Symbolism in Visual Communication

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Abstract: *Given the power of images to express feelings, to call to action, to create and use experiences, among others, in this paper, we aim to identify and analyse the various symbols and signs present in a set of photographs. First of all, we will discuss the concepts of nonverbal and visual communication, as well as some ideas regarding symbolism in communication. Then, we will focus on two qualitative and one quantitative research methods. On the one hand, we performed a visual analysis of images. We only used photos from the personal collection of one of the authors, which capture various aspects, in a specific way, from the author's own perspective. On the other hand, to meet the research objectives, we used the focus group - a research method based on free collective discussions that explores a particular question or set of questions. Subsequently, we also conducted a self-administered questionnaire, as we considered it necessary to use qualitative research techniques, followed by some quantitative analysis such as the survey.*

Keywords: *photography, visual communication, symbols, signs, interpretation.*

1. Introduction

This paper examines the use of visual methods in research. The purpose of this paper is to identify symbols in visual communication, more precisely, in a set of given photos. The analysis of the identified signs, symbols, ideas or memories, each with its own particularities, allowed us to find out how specialists and non-specialists in visual arts rendered and paraphrased a specific message that appeared in front of their eyes. The overall aim of the interviews was to collect, synthesize and then analyse participants' understanding of their own past experiences and present beliefs.

We conclude this paper with a summary of the strengths of visual analysis in communication, of lessons learned and memories unfolded.

2. Expert sources consulted

The topic addressed in this paper belongs to the field of nonverbal communication and symbolic communication. In addition, we considered it essential to consult bibliographic sources related to photographic art.

The whole process of communication involves a variety of forms of manifestation. One of the features that distinguishes verbal from nonverbal communication is the code. The formal aspect of the nonverbal message is represented by images and sounds, and not by articulate language, as in the case of verbal communication. L. Suciu (2014, p. 89) thus defines the code as the "demarcating feature" (our translation) between the two types of communication mentioned.

The entire set of nonverbal communication features is often called "metacommunication" (the Greek word "meta" means "extra"). "Metacommunication" is, therefore, something in addition to communication, and we must always be aware of its existence.

Along with verbal, paraverbal and nonverbal communication, symbolic communication can be admitted as a form of independent communication. It is not verbal communication, but it is not purely

nonverbal communication either, because it is defined as "a language of images that are meaningful in themselves, but which can also be translated into words"; thus, a nonverbal language that can be reduced to verbal language, explains Abrudan (2013; our translation). She also emphasizes an essential fact: "the symbol itself is, in a sense, a sign, but while the sign in the strict sense is completely arbitrary and has an immediately identifiable meaning, the symbol is more than just a sign" (Abrudan, 2013; our translation). Thus, the symbol has something more than a sign and more than that, the symbol has the function of recognition and exhortation, not just that of denoting something already determined.

We note that the great semioticians and researchers in the field agree with the idea that images convey visual messages, so "a synonymous relationship can be established between image and visual representation" (Dâncu, 2009, p. 90). Furthermore, Dâncu (2009, p. 90) argues that "the image is a universal language", but the fact that people recognize certain elements in images does not automatically mean that they have understood the meaning transmitted by their creator.

Any act of communication involves signs and codes. Signs are acts or artifacts that refer to "something other than oneself", according to Abrudan (2013; our translation). She identifies codes as systems in which signs are organized and which determine how they relate to each other. Since the appearance of Homo Sapiens, we have found symbols in almost everything. A drawing becomes a symbol that evokes a certain object, idea, feeling or image. We could thus say that the symbol becomes part of a system of signs that constitute information.

Another interesting fact derived from the definition provided above is that the symbol is generally perceived as a kind of intermediary between the sign and the image. From this perspective, the symbol becomes a synthesis of opposites, because "the image is the inverse of the sign", as Lester (2014, p. 43) points out. The sign shows an intentional reference, while the represented content in the image conceals the intention, adds Lester. Each symbol is a microcosm, it can be perceived

as the expression of a macrocosm, because each incorporates, reflects and connects the dynamic structure of the cosmos and the human mind.

By virtue of these considerations, any image can be analysed from a semiotic point of view, which would facilitate our entry into what lies beyond the first sensations and appearances, that is, into meaning.

Sandu and Tudose (2008, p. 37) argue that "photography is a powerful means of expression." When used properly, it can become "a real force of charity and understanding" (Sandu and Tudose, 2008, p. 37); used incorrectly, it can "cause many dangerous fires" (Sandu and Tudose, 2008, p. 37). It can thus be inferred that the interpretation of any photographic image depends on both the intention of the viewer and the intention of the creator. Given the various levels of understanding, their coincidence implies the "cancellation of the relative" (Sandu and Tudose, 2008, p. 37), because subjectivity is present "without claiming the universal-valid" (Sandu and Tudose, 2008, p. 37).

