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Public Relations as Visual Meaning-Making

Introduction

The visual culture and media theorist JWT Mitchell (1994), who coined the term the 'pictorial turn' to describe the (re-) orientation of modern society towards the visual, highlights that many questions regarding how visual communication works remain unresolved:

> The simplest way to put this is to say that, in what is often characterized as an age of "spectacle" (Guy Debord), "surveillance" (Foucault), and all-pervasive image-making, we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them (Mitchell, 1994: 13)

30 years on, all-pervasive image-making has reached record levels fuelled by omnipresent global access to technology and use of social media. An estimated more than 1 trillion photos are taken annually (Mylio, 2016). Google Photos, a photo storing and sharing site launched in 2015, boasts 200 million users who uploaded 13.7 petabytes (quadrillion bytes) of visual data including 24 billion selfies within a year (Sabharwal, 2016). Nearly 90% of US adults use the internet, 77% own a smartphone and 51% a tablet (A. Smith, 2017). Nearly 80% of US adults use social media sites (A. Smith, 2017), with 68% using Facebook, 28% Instagram and 24% Pinterest (PewResearchCenter, 2017). Almost 20% of American households are 'hyperconnected,' that is, they contain ten or more smartphones, computers, tablets or streaming devices (Olmstead, 2017).

Clearly, the pictorial turn cannot be reduced to a 'straightforward replacement of language by pictures, books by television' (Boehm & Mitchell, 2009, p. 114) or the internet. However, images are not only ubiquitous, they are also central to 'questions of language, social and emotional life, realism and truth-claims, technology' (W.J.T. Mitchell, 2015, p. location 154). Understanding how visual meaning-making works is, therefore, fundamental to understanding and engaging with stakeholders in Public Relations.

This chapter will explore the implications of the 'pictorial turn' for Public Relations and strategic communication, propose a systematic framework for understanding how visual communication works, and conclude by considering future directions for conceptual engagement with visual meaning-making.

Implications of the Pictorial Turn for Public Relations

Definitions of Public Relations are numerous and contested as the discipline is still evolving (L'Etang, 2013; Moloney, 2006; R. Smith, 2014; Theaker, 2016). Rather than engage in definitional debates, I will focus on core concepts of public relations, namely understanding stakeholders and communication.

It is possible to identify two influential paradigms in public relations communication. On the one hand, Grunig proposes the ideal of two-way symmetrical communication between organisations and stakeholders (e.g. Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002); on the other hand, in a more conflict-based understanding a multitude of voices battle for audiences in order to persuade and influence (Holbrook, 2014, p. 144 ff; Ihlen, Ruler, & Fredriksson, 2009) based on Bordieu's notion that 'actors struggle and compete to position themselves' (Ihlen, 2009). In the latter, meaning is negotiated through language. Language is, thus, both the locus of conflict and a weapon (Bourdieu, 1991; Ihlen, 2009; Moloney, 2006).

Indeed, an overwhelming flood of entertainment, infotainment, news, and fake news inundates today's publics via traditional mass media as well as social media vying for attention. World events are no longer framed in their salience and meaning by TV commentators or major newspapers. The virtual world is the new public sphere. Through activities such as uploading images, downloading stories, blogging and so on knowledge of the world is constructed. These activities 'shape our participation as citizens without the pre-filter of anchored network news to package a national consensus' (Buck-Morss, 2009, p. 161). Language, verbal and visual, is at the forefront of the public sphere and thus Public Relations. It is the means by which the knowledge of the world is constructed and a powerful tool to influence or persuade audiences and mobilise support for a cause (commercial, political, social etc.). Understanding how visual language works in an age of all-pervasive image-making enables Public Relations to effectively manage perceptions and strategic relationships between organisations and stakeholders.

Perception is germane to shaping stakeholder opinion and attitudes. As a reflection of the

zeitgeist, Oxford Dictionaries chose 'post-truth' as the word of the year 2016. It is defined as 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief' (OxfordDictionaries, 2016). Images contribute to forming post-truth narratives. In his now infamous 2003 attempt to shape a narrative of the soundness of his actions in keeping America safe, President George W. Bush positioned himself under a banner 'Mission Accomplished' on a war ship, addressing military returning from battle (AP Photo by J.Scott Applewhite) to declare "In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed" (Rifkin, 2015). However, it was not until 2010 that President Obama declared the combat mission in Iraq over, and, of course, the country is still highly politically unstable to date. Recently, in April 2017, after a North Korean show of power with a military parade and a missile test, images apparently showing American war ships heading towards North Korea were, in fact, revealed to be moving away (BBC, 2017).

