



First Assignment

SEMIOTICS COURSE

Assignment Topic: Semiotics in your country

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Introduction

In this assignment the topic that will be discussed is what I have learned in Greece during my studies at Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences (Communication, Media and Culture Department). In our department we focused extensively on Visual Semiotics, a sub-domain of semiotics that analyses the way visual images communicate a message. Therefore, I will provide sources from the notes and passages that were given to us for further understanding of the visual culture and I will discuss them.

Source 1

Text fragment from the source;

“What is the content of the photographic message? What does the photograph transmit? By definition, the scene itself, the literal reality. From the object to its image there is of course a reduction - in proportion, perspective, colour - but at no time is this reduction a transformation (in the mathematical sense of the term). In order to move from the reality to its photograph it is in no way necessary to divide up this reality into units and to constitute these units as signs, substantially different from the object they communicate; there is no necessity to set up a relay, that is to say a code, between the object and its image. Certainly the image is not the reality but at least it is its perfect analogon and it is exactly this analogical perfection which, to common sense, defines the photograph. Thus can be seen the special status of the photographic image: it is a message without a code; from which proposition an important corollary must immediately be drawn: the photographic message is a continuous message. Are there other messages without a code? At first sight, yes: precisely the whole range of analogical reproductions of reality - drawings, paintings, cinema, theatre. In fact, however, each of those messages develops in an immediate and obvious way a supplementary message, in addition to the analogical content itself (scene, object, landscape), which is what is commonly called the style of the reproduction; second meaning, whose signifier is a certain 'treatment' of the image (result of the action of the creator) and whose signified, whether aesthetic or ideological, refers to a certain 'culture' of the society receiving the message. In short,

all these 'imitative' arts comprise two messages: a denoted message, which is the analogon itself, and a connoted message, which is the manner in which the society to a certain extent communicates what it thinks of it. This duality of messages is evident in all reproductions other than photographic ones: there is no drawing, no matter how exact, whose very exactitude is not turned into a style (the style of 'verism'); no filmed scene whose objectivity is not finally read as the very sign of objectivity. Here again, the study of these connoted messages has still to be carried out (in particular it has to be decided whether what is called a work of art can be reduced to a system of significations); one can only anticipate that for all these imitative arts when common - the code of the connoted system is very likely constituted either by a universal symbolic order or by a period rhetoric, in short by a stock of stereotypes (schemes, colours, graphisms, gestures, expressions, arrangements of elements). When we come to the photograph, however, we find in principle nothing of the kind, at any rate as regards the press photograph (which is never an 'artistic' photograph). The photograph professing to be a mechanical analogue of reality, its first-order message in some sort completely fills its substance and leaves no place for the development of a second-order message. Of all the structures of information (...), the photograph appears as the only one that is exclusively constituted and occupied by a 'denoted' message, a message which totally exhausts its mode of existence. In front of a photograph, the feeling of 'denotation', or, if one prefers, of analogical plenitude, is so great that the description of a photograph is literally impossible; to describe consists precisely in joining to the denoted message a relay or second-order message derived from a code which is that of language and constituting in relation to the photographic analogue, however much care one takes to be exact, a connotation: to describe is thus not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown. This purely 'denotative' status of the photograph, the perfection and plenitude of its analogy, in short its 'objectivity', has every chance of being mythical (these are the characteristics that common sense attributes to the photograph). In actual fact, there is a strong probability (and this will be a working hypothesis) that the photographic message too - at least in the press - is connoted.

Connotation is not necessarily immediately graspable at the level of the message itself (it is, one could say, at once invisible and active, clear and implicit) but it can already be inferred from certain phenomena which occur at the levels of the production of the photograph (choice, technical treatment, framing, lay-out) and represents, finally, a coding of the photographic analogue."

Bibliographic description of the source

Image, Music, Text- Roland Barthes- Stephen Heath- Fontana Press-
HarperCollinsPublishers-2010

Estimation of source quality (one sentence)

This source is very credible and valid as it comes from a book that has been written by Roland Barthes; expert in semiology, theorist, philosopher and linguist.

