Analysing Images:
A Social Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract: The present paper introduces briefly one of the most important theories and models of visual social semiotics, namely Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design. An image, advertising honeymoon packages, is used to illustrate to the reader the points presented by the theory. The conclusion includes practical implications of the theory, pointing out several areas where visual social semiotic analysis can be applied.

1. Introduction

Visual communication conveys information and ideas visually by visual means. Along with its various types, it has been studied from various perspectives, such as: content analysis (Bell 2001); cultural dimensions (Stoian 2015); anthropological studies (Collier & Collier 1986); psychoanalysis (Diem-Ville 2001); film and television (Price 2015) or social semiotics (Jewitt & Oyama 2001), to mention just a few. Social semiotics, the perspective dealt with in this paper, is said to involve "the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted" (Jewitt & Oyama 2001: 134). Visual resources are, thus, considered from a functionalist approach; like any semiotic resource, they perform several metafunctions simultaneously in order to convey meaning.

This paper presents briefly one of the most important theories and models of visual social semiotics, i.e. Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (1996; 2006). It uses an image that advertises honeymoon packages from a tour

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operator's website to illustrate to the readers the points presented by the theory. The image is included in the Appendix. Finally, the paper points out some of the fields where visual analysis can be applied.

2. Visual design

Visual social semiotics follows Halliday's theory of metafunctions (1994; 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen 2004), which postulates that language fulfils three metafunctions simultaneously, namely ideational, interpersonal and textual. The same metafunctions have been extended to visual social semiotic resources by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006) and renamed as representational, interactive and compositional. They consider that "the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several communicational (and representational) requirements, in order to function as a full system of communication" (2006: 41).

2.1. Representational metafunction

The first metafunction has to do with the patterns of representation, in other words, the way experience is encoded visually. The visual encoding is carried on either by narrative and/or conceptual structures. *Narrative structures* present unfolding actions and events, processes of change and transitory spatial arrangements. They always include a depicted element which forms an oblique line and indicates directionality, called vector (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 59). For example, in the image used here for illustration, there are two vectors, one indicated by the couple's arms and the other by the direction of their look. There are several kinds of narrative processes: action, reactional, speech, mental, and conversion, depending on the types of vectors and participants included. Action processes contain a vector formed by a depicted element or an arrow, departing from a participant, i.e. Actor. There are two types of actions: non-transactional (only the Actor) and transactional (Actor and Goal). In this case, Goal is the participant towards which the vector is directed. Transactional processes can be bidirectional, meaning that each participant plays now the role of Actor now the role of Goal, as Interactors (63-66). Applying this to the image, the couple act as Interactors in a transactional bidirectional action, since they appear hugging each other, as indicated by the vector formed by their arms. In the case of reactional processes, the vector is formed by the direction of the glance of one or more participants, i.e. Reacters. Also these structures can be non-transactional (the glance is directed towards something outside the picture frame) and transactional (the glance is directed towards another participant, the Phenomenon) (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 67-68). For example, the represented participants in the image from the Appendix are involved in a transactional reactional process as Reacters looking directly at something outside the picture that can be identified as the viewer. Turning to speech processes, these present dialogue balloons in order to link speakers, called Sayers, to their speech, called Utterance. The same is applicable to mental processes, just that dialogue, speakers and speech are replaced by thought balloons, thinkers

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(Sensers) and thought (Phenomenon). The last type of processes, <u>conversion</u>, depict a chain of transactional processes, where a third participant called Relay is Goal for one participant and Actor for another (68-70). These three last processes have not been identified in the image considered.

Narrative structures contain also secondary participants, called Circumstances. They are connected to the main participants by other ways than vectors. Moreover, they can be left out without changing the narrative pattern, but this would cause loss of information. The circumstances expressed by visual language are of several types: Locative (relate participants to the Setting), Means (present the tools used in action processes) and Accompaniment (depict two participants, who are not linked by a vector) (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 72). The image here shows how the encoding of reality is made more detailed by using circumstances of location (the setting against which the couple is placed) and means (the couple's hands).