Given the ubiquity and significance of visual commnication, the advancement of the visual image as the object of serious scholarly study has been charted (Dikovitskaya, 2005; Woodrow, 2010). Moving towards a theoretical framework to answer Mitchell's question how pictures work, that is for deconstructing and constructing effective visual communication, Public Relations can build on a plethora of existing scholarship.

Semiotics (Bouissac, 1998; Chandler, 2007; Cobley, 2010; Danesi, 2000) is probably the most widely used and best understood approach for visual meaning-making. Public Relations can build on landmark studies such as the ground-breaking early work in semiotics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1972/1983) on linguistic signs and Barthes's (1957/2009, 1964/1999) concept of 'myth' as a higher-level sign, Stuart Hall's influential concept of encoding and decoding of messages (1980) as well as, for instance, studies of advertising which often expose its ideological dimension (Goldman, 1992/2000; Messaris, 1997; Williamson, 1978/2002).

Outstanding existing cross-disciplinary scholarship on reading images includes the anthropologist Erving Goffman's (1979) seminal analysis of gender and power display in advertising. (For a meta-analysis of scholarship on power dimensions in advertising see Hall, Coats & LeBeau (2005), for a recent corpus-based review of the language of gender in advertising see Kohrs & Gill (in press)). Superb contemporary scholarship in non-verbal communication focussing on body language includes Burgoon, Guerrero & Floyd (2016),

Giri (2009), Knapp, Hall & Horgan (2014) as well as Ekman on facial expression (2003). Deep and broad interdisciplinary expertise is also available in the form of the language of art (Fichner-Rathus, 2015, 2017; Lewis & Lewis, 2014; Ocvirk, Stinson, Wigg, Bone, & Cayton, 2013) and film studies (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013) as well as photography (Hirsch, 2015; Marien, 2010; Präkel, 2010; Wells, 2015). Visual rhetorical devices such as metaphor have been shown to exist (Forceville, 1998): further investigation of this topic can build on expertise such as Lanham's (1991) and Sloane's (2001)(2001) decisive work. Similarly, excellent extant scholarship on genre (Corbett, 2006; Duff, 2014; Frow, 2015) is a superb foundation for the investigation of genre in visual communication.

A plethora of outstanding existing scholarship is thus on hand to aid in advancing a systematic and comprehensive analysis of meaning-making in visual communication. To understand how visual communication works, the next section will first look at what pictures do, investigating differences between verbal and visual communication, followed by a proposal for a theoretical framework identifying how pictures work, that is framework of dimensions of visual meaning-making and their components parts.

What do pictures do?

Images and their intrinsic properties of meaning-making have a different logic than words. For instance, a declarative verbal sentence such as 'A woman is wearing a red dress,' restricts its interpretation of meaning in that the dress is not blue, for instance, and in that the woman is not wearing trousers. However, the mental image of the dress and the woman that is formed individually will vary depending on socio-cultural context. A pictorial image of a woman wearing a red dress, on the other hand, generates no such ambiguities, though it may be open to a variety of interpretations.

In many ways, pictorial images can be less precise than words. Brummett argues that 'images are *relatively* more flexible at allowing differing, even conflicting attributions of meaning to the same text' (2015, p. 199 [original emphasis]). For instance, the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington D.C., a black wall listing the names of the 58,000 Americans who died in the Vietnam war, is a visual text which creates emotional common ground, a collective memory, as shared sense of community, without addressing the still extant controversy over the legitimacy of the war that utterances might provoke. Real agreement on the topic is elusive and but the image resolves conflict and contradictions rhetorically. It 'gives the public

nothing to counter, nothing to object to; it simply exists as a visual, material statement' (Brummett, 2015, p. 199).