Source 2

Text fragment from the source;

For modern criticism, language and imagery have become enigmas, problems to be explained, prison-houses which lock the understanding away from the world. The commonplace of modern studies of images, in fact, is that they must be understood as a kind of language; instead of providing a transparent window on the world, images are now regarded as the sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification.

(...)Images are not just a particular kind of sign, but something like an actor on the historical stage, a presence or character endowed with legendary status, a history that parallels and participates in the stories we tell ourselves about our own evolution from creatures "made in the image" of a creator, to creatures who make themselves and their world in their own image.

Two things must immediately strike the notice of anyone who tries to take a general view of the phenomena called by the name of imagery. The first is simply the wide variety of things that go by this name. We speak of pictures, statues, optical illusions, maps, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memories, and even ideas as images, and the sheer diversity of this list would seem to make any systematic, unified understanding impossible. The second thing that may strike us is that the calling of all these things by the name of "image" does not necessarily mean that they all have something in common. It might be better to begin by thinking of images as a far-flung family which has migrated in time and space and undergone profound mutations in the process.

Bibliographic description of the source;

Iconology: Image, text, ideology- W J Thomas Mitchell-Chicago[u.a] Univ.of Chicago Press-2009

Estimation of source quality (one sentence)

This source is very credible and valid as it comes from a book that has been written by W J Thomas Mitchell; someone who has invested his life in visual culture and explaining the role of the image.

Source 3

Text fragment from the source;

We are, of course, surrounded by different sorts of visual technologies- photography, video, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example; and the images they show us- tv programmes, advertisements, snapshots, public sculpture, movies, surveillance video footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. All these different sorts of technologies and images offer views of the world; they render the world in visual terms. But this rendering, even by photographs, is never innocent. These images are never transparent windows on to the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways. Thus a distinction is sometimes made between vision and visuality. Vision is what the human eye is physiologically capable of seeing (although it must be noted that ideas about that capability have changed historically and will most likely continue to change: see Crary, 1992). Visuality, on the other hand, refers to way in which vision is constructed in various ways: 'how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein' (Foster, 1988a: ix). Another phrase with very similar connotations to visuality is scopic regime. Both terms refer to the ways in which both what is seen and how it is seen are culturally constructed. For some writers, the visual is the most fundamental sense.

Bibliographic description of the source

Visual methodology: an introduction to the interpretation of visual materials- Gillian Rose- Sage-2001

Estimation of source quality (one sentence)

I find this source extremely credible as it comes from a book that is written, to interpret the plethora of visual stimuli surrounding us, by the famous British scholar Gillian Rose.

Source 1

Summary

In this text, the content and the message that a photograph transmits is discussed. More specifically the content of a press photograph and not an artistic one. A press photograph depicts the reality itself, it transfers the reality we know into paper but no code is created between when this transaction happens. Of course, it is not implied in the text that a press photograph is a reality but it is certainly the perfect analogon of reality. As it was mentioned before, the press-photograph conveys a message, a message without a code. Paintings, movies, drawings and theatrical plays do that too; they convey a message without a code. However, the message a painting, a drawing, a movie or a theatrical play sends-even though it is not coded or a code itself- it is always an additional message or an explanatory message and not the whole message itself. On the other hand, when someone sees a picture the whole message can be transmitted. A press photograph is very substantial and leaves no gaps to the observer. In other words it does not have a direct and a connoted message like the other imitative arts have alas it has a direct message only. This “analogical plentitude” of the photograph makes it impossible to proceed and describe it with words.

However, all of the above does not lead us to the conclusion that the photograph cannot have a connoted message apart from the denoted one. A press photograph can actually convey a message in addition to the explicit or primary message. That is connotation and connotation is so fluid that can actually seem so graspable to the eyes of the observer but so immaterial at the same time. This depends a lot on the process the photographer chooses to go through and that process is in fact a process of coding.

