INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE ARTS AND COMMERCE

Visual culture: the interpretational options of a visual narrative In visual media

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Abstract:

The technological progress of media has been accompanied by a change in their narrative through the linear codes reading, which are the result of a diachronic perception of their phonetic literacy. This leads to their substitution by two-dimensional codes by which we read texts of the so-called technical images. French screenwriter Jean-Claude Carrière in one of his reflections on the book narrations notes that the book is not the only medium that is read. He points to the fact that not only a letter can be read, but a text banner at a demonstration, tombstone or computer monitor as well [1]. And, if a text is placed into any media content available, it is usually subordinate especially to the image that then becomes its substitute. With the gradual preferring of the image up to the verge of its absolutism, the nowadays modern culture can be comprehended as the Visual culture.

The current media narrative with its strong inclination to the impressive image violates the classic sujet composition and intensifies it into "only" impressive fragmented story. Today, the audio-visual media purposefully distort the sensory balance in favour of a hypertrophied visual reality. This paper confronts the usual methodology with the study of how can an image tell a modern story using a sample of existing media products. It points out that viewing, e.g. a cinematographic work, defines its narrative as a process of comprehending its story, resulting in the narrative becoming the product of comprehending its media message. The paper specifically focuses on what is happening outside the shot as a form of a revitalizing element, while, especially in the film or advertisement, an intentional emptying of the supersaturated visual field by its creator occurs. It critically perceives the stance when everything has been narrated through images with a clear dominance of thematic recycling or repetition of pictures.

Keywords: narrative, media message, image, scene, movie, expressive category, the actuality of an expression

Introduction

Narrative content falling within the media mainstream we perceive through its several distinctive features. First of all, it's a cheap desire of the audience after fancy content, often without the warranty of its verification. Furthermore, it is the low requirements for analytical thinking in the process of viewer's reception, a frequent absence of the phenomenon of authorship, novelty, originality, and multifaceted processing of already recycled themes. However, some individual strategies, through the incorporation of creative and innovative practices into their production, disrupt the content singularity and clichés. For example, by the focus on the last member in the triadic structure of the information transmission - author content- recipient - the audience, during the creation of such narratives; particularly using a reorganization of the previous perceptual stereotypes of the narrative. According to the film and media theorist Francesco Casetti, the media landscape becomes a place where the content gives birth to meanings, which are then visualized and are the subject to interpretive exchange between different parties. The image, exposed through the media, is therefore an imaginary synergistic space of meaning and communication [2]. Its visual content finds its new artificial horizon in the field of a screen and supports the superiority of media perspective over the immediate prospects in real space. For the audience this leads to an inversion of the original opposition inside and outside, leading to the expansion of the optical width of the image perception - to trans-horizontal optics. [3] If such an image wants to be sold in the audio-visual media, it must constantly attract the target audience to the permanent actuality of its expression. However, there is a risk of falling into crisis at the moment "when it can no longer produce an artificial day, it explains the existence for being" [4]. Another troublesome area regarding the current media narrative is the content replication process. It is this rejuvenating process that is deemed the exceptional phenomenon intrinsic to nature. But why then this analogy does not apply in our modified human reality?

But let us return to the issue of visual narratives. The first text is always the original - the source text with functional narratives. But this same prototext also provides secondary space for eventual adaptation to different metatexts along the lines of creative activity. On the other hand, however, there is also the risk of abuse in the form of a conscious copy, explicitly presented as the original, while it is a falsified narrative. Sometimes, however, there is an inadvertent mistaking of one narrative for another on the basis of certain common features. Eco accepts such exchanging to be unintentional errors, which are just the work fo coincidence. He exemplifies it on social events, during which we place our cup besides someone else's and after some time we are not able to distinguish them [5].

An example of a visual narrative in the media no. 1:

Visual glamor of Slovak narrative in an advertisement

"For twenty years we fulfil your dreams of living" - that is the slogan of Prvá stavebná sporiteľňa (a financial institute focused on housing) advertising campaign namedThe most important place on earth as it was presented about a year ago in the Slovak audio-visual media. Its captivating, humanly accessible visualization was focused on a worthy celebration of the twentieth anniversary of its existence on the commercial market. The creators of the advertisement aimed it towards the life of ordinary people, who are also the intended

recipients. Since it is impossible to show something intangible without physical empiricism, the product itself stays unmentioned with the exception of the last three seconds in the form of the company logo at the very end of the ad. Actually, such narrative is nothing unusual especially for ads that have undertaken to semantically picture products like financial services that are, on the whole, difficult to be visually interpreted. The sound and the background music of this advertising consist of a melodically stable and peace evoking piece with a subtle female vocal, enhancing the already existing pleasant feeling from its dominant visual component. The feel is the same as how should a client who enjoys the benefits of the services offered feel. Forty seconds of space of this media product offers a "time-lapse" video capturing a simple but unique beauty of the flow of life of each of us. This is done through a combination of different types of camera images from the movie-making environment - from the subjective camera (point of view), through great detail imaging to the images of a whole scene. The changing of angles, colours and imaging methods perpetuates rhythm of the narrative about our past, present and future, depending on whether you're watching archive footage from a home album or video reportage depicting a pair in a cinema or shopping, where we are known by our names to the baker. The poetic-like video cutting of several overlapping human lives is very effectively squeezed into the small narrative space, which has a bold ambition to talk about the most important place on earth for everyone from the birth until the death.

