

VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN FILM: A CASE STUDY OF YADIA'S LA MARCHE (2018)

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show how film, through visual communication signs, transmits information to viewers without taking into account the nationality or the cultural affiliation. For the communication process to be successful however, the viewer who stands at the receptive pole must hold informed beliefs about the theme watched on screen and the film medium and conventions. A visual semiotics analysis of film as a communicative act is applied in this study while also considering the complex interplay of visual, auditory and verbal signs that combine to make up a film. To illustrate the reflections, the arguments in the paper use Yadia's *La Marche*, a 2018 feature film, as background data. It is revealed from the study that the film, set and shot in Cameroon is part of Cameroon culture and is filled with visual significations which are perceived to be just as crucial to human understanding, if not more so, as words.

Keywords: *Visual communication, meaning-making, film, semiotics.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The world is filled with people and objects from different backgrounds. For people to interact with each other, they are expected to be involved in communication acts which basically consist of sending and receiving information/signals from an emitter to receiver passing through a channel. More than ever before, mediated environments collectively or individually immerse people in a consumption process of information. In this light, the content received and created through various media influence the way people think, what they think about, how they conduct everyday life, and how the world is experienced. The film represents a medium through which information is enhanced and transmitted in the society.

Film is primarily focused on visual communication. In line with this assertion,

Dreyer holds that "the film first and foremost is a visual art, first and foremost directs itself to the eye, and that the picture far, far more easily than the spoken word penetrates deeply into the spectator's consciousness" (DREYER, 1991). Filmmakers, in different ways, make use of visual signs in order to communicate with the viewers. As such, the viewers are also expected to understand or master the conventions or contexts in which these signs are produced to as to be able to create meaning from the visual signs. For the viewers to enable this, they get involved in a process of co-creation of meaning or what Helbo calls "enunciating collective" (HELBO, 1981).

This communication approach, which Helbo develops from pragmatics, focuses on the manner in which a message is sent and received. In this respect, there are reciprocal functions between the sender and the receiver of a sign. This implies that the division between sign production and reception is viewed as "a pedagogical distinction" only. Considered as a more accurate means of designating the process of communication in the reception of media, enunciating collective or co-creation essentially consists of two notions:

- a discourse or combination of communicative acts;
- a situation of enunciation which evokes a dynamic set of relationships and contracts (pre-existing or constructed by the performance) determined by the prevailing ideology. (HELBO, 1981)

These concepts therefore go beyond the linear form of communication to suggest that the receiver of film communication is involved in a collective creation process or enunciating collective under specific cultural norms. The film

therefore is seen as a communicative product that draws from the cultural milieu in which it is set; it considers the audience before engaging in the coding process. In this light, this study seeks to analyse the film *La Marche* (2018) in order to bring out some visual communicative signs therein and show how they contribute in the meaning-making process between the filmmaker and the audience.

2. VISUAL AND FILM SEMIOTICS

The 21st century is filled with visual signs in almost every area of life. This is because visual media are more available, less expensive, and almost impossible to censor. With the dawn of new media, visual media is increasingly being used for entertainment, education and communication. In order to study visual media, visual semiotics is considered as the most appropriate method, since it deals with the visual signifier. In this way, the area of visual semiotics is often combined with visual communication to foster interpretation and understanding. According to Hill, visual communication studies are distinct from other communication theories, not so much by their theoretical background or methodology as by their targets of analysis (HILL, 2009).

