IMAGES IN DIALOGUE
HOW THEY TALK
AND WHAT THEY SAY

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As well as being tasked with clearly communicating textual and written contents, as communication designers and design scholars, we are also, and above all, responsible for visual ones, deciding how to convey these contents; the point of view and emphasis, authorship and interpretation of the designer ensure that the communication becomes a tale, a story made up of symbols and images. The transposition from the semantic to the visual plan takes place through various types of operations which ensure that the original content is always different from its visual translation, even if only very slightly. To carry out this process we use images with different kinds of relationships which allow us to visualise, condense and convey complex concepts that would otherwise be difficult both for graphic designers to translate and users to understand. Taking into consideration a series of case studies coming from different fields pertaining to the visual sphere, this text focuses its attention on the dialogue between the images, understanding how they talk to each other, and which relationships contribute to the construction of a narrative.

IMAGES THAT TALK

The way we use images, the way we arrange and crop them, can significantly alter the perception of the end user. One standout example of this is the iconic war photograph taken in Iraq by Itsuo Inouye (2003) which depicts two American soldiers at the sides of the image with an Iraqi in the centre of the composition.

The meaning of the image changes radically depending on how we crop it: if we cover the right side with our hand or a piece of paper, the left half suggests that the Iraqi soldier is being held at gunpoint; this is in fact an optical illusion as the rifle which appears to be aimed at the head of the soldier is actually being held by a fourth person not in the picture. If we consider only the right side of the photo, the message is turned upside down with the marine intent on giving his adversary some water. But which of the two versions is more accurate?

There is no way of knowing which narrative is more correct but both images –the capture and the aid– are a valid part of the image as a whole. In the arrangement of the content and their communication on different media, the actions of the designer play a key role and can deeply alter the meaning of the story. We therefore have a photographic reproduction that is susceptible to different interpretations based on how it is cropped and presented in the context, and the perspective of both the designer and the viewer[1]. Unlike with news reports, in the field of visual communication the composition of the content, with text placed on the same footing as visual content, enables us to actively contribute to the narrative with pictures.

This potentially endless use –and reuse– of images is a key part of the contemporary visual culture we are living in. Borrowing the words of image expert Riccardo Falcinelli: "To use images is to give them meaning" (2016, p. 6). Images are many different things, and their meaning is defined by a myriad of parameters: the social and historical

context, the place in which an image is then positioned, its economic value, the cultural negotiation that occurred between senders and receiver, its technical qualities, the way it is framed – "an image's use and context come first, and they frame how we read it" (Falcinelli, 2016, p. 10). Based on this excerpt, below there is a series of case studies that exemplify different kind of relationships useful to understand the language of images and the circumstances that enable them to speak to each other.

HOW IMAGES SPEAK AND WHAT THEY SAY

In order for two images to 'talk' they must be in a position of mutual dialogue. We have noted how the creator of the image or the designer that has to manipulate it is responsible for communicating one story rather than another. But the observer –as the end user– is also able to change the original message of the image with their own perception based on the relationships they are able to create.

In particular, the narrative potential of images multiplies when we find ourselves faced with a visual story – a combination that implies a mixture of two or more elements. In the case of images their association can be formal, on the basis of their aesthetic similarity, or semantic, i.e. when images communicate and create a dialogue between themselves and according to their meaning (Luigini & Moretti, 2022; Camillini, 2022).

The two typologies just mentioned call into question the two different horizons of semiotics and semantics. In the first case, as the title of an important work by Umberto Eco –later collected in his *Trattato di semiotica generale*– states, the emphasis is on the 'forms of content' (1971). The second, as widely demonstrated by Gilbert Durand, addresses the symbolic regime of meanings –'signified'– thus a much broader domain than that, judged abstract, of the structural unity of a configuration of signs alone

It can be said that the symbol does not belong in the semiological area, but has a special kind of meaning. It does not simply have an artificially given meaning, it has an essential immediate power to affect deeply the consciousness. (Durand, 1999, p. 32).