Analysis

After we have summarised the text from our source, we will proceed into analysing it even though the text itself is very explanatory. I chose to divide my summary into two parts, thus two main points. These two main points will be analysed further more.

The first point the writer tries to make clear is the clarity of the photographic message. Of course, he clarifies that only a press photograph can actually do that and not an artistic photograph. The artistic photograph is fated to always give a connoted message because that is the purpose that was created. Artistic photography uses a range of signs to imply what it wants to convey but it does not convey it clearly and upfront. That is a quality only art, because art sometimes doesn't want to convey one or two messages but many messages as it is not guaranteed that every observer will translate the connoted message the same way that another observer will. Maybe that is what makes an artistic piece successful;

to convey many messages that will express each one of its observers accurately. So after we have established that no type of art can convey a solid denoted message and that an artistic piece(movie, painting, drawing, theatrical play) will always consist a supplementary message we move on to our analysis.

Leaving aside that, the press photograph can convey only a denoted message, a message that is not coded in any way and that is indeed very graspable. It is actually so accurate and precise that an accurate description is impossible. So we can actually say that the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” is not real. After all, there is a fundamental gap between text and images. For Barthes to describe is to join a denoted message with a second-order message derived from language and language is also a code. If we did that we would cancel all that was stated above; that a photographic message is so accurate that it is not coded. So if we joined it with a coded message through language its meaning would change.

However, that does not mean that it is entirely impossible for a press photograph to convey a connoted message. That would be very ignorant to claim. The photographer can make his photograph to convey one or more connoted messages too apart from the denoted one though the process he follows to take the photograph such as choosing what to photograph, choosing his technical treatment (either in the dark room if he shoots with a film camera or during his editing if he is shooting with a Digital Camera today), choosing his framing and his lay-out. There are so many factors a photographer can take under consideration. This process actually consists the process of coding a photograph because two different photographers can choose for example to photograph the exact same place but they can do the other factors so differently, thus delivering a photograph with the same denoted message but a different connoted one. That is because they will choose a different coding process.

Opinion

I will conclude by offering my opinion. Personally I find Barthes points very valid. In the beginning I was very sceptical about the second point he made about the connoted message of a photograph. Even though I was thinking that a photograph- even a press photograph- can definitely have a connoted message, I was convinced in the beginning about the accuracy of the depiction of reality that a photograph can offer. We can safely conclude that boths thesis are true.

A photograph is the absolute analogon to reality and has the power to convey a powerful denoted message. From the other hand we cannot rule out that a photograph can also have a connoted message which varies depending on the process-coding the photographer chose to follow while shooting the photograph.

Source 2

Summary

In this source, the writer- WJ Mitchell-attempts to explain what an image is. According to him, images and language are enigmas and have actually have taken the capability of understanding away from humans. In order to be understood, images should not be considered as a “transparent window to the world” but as a language themselves and as signs. Signs that do not represent the actual reality as it really is but the reality as we perceive it.

That is why Mitchell makes a simile with image and an actor. He believes that we should think of an image as an actor that plays a part in a historical theater. And the historical play is no other than the story-stories we tell ourselves about our revolution and our reality, as we perceive it.

As he moves on he proceeds to claim that pictures, statuses, optical illusions, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memoris and even ideas are images but that does not mean that all these have something in common. Mitchell point out that, if we try to team up all of the above it would be impossible to understand their individual purpose. So it is very important to divide them into families.

Analysis

Mitchell makes some extremely interesting observations. It would be indeed totally false if we tried to see images as a “transparent window to the world”, because this is not what they really are. We can say that an image is a translation of reality as we perceive it. Images can be better understood if we consider them as signs and more specifically as a language. Of course, this is complicated itself as the language can be considered as a sign itself and at the same time language is considered to be consisted of signs, alas both can be true at the same time.

