The political relevance of “almost trivial-looking things”. An interview with Theo van Leeuwen

In this interview, Theo van Leeuwen reflects on the role of social semiotics and iconography as research methods for identifying the ideology conveyed by multimodal texts and signifying practices. Van Leeuwen defends the relevance of analyzing and understanding what seems trivial and apolitical, such as images, toys, PowerPoint presentations and spaces, all of which shape our worldview and establish the possibilities and limits of social practices and relationships, as well as their role in legitimating (or challenging) the social order. The last section of the interview is devoted to an analysis of overtly political images: van Leeuwen talks about how politicians present themselves to the media in the current era of politainment; reflects on how social movements use the visual to stir up debate and challenge dominant discourses and, finally, he discusses memes as examples of popular humor and participatory culture and their potential and limitations in terms of challenging and fostering social change.

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Theo van Leeuwen is one of the leading scholars on social semiotics. In his work, he explores the relationship between texts, practices and society. His research has been focused on what goes unnoticed and seems natural, such as images (KRESS and VAN LEEUWEN, 1996; VAN LEEUWEN, 2001; VAN LEEUWEN and JAWORSKI, 2002; VAN LEEUWEN, 2005), spaces (VAN LEEUWEN, 2005), toys (CALDAS-COULTHARD and VAN LEEUWEN, 2003; VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 149-162), typography (VAN LEEUWEN, 2006; VAN LEEUWEN et al., 2013), music (VAN LEEUWEN, 1999) and software (DJONOV and VAN LEEUWEN, 2013). These are all semiotic systems, “a mixture of affordances and constraints” (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 161) that guide social practices. Van Leeuwen’s writings have been devoted to understanding how these semiotic systems work, inventorizing what kind of semiotic resources are available to us and what kind of texts can be produced. In this way, he defends the political importance of analyzing (apparently) apolitical, even trivial, texts, objects and practices. And, breaking with the traditional semioticians’ focus on the text, he also analyzes how (ordinary) people use these semiotic resources in their everyday lives – and how everyday lives are shaped by these semiotics systems. That is what makes his work fascinating.

Power is at the center of his analyses, since he is interested in identifying how it is inscribed in contemporary multimodal texts and artifacts and how it is legitimated and naturalized in everyday texts and practices. Thus, van Leeuwen has analyzed the ways in which Playmobil promotes social, racial and gender hierarchies (by replicating social norms and reinforcing stereotypes) (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 149-162; 2009); how open plan offices and schools induce certain ways of behaving in workers and students (VAN LEEUWEN, 2005) and how PowerPoint fosters a marketization of public discourse, marked by a mixture of the visual and the verbal, and a succession of brief and unconnected ideas (DJONOV and VAN LEEUWEN, 2013). He has also been interested in iconography, showing how it can be a useful method for identifying the ideology behind contemporary images, such as those of advertising. Throughout this interview, van Leeuwen goes over his work and reflects on social semiotics and iconography as research methods for analyzing the role of daily signifying practices in legitimating and shaping social relations and hierarchies.

Although van Leeuwen has not tackled openly political texts (i.e. the kinds of texts analyzed in political communication), his work is very relevant for our own project, “The visual motifs in the

public sphere”, and for this monographic issue of *Comparative Cinema*, for a number of reasons. The main aim of this project is to carry out an iconographic analysis of how power is represented in the Spanish media. In other words, we want to identify which visual motifs are used to represent political, economic and judiciary institutions and to identify their origin and presence throughout a broad range of texts, such as paintings, films, documentaries, celebrity gossip magazines and memes. That is why, in the last part of the interview, we asked him to reflect on how politicians and social movements represent themselves in the public sphere, as well as the potential of memes and humor to challenge the social order.

Moreover, this interview is accompanied by four sequences of images that correspond to four visual motifs related to the content of the interview (the bourgeois portrait, the PowerPoint presentation, the politician in disguise and the fallen statue), selected and commented on by the interviewer. The main aim of these four visual sequences and the texts that accompany them is to establish a dialogue with van Leeuwen’s work and reflections.

M O

I’d like to start this interview by talking a little about social semiotics and iconography as research methods. What role do you think iconography can play as a method for analyzing the relationship between contemporary images and power, and what is the relationship between social semiotics and iconographic analysis?