Semiotics is considered as the first theory that falls under visual and multimodal communication. In its conception and understanding, any image can be viewed as a sign. The sign understood here as something that stands in for and elicits in the viewer's mind an object, person or concept separate from the sign itself. Visual semiotics is considered as a teaser, debunking the complex and more subtle meanings represented by the sign. In this light, a sign, according to Eco is anything that generates and conveys meaning (ECO, 1976). These two continuums (signifier/signified) function inseparably in the process of communicating with the viewer as emphasised by Peirce who states that "nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign" (PEIRCE, 1958). This leads to the understanding that visual media can be looked at from three positions: production of the image, the image

itself and the audience that receives it. This is identical to the process of communication described by semioticians in which there is the sender who conceives a sign, the sign itself and the receiver. This notwithstanding, this study contends that the understanding or the meaning-making process in a film is facilitated by the joint venture in which the viewer and the film get involve in what is otherwise described as enunciating collective. This is one of the basic suppositions which semioticians like de Saussure, Morris, Sebeok and others on film semiotics hold on the notion of a relationship between signs themselves, signs and their users and signs and their context. Therefore, a sign is not a phenomenon in and of itself, a "thing" becomes a sign only because it has a specific relationship to other "things".

The process of film communication begins with a decision which the filmmaker develops to communicate something. With the decision to communicate, a filmmaker must develop a story, an organic unit whose basic function is to provide a vehicle that will carry the message. The story must not be one in the usual sense of the word. It is rather a set or cluster of "things" developed from the internal thoughts of the filmmaker. Movies according to Danesi are aesthetically powerful because they juxtapose sounds, dialogues, noises or visual narratives or images to transmit thoughts (DANESI, 2004).

An image is considered a unit of film. In line with this, Christian Metz states that "the image or shot is the smallest unit of a film", which can be equated to a sign (METZ, 1982). After the production of a film, the reception is supposed to be a mirror image of the production process. The viewer in the first instance sees the images which constitute the film. Usually, the viewer is ignorant of the production process, the filmmaker, his personality or the content of the film. While viewing, the film will communicate with/to the viewer predominantly through the images otherwise referred to as signs. In relation to the messages conveyed by visual images, Barthes divides them into two categories: a coded iconic or denoted message and a non-coded iconic or connoted message (BARTHES, 1977). This application that the notion of signs is relevant to the study of film discourse is a

characteristic of film semiotics. To Metz, in the sign system in filmic discourse, the filmic signifier is the image [visual images] and its signified is "what the image represents". This implies cinema communicates through images or visual images and the viewers/audience views the images and creates meaning from them. The semiology or semiotics (from the Anglo-Saxon tradition) of images is interested in the process of interpreting the signs (images) used in cinema to communicate.

A sign is a part of a film that stands for something or what Morris calls "comsigns" (communications signs) (MORRIS, 1946). It refers to "a sign which has the same signification to the organism which produces it that it has to other organisms stimulated by it". The notion of communication signs contains the basic problem of a film semiotics, for it challenges us to determine whether in fact the process of sign manipulation which we call film is communicative, and if so, how this common signification between filmmaker and viewer occurs. Film communication now refers to the transmission of a signal, received primarily through visual receptors, coded as signs, which are treated as messages by the inferring meaning or content from them (HEWAK 1991). A film is said therefore to communicate to that to which the viewer infers what the maker implies.

If a film is a specific set of images that we call signals, which we organize into signs and messages and from which we infer content, we can ask several basic questions. What is there in us, or in the sign system, that tells us when to treat signals as messages, that allows the transfer of common signification that makes for film communication. Although the meaning of a film is inferred in large part from the images and sounds in sequence, meaning is also from that which the filmmaker implies, in his arrangement of the elements, units, and parts of the film. From the semiotic standpoint, a film can be considered as a text which, at the level of the signifier, consists of a chain of images that represent real-life activities. At the level of the signified, a film is a metaphorical mirror of life (DANESI, 2004).

It may be postulated at this stage that film communication represents the transfer of an

inferable meaning through the range of materials that a film offers, or does not offer, as signs, and through the elements it allows or does not allow. These materials and elements impose their own restraints and constraints upon the signs and signals we receive and choose to treat as messages. Film and visual semiotics engage in the study of these filmic materials, elements, and constraints and their relationships to meaning-making as illustrated in the case study.