Although the narrative used in the advertisement does not show explicitly what it aims to sell, it still sounds reliably. It succeeds in evoking an existential lightness of being through a pleasant, but especially voluntary identification with the story of a media product. It evokes positive emotions with a hint of nostalgia that are likely to appeal to the whole spectrum of diverse audiences including those uninterested in the product. We can say that, thanks to the actual narrated narrative, there occurs some kind of spectator appropriation, bypassing the usual superficial persuasive techniques so typical for any advertising. The composition, which was used for the dramaturgical exhibition of the product, precisely and effectively targeted the intended audience without risking the seriousness of the product and the company standing behind it. We present here a translation of the transcript of the commentary accompanying the visual narrative of the advertisement as performed by the compelling voice of Slovak actor Marián Miezga:

"You do not buy housing, but the neighbour who will help you and the guy with the same hobbies. You buy the multitude of experiences and football every week.

You buy everything the city or countryside has to offer.

You buy the home zoo and pleasant moments on your balcony.

You buy the place, where you lose your head and bear all the consequences.

You buy the theatre, cinema, museum, baker, who knows you by name, and the sun on your terrace. You do not buy a house or apartment; you buy the most important place in the world.

For twenty years we fulfil your dreams of living."

In general, it can be concluded that today's mainstream forms of movie media are functionally defined, in addition to marketing determinants, also by the overused schemes and proven commercial practices in their manufacture as opposed to creation. This mainstream is overwhelmingly focused on the spectator's affect as opposed to higher mental processes. From a different point of view, it is a contrast between a passive reception and active perception. In this regard, the movie is subjected to the whims of its viewer, resulting in an "enjoyment of the narrative comprehension and emotional participation" [6]. For any type of movie audience in different historical periods a determining factor is therefore the procedural tandem - cognitive and emotional side of one's psyche. Mišíková further in her narratological theory acknowledges innate dispositions guiding viewers' understanding and experiencing of the movie based on the narrative scheme expressed in human speech.

The linear movement of the plot forward not only directs the expressiveness of the movie narrative, but also the interpretive matrices of different viewers' understandings of media content. Roland Barthes in his specific view of stratification of a narrative refers to an almost identical process. In his opinion, the understanding of a pictorial narrative requires not only the ability to follow a storyline, but to be able to recognize also the different levels of the composition [7]. The processuality of the narrative understanding is thus determined by its multilevel blending, as noted also by Vlastimil Zuska pointing to the need for active integration of sub-meanings, without which the narration could be only watched [8]. The above-mentioned determinants cannot be applied to the model viewer aka the recipient with a sufficient ability to read the message content of the movie media. The processuality of the narrative understanding is based on cognitive operations of the percipient, which are directed by the narrative and stylistic procedures used in its construction. The movie viewer can thus be considered the "hypothetical entity performing operations relevant to the construction of a story based on the movie representation" [9]. We are, therefore, inclined to believe that the merger of the mentioned issues allows us to analyse the narrative method using a dynamic interaction of the viewer with the artefact, resulting in the narrative comprehension and participation in the perception of the movie.

The commercial aspect of the expensive production is generally focused on the dynamic cutting, expressive camera, shooting of details, a digital blending of simulated and real scenes, atmospheric music, cast, diversity of costumes, scenes, etc. and a clear story climax. But what if the movie methodology leads to the postmodern which purposefully disorientates the viewer? Or is it just the "metamorphosis of the relationship between movie image and reality"? [10]. To show two major forms/methods of the movie narrative in almost their quintessence, we have chosen two screenwriting and directorial manuscripts of Michael Haneke. These we have submitted to an interpretative analysis from the viewer's perspective. We have focused on a sample of two of his movies, both mirroring the immanent mechanism of tension-building through the subliminal sense of disquiet, albeit compromising a sample "viewer unfriendly" due to their complicated comprehension.