T V L

It was actually a semiotician who drew my attention to iconography, a very long time ago: Peter Wollen (1972), the English writer on film. Wollen included iconography in his broad view of semiotics and I realized that this brought in a number of things that immediately interested me: in contrast to what often happens with other forms of semiotic analysis, which only look at the text, he also looked at the context – of course, with an iconography that was primarily historical context. So, the good thing about that approach was that it combines text and context. The second good thing about it was that, as a result of this, it was a multidisciplinary sort of work, in terms of looking at different kinds of sources, not only texts but also historical documents, to flesh out the social context. That was very exciting as a method.

But I also saw already at the time that there was a difference

between semiotics and iconography. Semioticians, particularly when they come from the study of language into other modes of communication, are trying to understand the resources that are generally available for people to use, whether they are poets or everyday letter-writers. Whereas art historians would look at specific artists or specific periods, so they could discover why things began and how things began – which linguists have no idea about; they just describe a system. But on the other hand, art historians see art as the invention of some artist in some particularly fertile important periods, and not how conventions grew after that and how they became part and parcel of the whole available resources of visual communication for designers, brilliant ones and everyday ones as well. And sometimes they saw that, but then it would only be in a footnote. For example, the great art historian Meyer Schapiro, in his book *Words and Pictures* (1973), which is a very good book, talks about a particular scene from the Bible at a particular time and how it started to be painted, represented, differently: first the figures were sort of static and frontal, then they became profile, and finally they were represented in “x”. So, he talked about “theme of state” and “theme of action”, which is exactly the same thing that Gunther Kress and I discussed in *Reading Images* (1996): we talked about narrative processes and conceptual processes. And then, in a footnote, Schapiro suggests that perhaps the same kind of themes could be seen in other periods as well as in the whole subsequent history of visual representation.

And regarding power, visual representation – indeed all representation – is always associated with power. Throughout history you can see it aligned to the power of religion, to the power of nation-states, to the power of capitalism. Think of Gainsborough’s *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews*, standing in front of their property. And at the same time, there can also be forms of representation that subtly or more directly challenge power. Art history, again, can often help to show that by looking at attributes of power which were used in earlier paintings that we don’t necessarily immediately recognize as such unless we study it, and which alert us similarly to the kind of symbolic attributes of power in contemporary visual representations.

Visual sequence 1: The bourgeois portrait as a legitimization of capitalist heteropatriarchal institutions

Mr. and Mrs. Andrews (Thomas Gainsborough, 1749)

Sofia Vergara and Joe Manganiello (*HOLA! USA*, January 25th 2017)

Blue Jasmine (Woody Allen, 2013)

The Queen of Versailles (Lauren Greenfield, 2012)

Historically, bourgeois portraits have served to legitimate capitalist institutions and values, such as marriage and private property. Today, these kinds of images – showing a couple posing in front of their home, garden and properties – populate celebrity gossip media, such as *Hello!* In these images, stars and celebrities embody the “myth of success”, the idea that capitalist societies are “sufficiently open for anyone to get to the top, regardless of rank” (DYER, 1979: 42). These images show the existence of acute social and economic inequality, while at the same time legitimizing it through an individualistic discourse that explains inequity as the consequence of personal success and failure.

The film *Blue Jasmine* (Woody Allen, 2013) and the documentary *The Queen of Versailles* (Lauren Greenfield, 2012), both made during the economic recession that followed the crash of 2008, revisit this very iconography of the bourgeoisie portrait to offer a critical commentary of the ideology behind it. *The Queen of Versailles* features Jacqueline and David Seagal, a married couple building the biggest house in the US. The first sequence of the documentary shows, precisely, a photo shoot in which the couple poses for the camera while sitting in a golden throne in the middle of a luxurious room, reproducing the images that fill up celebrity gossip media. In the next sequences, they conspicuously display their economic capital: a boat, a private plane, a mansion with 17 bathrooms. The film progressively shows what is behind these images of luxury and wealth, highlighting that the Seagal's empire is constructed upon a timeshare property business that sell vacation homes to working class families. Thus, the documentary shows the speculative practices through which neoliberalism fosters a concentration of wealth and power upwards (ALLEN et al., 2015), deepening even more the inequalities between the elites and the oppressed groups. *Blue Jasmine* is built upon this same idea, by comparing the luxurious lifestyle of Jasmine in the past – pointing to the tradition of the bourgeois portrait – with the life of the working class. And, as *The Queen of Versailles*, the film also shows how the accumulation of wealth by the economic elites is built upon speculative practices and unethical schemes. But although these two films apparently denounce inequality, they also foster the idea that the crisis can be understood as a moral corrective to an era of irresponsibility, hiding the idea that, in fact, the crisis was a new opportunity for elites to accumulate wealth, while ordinary citizens faced the consequences of the recession.