3. LA MARCHÉ (2018)

In a world where the idea of "I mind my business" and carelessness have taken over the power of concern, nothing worse can be expected than the total disregard for the needy. *La Marche* (the walk), produced in 2018 by Yadia Boris Calvin is a twenty-nine minutes and fifty seconds award-winning movie (best short film for Central Africa in ECRAN NOIR 2019) which tells the story of the evasive nature of man towards fellow humans and especially those in need – orphans. Talom, the lead character is an orphan who loses his parents to an unknown cause at an early age when he has not got the strength and ability to successfully fend for himself. In such inability, it would be expected that society will step in as aid for him, but conversely, no one cares. And not only do they care less, society does not want to identify with his predicament and thus shun him. In the midst of his confusion, the trader in the market would not spare a pair of slippers for him. Neither would the restaurant operator let go of a plate of food nor would an old man sacrifice a hundred francs for a visibly hungry, tired and weary boy sitting right in front of a church. The situation in which society puts the poor orphan is so bad that a mother would not allow her daughter to give away one out of her four puff balls to the hungry Talom. The crumbs which seem to be within reach are yet too far to get with the presence of yet another old man. The only thing left as an option is the radicalisation of the young boy. But in the midst of all this, an angel tries to school Talom into understanding that for as much as he searches for his parents, his parents search for him and long for his happiness as well. Gaining some

wisdom later and coming to the realisation that his parents surely want the best for him, he yet holds that life is vanity. The first real meal the desperate boy will have to eat, one banana, is stopped midway by either an accident or a malaise which knocks him into unconsciousness. The movie ends without Talom's return to his feet and we would not understand if he has joined his parents or not.

4. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Many themes are explored in the movie but a major one stands out: neglect, which is manifested a good number of instances. When we see the reaction of the shoe trader towards Talom, it tells of how much he does not identify with the young boy's situation. He does not seem to notice any aspect of need and though the boy's countenance tells how needy he is, the trader will yet not help, nor let him even have the leisure of eye-shopping. He does not even see the necessity of using up energy to utter words to the boy, and simply ushers him to leave.

Right in front of a church, an aged man, old enough to be Talom's grandfather, makes a fool out of Talom. It is the height of neglect when a problem is identified, a possible solution earmarked and nothing is deliberately done about it. By dropping a coin right at Talom's feet, but not letting him have it, it is one of the cruellest ways a needy and desperate child's emotions can be stabbed. Worse still, this old man who is toying with a child's emotion is heading to a church where echoes of God's love to humanity fills the background of their interactions. To which we can ascribe how much neglect has been directed towards God and the gospel of charity and love.

Another instance where we see neglect is when the woman on the road, stops her child from giving food to Talom. Though being a mother, who should understand perfectly well, what it means for a child to be hungry, she chooses to throw compassion, empathy and love to the dogs. Here, we see neglect on a double front as well; ignoring the hunger in the hungry Talom, and caring less of what lesson is being given to her child. Morality is completely forgotten. Even the natural things that come with

life are consciously and unconsciously restricted from getting to some in need. The scene at the water fountain is an example of such phenomena. Talom is restricted from getting to the source as the fountain flows ceaselessly, a mother will still not allow her daughter to offer a sip to Talom. And yet, this is another mother, neglecting the kind of lesson her daughter is copying. Society is being presented here as being wicked, unconcerned and undisturbed by what obtains around it.

There is equally neglect at the level of some social values which are being preached on a daily bases. The doctrine of 'a mother is a mother, no matter who the child is' in the African society is being proven as false in *La Marche*. Every woman we see in the movie does not care if another child is fine or not, especially one in need as is the case of Talom. The men, who are acclaimed to carry wisdom, do not show any aspect of wit in their actions. We may conclude that these men never went through any of the experiences Talom is going through and so, cannot feel his pain. We are thus pushed to ask where the story of 'helping the poor' has gone to. As portrayed in the film, it has surely been eaten up by neglect. The manifestation of this theme is reinforced by visual signs which, when examined, reveal more hidden meaning embedded in the film.