Exploiting a similar socio-psychological dynamic, cartoons (e.g. Warner Brothers, Walt Disney) were hugely popular in early US television as their animal characters allowed a distinct range of ethnic groups to enjoy and share an experience, without raising the controversial issue of race in a highly diverse country. Equally, today, advertising frequently shows figures from diverse ethnic groups (e.g. Caucasian, Asian, black) constructing an idealised post-racial world in order to be able reach the broadest possible target audience. The relative ambiguity of pictorial images 'allows appeals to solidarity, seems to create collective memories, and resolves social conflict with rhetorical effects' (Brummett, 2015, pp. 200-201).

This evidence suggests, that rather than generating verbal debate, visual images, thus, appear to primarily elicit emotional responses. In terms of understanding stakeholders, this is a crucial dimension of images as 'affect appears to play a major role in how people represent and structure their social experiences' (Forgas & Smith, 2003, p. 147). Research in social psychology and the behavioural sciences has long since established that human behaviour is irrational; decision-making, for example, is most often influenced by emotions rather than facts (Ariely, 2008; Kahneman, 2011). Images are thus a powerful means of engaging with stakeholders.

Meaning is negotiated through visual discourse. Terrorism, for instance, makes for an unlikely but fascinating case study for a Public Relation initiatives with the objective of mobilising support (Holbrook, 2014). Audiences negotiate the meaning of terrorism based on a 'war of words and images carried by the mass media [...] conducted mainly by symbolic gestures of violence, ones that attempt to conquer the enemy through psychological intimidation rather than physical coercion' (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2005 / 2011, pp. 298-299) such as the spectacle of the 09/11 terror attack on the on the iconic World Trade Center in New York.

Images, furthermore, take on a life of their own, 'beyond their historical, documentary function, detaching them from the strict rule of narrative, and releasing them into a world of verbal and visual associations' (W. J. T. Mitchell, 2005 / 2011, p. 305). Images of spectacle, such as the destruction of the World Trade Center, terrorist atrocities or toddlers in Arab countries learning to use heavy weapons, become memes, a term originally coined by

Richard Dawkins (see also Blackmore, 1998; 1976/2006), to describe a cultural unit of transmission or imitation, a cultural replicator. A meme is a 'cultural element or behavioural trait whose transmission and consequent persistence in a population, although occurring by non-genetic means (esp. imitation), is considered analogous to the inheritance of a gene' (OxfordEnglishDictionary).

Images are thus relatively ambivalent in their meaning, primarily elicit emotions, are means of negotiating meaning as well as cultural replicators. But how do they work? Building on cross-disciplinary scholarship the next section will propose a systematic taxonomy of visual meaning-making, delineating its key dimensions as well as the individual building blocks which make up the dimensions.

How do pictures work?

Most scholars agree, that communication is a '*process of creating meanings between senders and receivers through the exchange of signs and symbols*. Messages originate as sender cognitions that are *encoded* (transformed into signals) *through commonly understood codes* and *decoded* by receivers (the signals must be recognized, interpreted, and evaluated)' (Burgoon, et al., 2016, p. 12). However, as yet, we still do not understand exactly what the signs and symbols, that is, the basic units, of visual communication are or how they work individually and together. There is, furthermore, no established practice or consensus as to scope, methods, objectives or definitions in scholarly research into visual meaning-making (Kohrs, 2017).

The theoretical framework proposed here will build on long-established scholarly traditions and expertise of numerous disciplines such as the language of art and film studies, nonverbal behaviour, semiotics, rhetoric and genre theory. In each of these categories more systematic corpus-based research specific to visual communication needs to be carried out in terms of identifying the individual components of these dimensions and how they work individually and in conjunction. The following case studies can, however, provide an illustration of the potential power of a comprehensive and systematic understanding of visual meaning-making for Public Relations.

1. The Language of Art

In literature, the function of directing the attention of the reader / viewer to the most salient

part is called foregrounding. Linguistic devices are used to 'enhance the meaning potential of the text, while also providing the reader with the possibility of aesthetic experience. [...] unusual forms of language – break[s] up the reader's routine behavior: commonplace views and perspectives are replaced by new and surprising insights and sensations' (van Peer & Hakemulder, 2006, p. 546).