Mercè Oliva

M O

You have argued that this kind of historical analyses can be an antidote for the “genesis amnesia” (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 110) upon which certain stereotypes and moral explanations are naturalized and legitimized, and that analyzing the historical origin of contemporary images can be useful. You did that with racist images in Dutch advertising (VAN LEEUWEN, 2001). Could you talk about the importance of analyzing the origin of these images?

T V L

If we take as an example the racist images that you mentioned, if you look, for instance, at the writings of what you might call very early anthropologists – those kinds that measured skulls from the late-18th century onwards – they described in quite blatant terms Africans as an inferior race on the basis of physical characteristics that they described. That was considered to be science and that was also, and more importantly, a legitimation for the colonial enterprise that was happening at the time. You cannot say those kinds of things anymore, and people don’t say them anymore, those discourses have been discredited. But visually, they continue on in many different areas and often without much change. They have become stereotypes that are almost the only way in which certain things can be represented, they are taken for granted and not questioned. Therefore, it was surprising to find those very old racial stereotypes that started in the colonial era in contemporary advertisements. These kinds of representations are still today found in texts and genres that are on the side of entertainment, which are apparently frivolous but are nevertheless there and play a big role on maintaining stereotypes. And people are not always aware of that. To recount a personal anecdote, my grandparents were enormously frugal protestant people in the Netherlands who never went to a café or cinema, but they had a little wooden statue of a half-naked Javanese girl on their mantelpiece. Thus, in that way, even very ordinary people were unknowingly participating in the whole enterprise of the colonization of Indonesia.

Those kinds of almost trivial-looking things are important, since people do not know where these representations come from and they seem to be an accepted reality, an accepted shorthand representation. For example, one of the *Star Wars* films, *The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999), depicts a sort of mean-spirited second-hand dealer named Watto. I

compared it with a picture that is a hundred years old from a European satirical magazine, which is an anti-Semitic picture, and they were almost identical, every single detail, it was very striking (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Left: *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (George Lucas, 1999).
Right: Anti-Semitic caricature, 1873

75

And it is not just in images where you find it. I wrote a book about interviews (BELL and VAN LEEUWEN, 1994) where I described the origin of radio broadcasts. Long speeches, as they were held for live audiences, were not suitable for a medium like the radio, so they began to experiment with other formats, by having the speech interrupted by a questioner or getting somebody into the streets to do a *vox pop*... Eventually, it developed into various formats. Broadcasters writing about interviews happily say that interviews started with Socrates and have always existed, but they forget how they came about in a particular era. Moreover, radio interviews had a very big influence on changing the way we use language in conversational genres and on introducing a different tone into politics. Think of Roosevelt's fireside chats, or when Goebbels wrote that radio people had to speak in local dialects, etcetera. Eventually, radio interviews changed the tone and the nature of public discourse.

M O

You were talking about the importance of analyzing the apparently frivolous or trivial, and I think that this is one of the most interesting things about your work: you take multimodal discourses that are apparently apolitical and

TVL

neutral (such as the design of offices and classes, textbooks, toys or Microsoft PowerPoint) and you analyze how they legitimize and sustain power and the ideology behind it. What is the role of these “everyday” texts in the legitimization of power?

The question gives the answer... If things are legitimized in a way that they seem quite a natural part of how the world is, then they are not questioned, they are not part of the debate, and that is what the ultimate aim is. Berger and Luckmann wrote interestingly about legitimation in the book *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967). They emphasized the fact that the most powerful form of legitimation is the everyday language that we use: not necessarily the arguments of the politicians but the everyday language that we use to log the environment in which we live. That, by nature, creates the status quo of the way we organize reality. That is why the creation of words that eventually get to be spoken by everybody, the terminology, is very important (which in our era is happening all the time with the neoliberal discourses) and why the pictures that circulate every day are also very important.