We can be sure, that an image portrays our view of the world, it is an actor whose role is to demonstrate a history parallel to the one we tell ourselves to explain our world.

But what is more important is to establish that all these things that we call an image cannot be clustered in one group because it will impossible to understand what an image is and what each of those things that we describe as images are as well. Pictures, statuses, optical illusions, diagrams, dreams, hallucinations, spectacles, projections, poems, patterns, memoris and even ideas are images but not in the same sense. Dividing images into families is very important in order to understand better their use and their meaning. It is not the subject of this present analysis to go deeper into analysing the families as well. What is important, at this point, is to establish that there are different families of images.

Opinion

I will agree that images we will never understand the true meaning of images if we perceive them as “transparent windows to reality”. Maybe they are windows to reality, but in no sense they are transparent. They are filtered by many things, especially ourselves and our ideas of things. Reality itself cannot be defined, not by humans, because each one of us individually has a different perception of reality which is not necessarily correct.

But what is an image? We can understand that as we proceed to talk about images, it becomes more and more complicated to express our ideas and our opinions about them and that is because the term “image” is very wide. It is essential to group all of these things that we consider as images in order to actually proceed and understand better the usage and the purpose of Images individually.

Source 3

Summary

In this text fragment, Gilian Rose explains that all those sort of visual technologies and images that surround and have indulged into our life offer us views of the world. They administer the world into visual terms. However, we cannot depend on them for a true and clear interpretation of the world because these images display the world in their own unique and particular way.

This is why, sometimes, a segregation between vision and visuality is made. According to the writer; vision is the biological capability of the human eye to see, to view its surroundings. Even though that definition could not be one hundred percent accurate as its definitions have changed over time and it is very possible that they will keep changing.

From the other hand, according to the writer again, visuality is how we perceive what we see. Visuality can also be referred as “scopic regime”. Both terms-visual and visuality- explain how we see things but in a different text and both terms are culturally constructed. For some the visual term is more important than the one of visuality.

Analysis

In this text fragment, Gilian Rose presents to us some of the things we consider as images. We can say that his examples include visual technologies as well making his next points more understandable for the younger generations too and more up-to-date. We can say that, at first, he approaches the subject the same way WJT Mitchell in the text fragment we chose to analyse above from his book *Iconology: Image, text, ideology*. Both Rose and Mitchell present what we consider as images. In Rose's case; photography, video, digital graphics, television, acrylics, for example; and the images they show us- tv programmes, advertisements, snapshots, public sculpture, movies, surveillance video footage, newspaper pictures, paintings. So Rose gives us a wide range of things. He then, proceeds to use the same phrase as Mitchell did and espouses his idea that the world is not a "transparent window" to our world. He does not believe that what all these images have to show are the absolute and innocent reality but the opposite. He actually implies that all these can distort the reality itself.

So it is, in fact, very important to distinguish the visual from visuality. Even though there are many definitions of the visual, Rose chooses to define the visual as the capability of the human eye to see. But visuality is a whole other story. He defines visuality as the way we see something but in the sense that we perceive it, therefore the idea that is created in our mind after we physically see something. Visual is the biological trait of actual vision and visuality is the way we perceive something. The visual part is almost the same for everyone. But the part of visuality can vary from person to person. It is not possible for everyone to maintain the same message from an image.

Opinion

As I did with WJT Mitchell's text I agree with Gillian Rose's points too. Rose essentially states what Mitchell has done in the past too; images cannot deliver an accurate overview of reality and of the world. They can definitely help us visualise the world and create a perception-idea for it. It can definitely not, whatsoever, give us the reality itself. Rose also takes us one step ahead by pointing out the differences between the visual and visuality. It is indeed very pertinent of him to render that maybe the physical trait of vision is something that we all have and it is the same. But the way our brain codes the image and creates an idea for it is extremely different from individual to individual and it varies. This is why we can never characterise an image as a "transparent window to the world" because it is not. Therefore I agree with Gillian Rose's thesis.