The first dimension of visual meaning-making is the language of art. Its principles of organisation guide the arrangement of its building blocks, the five elements of art, namely line, colour, texture, shape, and value, to achieve a sense of visual order, create impact and direct the viewer's attention to what is most salient.

In the visual arts, avant-garde artists like Alexander Rodchenko (1891-1956), for instance, invented a radical new visual language to disrupt the viewers' commonplace perspective in the belief that art could have a functional purpose in building a utopian society. His choices among the basic elements of the language of art, colour, line, shape, texture and value, are striking. He seldom uses more than two colours in addition to black and employs bold shapes. Rodchenko's famous 1924 advertising poster for the State Publishing House [https://www.heritage-images.com/preview/2489339 or http://www2.museothyssen.org/microsites/exposiciones/2006/Vanguardias/fundacion/fundaci on53_ing.html] is a good example of this remarkable new visual language. It is forceful, direct and eye-catching. Its dramatic font and a straightforward message seize the viewer's attention.

Rodchenko's visual language remains surprisingly modern. It is still current a hundred years later. The rock band Franz Ferdinand paid homage to Rodchenko by adapting and using his design for their 2005 album cover *You Could Have So Much Better*. Also, in a style that is very similar to Rodchenko's, Shepard Fairey created his iconic HOPE poster (http://npg.si.edu/blog/now-on-view-portrait-barack-obama-shepard-fairey) for Barrack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign.

Most recently, this high-impact visual language can be found in countless (mostly anonymous) posters and disseminated over the internet during the 2016 US presidential election depicting Donald Trump, with a play on words: rather than 'HOPE' these posters carry the words 'NOPE' or 'GROPE' (Figure 1) Given the overall flexibility in meaning in pictures, words frequently occur in conjunction with an image to narrow down the number of

possible interpretations. Removing some of the ambiguity of interpreting visual communication, words thus 'anchor' the meaning (Barthes, 1964/1999). While Obama presents hope, Trump (Figure 1) is not acceptable as president of the United States (NOPE), also because of his inappropriate conduct towards women (GROPE).

Figure 1 US Presidential Campaign 2016: Donald Trump

In these images, further to the language of art, nonverbal behaviour, that is body language and proximity, is a second dimension of visual meaning-making which plays an important role in understanding the meaning of the images as the next section will elaborate.

2. Nonverbal Behaviour

The term body language 'lumps together some conventional forms of non-verbal communication with other states or dispositions of a human body, voluntary or involuntary, identifiable as some kind of 'sign' to other people' (P. H. Matthews, 2014). Gesture, facial expressions and bodily movements communicate in addition to verbal language (Ponzio, 2006). Body language in images inevitably draws on and deploys socially shared codes and conventions from concrete social interaction, otherwise, it would not be possible to consensually interpret and assign meaning.

In Rodchenko's advertisement, the model's facial expression shows joy as she shouts the

news about the availability of books on 'all the branches of knowledge.' In Shepard Fairy's 'HOPE' poster Obama's facial expression is contemplative and visionary while Trump appears highly emotional and aggressive, his brow is furrowed, his mouth contorted. Line of sight also contrasts in the visual representation of the two men: Obama gazes into the distance, the heroic pose of someone who is a visionary leader, while an angry Trump looks slightly down at the viewer. The image makers have, of course, made deliberate choices in representing their subject matter in a particular manner. The images, thus, convey attitudinal meaning, as they do not only communicate factual information but also feelings and attitudes of the producer toward the persons depicted (Wales, 2014).

Proxemics, first introduced by Edward T. Hall (1959, 1963), add further depth to understanding the dimension of nonverbal behaviour in visual meaning-making. It is the study of the personal space which individuals naturally maintain in social situations as an indicator of social relationships. Personal space is the culturally determined 'invisible, variable volume of space surrounding an individual that defines that individual's preferred distance from others' (Griffin, 2012, p. 105). These spatial distances range from intimate to public space. The close framing of the portrait on the face in the posters suggests intimate distance to the portrayed, simply because only other human beings with whom we are very close are allowed access to such an intimate strata of an individual's personal space. The suggested close proximity to the aggressive Trump makes the virtual encounter (almost) as unpleasant as a real encounter would be and shapes perception of the depicted person. Elements of the language of art, for instance colour, moreover underpin the reading of the images. The bright signal red colour across Trump's face further emphasizes aggression and emotional volatility in his facial expression while most of Obama's face is a cool, rational blue alongside some, but more subdued, red. Thus, the dimensions of visual meaning-making, language of art, body language and proximity, as well as words anchoring meaning, work in conjunction to establish the opposing characters of two American presidential candidates.