These two modes of image functioning have often been conceived as antithetical and irreconcilable. Symptomatic in this respect is the formalistic attitude found in both Saussure and the Prague Circle and, later, in some French developments of the *périple structural* (Milner, 2008). While on the other hand, privileging the symbolic side has opened the door to the anthropological investigation, especially in the context of the history of religions and comparative approaches. It is true, however, that an example such as the one cited, Inouye's photograph, becomes significant exactly where these two approaches are not kept distinct but rather made to act jointly. Indeed, both the act of giving drink to a thirsty soldier and the act of pointing a gun to his head are loaded with symbolic connotation: they cannot disregard, in terms of what they communicate, the socio-historical context in which they acquire meaning – which, in this case, is represented by war.

However, the procedure of excluding either side of the photograph, which could be cut off, thus conferring to it a meaning or its opposite, is possible only on the formal basis of the symmetry that characterizes it. Hence, it is a specific form that makes possible a specific operation on the content. How can this happen and, more importantly, what kind of theoretical equipment makes it possible to articulate a discourse consistent with this specific performance of the image? The proposed thesis concerns the need to refer to the concept of montage in order to conceive of semantics and semiotics in unity. Montage –and, specifically, in Sergei Eisenstein's theoretical elaboration of it– will thus be conceived as that fundamental operation on images that allows both their formal structure –semiotics– and the meaning of their content –semantics– to act unitarily.

A THEORY OF MONTAGE

That the core of Eisenstein's theoretical elaboration is defined by the unity of content and form in the treatment of images is made explicit from the very first pages of his seminal work:

> We shall consider the notion that living man, his consciousness and activity, is not only the basis of what is expressed in the content of a film, but that man is also reflected in the exigencies of form and the structural laws of a work of art, of its generalized image. (Eisenstein, 2010, p. 4).

To be decisive, in this regard, is the concept of life –in fact, he speaks of 'living man'– because the set of sensations, perceptions and emotions that an image arouses depends first and foremost on the fact that it represents an action performed by the living, by something therefore, which is jointly form, content and movement. Montage, from this point of view, succeeds in fusing the three elements together: in translating the content of a living movement into form. It remains to be understood, however, what exactly the terms content and image mean in this approach at once empathic –in the classic sense given to the term by Worringer (2014)– and realist. The Russian director clarifies this shortly after in an inspiring line:

> A truly realistic work of art, deriving from the fundamental tenets of realism, must contain as an indissoluble whole both the representation of a phenomenon and its image; by image is meant a generalized statement about the essence of the particular phenomenon. (Eisenstein, 2010, p. 4).

As made explicit by Michel Foucault in his famous essay on Magritte (Foucault, 1988, p. 43), the representation of something is based on the similarity between the actual content ascertained by visual perception and what is seen in the image. Otherwise, the virtual form of representation must be more general than the actual form, first of all be-

cause, unlike the latter, it can be separated from the concrete matter of the represented entity. It is no coincidence that a represented form, precisely because it is removed from the specific material constraint, can be reproduced serially –the series, for example, of photographs of a thing– while a real object is itself unique and irreproducible – no two Napoleon Bonapartes exist, but neither do two animals that are the same animal, or two stones that are the same stone. The image thus represents a generalization of the immaterial existence of a thing achieved through the transfer of that same thing into a form that is logically more abstract, but precisely for this reason also more 'free'. This last observation makes it possible to define in the most precise manner the theoretical junction that makes possible the considerations that will be addressed later, where we will discuss the way in which images combine with each other by establishing a relationship based on formal correspondences and-or on the establishment of connections that disregard the context. Since in fact, as argued by Eisenstein, the operation of montage is accomplished by jointly implying both the content aspect and the formal aspect, and since the formal aspect allows a release from the objective real context from which the images come, it is possible to juxtapose two images either by keeping their context of belonging unchanged or by abstracting them from it. In this article, these two possible approaches will be analyzed by considering some specific examples.