3. Research method

In the present research, we used two qualitative and one quantitative research methods.

First, we have performed a visual analysis of a set of photographs taken by one of the authors of this article. We started from the assumption that photography is one of the most powerful means of expression. Moreover, we believe that interpreting a photographic image depends both on the intention of the person looking at it and also on the intention of the person who created it.

Second, we have used the focus-group technique, which is a research method based on free collective discussions that explores a set of questions. The focus group was divided into two "working groups": the group of professionals in the field of visual arts / photography and the group of non-specialists / people working in completely different fields. For the optimal development of the focus group and in accordance with the set of four open questions, we prepared a set of nine photos, which the participants inspected and analysed carefully.

Table 1 Pictures used in the focus-group and in the survey

No.	Picture	No.	Picture
Picture 1		Picture 6	
Picture 2		Picture 7	
Picture 3		Picture 8	
Picture 4		Picture 9	
Picture 5			

Based on their answers, we received practical examples and learned more about their opinions. We encouraged the interviewees to go into as much detail as possible, allowing them to be free and honest in expression, so that we could get an image as close to the truth as possible. As for the actual location of the focus-group, it was carried out online, using the Zoom meeting platform. Unfortunately, due to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, we could not do the interview face to face.

Last, the quantitative analysis was carried out by using a questionnaire-based survey, administered exclusively online, via a specialized platform. There were 102 respondents to the survey. The questionnaire aimed to identify the respondents' opinions and thoughts regarding the given set of nine images. We believe it is important to mention that the survey was based on the same four questions that were used in the focus-group, but at a larger scale in terms of respondents. The data collected, processed, analysed and interpreted in this research are exclusively visual.

Table 2 presents the above-mentioned nine images used in our research.

4. Results

Experiencing the world behind the camera lens encourages the creation of inner experiences, as it allows us to exercise control over what we consider worthy of being seen and transmitted. In our study, we relied exclusively on photos from the personal collection of one of the authors, which capture various aspects, in a specific way, from the author's own perspective.

In the process of collecting, editing and reframing the dozen photos we used as source material, we constantly asked ourselves the following question: "What is the meaning of this image?" We selected and organised these photos according to the meanings and symbols behind each.

It was interesting to search and find, in our own memories, how much meaning a simple image could evoke, be it a hesitant look, a

landscape, a couple or a crying baby. Each photo communicates a message and was created with a specific individual intention. In choosing to make a family portrait, for example, there are a number of factors in creating the desired moment. Family members must be arranged in appropriate positions, expressing the desired emotions and engaged in a special, structured embrace.

The first question in the focus-group, which asked the respondents to define a "good" photo, was created so as to set the tone for the discussion, giving respondents a brief introduction to the topic of the interview. The next question required an explanation of the method used to facilitate the interview. The three questions had as subject the nine images, which offered the respondents the opportunity to relate situations and reasoned ideas. This group of questions explicitly and directly brings back the subject of the interview, aiming at determining the respondents to reveal facts, to reveal themselves and to make clarifications. The set of questions was carefully designed and oriented in such a way as to allow the interviewees to convey ideas through argumentation. Both the questions and the answers converge semantically in the same direction. We also consider that the transparency of the questions highlights the moderator's strategy, based on the knowledge of the subject, the interviewees and the social context.

The discussion about photos no. 3, 4 and 5 focused largely on positive experiences. These photos seemed to stimulate deeper thoughts and to engage the interviewees in conversation. They were eager to talk and freely discussed new topics, with examples of confusing situations and stories from shared experiences. The new stories evoked by the photos were shared willingly by the participants. The resulting discussion had an impact on our understanding of the participants, as it provided a closer look at what they considered important. The discussions around photos no. 2, 7 and 8 highlighted the negative experiences that the participants had had until then.

While the specialists in visual arts focused predominantly on the technical aspects, we noticed the interest with which the non-specialists

treated the subject and each image in a much more authentic way, trying to give each one a meaning. There was, however, on the part of the laypeople, a tendency to answer in the same way as the previous participant in the focus group. As expected, the specialists offered technical suggestions, related more to the composition, shadows, contrasts and less to the unseen side of each photo.

The focus-group allowed the collection of information in a discreet way, resembling a conversation with a well-defined purpose. The whole discussion was guided, so as to provide the targeted information. The use of projective and facilitation techniques allowed the moderator to build relationships with the respondents and to obtain in-depth responses. We believe that such an approach channeled the attention, maintaining the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewees.