MO

How do you choose the objects of study for your research?

TVL

There might be important things about which nobody seems to be doing anything. I have been very closely involved with Critical Discourse Analysis and I think is quite important to look at political speeches, but I have also noticed that people pay relatively less attention to things that take other forms than linguistic forms and to those new kinds of discourses and, in a time when so much of politics has migrated to the world of entertainment, and politicians use the language of advertising and public relations rather than political argument and debate to communicate with people, these things are important.

But also, quite simply, I am intrigued by things I do not know how to talk about and do not know what to say about. For instance, I had already written the book on visual communication with Gunther Kress, and teaching in Cardiff I woke up one day and I realized that in this whole book we had said nothing about typography, which is also visual (and getting more and more visual), and we had said nothing about

decoration – about fabric, wallpaper, carpets, etc. That is also visual. I just realized an enormous type of ignorance. I was intrigued, and I tried to find a way to talk about it.

Sometimes I also work on certain things because it can help to move the theory forward. For example, with toys. One of the reasons why I wanted to study toys was because you can see how they are interpreted, how they are played with. You can analyze the potential of toys and what is being done with them and, even more interesting, you can see what is being done in different contexts. That is why we compared how Playmobil is used in the school, in kindergarten, where they get just one kind of Playmobil for an hour on the activity table with six children, and how it was used at home, where all the different toys are mixed up. Therefore, it seemed a fine topic to investigate the semiotic link between the resources and the way they are taken up by people.

M O

You have also talked about the concept of “kinetic design” regarding toys such as teddy bears (CALDAS-COULTHARD and VAN LEEUWEN, 2003), Barbies and Playmobils (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 149-162).

T V L

And the same thing applies to PowerPoints. Studying what can you do with PowerPoint and how people actually use it and why: talking to people and asking them how they learned it, whether there are any rules in their environment as to how to use it, if they have to follow corporate formats or they can decide it for themselves, how they got the idea to use this black background and these red letters, and so on. We can get a broader view of texts in the contexts and the practices in which they are used.

M O

Your work is very much focused on understanding how semiotic systems work and how the semiotic resources and repertoires are organized within them (framing in the design of offices, toys, the representation of social actors, the depiction of wars, software). How do you proceed in these analyses? How do you analyze multimodal discourses?

T V L

Let's take PowerPoint for an example. The first step is obviously a theoretical step. You want to establish the relevance of what you are doing. As I have said in my work

on “the new writing” (DJONOV and VAN LEEUWEN, 2013), PowerPoint is a very different language that has made available things such as animation, texture, typography and so on. But in a certain way, that has been decided by some designers, and it gets unilaterally changed once in a while, being a different kind of resource. PowerPoint originally started – and the history is important there too – in the Bell laboratories for the engineers to pitch to the management for money for a project. So, they had to pitch the idea quickly, in a few points, and that’s the “bullet points”. Then, subsequently, it got used in many other contexts, and rather than adapt it to those contexts we all had to adapt to it: we all have to use bullet points, and even though some people don’t, still most people do even though you don’t have to. That seemed to me the important thing about PowerPoint: we get a homogeneity of practice without any apparent force. Yet, because of the way the system makes some things easy to do and some things not so easy, you get a particular kind of discourse, which is basically based on classifying things and making lists. That is the relevance.

The second step is looking at it, trying to inventorize what is available with a fairly open mind. For example, regarding texture, first we identified a lexicon of different backgrounds that you could choose, such as marble, birch, you name it. Then we realize that there were certain manipulations that you could do: you could make the texture finer, more regular or more irregular, etcetera. So, we inventorized what operations were possible and tried to understand why. After that, we looked at how people used it and asked them why they used it like that.