5. A VISUAL READING OF LA MARCHE

Gillian Rose holds that the interpretation of an image is drawn from three sites "the site(s) of production of an image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by various audiences" (ROSE, 2012). From this, emanates three critical points to contribute in the understanding of visual images as employed in *La Marche*: technological, compositional and social. Technological according to Rose refers to visual technology as any form of apparatus designed either to be looked at or to enhance natural vision, from oil paintings to television and the internet. Visual technological is relevant in the understanding of how an image is made, how it travels and how it is displayed. In this light, *La Marche* adheres to the technological paradigm by making use of camera and the

screen or television in order to enable the viewer to see the images which are used to communicate.

Compositionality on its part Rose states, refers the specific material qualities of an image or visual object like content, colour and spatial organisation (ROSE, 2012). Here, special attention is paid to the spatial organization of characters and objects in the selected images from *La Marche*. When viewed closely, it is seen that the filmmaker deliberately decides where to position his characters and objects. No disposition is taken for granted as each placement is meant to add content to the spoken dialogue in the scene. As for the social component of the image, Rose points to the range of economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround an image and through which it is seen and used. This third modality is that which is of interest in this paper as its composition is the most important factor in understanding visual images. Commenting on this, Rose holds that a "cinema, a television in a living room and a canvas in a modern art gallery do not invite the same ways of seeing" (ROSE, 2012). The ways therefore in which viewers respond to visual signs are influenced by visual elements that draw on established cultural codes, values, and icons. The analysis of these cultural codes, values and icons is an essential method and key to understand all types of communication having the latent rules that facilitate sign production and interpretive response (MICK, 1986).

The camera is one of the means through which fix and moving images are produced in a film. These images, known as visual signs, are also called shots. Almost every film is made up of hundreds of different shots and each shot (image) contributes in some way to the meaning of the film. In contrast to verbal literacy, the ability to understand images does not require extensive experience because it is based on perceptual processes that each viewer has.

Five basic shots determine how much of a subject is included in the frame: the extremely long shot, the long shot, the medium shot, the close-up, and the extreme close-up. In addition to shots, five basic angles are also used: the bird's-eye view, the high angle, the eye-level angle, the low angle, and the canted angle. Semiotically, each of these shots and angles is

capable of suggesting meaning. The extremely long shot for example, is often used to suggest the insignificance of a subject in comparison to a setting. The low-angle shot is often used to suggest that a subject or object is powerful or dominant. These conventions are important to notice, though there are no one-to-one rules for what a shot or angle must suggest, nor an absolute meaning given to a particular image.

In the opening scene (fig.1), a full shot presents Talom up on the mountain. In complete solitude, he plants two crucifixes right in front of him (fig.2). From these images, meaning can be derived when a semiotic perspective is adopted.



Fig. 1. Full shot on Talom in solitude up the hills



Fig. 2. Full shot on the two crucifixes planted by Talom

From these images, it is seen that the crucifixes which Talom plants on the hill are so close to each other that there cannot be a possibility that these are graves. They are signifiers which symbolise Talom's late parents. The location where he decides to plant these crosses is also a signifier, with the signified here being that the dead are somewhere in a higher realm, watching over the living at a lower level of life as clearly illustrated in figure 2. Here we get to understand the superiority of the spirit over the flesh almost in a similar way as Christ on Calvary.

There is also a deep aspect of Roland Barthes's action code of symbolism coming into play in these two shots. This action by a boy as young as Talom, going up the hill to plant crosses is obviously a sign of remembrance of his late parents. We thus deduce from this that it is not just a form of an adventure, but a symbolic move carried out by people around the world in remembrance of their loved ones. This is linked to the representation and interaction process in visual communication (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN 2006).