In what concerns the survey, it was important to identify the respondents' views on the three most important features of a "good" photograph. As shown in Figure 1 below, the three most important characteristics in this respect are the following:

- "*It has meaning (a story / message)*" - 77 answers (75.5%)
- "*It induces a certain state*" - 54 answers (52.9%)
- "*It induces a certain feeling*" - 54 answers (52.9%)

**Fig. 1** Characteristics of a "good" image
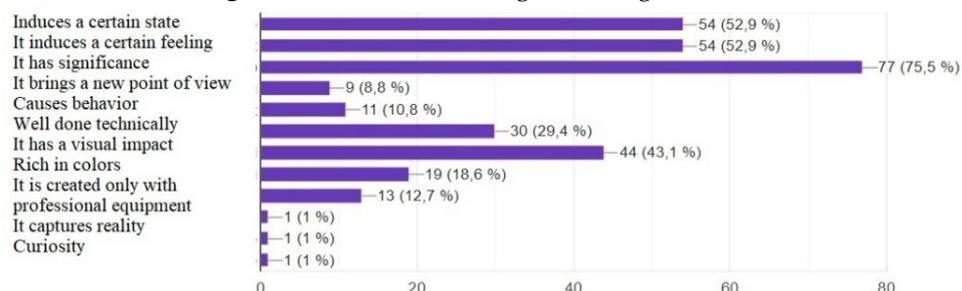
In the photographer's opinion, the picture below is one of the most striking images ever captured, being a snapshot of the cruel reality of that place. In order to better understand the symbolism of this image,

which at first sight seems to depict a nice landscape scene, we want to highlight a historical fact: the village of Geamăna, now buried under the tailings lake shown in the image, was a particularly picturesque area until 1977. Then, it was decided to relocate that village. The locals were forced to leave their homes, graves and birthplace, to leave the tailings site. According to the survey results presented in Figure 2, this picture predominantly evoked "relaxation" and "curiosity" in the respondents. It is noteworthy that, in the interview, only one person from the group of non-specialists recognized the place.

Fig. 2 Feelings/moods expressed by the picture above (picture 8)

Feelings/ moods expressed by the picture

Curiosity (21.6%)

Melancholy (12.7%)

Sadness / Relaxation (8.8%)
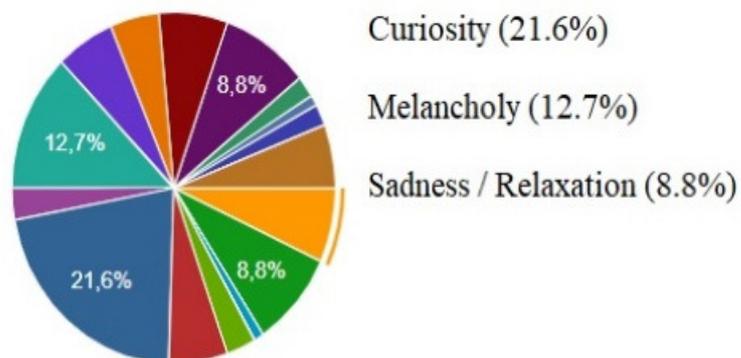
The photo showing the joined hands of an elderly man in close-up elicited different opinions from the two groups: non-specialists expressed mostly positive moods, whereas specialists felt sadness and nostalgia.

Fig. 3 Feelings/moods expressed by the picture above (picture 9)

Feelings/ moods expressed by the picture

Sadness (27.5%)

Melancholy (23.5%)

Hope (13.7%)
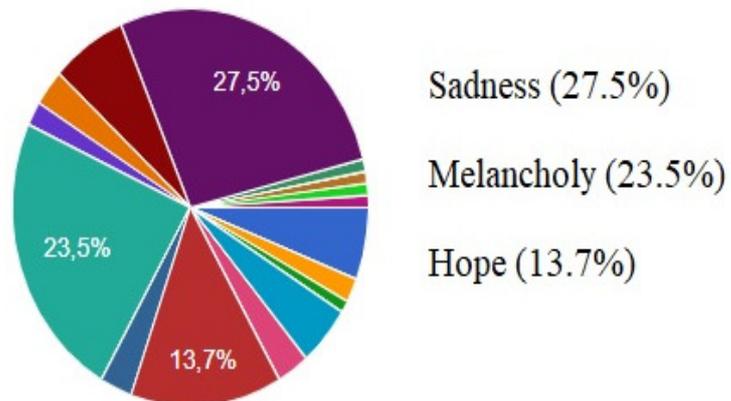
We noted that, in general, the respondents would not suggest changes to the images under analysis. This is mainly due to the fact that we provided pre-determined answers in the questionnaire, not open-ended questions.

Conclusion

Based on the theoretical background resulting from the various sources we had consulted, we conducted an exclusively qualitative research of a corpus of photos.

In the paper, on the one hand, we performed a visual analysis of a collection of pictures by identifying, describing and comparing the symbols, signs and codes used in a visual message. On the other hand, we used the focus-group technique, in which participants negotiate meanings, create new ones and give rise to diversity and divergence of opinions, as well as to consensus.

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