In Gordon Park's image *Ella Watson, Washington, D.C., Government Charwoman* (Figure 2), the entire upper body of the figure, Ella Watson, is depicted. As a viewer, we thus perceive her to be at a fairly close personal distance, though, not as close as Trump in Figure 1. The woman's upright posture, facing the viewer frontally, gives her dignity. Like Obama, the woman appears lost in thought, looking into the distance and not at the viewer. However,

while Obama looks up to the right, Ella Watson looks left and slightly down. For a closer reading of this image, a further dimension of meaning-making, semiotics, is essential which will be elaborated in the next section.
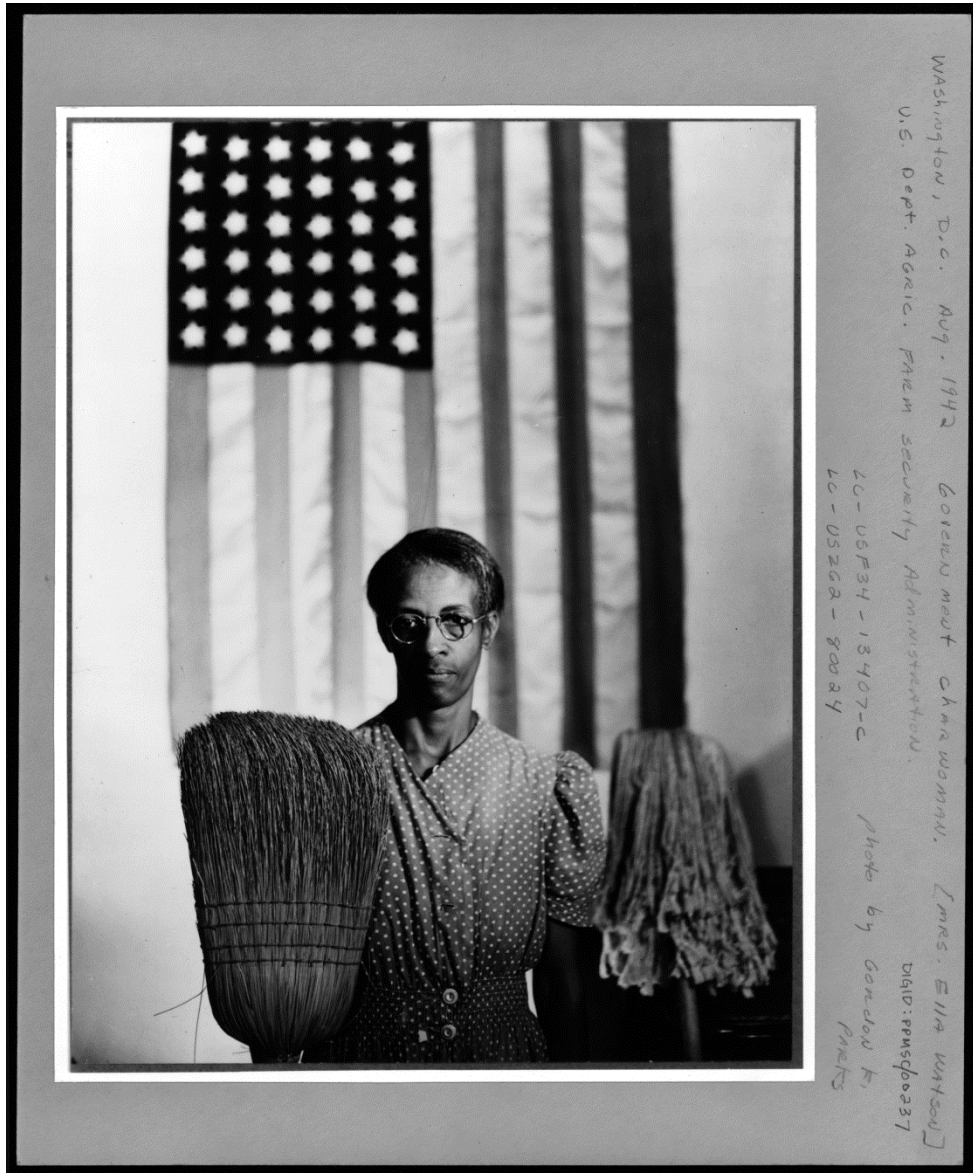

