

'Gaps': communication strategy in images

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In a very special way during the last decades and in parallel with the expansion of communications media and the proliferation of audio-visual systems, 'image' has been submitted to a great many processes, both theoretical and practical. Thus, there are many disciplines which use this concept and therefore have it in their vocabulary as a cliché in their working procedures.

This promiscuous use and exercise of the word, as well as its production, has the advantage of constructing a wide spectrum of experiences from which information can be taken, but it also has the disadvantage of dissipating its intensity as a definition and its clarity of concept and representation. In this way the use of the concept of image from the point of view of theory forces us to a previous exercise of territorial specificity and establishing the interests towards which considerations are directed. In this sense, it is important to rank the positions from which it is most appropriate to approach the 'image' when we are going to expose a communications strategy.

In the first place, taking into account that we will be dealing with 'strategies', it is important to heed, above all, the sense of praxis which theory should have here. Thus, even though this analysis has in the background a careful phenomenology adjusted to semiotics applied to the image from the text, it is towards a pragmatics of the event that the interest and final aim of this study turns. In this way the image is conceived as a lived experience in which either through closeness or overlapping, analysis or synthesis, taking into account meaning or reference, we obtain sense and thus affect our judgement, behaviour and interpretation. Moreover, we must take into account the integration of image within the communicative process and have this aspect prevail over the purely morphological, syntactical, philosophical, etc. considering the field of interaction of the image with all the audio-visual operators, experiences in reception, the context value, etc. and do so beginning from some dominating stimulus which creates a kind of hierarchy.¹ Thus it is also pertinent to insist on the relational value the concepts of strategy and commun-

ication possess, always considering the effects of meaning which are a consequence of the socio-communicational process linked to image, and which we can more correctly call effects of meta-communication.²

Also, taking into account the presentation and representation of 'reality' which image constructs, it is appropriate to quote a 'theory of action'³ from which to understand the meta-communication framework and the everyday experienced praxis in a world which is visual and basically symbolic.

From these three points of view discussed, -image as pragmatics of the event, its insertion in the meta-communication process, and in a 'habitus'⁴ of symbolic action- we will interpret, taking into account the textual value of an image, the writing of W. Iser on the reception of a literary work that, with a phenomenological profile, has developed the concept of 'gap'; as a general framework to the former, as well, U. Eco in his publications on the role of the reader, the interpretative aperture of certain works, and the concept which, starting with Heidegger, he makes of 'vacuity'.⁵

¹ We have a good example of this in Umberto Eco when he refers to a work of art and places the relationship of enjoyment (although this is not our case) as a hierarchical axis which organises reception: 'The model of an open work does not reproduce a work's presumable objective structure, but rather the structure of a relationship of enjoyment.' *Obra abierta* (1990), Barcelona: Ed. Ariel.

² We can find the beginning of this concept in E. Husserl: 'This communication is made possible because the hearer understands the speaker's intention, and understands it inasmuch as he conceives the speaker not as a person who merely emits sounds, but as a person who speaks to him, who, thus, executes with the voice certain actions which give sense—acts which that person wishes to notify or whose sense he wants to notify— to what he is doing.' *Investigaciones lógicas*. Tomo I. *Selecta de Revista de Occidente*. Madrid, (1967). pg. 325. There really is an association of linguistic construct, with a semiotised perceptive construct (metalanguage) and a performatised communicative construct (metacommunication).

³ P. Bourdieu: 'The theory of action I propose (with the notion of habitus) is the same as saying that most human acts have as a principle something completely different from intention, that is to say acquired disposition which enable and force actions to be interpreted as oriented toward such and such an end without necessarily bringing about a conscious purpose towards that end ('everything happens as if' becomes very important here)' (1997). *Razones prácticas*. Madrid: Ed. Anagrama, (1997), pg. 166.

⁴ Basic concept dealt with by P. Bourdieu in the work quoted, and which presupposes that the social medium in which we act disposes us in a specific manner as to our conduct, judgement, and representation.

⁵ 'This implies that a significant message, when it reaches the receiver, is empty. But its vacuity is the availability of a significant device not yet cleared by codes'. Eco, Umberto. *La estructura ausente*, Barcelona: Ed. Lumen (1978), pg. 454.

Along a very differentiated line (and with no idea of unifying it with the former), the contributions which Lacan makes of the concept of image and representation. And all this with the intention of creating a contiguity (or at least, a bridge) which can favour the operativity of the concept of the 'gap' when it is applied to an image –the object of this essay–.