Representational and interactional pictures deliver different messages. In representational images, the participant is representing him/herself, whereas in interactional images, the participant plays a more interactive role and seeks to communicate with the viewer (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Images in general involve two types of participants: represented participants, who are usually people, places, or other things depicted in the pictures and interactive participants, who communicate with other people. Figure 2 is one example of a representational image, using the crosses to represent people (Talom's parents). The content of the images below (fig.3 and fig.4) has three types of relations: those between the participants present, those between interactive and represented participants, and those between the interactive participants of the given image (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). These images signify aspects of life that go beyond just the situation of the young boy - Talom. They represent the level to which society has relegated the needy and the helpless. This is done through the use of shots which tell more than just a story.



Fig. 3. Medium Shot showing the superiority of the old and fulfilled over the young, poor and helpless



Fig. 4. Close shot showing the cruelty of the old on the young.

Figures three and four show the old man looking down at the little boy with disdain which is contrary to what happens in life, wherein the older generation takes care of the young, and the young look up to the old. Sadly, in this scene, we observe that what is generally understood about the old taking care of the young is completely absent. This shot portrays the way in which our society now operates. Yadia uses this shot similar to the high angle shots with the old man dominating the boy completely. This symbolises the gap that exists between the elderly/society and the young needy persons. The needy persons are relegated to a very deplorable situations and society becomes very violent on them.



Fig. 5. Full Shot with Talom walking away naked after handing back the stolen dresses

In figure 5, man's journey through life is captured. In this shot, the naked boy stands for the emptiness of man. This tells the story of how naked man came to this world and how naked he shall leave. From another perspective, the image shows Talom walking naked, passing between the two dressed boys and exiting the scene. It can be deduced from this that, life is a journey in the course of which, man goes through a lot and meets all kinds of people and experiences, yet leaves the world just as he came into it. The two boys standing on both sides of the road are dressed

as opposed to Talom and they represent the numerous wealth and materials man accumulates during life, while others have nothing. The road on which Talom moves is also symbolic. We do not see the end of the road. This signifies that life is like travelling on a road to a destination which is not definite. In real life, it is true that as we live, we do not know what tomorrow will look like and where we may find ourselves. Yadia's attempt towards reviving humaneness is greatly achieved in this shot as repentance begins with Talom's handing back the stolen dresses to their rightful owners and moving on naked and away from the act. With this shot, Yadia is proposing a way out of our entanglements (YADIA, 2018).



Fig. 6. Long Shot of Talom's Mother painting, while Father sings a song accompanied with a piano



Fig. 7. Mother's painting of her son - Talom



Fig. 8. Mother's painting of her son - Talom

As represented in Figures 6, 7 and 8, there is an embedded meaning linked to Barthes's cultural codes on visual semiotics and communication. In these scenes, as the mother paints images of her son, the father sings a melody relating to the pattern he intends for his son. Two art forms interplay with film here to produce a visual narrative rich in content and quality. Painting and music are art forms used in communicating with and to the audience usually in different settings. Combining them in the film narrative is a holistic approach which Yadia uses to manifest the spirit of creativity that surpasses the basic film production techniques which most Cameroon filmmakers employ. The narrative here as presented by the director expounds the African doctrine of the ancestors watching over those still living. This semiotically corroborates the thesis of a causal relation between a visual code and culture or belief. Just as the mother patiently paints out events in the life of her son without being there, we see him living through these events as it was painted in the world beyond. The interpretation of these shots further situates the film within a Cameroonian setting where there is still a strong belief amongst many, of the existence of their dead around them and that they watch over them. The film in a way postulates that, the dead even have great influence in the life of the living.

The visual signs initiated by the filmmaker and coded into a film are hereby seen as a form of communication as posited by Kris (KRIS, 1952). According to him, communication "lies not so much in the prior intent of the artist as in the consequent recreation by the audience of his work of art. What is required for communication therefore is similarity between the audience process and that of the artist." This is directly in line with the process of co-creation or enunciating collective mentioned earlier which according to Helbo, sees the distinction between production and reception as pedagogical.