RELATIONSHIPS BASED ON SHAPES AND COMBINATIONS

The first relationship is more intuitive, i.e. when two images are placed side by side because of aesthetic similarities: colour, balance or, as alluded to, shape. To this end, it is worth looking at the work of American artist and photographer Tana Hoban (1917-2006) who, having begun her career as an advertising photographer, established herself as a leading creator of silent or wordless books for

children, with 50 of her over 100 publications belonging to this genre. Tana Hoban believed in the importance of noticing and, with her picture books made of seemingly banal moments, she invited us to look around and lay our eyes on what is around us, without superficiality, and taking care of certain moments of life that, if unnoticed, would slip away. In addition to this, the ability to understand the meaning of illustrations, i.e. to perceive that a drawing is a representation of a real object, is not an easy achievement. Until 18 months, children are not yet able to understand this process; it is much easier for them to identify objects through photographs or very realistic drawings: this is the case of *White on Black* (Hoban, 1993), a book aimed at stimulating the curiosity and interest of young readers also through the use of the basic principles of visual perception (Giazzoli & Lortic, 2021). Though completely devoid of text, Hoban's books 'say' a great deal with sequences of juxtaposing photographs positioned alongside each other because of their colour and textural similarities, or images that share the same shape, as in *Shapes, Shapes, Shapes* (Hoban, 1986) (Figure 1) and *Round and Round and Round* (Hoban, 1983): two books made of photographs depicting shapes to be discovered page after page thanks to their visual affinity and sequence.

Fig. 1 Tana Hoban (1986), analogue photography, New York: Greenwillow. Courtesy of the author and the publisher © Tana Hoban and Greenwillow.

Visual associations similar to those of Hoban are also the premise of *This Equals That* (2014), a picture book by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin that takes readers on a journey while introducing them to the fundamentals of visual literacy and teaching them associative thinking. The book can be used to teach how form, content, and context work together to create meanings within a single image or group of images.

Through a sequence of photographs, the book inspires conversation and multiple interpretations, allowing for an image-based learning experience: underlining the similarity of the shapes, in the first spread we are presented with a photograph of a wooden set square alongside another photo depicting a large shark-shaped tunnel (Figure 2); when we turn the page the large shark tunnel is repeated but is now paired with a festive decoration made up of flags which look just like a close-up of the teeth of the shark on the previous page (Figure 3). Not only do the two photos repeat the same shape, but they are also balanced in terms of their colours

Fig. 2 Jason Fulford & Tamara Shopsin (2014), photography, New York: Aperture. Courtesy of the authors and the publisher © Fulford, Shopsin and Aperture.

with very similar palettes used in the two images. The book continues in this vein, following this and other forms of logic, before arriving at the final double page spread where we are once again presented with the original wooden set square. The result is a 'circular' Duchamp-inspired book in which the stories and the associations established between the images are endless and at the discretion of the reader (Fulford & Shopsin, 2014); the thick cover with rounded corners suggests the book is aimed at children but in reality it is actually designed for a wider audience interested in the use of images and professional photo-editing.

DECONTEXTUALISED RELATIONSHIPS

Fig. 3 Jason Fulford & Tamara Shopsin (2014), photography, New York: Aperture. Courtesy of the authors and the publisher © Fulford, Shopsin and Aperture.

Every photograph has an intrinsic meaning defined by the taker, by the objective reality that the image depicts and the surrounding context. Let's take a school yearbook

for example, one with lots of portraits of students and relative captions with information on them. This image is unequivocable and leaves no space for interpretation. But what happens if the image is separated from its original context? When do we not have any supporting information or unambiguous clues that tell us what the image refers to?