Some characteristics of literary text to apply to image

'Words, words, words...'

Hamlet, II, 2.

'The rest is silence'

Hamlet, V, 2.⁶

The image of the Prince of Denmark's soul described by Shakespeare and which we may have in our mind goes far beyond the words he wrote. It takes us to the depths of a nameless space where sense is not obtained only from a literal or figurative interpretation of the text, nor through the meaning in the field of presence or absence; where part of the poetics we experience (without avoiding at all the author's narrative strategy) slips on the words because its origin is beyond them: they are in the reader. That the reader finishes or helps to give sense to a text is something already settled by theoreticians⁷, but that in the text we can find "gaps"⁸ that only the reader can fill brings us to a different consideration: there is a place, even if it is a vacuum, which demands the contribution of the receiver.⁹

Another aspect to deal with is whether these gaps have been part of the author's strategy or rather if they are solutions contributed only by reception to complete the sense; surely in a more or less conscious way, both participants in the process have their contribution, and in the end what interests us here is the existence of these gaps and that the 'text is constructed in'.¹⁰

Thus, returning to *Hamlet*, the 'mental representation' which each reader has constructed in the form of images has elements that are exclusively his own, individual, and in many aspects private and untransferrable (beyond feelings without specific formalisation) It seems that 'adjusting ourselves' to the text to form images has the meaning of cohering our chao-

tic experience together with the literal effect of literature. Thus, there appear in one common space, in one event, as far as real effects are concerned, without discriminating: thinking, reading, saying, imagining, interpreting, etc. in a strategy for obtaining meaning in which the receiver himself is included as message in an action of connotation.

The role of the 'gaps' is basic in this process, they allow us to complete (and complete ourselves) in the indetermination caused by the text and to construct a 'framework of relationships' among all the heteroclite elements of our experience. We must also stress that the only difference to be underlined at this moment, to differentiate between the mental image (to which we have just referred) and the visual image –physical, representative, perceptual–, is that the latter is formalised at some moment or another of the communication chain, and which we could illustrate following on with Hamlet and the photograph of an actor playing him, seen after reading the play:

- Written text
- Mental images
- Feedback
- Photograph
- New mental images

The ultimate conception of sense always rests on the receiver's mental construct and there is a logical empathy between mental image and what has bred it in us; thus, the concepts treated here have a double direction: mental image versus visual image, visual

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⁶ Vigotski begins his study on the tragedy of Hamlet with these quotes; he exemplifies the value of silence as 'what completes words'. *Psicología del Arte*. (1970) Barcelona: Ed.Barral, pg. 369.

⁷ Umberto Eco in articles dating from 1959 enunciated, when referring to works of art, that there are open texts which are completed by the reader. (1979) *The Role of the Reader: explorations in the semiotics of text*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. And more specifically in *Obra Abierta*, Milan, 1962; Spain, Ariel Quincenal, 1979.

⁸ To be understood as gaps of meaning in the case of texts.

⁹ "Relationships established among supposed perspectives are not usually formulated by the text, although the mode of connection is important for the intentionality of the text. In other words: among 'planned perspectives' there are empty spaces which arise from the determination produced by the Clash of perspectives". In the compilation of articles by WERNER Rainer (1989): *Estética de la recepción*. Madrid: Ed.Visor. An article by ISER Wolfgang: «La estructura apelativa de los textos», pg. 137.

¹⁰ W. ISER, op.cit. pg. 149.

image versus mental image. And only one end: attaining meaning.

In this elaboration of meaning, there is a domain of the temporal over the spatial¹¹, which belongs to the process of reading. Searching for a relationship among the actions of text reading, image perception, and the cohesive action of thinking, we can see basic structural differences: we think synchronically what we say diachronically, we see synchronically (fixed image) what we think diachronically, we read diachronically what we visualise synchronically... The importance of the case is that all these diverse actions, which are operationally in unison, are within a 'field of strategies' for obtaining meaning, directed by a dominant presence, be it the literary text, the advertising image, the artistic object..., which does not exclude the functionality of the rest of mental structures; that is to say, seeing an image does not disable thinking in words –a completely different structure and practice–, or explaining it with different languages and different levels of discreteness.

This relational nature of the process of communication, from the most interiorised act of thinking to the perception of the linguistic forms that are most strange to us, searching for a unifying isotopic¹² level, makes us understand that these 'gaps' belonging to the text are completed by different structures (synchronic/diachronic, continuous/discrete), and that they belong to the diversity of thought, and that among them there are images, responsible for corresponding to the 'gaps' in the text and which, besides, will be those which individually give more internal coherence to the narrative or discourse.