Figure 2 Gordon Parks, *Ella Watson, Washington, D.C., Government Charwoman* (1942)

3. Semiotics

As the analysis of the images above showed, knowledge of the context (for instance, the US elections of 2008 and 2016 for the political posters), has already added layers of meaning to the images. *Ella Watson* (Figure 2), is an image taken in 1942 by the photographer Gordon Parks while an apprentice at the Farm Security Administration which employed various photographers between 1935 and 1943, such as Dorothea Lange, famous for her *Migrant*

Mother, documenting the hardship that particularly the rural population in the US suffered. Further to context, semiotics, the study of signs, unlocks additional dimensions of meaning.

Fundamental to semiotics is the differentiation between a literal message, denotation, and culturally cued associations, connotation, in visual meaning-making (Barthes, 1964/1999). Thus, Figure 2 denotes an African-American woman with a broom and a mop standing in front of an American flag. Proximity, the close framing of the image (upper body) and her frontal position, forces the viewer to engage with the woman. Her body language, the upright posture and pensive expression give her dignity, her gaze to the left and down suggest humility (cf. the aggressiveness of Trump's full frontal line of sight, looking down at the viewer and Obama's visionary leadership looking up into the distance). The depiction of a broom and mop (denotation) connotes Watson's work, she is a cleaner. The image denotes an individual. The title of the photograph even reveals her name, Ella Watson. However, the American flag which dominates the picture suggests that the image depicts the human condition for African Americans in the United States about two decades before the Civil Rights laws were introduced. This reading is underpinned by formal similarities (frontal facing figures, dominance of vertical lines, work implements held upright) which connote the iconic image, *American Gothic* (1939) by Grant Wood (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/6565) depicting a man and woman as a representation of rural American values. For those who are aware of Wood's well known painting, Park's image juxtaposes traditional American values with the existential condition / human experience of African Americans. The image furthermore creates affective meaning in that it effects emotional association in the viewer (Wales, 2014) through the dominant use of the American flag charged with patriotic meaning as well as through Ella Watson's display of quiet dignity in the face of the hardships of racisms. The political posters of Obama and Trump, of course, also exploit the patriotic connotations of the American flag in the form of the language of art, using the colours red, white and blue of the star spangled banner.

The African American experience is also, however, almost inadvertently the focus of the next case study, a Pear's Soap advertisement (Figure 3), as it presents an entirely different point of view. Articulated, firstly, through the language of art the image communicates a cause-and-consequence conceptual relationship between the first and the second image through the use of a decorative frame which constitutes a connective marker (Sanders & Pander Maat, 2006, p. 593) between the two sequential scenes. This is supported by continuity in terms of props,

the viewer's perspective, characters, and so on between the two images. The producer's point of view and the meaning of the image is, secondly, articulated through the dimensions of nonverbal behaviour, in that the child is clearly delighted that his skin turned white after using Pear's soap. Thirdly, a visual trope, a further key dimension of meaning-making, is key to reading the image as will be elaborated in the next section.

4. Visual Tropes

Tropes or figures of speech are frequently employed in verbal language. A figure of speech is 'any form of expression in which the normal use of language is manipulated, stretched, or altered for rhetorical effect' (Peter H. Matthews, 2007, p. 138). Tropes also exist in visual language.