The film deals at great length with the psychic processes that occur when the process of creation is reversed within the viewer. Kris suggests that this process proceeds from perception of the work on a conscious level to the understanding of the work on a preconscious level to a re-creation of the original intent on an unconscious level,

thus reversing the sequence that takes place within the artist (KRIS, 1952).

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Vision it is said, constitutes an important source of message and meaning-making. In reality, there is no culture without some form of visual signification. Considering that the film is part of the cultural representation of a people, Yadia's *La Marche*, set and shot in Cameroon is part of Cameroon culture and is filled with visual signification. In cinema or film, visual signs are perceived to be just as crucial to human understanding, if not more so, as words. It constitutes a rich repertoire of visual communication.

As illustrated in this paper, film communication begins with the director taking an intentional decision to send out information to the viewer. This information is passed through a story organism which controls the choice and organisation of specific Image-Events that are always the external, available film. A film hereby serves as a mirror image of the making process, that is, that the decoder reverses the process by which the encoder made the film. Should the viewer choose to treat these signs and signals as a message, he will first infer the Story-Organism from the sequenced Image-Events. He will become aware of the belief system of the filmmaker from the images he sees on the screen.

From this awareness of the message, the viewer/receiver will, if the communication "works," be able to infer meaning to the images received. As illustrated in the enunciating collective process, the meaning of the film for the viewer is closely related to the inner motivation of the filmmaker. The visual signs of the film are the signals; sequenced signs become coded into signs which the viewer treats as messages; and his inference about the object of the maker is what we call the meaning of the film. It is in this way that the interpretation of Talom's crosses or crucifixes, close to each other in figures 1 and 2, reproduced in painting on canvas by the mother in figure 8, points to the emitter/filmmaker's inner intent to transpose death not graves as it is usually the case.

The symbolic representation of death ties with the maker's intention not to shock his audience/viewers with realistic scenes. It is for this reason also that, in the later part of the film as seen in figures 6, 7 and 8, Talom's parents reappear, not to interact with him, but rather to paint on canvases, the visual images of what he is going through and what he will become in the future. Ernst Kris (1952), in *Psychoanalytic Explorations in Art*, takes a somewhat similar view of the process. Writing from a psychological aesthetic framework, he conceives of art "as a process of communication and re-creation". While the viewer/audience gets involved in the collective process of communication, at the same time, he is involved in the recreation of signs based on his cultural baggage which allows him to decode coded visual signs with relative ease. This does not in any way ignore the possibility of visual signs to be misinterpreted by the viewer. The argument is that visual signs are exploited by filmmakers and make film narratives more accessible by limiting the possibilities of misinterpretation.

Contrary to other forms of communication wherein the sender can receive a feedback from a receiver, film communication is linear. It is compared to the act of viewing a painting wherein the viewer basically makes meaning himself. To do this, the viewer sees visual signals, recognises them, codes them into signs, reorganises them into their component units of a narrative and then infers meaning to it, which might be similar to that of the filmmaker. The meaning might be aesthetic, cognitive or a combination of the two. The viewer might get it right (in the same way as the filmmaker) or different from the filmmaker. In any case, semiotics permits the understanding that, a potentially communicative situation in the film (in which communication is impossible, broken, uncertain, or misinterpreted) represents a rule rather than an exception. Just like film situations are imperfect communicative situations that depend on the filmmaker and his social and psychological context, the viewer's social and psychological context, and the film itself, the analysed visual signs drawn from Yadia's *La Marche* by another critic, might as well provide a reading that is different from this one. This is

not a weakness, but rather a strength which film communication through semiotics has. In fact, there is no absolute wrong interpretation of visual signs in film (YADIA, 2018). Viewers only get them differently.

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