Following the first example on Shakespeare's work, we should explain that the images we have of *Hamlet* are not only a result of narrative description, but rather the act of filling in gaps in the text with our imagination, with images. That is to say, gaps will be images, and they will be so due to a situation of isomorphism; images will fill these gaps because they are also hollow gaps: they have one and the same quality which make image and text unite.

This reasoning on the pragmatic characteristics of mental images to be hollow gaps needs to be widened along with other points of view to ratify it and allow us to later refer to the image in a physical representation.

Lacan says, referring to the hollow gap quality of images, that it is the signifier which makes something be missing, because it imposes an order on reality that

need not correspond; this other order is 'the symbolic'.¹³ The order of the symbolic always excludes something, produces an impossibility, and this absence is the equivalent of the gap in the image –order of the significant–. Thus, image has, from this point of view, a double function: blocking the gap caused by separating dimension from reality and, at the same time, reporting on this gap by means of the symbolic. This 'double function' which is parallel to the 'double articulation'¹⁴ of language, insists on the isomorphic nature between gaps in the text and those in image. Image adapts to the lack of narrative, to the absence of order and the correspondence of the text to 'reality', but this does not imply that they are void of meaning, as they are the site of installment, by the receiver, of the symbols which allow ordering and hierarchisation of their belonging to a communications community. In this way, images are always 'up to their times', because only in this way can they be present in the symbolic world they are a part of.

Going ahead with a more practical view, we can use Eco to establish a link between the characteristics of the image we are studying and the communication process: 'Let us return to the communication chain we have already examined (...) This chain implies that the significant message, when it reaches its destination, is empty. But its vacuity is the availability of a significant apparatus not yet cleared by the codes.'¹⁵ This

¹¹ "In structural terms, the main difference between these two extreme types of culture continuums we call 'primitive cultures' and 'complex cultures', as to their comprehension of space, lies in the fact that, while the former intend a saturation of their markwelt or 'virtual cognitive space', correlative to a symbolic circular closing of time, the latter have chosen as a strategy adequate to their intrinsically expansive dynamics a simple conventional reference of space, which varies with time linearly conceived". A. CARDÍN *Diseno simbólico y espacio primitivo*. Experimenta, Ediciones de Diseño, n.7, Madrid, (1990) pg.34.

¹² 'With the concept of isotropy –which comes from physics and chemistry– Greimas (1966, 1973) approaches the -intratextual- problem of coherence in discourse'. LOZANO J.; PEÑA-MARÍN C.; ABRIL G (1982). *Ánalisis del discurso*. Madrid, Ed. Cátedra, pg.29.

¹³ 'The teachings of this seminar are created to sustain that imaginary incidence, far from representing what is essential in our experience, gives no more of them than the unconscious, unless we refer to the symbolic chains connecting and orienting them'. LACAN (1984). *Escritos 1*. Barcelona: Ed. Siglo xxi, in «Seminario de la carta robada», pg.5.

¹⁴ As to the problem of double articulation..., the chapter «El mito de la doble articulación» in *La estructura ausente*, is exemplary. Eco (1978), U. Barcelona: Ed. Lumen.

¹⁵ Eco, op. cit. pg. 454.

vacuity has meanings parallel to those quoted previously when referring to the 'gap'; it is an absence crying to be filled with symbolic elements within the 'receivers' reach and which lie both in the problem of corresponding codes between origin and reception, and in the quality 'per se' of images and of the human being: they are always somewhere different from where we are speaking, looking, imagining... (Lacan, Heidegger).¹⁶

To summarise what we have commented on so far, so as to be able to apply it to an example in the following chapter, we can say that image can be provided with a type of communication strategy, with the aim of obtaining a specific sense which will affect the viewer towards the direction or the quantity expected, and that this consists in generating (or taking advantage of) the gaps, to be filled in by the viewer with the 'symbolic material' emerging from his social dimension. This gap, which in terms of fixed image we will look at later, can be extended to parameters of other types of more complex representation: cinema, television in all its products, theatre, dance,etc.; and to the terminology belonging to each kind of specialisation: vauity, silence, quiet, absence of rhythm, dark, sensory absence,etc. as 'gaps' only take on sense inside each 'linguistic system'. It would be interesting, though beyond the scope of this essay, to study this process of "gap" filling in some productions with a common plot, such as a novel later turned into a film, a play, a musical; a work of art which has inspired novels; or, on the contrary, a play which has been interpreted by different disciplines such as painting, cinema,etc. And it would be interesting to analyse and compare the different kinds of 'gaps' that exist, and how they complement, fill in, overlap, or ignore each other.