Haneke's open narrative

The last December awards of the European Film Academy(EFA) in Malta were deservedly dominated by the Austrian director Michael Haneke with his intimate drama Love(2012) depicting an irreversible fate from its always present aspect as reflected in the slow death of one of the partners of the old married couple. The basic ingredient of the film narrative is therefore death and its acceptance. The cold, academically strictly filmed story close to the image minimalism is located exclusively in the monolithic interior of the jointly occupied dwelling, which feels only a step from the final emptiness. The audience is invited to participate - it observes, almost like it was spying on, the subtle revelations of the forms of love between the two former music teachers in their defiance against the existential inevitability. Haneke here, paradoxically thanks to the minimalistic cutting with a dominant static camera, almost sterilely reveals the seemingly simple concept of love and its manifestations as an elusive mystery - the silence in between scenes. For the mass audience this certainly compromises a minimalist, cold and complicated film phrasing, assuming an emotional identification of the recipient with the media message. To an appreciative spectator Haneke's narrative reveals the semantic richness of love during death, stemming from the subjective feelings of the main characters.

The typical Haneke's signature is, in fact, minimal expressive means formulating the subtle emanation of the central theme and the tension in seemingly peaceful shots. The mind shaking slow imaging and ominous silence affects spectators almost subliminally, thus prompting the feel of a turning life point everyone has to go through. The theme of death and mutual passion enhance the awareness of the ephemerality of human existence in classical art methods, especially at the time when Anne overcome stroke. Functionally exhibited scenes of the two teacher's ideas and dreams just emphasize the atmospheric hardship and the urgency of following the narration. In February during the 85th Academy Awards - the film also won, other than best directing award, the awards for best actor - Jean-Louis Trintignant and for best actress - Emmanuelle Riva. Haneke for his open narrative claimed the deserved Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. This film is an example of a clean methodical directing. The humanly uniting social topic shot by the documentary camera, what we occasionally see in stylized TV formats focused on charity and other meta- stories about help, and whether in the studio, in the auditorium, or in front of screens, exposes us, the spectators, to the obsessive pursuit of the main actors behaviour in face to one of the strongest emotions of life - fear of death.

Haneke's "secret" narrative

Another form of love, albeit using similar expressive means to capture movie narrative, carries another Haneke's internationally acclaimed French film Caché(Hidden) of the 2005 Austrian-German co- production. Georges in the brilliant acting of Daniel Auteuil and Anne every bit as brilliant by Juliette Binoche represent typical middle-class family living in long marriage couple's monotonous life. The key to brighten their emotionally stale relationship is their gifted 12-year-old son Pierrot. Another common denominator is their professional roles - working with a literary text - Anne works in publishing and Georges produces his literary television show. But the story does not talk about their mutual past - when and how they became husband and wife, their successes and failures, nor the cause of the partner crisis

deforming their stereotypical experience. For the author and audience, the only narrative is their actual present.

The key moment of the narrative is a leitmotif VHS. Its content Haneke takes from another independent film Lost Highway (1997) directed by David Lynch. Even here, the acceleration component of the storyline is the main characters' privacy attacking footage. Both the viewer and the characters side-by- side watch long, few-minutes lasting, static photos of a house, during which past issues and secrets hidden away in the deep inside of the unseen on-lookers are evoked. It is almost an existential symbiosis between the spectator and the main characters, who, at this moment have escaped the stereotype. Questions are asked such as:Who? What were the motives, reasons? Is he/she known, unknown to us? Is it just a prank of their solitary son's friends? No answers follow. Until such time as one of a number of received videos is accompanied by an infantile-like drawings. This drawing has probably essential strings attached to Georges' past, to which conclusion the spectator is encouraged by the encounter with Majid - a boy from Georges' childhood. The impersonal conversation with Georges' mother, arid relationship with Anne, and sterility in the dealings with their family friends suggest that the partners forming the base of the story happen to have too many secrets. Everything dramatically anticipates a tragic climax.

Since the very first exposure to the story is formed using a long static shot of a house in which the main characters of the story live, the spectators - seeing the limited camera frame shooting only a minimal movement on a street - begin to reciprocate with claustrophobic feeling that continuous throughout the film. The narrative has its slowly flowing time, the seemingly calm exterior, but with the sense of gradation that takes place mostly behind the walls of the house. While the spectators follow the tranquil shots with real sounds of the street and the occasional flashes of a pedestrian or a car, the opening credits of the film emerge with the same emotional quality. Transparent and linearly growing, as if typed by a machine.