In the Pear's Soap advertisement (Figure 3) dating back to the 19th century, the advertisers use unusual pictorial elements to illustrate that Pears' Soap is for 'improving and preserving the complexion.' The advertisement uses a visual marker, violating expectations of what is taken for granted and surprising the viewer. It 'foregrounds' (Wales, 2014) an element of the advertisement: the black skin of the child has turned white.
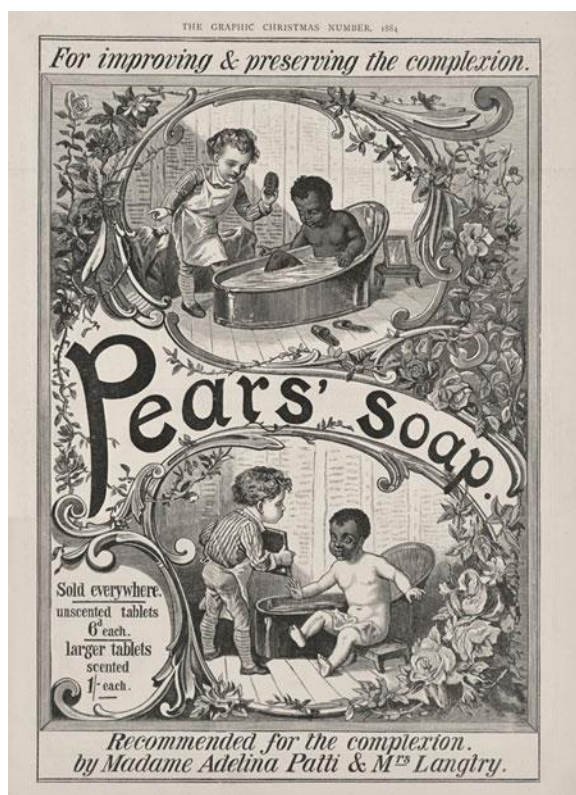

Figure 3 Pear's Soap Advertisement 1885

By highlighting a change in skin colour, that is making it prominent, the viewer's attention is

focused on an unexpected and unusual conjunction of visual devices, forcing his or her attention and compelling new understanding and insight. In this case, the normal rules of continuity in a sequence of pictures are violated. The fact that skin colour is not fixed, but turns from black to white, suggests that a non-literal reading is required.   Pear's Soap advertisement is an example of a metaphor, in which a key feature (dirtiness) of a source object (laundry) is mapped on a target object (black skin). Black skin is washed white like dirty laundry, thus, 'black skin is dirty skin.' Furthermore, the foregrounded visual device is an example of another visual trope, namely a hyperbole, an amplification or exaggeration intended to intensify the emotional impact (Wales, 2014), or, in this case, create a humorous effect.

The figurative visual language, the visual metaphor (black skin is dirty skin), reveals the underlying belief system of the communicator. Less than 50 years after the abolition of slavery in Britain, it is likely that the Victorian audience shared the advertiser's belief system and thought the advertising amusing. However, a 21st century audience is likely to find the advertisement deeply offensive. This type of moral judgement is based entirely on the producer's and viewer's frame or knowledge of the world and imposed on the image (Tannen, 1984).

A further example of a visual trope is an antithesis. It is a visual rhetorical device, frequently used by the artist Martha Rosler, in which two contrasting ideas are brought together to engage the viewer emotionally. In her collages, Rosler opposes the ideas of a secure, affluent American lifestyle and the violence and death of the war in Vietnam. In *Patio View* from the series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/195590?search_no=1&index=83) the viewer looks out from inside an ordinary, safe, affluent middle class home onto a war-torn street showing soldiers taking cover behind tanks and dead bodies. The contrast is enhanced through the language of art; the black and white representation of the patio contrasts with the depiction of war in colour. The viewer feels some sense of the terror of war as it encroaches visually in our homes. Through the use of an antithesis, the viewer's emotional engagement with the violence of war is of a different quality to the typical way of watching war from a distance on television. The rhetorical figure of antithesis, in conjunction with the verbal anchoring through the title of the artwork, 'brings the war home' emotionally for the viewer.

The literary concept of foregrounding relates to the socio-psychological notion of a script,

frame, or schema, all of which describe 'structures of expectation based on past experience' which 'help us process and comprehend stories [and] serve to filter and shape perception' (Tannen, 1984, p. 179). Visual tropes, thus, constitute an act of 'defamiliarisation,' that is an unfamiliar use of visual language in order to challenge habitual perceptions of the world 'for slowing down and intensifying the reader's perception' (Duff, 2014, p. 1).