Continuing with a desire to be more schematic and to summarise, we will specify six aspects by which an image can be considered wholly or in part 'a hollow gap':

1. Hermeneutic

Images are hollow –in a wider sense than we are interested in– because of the hermeneutic effects proper to interpretation.(This is an issue we will not develop here, an it is indisputable and has already been perfectly discussed).¹⁷

2. Characteristic

Images are essentially hollow: they establish an order which does not necessarily correspond to the cul-

turally foreseen one, and which is sutured and denounced (in a double action) with the symbolic content of the receiver and his belonging to a communication community.

3. Interprocess

They are also hollow because they are in a 'fluid' belonging to the process of reading, looking, seeing, thinking, reflecting..., which is always interdisciplinary (in as much as it is a product of representations), multiple and complex, and which creates gaps from the differences in 'space-time' of each linguistic system.

4. Communication

Images have gaps because of differences in decoding and encoding processes, and because of the nominalist nature of human coding and communication.

5. Interlinguistic

On the other hand, images give gaps due to interference (of all kinds) between them and the texts that usually go with them (especially in advertising).

¹⁶ In Lacan's lecture on 'The Stolen Letter', the concepts treated here are established, although, in an implicit sense, they are in all his work: 'Thus, it happens that if a man comes to think of symbolic order, it means that, first, it is caught in his being. The illusion that he had formed it by means of his conscience comes from the fact that it is by way of a specific aperture of his imaginary relation to his peers that he can enter that order as a subject. But he cannot carry out this aperture except by the radical chasm of the word...' (1981) *Escritos I*. Madrid: Siglo xxi Editores, pg. 46. It is also a thought widely-installed in Heidegger's work:

'The bridge aggregates, in its fashion, heaven and earth, the divine and the mortal. According to an old world in our language Versammlung (reunion) is thing. The bridge is –insofar as a marked reunion of fourness– a thing. Of course, it is said that a bridge is, in the first place, simply a bridge. Then, and in certain moments, it can express something else. As soon as such an expression converts, it is then a symbol. The bridge is only a symbol as long as it expresses something which, in a strict sense, does not belong to it.' Fragment of the lecture published in 1951 in the Neue Darmstädter Verlaganstalt. Spanish translation Kobie, number 1, Bilbao, (1983). Or, in another fragment which more specifically refers to language: 'Language is the house of being. Man lives in the habitation of language.' 'Letter on Humanism,' translated from De Brief Åber den 'Humanismus' in Platons Lehre von der Wahrheit. Berne: Francke, (1954).

¹⁷ In this respect, for example, GADAMER H. G.(1988) in *Verdad y método*. Salamanca: Ed. Sigueme. Or also, RICOEUR P.: (1969) *Le conflit des interprétations*. Paris: Ed. Seuil. Spanish *Hermenéutica y estructuralismo, Hermenéutica y psicoanálisis*, and *Introducción a la simbología del mal*. Buenos Aires: Ed. Megalópolis (1975-1976). And DILTHEY W.: *Introducción a las ciencias del espíritu*. Madrid: Ed. Alianza (1986).

6. Fragmented

Finally, fixed images have gaps to take part in wider series, of which they are only a fragment (an image in a magazine can be a reinforcement of a campaign in television spots, a painting that can only be understood in the context of the whole of the artist's work,etc.)

In the framework of an example

To apply the concepts we have looked at so far, we will use the insert of an entire page in the 'Christmas 1998 campaign' for Chanel 5. The basic interest of this image lies in the references to the television spot for the same brand and campaign: in an avant-garde space an analogy of the 'Little Red Riding-hood' story is set up; from it two of the key characters have been kept, Little Red Riding-hood herself, and the Wolf. A sensory background has been set up, based on intense feminine sensuality, a mixture of ingenuity and seduction. All literal representations to the story have been eliminated; there is only a schematic idea of the 'route crossing' as a simulation of the rhythm of the original story, and the 'relationship of complicity' between the two characters; a not very clearly defined complicity, but which in the context can be read as a generalised de-categorisation between childhood and adulthood, beautiful and sinister, domination and submission.