You have to start analyzing with a relatively open mind to see what is there and how it is being organized. It worries me sometimes that people close themselves off into observation a little bit too much before they start the research by picking what seems to be very visible and analyzing this might blind them to things that are also there, and which you might not necessarily see at first sight. For example, in *Reading Images* we wanted to analyze where things go on a page or a screen (the top, the left, the right, the middle...). We started by looking at many pictures of different kinds: what goes on top, what goes at the bottom... For example, for left and right we made various hypotheses: we said “Okay, is it the present and the

Visual sequence 2: PowerPoint and the changing forms of the public discourse under neoliberalism

Netanyahu press conference (Sebastian Scheiner/AP, April 30th 2018)

Steve Jobs (Danny Boyle, 2015)

79

Little Miss Sunshine (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006)

O.J. Simpson. *Made in America* (Ezra Edelman, 2016)

On April 30th 2018, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu held a press conference to denounce Iran's alleged secret nuclear program. In the media reports, Netanyahu appeared holding a microphone while standing in front of a gigantic screen showing a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation included diagrams as well as short messages ("Iran lied", "The nuclear deal is based on lies"). The ascetic design of the slides (black letters on white background) and the font used (Times New Roman) connoted rationality and factuality, while the size of the letters and the short but blunt statements added a more emotional tone. This is a good example of how PowerPoint has transformed public discourse in several fields, from politics to the judiciary system. PowerPoint has also introduced a new visual motif: the image of the Netanyahu press conference refers back to images of technological gurus and motivational speakers. Tellingly, self-help and business are the two paradigmatic fields in which this visual motif has developed, merging the "new writing" of the bullet points with the figure of the entrepreneur, which provide the model to the new ideal citizen under neoliberalism: citizens must become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (ROSE, 1998), they must work continuously on themselves to accrue value and construct themselves as a brand.

The visual motif of the speaker in front of a presentation has also been examined in contemporary films such as *Little Miss Sunshine* (Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris, 2006) and *Steve Jobs* (Danny Boyle, 2015). But while *Little Miss Sunshine* offers an ironic portrayal of the motivational speaker as a figure upon which the American dream is constructed, Boyle's film offers a much more ambiguous stance. The narrative of the film is constructed entirely around Jobs famous public presentations of new products, eliding the presentations themselves and only showing the final moments of preparation and testing before they begin. By doing that, Boyle paints a portrayal of one of the technology moguls that has helped create this visual motif. It also shows a critical portrayal of Jobs (ego-centric, perfectionist, despotic), but at the same time the film cannot help showing admiration for a character that embodies every aspect of the new neoliberal enterprising culture.

Mercè Oliva

future on the right?" And very gradually you start to come to an insight as to what the meaning potential of those elements is, and which can be then refined when people use the resources in specific contexts. Sometimes it is clearer. For example, to talk about top and bottom is a little bit easier because it has such a grounding in human experience, as has been shown in the work of cognitive metaphor theory: the feet are down there and the head is up here, the earth is down, the sky is up... It is a very universal device with which that meaning is made, and it is not surprising that it is happening in the composition of images, too.

And sometimes you have to look at meanings in terms of cultural history. For example, when you study color you see very clearly that in some cases there is a clear cultural reference point (we could call it connotations) but in other cases you have to look at what I call the experimental method: what are actually the attributes of the very material or the very forms of articulation that you deal with.

M O

You were talking about inventorizing all the available resources to understand how a particular language works. What are the main visual semiotic resources used in multimodal discourses to represent social actors? For example, in *Discourse and Practice* (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 136-148) you talk about vertical and horizontal angles, as well as distance regarding the object/subject represented.

T V L

That inquiry started as a linguistic study, a critical discourse analytical study, with a practical analytical purpose: I wanted to investigate how we can talk about people, how we can represent people. I realized that there was not a simple method since it draws on many different resources of language. So, you can talk about people by name or you can keep it anonymous, you can talk about them as a collective or as individuals, you can talk about them in terms of what they supposedly are, for example, in terms of gender or race (as difficult as that is), or you can talk about them in terms of what they do. People can be considered in very different terms based on those things. The matter is context and how it is manipulated in discourse. So, the aim of that research was to get a complete overview of the resources, of the different ways you can talk about people. But also, you can say how

it is that significant, why if people are talked about as they were all the same is important. For example, nowadays in the media, Muslims are constantly represented as if they were all the same, which is patently not true. Also, in Australia we see it all the time with aboriginal people. People can make very general statements about aboriginal people, and in fact there are enormous differences among them: if you have seen a map of the aboriginal nations in Australia, it is astonishing how many nations there are, with different languages, backgrounds... That is a question that is politically important to look at.

But we can also take a step further and look at how you can represent people visually or with toys or even with music. There are many forms of music, in opera and in film, where particular themes are related to particular kinds of characters. So, this is a research that started as a linguistic study, but it became (and is becoming gradually) more multimodal. And it is nice to see that it has been useful to look at what happens in politically important texts.