As for *conceptual structures*, they represent participants in terms of their class, structure or meaning (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 59). These are divided into classificational, analytical and symbolical. <u>Classificational processes</u> relate participants to each other; there is always a Subordinate for a Superordinate. They are further classified into overt and covert taxonomies, depending whether the Superordinate is shown or not (79-87). This type is not found in the image presented here. Furthermore, <u>analytical processes</u> connect participants in terms of part-whole structures; the parts/Possessive Attributes belong to the whole/Carrier. Also, these processes can be of several types: unstructured (no Carrier); temporal (realized by times lines); exhaustive (Possessive Attributes presented exhaustively); inclusive (much of the Carrier unaccounted); topographical (physical spatial relations); topological (logical relations between participants); and spatio-temporal (applied to charts) (87-104). In the image discussed, the represented non-human participants are depicted belonging to the surrounding of the couple. The bushes, trees and sky are part, as Possessive Attributes, of the landscape, as Carrier. However, the way they fit together as a whole is omitted, indicating an unstructured analytical process. Finally, <u>symbolic processes</u> depict what a participant is or means. They can be attributive or symbolic. In the former case, two participants are involved: a Carrier, the part whose meaning or identity is established in the relation, and a Symbolic Attribute, the part which represents the meaning or identity itself. In turn, in the last case, there is only the Carrier, whose meaning and identity is not being conferred, but is coming from its own qualities (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 105-107). The image here uses a symbolic attributive process to picture the couple (Symbolic Attribute) as doing nothing but posing for the viewer, displaying their example of 'just married' happy people on honeymoon (Carrier).

Narrative and conceptual structures can appear individually or together, the same as simple or complex sentences in language. When they appear together, embedding takes places. The distinction between major and minor processes in visuals is determined "by the relative size and conspicuousness of the elements" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 107). The image used in the honeymoon advertisement

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represents reality through several processes, forming a complex pattern of representation. The reactional process is the main one and embeds the other processes, action and analytical.

2.2. Interactive metafunction

The interactive metafunction is represented by the patterns of interactions between participants. Several types of participants are involved in visual communication, namely represented (depicted) and interactive (real). They can lead to various relations within the same types and between the different types (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 114).

The interactive meaning of images has three dimensions: image act, social distance and point of view. The *image act* is related to the gaze direction of the represented participants, which can be directed at the viewer (demand) or not (offer). Demands are considered to establish an imaginary relation with the viewer since they address her/him directly. The act can also be emphasized by facial expressions and gestures (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 116-118). The image analysed here establishes an imaginary relation between the represented couple and the real one by using a demand act. They look directly at the viewer, creating, thus, a visual form of direct address. The couple's gaze and smile seem to demand the viewer to enter into a relation of social affinity and identification. To continue, offers, on the other hand, address the viewer indirectly, as there is no 'gaze' contact between participants. They depict the represented participants impersonally as items of information or objects for contemplation (119). It is important to highlight that the choice of image act can suggest different relations between participants, such as engagement or detachment (116-120).

As far as *social distance* is concerned, it is influenced by different sizes of frame, namely close-up, medium or long. These sizes apply not only to humans, but also to objects, buildings or landscapes. They can lead to different relations between represented participants and viewers (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 124-129). The size of frame in the focused image is a close-up shot, which leads to a close social distance and involves the participants in an informal relation typical between friends.

The last dimension of the interactive function is *point of view* or *perspective*. There are two types of images: subjective, presenting everything from a particular perspective, dictated by the image-producer, and objective, depicting all there is to know about the subject (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 143). Participants can be depicted from various angles, each indicating a different relation. For example, the horizontal angle can be frontal and indicate involvement or oblique and show detachment. As for the vertical angle, this can be high and assign power to interactive participants, low and make represented participants more powerful, or eye level and maintain equal relations (133-143). The image of the couple is subjective, as they are presented just partly. They are photographed from frontal and eye level angles, angles that indicate involvement and equality between participants.

Kress and van Leeuwen include in their model of visual design also the concept of *modality*. As in language, this is related to the reliability of the message, since "visuals can represent people, places and things as though they actually exist in this way or as though they do not (as imaginary)" (2006: 156). Modality is constructed by a complex interplay of markers, such as colour saturation, differentiation or modulation; contextualization; representation; depth; illumination and brightness (see Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 160-163 for more details). The interplay of the markers of modality in the image from the online advertisement turns it into certain. High and medium modality is suggested by the following visual clues: median colour saturation and modulation, several different colours, incomplete articulated and detailed setting, median represented details, central perspective and median degrees of brightness.

2.3. Compositional metafunction

The last metafunction refers to the meaning of composition, being related to "the way in which representations and communicative acts cohere into the kind of meaningful whole we call 'text'" (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996: 181). Meaning is built by three interrelated systems: information value, salience and framing. In addition, these systems are not restricted to single pictures, but they apply also to composite visuals, i.e. visuals, which combine text, image and/or other graphic elements, and their layouts.