No visually rich graphics, music nor energetic cutting foretells the atmosphere of the artwork. Haneke does expect its audience - like a mature reader of a movie language - to be opened to a movie voyeurism. He calculates with a sensitive percipient, with his/her weakness to succumb and identify with the story on an emotional level. However, Haneke is expecting that the emanation of spectator's feelings participates in the process of decoding the narrative for each one uniquely. "Neither life nor film is simple and in both we depend on ourselves. Haneke as a psychologist knows very well that each of us is hiding something, harbouring some secrets. As a film maker he promoted the movie to an organism". [11] Haneke deliberately does not serve narrative answers the way we are used to with a traditional story telling. The spectator is looking for them alone, and if he/she succeeds, once again he remains alone in their decoding. The author fragmentises the flow of events to brief visual mise en scène. The dominant factor is the slow camera shot, with its expressiveness of the visual field bigger, the less details it offers; the image is largely fragmented only to large units. The same applies to the individual characters; dialogues flow passively without marginal speech outside the scene. The spectator is left to his/her own limits of sequencing the plot and its consequences. The storytelling is subjected to a narrative gradation even in the absence of

music - one of the elementary constituents of the film expression. The rhythm and upward gradation of story are composed only on visual language and the brilliant acting of Juliette Binoche and Daniel Auteuil. The selection of central characters actors itself was an almost exact copy of the film needs, therefore manipulating the viewers' interpretations so effectively. Haneke deliberately disturbs the film time sequence through various interventions such as breaking the fluency of the visual narrative particularly in one passage when the rapid forward shortens the anonymous exposure scenes from the anonymous VHS.

Each scene in the film thus becomes a closed micro-narrative - the key to an uncertain answer or rather assumptions as to who is the anonymous sender of the videotapes that mentally terrorize a family. However, one interpretative reasoning emerges - that the very title of the film is the key leading to the main motive. These elements are forming the model of a movie whose stylistic language is not mass-user friendly, since its imaging tries to combine theatre and movie expressive methods. The synthetic potency of Haneke's manuscript is based on the cold, almost like long-distance record forming the movie narrative. The muted and slow composition of the individual scenes is the result of a hard work with the theme, creating the narrative path through the use of thematic variations and its functional derivatives.

Using the gradation of the unaddressed psychological stress on the main characters and the audience provides the space for collective catharsis. This further reveals the natural core in the form of elementary instincts and emotions - or super ego - dormant under the silt of culture and inherent to the children's stage of life. The very same stage that ultimately determines the narrative causality, which moves the film narrative based mainly on the image component. If we have wanted to analyse Haneke's creation to its full extent, we would have to cross towards re-interpretation. This may in turn lead to the concerns that Haneke's masterful manipulation of the narrative cannot be understand using the standard means, but it is not an end in itself. Finally, we can declare that every element in the film has its strict place, without which it would cease to exist. It is an excellent example of European intellectual film that will certainly sprout discourses not only among film theorists.

The film Caché image is perforated by lots of questions leading towards the single - the concealment of the past. Questions, however, exceed the narrative scale of the relevant narration, touching anyone who comes into contact with the film as its percipient. Director Haneke insinuates us with a compulsive belief that it is unimportant who is asking, the important is the response. The indices leading to the comprehension of the causal behaviour by different characters can be the covert xenophobic questions of sense of war, immigration and racial issues of contemporary France.

Results and discussion

The cross-sectional thematic variety presented in this paper leads us to the fundamental question:Is the Western culture presented in particular as the visual culture which is dominated by a solitary image? Building on the number of possible displays of visual communication by including the whole spectrum of media available, we can declare an affirmative yes, but, paradoxically, the same dominance makes its content overfilled and its

visual perception almost irrelevant for its comprehension. Although the ability to read media content gradually atrophies, this is only part of the many interpretational defects that threaten the current media audience. This concern we support, among other evidence, by the accusation of mass culture as outlined by Umberto Eco. He sees culture in its true sense rather rigidly in its opposition to the impoverished and falsifying mass-cult, alternatively to its nobler elitist version in the form of mid-cult. The cognitive influence on the personality of a media viewer through a continuous video stream eventually forms his/her often obscure taste and attitude, but distorts the ethical and semantic values of such media content. The behaviour of the audience is directed by an image with lessened values, as well as a culturally re-educational impact, for "the products of the higher culture spread in a levelled and condensed form in such a manner the consumer does not have to exercise any effort..." [12] However, what should be seen as an inevitable conflict, such an image is primarily a purposeful and functional construct, a prefabricated product. But, to be able to survive, the image requires cultivation, values, possibly brought through art. At the end of this essay there exists a space for modest optimism, since, in this visually oversaturated media very bottom, we can nonetheless register several challenging strategies and procedures to achieve the rejuvenation.

Conclusion

This interpretive study constitutes the personal conviction of the author that the innate dramatic qualities of the image-based media content over time have degraded; their audience tends to be compelled to their experience without their own control or perceptual effort. The emotional plane of the narrative in today's media is more or less just the result of the cold calculation of a staged and directed picture, which is the opposite of spontaneous and natural. The expression timeliness of current media is inclined to be subjugated by its business intent, where the rules of the visual narrative are not determined by a classic story, but a fancy and fragmentary replication.

Acknowledgement

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