M O

And what about space? You have analyzed the role of the design shaping the relationships of people populating classrooms and offices. Could you talk a little bit more about this question?

T V L

I realized that practices, the things that we do, have always been related to not just the actual things that we do and the actual people who do it, the social actors, but also to spaces, timings, objects and all sorts of concrete things. So, it is very clear that the neoliberal ideas that are so dominant in society today are not only a matter of language, they are not even only a matter of all those pictures that you can get on *Getty Images*, they are also a matter of how people are put into spaces and what spaces look like. Power is also very strongly represented in spaces.

In my work I have given some indications as to how to analyze spaces¹, but recently some very good work has been done by Louise J. Ravelli and Robert J. McMurtrie (2015) analyzing buildings precisely from that point of view. They have a very interesting study of a big shopping center in Sydney (Queen Victoria Building) that has different stories: right at the bottom there are the cheap shops, while at the top there are jewelers,

expensive clothes shops, the restaurant has white tablecloths and so on. But they have also made modern escalators, and I should add that this shopping center has a sort of Victorian decor, so the different levels are still connected in some way. So Ravelli and McMurtrie analyze how space configures layers of society.

And regarding offices, nowadays there are various things that are very important when analyzing them: not just height or elevation, but also distance and visibility. People can no longer be individuals, they have to work in teams, they have to sit at the same table, they can no longer own things. There are also major changes in design that try to work on people's dispositions and subjectivities. As I indicated in my book *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2005: 14-23), people at the receiving end, at the bottom, hated it and complained that they could be seen all the time, but the managers said that it created better workers, more docile workers. I think it is a very important part of how life is organized. And you can think of other examples as well: today there is a bigger mixture between the private and the public and between work time and leisure, and all of this is reflected in how houses look like. All those elements are interesting things to study, since they are embedding our everyday rituals and habits: not only what we say, but also (and especially) how we do things.

M O **There is also a relationship between contemporary offices (such as Google headquarters) and neoliberal work, for example the idea of flexibility, the mixture of the private and professional...**

T V L Nevertheless, if you go to an Apple store, they still have to sell, they still have the same costumes on, the same Apple t-shirts. There is still a regimentation but of a different kind. There is the appearance of casualness.

M O **As you mentioned earlier, toys have also been one of your objects of study. What do toys such as Playmobil tell us about society?**

T V L Regarding Playmobil, I started looking at it because I thought this was actually a little world of social actors: we've got policemen, farmers... Who don't we have? That was the first

question I asked myself. But then I discovered other things. I discovered, for example, that you could buy a box that was called “the family” that included a father, a mother and two children, all with different color hair – so they were a little bit individuated, despite the fact that they were very basic little figures. And you could also buy a box called “the ethnic family”; they were probably well-meaning with that, but the box included three children, the mother had her hair in a bun rather than loose long hair², and they were not individuated in the same way as the Caucasian family by all having the same color skin and the same color hair (Figure 2). Also, you could buy a box with a man in a car, who was exactly the same character as the father of the family, but you could not buy the mother in a car or the ethnic father in a car. So, I began to see certain funny little things that indicated that there was a structure behind this, and I felt that I had to write about it.

And then, of course, when children play with it, they can subvert it in many different ways. Nevertheless, I think that somehow those things leave a little bit of an impression on their minds in a certain kind of floating attention to these things. I think it does have some influence.

Although Playmobil still has realistic toys for very young children, since I conducted this study they have become more and more like imaginary worlds: fairy-tale characters, characters you don’t really see in the streets. You really need to follow up with another study that looks at how that is structured, what kind of characters you have there, what kind of men and women, physical characteristics, and whether it is the same thing in a different guise or there have been significant differences.