On the possible dialogues between decontextualised images, it is worth mentioning *The Pictures Generation, 1974-1984*, which was an exhibition held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, from April 29 to August 2, 2009): the research of the artists on display –including Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, Richard Prince, Sherrie Levine– was focused on the use of existing images which, once decontextualised, acquire new meanings. This is the case of *April 21, 1978* by Sarah Charlesworth, an artwork that challenges photography's reputation as the embodiment of truth. Starting from the front pages of the main international newspapers, the artist deconstructs time by isolating the visual contents from the textual ones, demonstrating that words are unnecessary and the magnitude of mass media's reliance on pictures.

The blankness on the page is unsettling, but here the image recounts the entire narrative. In addition, it is interesting to note how the same image –the iconic photo in which Aldo Moro held a newspaper in his hands as proof that he was still alive during his kidnapping by the Red Brigades– can take on a different meaning in a new, manipulated context: in the Italian newspapers like *La Repubblica* and *L'Unità* –two historic left-leaning dailies– the picture is large and centred while in the foreign press the image occupies a marginal space, overshadowed by a photograph of Queen Elizabeth holding her grandson Peter Phillips in *The Times*, for example.

Another approach worthy of mention is the work of Peter Piller, a German artist whose archive contains over 7.000 newspaper photos; in 2002 these were joined by 12.000 aerial images produced by a company in the 1970s to be sold

door-to-door to the owners of the houses in the pictures; the collection is completed by historic postcards and images taken from the Internet. Piller's artistic research is based on the manipulation of this vast collection of images to create visual stories consisting of different associations: formal or in terms of meaning, some intuitive, others less so: why is a woman depicted alongside an image of a rocket blasting off? And a war photo depicting parachutists jumping from alongside a girl blowing a dandelion? There is no single interpretation, the observer is left to draw their own conclusions. By reusing found photos in new contexts it is possible to create new stories but also new worlds, as is the case with the *Parallel Encyclopedia* by Batia Suter (2007). As the title of the book suggests, it talks about an imaginary parallel world to our own and is illustrated with pre-existing content completely devoid of text, with the exception of the original captions of some of the images which do not however impact on the narrative – on the contrary, the reader is free to imagine their own world, creating their own personal associations between the pieces of visual content. Batia Suter's work is a study of graphics and photography, an exercise in appropriation and decontextualisation, understood as artistic practice:

> In my work, I collect groups of images based on various themes and characteristics, and I investigate how they can manipulate each other, depending on where and how they are placed. In the process of making this book, narrative lines unfolded before my eyes as I shifted images around. (Suter, 2007, n.p.).

> Leafing through the almost 600 pages of the volume, we are able to understand the associations, both formal and semantic, between the sequences of images; and it is also possible to recognise chapters –or rather thematic groups of images– as in the case of pages on the human body and its representation (Suter, 2007, pp. 430-585).

One exponent of narration through appropriation is designer and artist Erik Kessels, whose practice is mainly

Fig. 4 Erik Kessels (2014). Courtesy of Erik Kessels © 2022. This is a book focused on the most common mistake in the history of image-making: the finger on the camera lens.

focused on the use of found photography. In his periodical publication *In Almost Every Picture* he presents a different theme series each time made using photographs found at flea markets: they are vernacular images, often deriving from private collections, taken by amateur photographers unaware of the reuse of their images. Kessels deconstructs the original collections, without the need for introductory texts or accompanying captions, and recombines and organises them to tell a new, different story; this is the case of issue number *13, Attack of the Giant Fingers* (Kessels, 2014) which is a book focused on the most common mistake in the history of image-making (Figure 4): the finger on the camera lens, but how can a finger on the camera lens be a creative error? And what do these 'wrong' photographs have to say?

