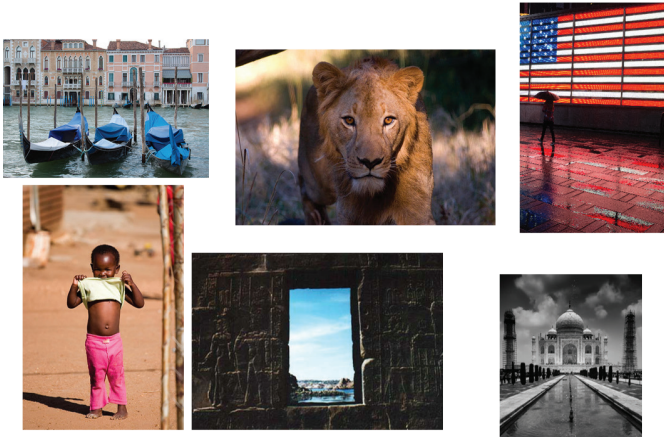


We only understand that this is a rose if we have been brought up using the language in question, or to put it another way, we are familiar with the codes of a particular language that dictate how letters should be arranged and how they should be used to generate meaning. Just as textual communication has codes that help us understand the meaning of communication, visual communication also has codes that help us make sense of what we see. Photography is actually about employing semiotic techniques, often unconsciously. Something small in a picture is likely to be far away, something large is likely to be closer. A person framed with the camera looking up at them is perceived to be powerful, while reverse framing implies weakness. Dark images imply that something sinister is

going on, while bright images convey as sense of lightness, or relief. Again, none of these things are natural—they are all learned through constant exposure to images and the act of interpreting them.

Denotation, Connotation and Myth

Since visual language is learned like spoken language, there is also a cultural element that comes into play here, because as we have discussed before we are really the products of our culture. This is most obvious with respect to three other facets of semiotics: Denotation, Connotation and Myth.



Travel image (source: travel blog)

In semiotic terms, Denotation tends to be described as the definitional, ‘literal’, ‘obvious’ or ‘commonsense’ meaning of a sign, so that in the image of Venice it would simply be described as “3 boats in front of old buildings”. Connotation is the set of secondary meanings we ascribe to a sign, often based on experience. So when we look at the image again, we might imagine “romance” or “history” or any of the other ideals that we commonly associate with Venice. Myth is effectively the accumulated baggage some signs acquire over time, which become so culturally significant that they get widely shared. So to use this example we have a “myth” of Venetian life that encapsulates all the connotations we spoke about earlier and more. Importantly, “myth” in this sense does not mean it is false, just that it has accumulated a lot of cultural weight. We often travel to these places because of the myths associated with them.

Try looking at the other images and working out the denotation, connotation and myth that might be associated with each. With respect to representation, an important thing to remember is that when we take photographs we often employ connotations and myths (both consciously and unconsciously). When I shot the image of the lion, I was deliberately trying to connect it with already established

myths about Africa, as was the case with images of the Taj Mahal and Times Square. These things happen in many images, but travel images are especially interesting because they often work to represent cultures. All photographs invite the viewer to construct a story, as well as implying truth in what it represents. This is why travel photography is so important – it tells a story and implies it is true.

Semiotics in television industry

The question here is: how we use photographic codes on television to represent the world around us. Of course, this occurs in professional circles too, with this being most evident in media industries like short videos and TV's advertising. TV's advertising faces particular challenges in a global environment, because the semiotic choices content creators make might be interpreted differently depending on the cultural background of the audience they are addressing. Consider the promotional video made to advertise Hanoi and its surrounding regions as an example.

Those of us who live in Hanoi will surely recognise many of the images which are shown in the video, but locals will also probably note many aspects of life in Hanoi that are absent. Any city in this world like New York, Tokyo, London, Paris, Melbourne..., every image has been chosen to portray a particular vision of the city, so anything that does not fit (like pollution, traffic jam, accident...) has been excluded. The advertisement will target primarily at specific customers, but we can imagine that advertisements targeting other regions might feature quite different images.

This is not just a problem for TV's advertising; any TV's production that tries to reach an audience outside of its local market must necessarily confront issues of cultural difference. The wider TV's market, the greater the diversity between TV's potential customers, and this means that TV industry often have to adapt its product, and also the way they communicate their message. This is the challenge faced by global brands, and the TV industry response has changed substantially over time.

Standardisation and Adaptation

This is one of the key arguments in modern TV industry: Can TV organisations produce one standard campaign for all regions, or do they have to adapt their message for each specific market? This debate can be traced back to the early 1930s and 1940s, which was also the first time international TV broadcasting became viable through the rise of mass media. Early research in Europe found that consumers across many countries shared very similar values, meaning that they could be marketed to using the same approach, and often the same materials. The key benefit here is that this is very cost-effective.

Some images on global television during the COVID-19 illustrate the idea behind the push for standardised information: Some things are common to all humans:

- Be strong against the epidemic
- Community support
- Share difficulties
- Let's hope for a bright future

These kinds of idea could really be standardised and still be successful, thereby saving the TV stations and the content creators a great deal of money. However, while this was true of markets that were already culturally fairly similar, it began to fall apart as advertisers entered into more culturally diverse environments. This prompted a re-think for Adaptation.

“Product [need] universality cannot imply global message appeal [Israeli and American women] might manifest the same need for cosmetics (i.e., preservation of beauty), but this does not mean that an Israeli woman perceives the American cosmetic in the same way as it is perceived by the American. Therefore, understanding consumer wants, needs, motives and behavior is a necessary condition to the development of an effective promotional program”⁽¹⁾.

What Gilligan and Hird are arguing here is that while some desires may be universal, the way they are expressed is often culturally based. This means that if TV industry wants to work in culturally diverse markets, they will need to adapt their messaging to suit. What we have here is a remarkable level of standardisation, but also some important adaptation. While the language has been changed, most other details are kept the same down to the clothes worn by the actors. Note this is not a total cost saving – the cheapest version would have been just to dub the TV images in different languages. However a lot of money was saved in terms of concept, planning and reuse of some materials. For example, culinary programs on television, different countries may have different standards for food safety, religious beliefs about animal meat, vegetarianism, clothing, etc. Today, most of TV's content is geared towards a global reach, as a result, TV images are a mix of standardisation and adaptation./.

(1) Gilligan, C. and Hird, M., 2013, *International Marketing (RLE International Business): Strategy and Management*, Routledge., p. 246.

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