Figure 2

- M O** You have highlighted the importance of analyzing everyday texts and objects, instead of overtly political discourses. What do you think is the legacy of Barthes' *Mythologies* (1957) in your own work and in the work in the field of social semiotics? Barthes saw the importance of what does not seem to be political, but it is.
- T V L** Barthes' *Mythologies* was at the start of the sorts of things I am doing. His legacy is one: he drew attention to everyday objects and materials in a way that nobody was doing then. He tackled an astonishing variety of objects, there is hardly a topic that he has not analyzed: he studied toys, plastic, wine, bottle cards, soap powders, you name it! And he not only talked about how meaning was made, he also developed an ideological critique of these elements. He pointed to the power of the bourgeois norm (as he would have put it) in society. He really was the first critical multimodalist in that line and he set the scene to be able to study those everyday objects as being worth analyzing. I was quite young when I read that book and it was a discovery that drove me away from the focus on high literature and high art to those other aspects of culture.
- M O** I'd like to start the last section of this interview by asking you about more overtly political discourses. In a time in which images are very important in conveying messages, what strategies do you think political, judiciary or economic institutions use to portray themselves? Earlier you were talking about how we are living in a populist time, in which entertainment and politics are merging together and advertising is shaping political discourse. What do you think about the strategies that the political actors use to visually portray themselves?
- T V L** I don't quite know about Spanish television, but in the countries where I have lived you find that politicians often try to appeal to citizens by showing themselves in different guises or by appearing in certain environments, such as in enterprises, visiting schools, greeting children, or by the things they do, such as sports. None of it is related to their actual work. That happens particularly in election campaigns, but it happens also all the time, in photo opportunities that are being created. For example, in Australia there is a debate right

now about the fact that the government wants to continue producing electric energy from coal. Because of the interest politicians have in getting votes from areas where the mines are important, we see a politician (former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott) taking part in a bicycle ride, which was organized to be photographed in that guise as he rides past an electrical energy factory where coal is being used. That is not a debate. That is an attempt to say “I am a guy like you, very sporty, I enjoy a glass of beer, and this is what I am in favor of”. They like to create those kinds of images or to appear, preferably, on entertainment programs rather than in a serious debate.

Of course, there are counter-movements to that. We have seen that younger people especially are still interested in listening to people who talk like politicians, instead of celebrities, such as Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. So, we are not without hope. My own feeling there is that you have to bring these things to the foreground, particularly in teaching. Teaching is also a contribution to make.

M O

And what about civil movements? During the last ten years, coinciding with the economic recession and austerity policies, citizens have organized public demonstrations and movements (such as OWS, the Indignados in Spain, supporters of Catalonia’s independence). What strategies do you think they have used to represent themselves and challenge power?

T V L

There is an issue of how they portray themselves, but there is also an issue of how they are being portrayed. That is something that has been studied a lot in media studies. Regarding how people portray themselves, we can talk about social media. And one increasing realization we have about social media is that it creates bubbles of people who think the same. But at the same time, it can also challenge traditional media and forms of communication. Of course, being visibly there and disturbing everyday life can challenge power. Nevertheless, certain demonstrations can go on for long time but get little public attention.

Visual sequence 3: Politicians in disguise

Tony Abbott riding past Yallourn Power Station (Victoria, Australia). (Aaron Francis/*The Australian*, April 9th 2018)

Bill Clinton on *The Arsenio Hall Show* (1993)

Justin Trudeau/*Instagram*

House of Cards (David Fincher/Netflix, Season 4, 2016)

20 years ago, Blumler and Kavanagh (1999) claimed that we had entered the “third age of political communication”, as a consequence of the changes that media were undergoing (digitalization, commodification of content, increased commercial competition...) and the influence of media languages, formats and practices on political communication. According to them, one of the traits of this third age was that “politicians are likely to seek to demonstrate [...] their ‘regular guy’ qualities” (1999: 224). This trend, viewed as a part of an anti-elitist turn, includes politicians strategically showing certain aspects of their private sphere and lifestyle and a performance of emotional “sincerity” (OLIVA et al., 2015). Tony Blair appearing on the cover of *Hello!* to present his new-born son while he was the British Prime Minister, Bill Clinton playing the saxophone on *The Arsenio Hall Show*, Obama dancing on *Ellen* and Justin Trudeau sharing photos of his family on *Instagram* are all images that have created the visual motif of the politician disguised as an ordinary citizen, a motif also developed in TV series such as *House of Cards*. The visual motif of the politician portrayed as a “regular guy” is not dissimilar from the image of the mogul dressed as a worker featured in the reality TV show *Undercover Boss* (CBS, 2010-). Each program includes the ritual of the makeover, in which the “boss” is transformed and adopts the social markers of working-classness to later infiltrate and monitor their workers. Nevertheless, here the main aim is not to reduce the difference between elites and regular citizens, but to highlight it: on the one hand, the “boss” is portrayed as not having the skills necessary to do the job their workers are doing, but at the same time, the program underlines his power, as well as legitimizing it by representing him as charitable and altruistic.