Page after page, one mistake after another, we notice that the finger highlights a certain part of the picture and, at

Fig. 5 Erik Kessels, *In Almost Every Picture* 17, 2021. Courtesy of Erik Kessels © 2022.

the same time, it becomes a graphic and narrative element of the sequence. Another magazine issue that exemplifies well this narrative potential is number 17 (Kessels & Smerieri, 2021) about the holiday pictures by Carlo and Luciana, a couple from the small Italian town of Vignola, in the province of Modena. And once again, what do the photos of a happy couple travelling around the world tell us? Carlo and Luciana made a small handful of trips right after they were married. This is the beginning of their project, black and white images, many shot on the road. Yet it is not until later, past the blank pages symbolic of their working years, that we really get to know how Carlo and Luciana explored the world. Black and white becomes colour, we witness time passing. Together they create a curious contradiction; two halves each with their own different motive, making one whole (Figure 5).

The final case study on how images can talk effectively without the need for any accompanying text makes use of recent technologies: *LP* is the magazine of the Autonomous Province of Bolzano which is focused on the narration of the South Tyrolean territory, but it is also the product of the co-design strategy adopted by this institution and a research team from the Faculty of Design and Art of the Free University of Bozen-Bolzano[2].Given the history of the region the publication is trilingual –Italian, German, Ladin– and, thanks to the use of QR codes and a transmedia strategy, it is possible to access its content on mobiles, via desktop computers and in a printed version, according to the type of user and media – language, video, text, image or mixed. The seventh and most recent printed edition uses augmented reality to enhance the narrative experience: by taking a picture of the printed images with a smartphone, these come alive, becoming animations, interviews and videos.

A NEW STORYTELLING

Umberto Eco considers loss as an indispensable condition in the field of linguistic and literary translation and interpretation, in which the original text must necessarily undergo a transformation for the sake of understanding, and indirectly contributes to the creation of new meaning (Eco, 2003). Just like when we look at a piece of art and ask ourselves what it means and what the intention of the artist was, often we find that there is more than one valid answer, and it depends on the viewers and the relationships they manage to establish.

Something very similar happens in visual communication –because communication it is– where complex concepts are transposed from the semantic level to the graphic-visual one for the sake of user clarity and comprehension of the message. In this process of transition, the design choices

and the use of graphic techniques make the output always different from the original starting point. As analysed in the examples above, the transposition from the semantic plan to the visual one takes place through various types of operations which ensure that the starting content is always different from its visual translation.

To carry out this process we use images with different kinds of relationships which makes a dialogue made of pictures to visualize, condense and convey complex concepts that would otherwise be difficult both for graphic designers to translate and users to understand.

A visual dialogue implies a mixture of two or more pictures; their association can be formal, on the basis of various criteria such as similarity, contrast, balance, colour combination and so on; or on the basis of meaning: in the first case, the montage and its resulting dialogue will privilege its semantic value, establishing a formal correspondence between representations analogically linked by nexuses of meaning; in the second case, it will instead privilege semiotic-structural –i.e. syntactic– nexuses, suspending the analogy of contexts and thus of meanings.

The case studies examined in this text demonstrate the potential narrative of images when associated with each other; original or found, decontextualised or animated, but above all without the addition of text, they are able to convey new stories, which can be unequivocal, multiple or freely interpretable messages according to the perception of the users.

NOTES

1 With regard to images, and war reports in particular, see the interesting reflection of Riccardo Falcinelli in *Figure* (2020, pp. 391-405), in which three images of three different wars –Secession, the Syrian civil war and the Cambodian-Vietnamese war– show the difference between straight photography –for example the objective reproduction of reality– and staged photography.

2 *LP magazine* is one of the research outputs deriving from *Assessing post-publishing and its connection with public institutions and public services and their communication* –VaLP, 20.03.2018-31.08.2019 and 23.04.2020-31.03.2022– a trans-media and co-designed research project conceived and led by Gianluca Camillini –2018-2022– Dr. Alvise Mattozzi –until 2021–and Matteo Moretti –until 2019– at the Faculty of Design and Art-unibz, funded by the Autonomous Province, and aimed at communicating the territory to its citizens, exploring new forms of storytelling and developing new relations with different audiences.

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