The studio image represents the 'Little Red Riding-hood' model glimpsed through a wall made of very large bottles of Chanel 5. The absence of one of the bottles allows us to see clearly the character's face in the window made by the gap. The colours are reiterative in the whole campaign: intense reds and yellows (reinforcing the basic metaphor of the television spot), and black on white in the brand label.

We can begin by applying the theory we have developed, and establish three orders of 'gaps' which we set out in the following points:

Gaps with a morphological basis (syntax)

A transparent wall which creates a window through which the model's face is specified. Colour relationships. References between fixed image, television spot (movement)... Relationship between form and smell.

Gaps with a semantic nature rhetoric

Metaphorical and metonymic strategy which creates substitutions between the 'Little Red Riding-hood' story and the image of 'Chanel'.

Gaps of a pragmatical origin context

Meta-communication framework, made up of the Christmas context, advertising competition, support quality, reading competence...

These three groups are jointly organised to create a strategy for obtaining meaning, based on gap-filling by the reader; thus, the gap generated by the window in the bottle-wall is filled by the receiver's own image establishing an identification at a level of the 'me image' created by the campaign. At the same time, one's own version and memory of the 'story' fills the gaps with 'personal elements', creating a distance between the literal reference of the image, and the figurative tropic reference (a simple woman dressed in red or little red riding-hood). And, lastly, and also under the symptom of filling-in, the effort forced on the reader of giving coherence to the image in the competitive framework of Christmas, in the space/time discourse of the device, which obliges us to a definition of femininity, perfume, seduction, present,etc.and finally, comparing it to our habits.

But we can also use a different way of classifying which is less linguistic and takes into account a more interdisciplinary and relational sense, as we have done with the concept of gaps in the previous chapter. We could thus consider six basic expositions:

1. Hermeneutic sense

The interpretation of the Little Red Riding-hood story by the viewer, with all the complexity supposed by the differences in format possibly seen for the Chanel allegory and the apparent incompleteness of the narration (where only the image and the logo appear, and 'audio' without text -in the spot- and even fewer elements in the image in the magazine format), obliges filling-in with content and form to complete the audio-visual and text vacuum. The viewer will have to define the wolf, its relationship to Little Red Riding-hood, if there is a granny or not, what the wolf thinks of the perfume it can smell,

Christmas campany, Channel 5. 1998



what such an innocent girl is doing wearing such a provocative dress, etc.

2. Characteristic sense

The viewer must solve the difference between the field of significance in the image and its 'everyday reality', and do so in two senses:

- a- Saturating the gap between the fictional world (image) and his reality, making a 'possible world' between the two possible.
- b- Installing symbols in this gap: definitions as to concepts of femininity, seduction, beauty, per- versity, innocence, etc.

3. Interprocess sense

It has to create coherence between the different processes of perception and thought which the Chanel page agglutinates; thus, for example, the senses, due to a synesthetic effect, will fill-in the sense gap to which the ad refers, ie. smell. They will also discover the smoothness of a skin they have never touched, they will see themselves in a real two-dimensional space which they will never be able to enter, etc.

4. Communication sense

The campaign will be seen by very different social classes, cultural groups, in different countries or regions... and, in the end, by many different 'spee- ches'. It is thus obligatory to approach image from the communication meeting-point, filling-in by rectifying and asserting interpretation codes. Thus, the more privileged classes will speak of vulgarisation of what will be sophistication for the less privileged.

5. Interlinguistic sense

Here, the viewer will find himself in the 'field of absence'. The normal thought process will fill the gap with words, which are always present in the whole ad campaign: what attractive woman uses Chanel? How can I combine my youthful innocence with that touch of daring and seduction that I like? (...)

6. Fragmented sense

Despite the fact that the image is a paralysis of space- time, we tend to complete it; thus this page we are studying is filled with elements from the rest of the formats, especially television, and, besides, with other allusions the same brand has in other spaces, other times: Marylin Monroe used to use Chanel 5, and it was all she used to wear to go to bed...

As a conclusion and summary, we can say images of all kinds (here we have concentrated on fixed im-

ages) have gaps which can be a part of the author's productive strategy (and the receiver's process of interpretation); they have several types, but all are related in the communication flow. The knowledge of these devices can allow us a greater control for obtaining sense, for communication efficiency, and the profitability of the process, whatsoever discipline we refer to. At the same time, it is in these gaps where the greatest poetical intensity of the visual discourse lies; as Lacan used to say, the beauty of image is hidden in their hollow gaps.

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