The images analysed in the case studies above belong to a range of genres from advertising, political poster to art and documentary photography. The genre of an image provides further cues which guide the interpretation of the meaning of an image as the next section will illustrate in detail.

5. Genre

In modern genre theory, genre is a 'recurring type or category of text as defined by structural, thematic and/or functional criteria' (Duff, 2014, p. 1). The case studies represent different kind of genres, political posters, advertisements, documentary photography and art which can be distinguished by authorship, function, audience structures and reception. Genre provides a set of contextual clues on how to read a text. Seeking 'to control the uncertainty of communication' (Frow, 2015, p. 4), genres offer 'frameworks for constructing meaning and value' (Frow, 2015, p. 79).

In visual meaning-making, genre features usefully add a further layer of meaning invoking structures of knowledge beyond the aforementioned four dimensions of meaning-making, language of art, nonverbal behaviour, semiotics and visual tropes. Key components of the dimension of genre are 1) the functional component in which an actual or implied sender chooses a medium to achieve a communication objective, 2) the structural component or stylistic register, and 3) the subject matter of a piece of communication.

Firstly, a genre cues the speaking position or authorial intention of an actual or implied sender / producer. Potential interpretations of visual communication are, for instance, shaped by the knowledge that marketing departments, advertising agencies and photographers / illustrators create advertising to sell products or services, or, in the case of the political posters, artists like Rodchenko, Shephard Fairey (Obama HOPE) or unknowns (Trump NOPE/GROPE) not only seek to express their values and beliefs but also to influence and persuade. The choice of media, furthermore, underpins the interpretation. Photography, for instance, adds to the perception of realism / verisimilitude in documentary, posters use a

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high-impact visual language to draw attention appropriate to the viewing situation and so on.

Secondly, the structural component of genre is the stylistic register, that is, the choice between a highbrow and elaborate or a lowbrow style. The degree of complexity and sophistication, for instance, the choice of use of rhetorical devices such as visual tropes, guides the viewer's construction of meaning. In contemporary fashion advertising, for example, the boundary between the commercial realm and art is frequently fluid. The unique, creative style of a photographer makes for successful advertising as well as fashion spreads in iconic magazines like Vogue and Vanity Fair and works of art.

Thirdly, the theme or subject matter of a piece of communication as a genre component signals what has been invested with interest. Whether a bar of soap or the war in Vietnam is chosen as significant to be the subject matter of visual communication invokes knowledge structures in the viewer that guide meaning-making. Thus, genre activates 'certain possibilities of meaning and value rather than others' (Frow, 2015, p. 79).

Conclusion

This chapter has identified the implications of the pictorial turn for Public Relations in that images are a crucial means of negotiating meaning as well as cultural replicators, that circulate, proliferate, propagate, in short, spread like viruses and take on life of their own in a world of visual and verbal associations.

Understanding not only what pictures do but how they work is, thus, vital to engaging stakeholders and strategic communication in Public Relations. To avoid vague and impressionistic judgement, a systematic and comprehensive framework for understanding how pictures work was introduced which distinguished five dimensions of visual-meaning making, the language art, nonverbal behaviour, semiotics, visual tropes and genre, and isolated some of their respective building blocks through practical application to a number of case studies.

Examples of how visual meaning-making works can only be illustrative here, not only due to a lack of space in this chapter, but also since much more systematic corpus-based research needs to be undertaken to test the framework empirically, to build on it and to refine it. Even if, according to Mitchell (2010), we may never be done with asking what images mean and what their effect is, it is crucial to work towards a systematic, empirical, coherent, replicable

and accessible framework confirming or contesting the relevance of the dimensions identified above as well as identifying and categorising the individual building blocks of each dimension with more specificity.

The importance of an accessible and usable theoretical model for (de-)constructing effective visual communication for the public space where countless actors struggle to position themselves cannot be overestimated, not only for Public Relations but for democratic discourse in general. Public Relations specifically, however, would benefit from a better understanding of just how personal beliefs and public opinion can be shaped through visual communication in order to create stronger bonds with stakeholders and manage strategic communication more actively and effectively.

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