Mercè Oliva

- M O** Do you think the visual is an important element in these demonstrations?
- T V L** Visual things, what people do, have a great influence. One example that just happened here in Australia that has stirred up a big debate, is that people are putting political graffiti on statues of James Cook, who is supposed to be the beginning of Australia – when Australia had already existed for 60,000 years. So, these graffiti contest a particular historical discourse that has to do with the subjugation of aboriginal people. Those images upset and challenged people, and have a certain power, apart from what they are meant to have. Although it does not convince other people, it certainly brings this debate to the public sphere.
- M O** Finally, I'd like to talk about memes. What do you think about these multimodal texts? How do memes work semiotically? What are their potentiality to challenge power and social order?
- T V L** I have not worked on memes. Obviously for them to be humorous is one essence of it. Many are not all that political, they are about everyday small things, but the thing about humor is that it can challenge power and social order (and of course now there are plenty of Donald Trump memes around), but at the same time, it can also do quite the opposite. It can be quite racist and sexist. And if I were to analyze memes, I think that the best thing that has ever been written about humor is a hundred-year-old book by Freud called *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1960, first published in 1905). It distinguishes between the comic, which is built upon what is too *much* or too *little*: the deviant that does not follow the norm and which we laugh about because it doesn't follow the norm. And in memes you see a lot of deviants, people that look different or that are made look different, and that is the beginning of the joke. But Freud also recognized the kind of humor that allows something that is repressed to be expressed. For example, you can see a lot of memes in which kids talk about school in a way that questions the teachers and the school system. That is a good thing, and it happens, but of course is ultimately a form of coping and relief and it doesn't change the world.

1/ See, for example, VAN LEEUWEN, 2005.

2/ “Older women and black women wear their hair in a bun; younger, white women do not. As a result, older woman and black woman lack a feature of ‘female attractiveness’” (VAN LEEUWEN, 2008: 157).

Visual sequence 4: Fallen statues

Statue of James Cook in Melbourne (Nicole Garmston/News Corp Australia, January 25th 2018)

Detroit: Become Human (David Cage/Quantic Dream, 2018)

Budapest 1956

Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008)

Painting a statue as an act of protest is an interesting variation on this visual motif of “the tearing down of a statue” (BALLÓ, 2018). From prints of the French Revolution to the tearing down of Saddam Hussein’s statue in Baghdad, from October (Oktyabr, S. M. Eisenstein, 1928) to Ulysses’ Gaze (To vlemma tou Odyssea, Theo Angelopoulos, 1995) and Good Bye Lenin! (Wolfgang Becker, 2003) this visual motif has been used to represent the end of a regime and the beginning of a new era. Science fiction has also used the visual motif of the fallen statue, especially the Statue of Liberty, to signify the end of times. Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008) uses the severed head of the Statue of Liberty lying in the middle of a street as the starting point of a narrative about a deadly attack by aliens. In this case, the fallen statue means irreversibility, but the motif is separated from the idea of resistance and is connected to the imaginaries of the risk society (BECK, 1993), in which citizens are not agents of social change, but the victims of catastrophes without any clear cause and which affect everyone.

If tearing down or destroying a statue is an irreversible act, then transforming it is an act of protest, a semiotic guerrilla act that transforms the meaning of the statue, and the hegemonic historic narrative that it conveys. This visual motif also has been developed in popular texts, such as the video game Detroit: Become Human (David Cage, 2018). In Detroit, the player must decide whether Mark, the leader of an android revolution, should destroy or transform a statue that commemorates the creation of the androids and legitimize their oppression and subordinate position in relation to the humans. Choosing the former will lead to a violent revolution, the latter to a pacifist movement. The actions of the player/avatar provoke different outcomes in the game regarding the response of the media and “public opinion”, encouraging the player to take into account public perception when choosing the avatar’s actions. Thus, Detroit explicitly reflects on the existence of iconographic motifs and how social movements strategically use them to convey their message and influence the media and public opinion.

Mercè Oliva

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