

## PICTORIAL AND VERBAL MESSAGES: CHALLENGES TO THE ADDRESSEE OF A POLYCODE TEXT

One of the founders of semiotics *Charles Morris* believed that *painting* as much as *speech* should be regarded as a *sign* system [3]. Thus, a picture should be regarded as a *semiotic* phenomenon, a text.

Yuri Lotman while meditating upon *semiotics of culture* was adamant about differentiating and even *opposing* to one another the two types of semiotic messages, namely, *discrete verbal* texts on the one hand and *non-discrete, continual* texts like pictures on the other hand [2]. He believed that translations from one type of text into the other or vice versa were impossible. But as far as they happen once and again, Y. Lotman concluded that such attempts result not in *translations* but in *equivalent versions* of one another. In my humble opinion, it is more the issue of terminology than the essential difference.

The situation stands out dramatically in a specific type of polycode text, namely, a *museum catalogue*.

The analysis of a picture gallery catalogue by H. Marx [4] showed that an article in a catalogue is a very interesting semiotic and communicative phenomenon. The readers of such text can be qualified as *“pampered” addressees*. They find themselves constantly switching their activity from that of a *reader* to that of an *on-looker*, in either case being *assisted* through all sorts of *clues* and *hints*, which improve their communicative activity (On the problem of communicative idiosyncrasies of such texts read [1]).

A *catalogue article* is a twofold message, comprising an iconic (namely pictorial) and a verbal component. The former being a *reproduction* of some famous picture, the latter being approximately 150-200 word long *annotation* commenting upon the painting, the artist, sometimes the history of the picture, its artistic and literary background.

The two components are unequal as to the degree of self-sufficiency in the process of their perception. The iconic component *might* function independently, though with certain loss of its informative potential. The verbal component is *nearly useless* in case it is devoid of the corresponding iconic support. In other words, an addressee may more or less successfully leaf through the catalogue without reading the textual messages, but an addressee cannot just read the annotations and skip the illustrations. The result will be a communicative failure.

The point of this publication is *to show how each of the components enhances the informative impact of the polycode text upon its addressee*. We

have already mentioned about clues and hints that the addressee gets, if he / she thoroughly perceives the catalogue article. To begin with, the **reproduction** that catches the eye first and foremost does not contain exact information of the picture size, which is by far different from what the addressee sees in the catalogue.

Our research proved that the size of a picture is decreased drastically: reproduction sometimes equals as little as 0.2% of the space which the original canvas occupies. For sure, the impact upon the on-looker in such circumstance is much weaker. The reader of the catalogue is usually quite unaware of this difference.

The **verbal component** of the article informs the reader about the original dimensions of the reproduced picture, giving the exact figures. Such piece of information is a **must** in the “passport” of the picture, containing the **name** of the artist, the **years** of his life, the **title** of the picture, its **dimensions**, qualification of the **technique** (oil, tempera etc) and **material** on which it is painted (canvas, poplar wood etc). Sometimes the dry figures are “revived” in the annotation through a *descriptive verbal* commentary.

For instance, the still-life by France Snyders is nearly 2 meters high and more than 3 meters long, its reproduction is more than 200 times smaller. The annotation revives the largeness of the canvas, saying: “*The **huge size** of the still-life indicates a certain type of client with **large rooms** available, like nobility with **castles** and **large dining-rooms***” [4, p. 48]. The descriptive details like “*huge size*”, “*large dining-rooms*”, “*castles*” help the reader visualize the hugeness of the original painting, supporting the precise data of the passport: “*1,97m X 3,25m*”.

In some cases the *cues* that help the addressee imagine the real dimensions of a picture are given in the annotation *indirectly*, through a *detail*. Titian’s famous picture “The Tribute Money” is commented upon as following: “*Titian painted this magnificent painting of Christ <...> on a **wardrobe door** in the castle of Ferrara*” [4, p. 15], thus highlighting the passport information: “*75cm X 56cm, Oil on poplar wood*”. It is much easier for the addressee to visualize the size of the picture knowing that it used to be a part of a wooden wardrobe.

Another way of “pampering” the addressee of a museum catalogue is explaining to him / her **what** the reproduced picture **is about**, especially if the picture belongs to the so called “*narrative painting*”. The addressee, functioning as an on-looker, has to guess who is who in the picture and what’s happening in the imaginary world of the painted message. Much depends on the addressee’s cultural thesaurus. In case of certain deficiency of cultural knowledge, the informative impact of the picture upon the on-looker is considerably weakened. A helping hand is thrust forward by the

annotation's author, who provides the addressee with all the information required for adequately perceiving the visual message.

For instance, Nicolas Poussin's picture "*The Kingdom of Flora*" (1630) is a visual "translation" of literary texts by antique Roman poet Ovid. The annotation explains, that "*the flower goddess is dancing in the centre, surrounded by figures which were transformed after death into flowers*" [4, p. 41]. Then each of the 7 characters is named (they are *Klytia, Narcissus, Smilax and Crocus, Adonis, Hyacinth and Ajaks*), their position in the picture is defined, as well as the position of the flowers, into which they will be transformed after death, and the names of the flowers are also given (correspondingly, they are *heliotrope, daffodil, bindweed and crocus, anemone, hyacinth and pink*). The amount of additional information encoded verbally and offered to the addressee of the museum catalogue is very big. It is unlikely that many visitors of Drezden Old Masters gallery, while looking at Poussin's picture, can enjoy as large scope of information as the addressee of the catalogue "*Old Masters*".

In fact, part of the annotation is a *verbal translation* of the *visual message* (reproduction of the picture). Besides re-telling "what is going on" in the picture, annotation also comments upon certain features of the painting: its symbolic details, its colour range, its composition and the like. Each commentary of such type makes the reader turn his gaze upon the illustration.

Comments like the following: "*his colours are elegant and very delicate*", "*the tendency to monochromatic painting <...> with uniform hues*"; "*delightful blooming colour*" make the reader turn his eyes to the picture and see for himself whether *the colours are blooming, elegant and delicate* and what are *the hues of monochromatic painting*. Important is that the **colour nominations** are not used: *green, red, yellow* are superfluous, as the picture is at hand and the colours are exposed to the on-looker. Meanwhile, the annotation offers **qualifications** of the colours (*fresh colours, subtle hues, surprisingly colourful*), thus suggesting certain interpretation of the picture.

The effect of perspective is one of the means of creating the optic illusion of three-dimensional world on a two-dimensional flat surface of a picture. Annotation helps the reader comprehend this peculiarity of painting, drawing his attention to the correspondence of **foreground** and **background**, as is in Jan Wildens's "*Winter Landscape with Huntsman*" (1624): "*the figure of the hunter is the main focus; the landscape stands in the background <...> a great suspense exists between things of the foreground level and the expanse of the wintry space which is lost in the depth*" [4, p. 46]. This is another reason for the addressee to look back at the reproduction and see for himself whether the effect of depth is created by the painter.

The analysis offered draws up the following conclusion: communicative activity of a catalogue user should be specified as constant transitivity of addressee roles – from that of a *reader* to that of an *on-looker* and back again. The idea of a catalogue addressee being “pampered” proves right: the user of a catalogue is loaded with lots of additional information about the annotated picture, which enhances the communication significantly.

### Литература

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