Information value is associated to three main visual areas: left and right; top and bottom; and centre and margin. In the case of left and right, the composition is structured along the horizontal axis. The left side is related to given information, which is assumed to be familiar and accepted as a point of departure for the message by the viewer. As opposed, the right side is reserved to new information, to something unknown or requiring special attention (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 179-185). The image discussed here is composed on a horizontal axis, placing the couple as given information and the landscape as new. This can mean that marriage has become known information and the couple should focus on the landscape or surroundings, implying, thus, the destination of their honeymoon. To continue, information can be structured also along a vertical axis. On one hand, the information placed at top is presented as essential or ideal, illustrating a 'promise'. On the other hand, the bottom depicts the product itself, by real or more specific and practical information (186-194). Placing the image considered into its context, namely the webpage of the tour operator's website, the layout of the webpage makes use of the vertical axis, presenting the image in the upper part and the text in the lower one. Thus, the image is considered ideal information, its essence, which presents the 'promise' of the advertisement. In contrast, the text represents the real, specific and practical information. Furthermore, different values are attributed to the information following a centre-margin alignment. The centre is reserved for the nucleus of information, whereas the margins are similar and subservient to the centre (194-200). These information values have not been found in the image provided here as an example.

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Another important system in the composition of visual meaning is *salience*. This makes a difference among elements, as some are presented as more important or attractive than others. The visual clues indicating salience are: size, sharpness of focus, tonal and colour contrast, placement in the visual field, perspective and specific cultural factors (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006: 201-203). The image here contains salient elements, such as the couple, placed left in the visual field, foregrounded and overlapping the bushes and trees in the background and whose 'pale' faces contrast with the green of the trees; and the word "Honeymoon", which is the only text within the picture and is written in white on a coloured background.

To conclude this description of Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design (1996; 2006), *framing* is another system that connects the representational meaning to the interactive one. The elements in an image or page can be either connected or disconnected by frame lines, discontinuity of shape or empty space between elements. Moreover, connection can be emphasized by vectors (2006: 203-204). The image illustrated contains no framing itself. Considering it, however, in its context, the image is framed by thick borders, which can signify individuality and differentiation. This means that the image is presented as a separate information unit from the text, fact in accordance with the vertical arrangement of ideal versus real.

3. Interpretation of visual analysis

As briefly described and pointed out above, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006) have provided, apart from a grammar of visual design, several analytical tools for interpreting visual language. Their descriptive framework leads to results that have a visual meaning and can be interpreted. Considering the findings encountered in the image from the online advertisement on honeymoon used here, it can be concluded that this presents the model of a 'just married' happy couple on holiday as a display object of contemplation for the viewer. The couple is placed on a natural background, surrounded by the sky and trees. The represented participants are looking straight at the viewer. By their gaze and smile, the couple ask the viewer to enter into a relation of likeness, agreement and resemblance with them. In other words, they want to establish a close and informal relationship with the viewer, desire also emphasized by the frontal and eye level angles of the shot. In addition, the picture is presented as certain, as something that will happen, through the combination of several modality markers. This promise of the future is suggested also by the vertical alignment of the page layout, where the image occupies the position of the ideal. The image is further emphasized by saliency and framing. Therefore, the advertisement as a whole seems to want to persuade the possible client visually, mainly with the help of the image, which depicts a promised certain to happen future.

4. Conclusion

To summarise, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996; 2006) have provided a grammar of visual design, presenting the theory and vocabulary needed to talk about and read images. They have extended Halliday's metafunctions to visual communication and called them representational, interactive and compositional. The types of structure, process, participant and circumstance; the types of image act, social distance, perspective, point of view, modality; and the types of information value, salience and framing can indicate the reality encoded; the interaction and relation established between participants; and the meaning composed, all of them visually. These meaning-making metafunctions and visual resources can, not only be described and observed, but also interpreted. The complexity created by the description and interpretation of images and/or any other type of visuals raises interest in various fields where visual communication is thoroughly used. To conclude, the model proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen is applicable to domains, such as promotion, websites, teaching material, paintings, fairy tales, spatial arrangements of buildings, tourism and/or cultural aspects of non-verbal communication, to mention just a few. It can help, on one side, students and researchers understand better visual communication and, on the other, professionals make a more adequate use of visual communication in order to convey information and persuade more successfully.

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Appendix

Image used for illustration

Source: Costa Rican trails (2009)