

Photographs and rhetoric

Despite being born as a discipline specifically focused on the language, both in its oral and written forms, rhetoric has been applied to the domain of images. Although it can be a very valuable instrument for understanding the semantics of any photograph, its use in the constructing of images varies according to the domain considered.

Rhetoric is defined as 'the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing, especially the exploitation of figures of speech and other compositional techniques' (Oxford Dictionary). It is a vast and old discipline to explore, yet what is relevant here is to understand how this eminently linguistic field of study ended up expanding its vistas to the visual world. Much of the merit of this leap is owed to Roland Barthes. Working from within Saussure's semiological framework which defined Semiology as a general science of signs which encompassed linguistics, Barthes (1984, p. 79) proposed an inversion of the terms suggesting that semiology should be a part of linguistics instead. Barthes (1977b, p. 38 and 1984, p.78) claimed the centrality of language in the signifying process repeatedly throughout his work; according to him even in the so called civilization of the image, it is the former that provides the informational structure to the latter. The very idea of examining 'every system of signs in relation to the laws of the language' (Burgin, 1982, p.60), an approach that attracted more than one critique, created the premises for rhetoric to have a greater scope: 'Classical rhetoric needs to be rethought in structural terms [in the semiological sense]; it will then perhaps be possible to establish a general rhetoric or linguistics of the signifiers of connotation, valid for articulated sound, image, gesture, etc.' (Barthes, 1977b, p. 50).

He starts his analysis by focusing specifically on advertising where images are deliberately created to deliver a persuasive and effective message: 'in advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional ... If the image contains signs, we can be sure that in advertising these signs are full, formed with a view to the optimum reading: the advertising image is frank, or at least emphatic.' (Barthes, 1977b, p. 33).

Barthes (1977b) skillfully uses the tools of structural analysis (i.e. signifier and signified, syntagm and paradigm, denotation and connotation) to dissect the signification process within the photographic image. He identifies in it three messages:

- linguistic message: the articulated language. It can be denotational in helping identifying the objects through nomenclature, and connotational by guiding the interpretation of the polysemic image (pp. 37-41).

- non-coded iconic message: the effigies of the objects/subjects represented in the photograph. It is a set of denotational signs because the effigies (signifiers) identify in a non-arbitrary way their corresponding real objects (signified) which left an optical/chemical trace on the photographic support involved (pp. 42-45).
- coded iconic message: the concepts/allusions/suggestions/symbols attached to and imbricated with the mix of non-coded iconic messages: 'knowing that a system which takes over the signs of another system in order to make them its signifiers is a system of connotation, we may say immediately that the literal image is denoted and the symbolic image connoted' (p. 38). This highly connotational signs are mediated and permeated by the predominating ideology/culture.

Several interesting points emerge from Barthes's (1977b) structural analysis, namely:

- the originality of the image as a system of signs lies in the fact that the same image allows for different yet compatible and coexisting readings. Each different reading corresponds to a specific plane of significance; therefore, each reading will be available to the reader who is competent in that specific area (p. 46).
- the language is always deeply imbricated in the assignment of a signification even in domain of the image (p. 38).
- the denotational value is perceived as in its purest form (or most "natural") in a photograph because this specific kind of image is an optical/chemical trace of reality, the result of a mechanical process. Photographs are thus perceived as the most objective form of representation because they are the least subjectively mediated by culture or ideology (pp. 43-46).
- to the perception of the viewer, the connotational value is irremediably fused with the denotational one within the image. Thanks to this entangled imbrication 'the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation, which is extremely dense, especially in advertising.' (p. 45).
- in the image connotation (the symbols) tends to be organised through paradigm whereas denotation through syntagm, which is quite a useful tip when using Durand's table to read photographs (p. 51).

By identifying in the image the same logic units that build the structure of the language, Barthes (1977b) sets the premises to enlarge the domain of rhetoric beyond the latter to include the former as well. The next step to create a rhetoric of the image was to inventory the system of connotation of the image (p. 49). In 1970 Jacques Durand took on this challenge and created, within the framework of structural analysis, a taxonomy of rhetoric figures of advertising images. The following table provides a meaningful synthesis of his work.

Three images will be analysed to try to exemplify the processes of decomposing a photograph along the lines of the structural analysis suggested by Barthes and that of identifying some rhetorical figures as per Durand's taxonomy. For this purpose three photographs have been selected where there is a contiguity

in the subject portrayed, yet the complexity of the signifying process involved in the making of them gradually dissolves.

Structural analysis:

Linguistic message: Omega / co-axial chronometer / anti-magnetic / In 1969 Omega defied zero gravity going to the moon. In 2013 Omega defies magnetic fields on earth. / This Omega Seamaster Aqua Terra resists magnetic fields greater than 1500 gauss, solving a problem that has perplexed watchmakers for centuries. / Exclusively at OMEGA FlagshipBoutiques and selected retailers worldwide /

Relation between elements	Rhetorical operation			
	A Addition	B Suppression	C Substitution	D Exchange
1 Identity	Repetition	Ellipsis	Hyperbole	Inversion
2 Similarity of form of content	Rhyme Simile	Circumlocution	Allusion Metaphor	Hendiadys Homology
3 Difference	Accumulation	Suspension	Metonymy	Asyndeton
4 Opposition of form of content	Zeugma Antithesis	Dubitation Reticence	Periphrasis Euphemism	Anacoluthon Chiasmus
5 False homologies Ambiguity Paradox	Antanaclasis Paradox	Tautology Preterition	Pun Antiphrasis	Antimetabola Antilogy

Tab. 1

www.omegawatches.com

denotational: brand, model of the watch, technical features of the watch, history of technology, where to buy it, where to find more information online

connotational: importance of the brand (gigantic omega in the background and repetition of the word 8 times including the writing within the quadrant), sophisticated technology, brand's solid tradition of



Fig.1 Omega Advertisement (2014). From the supplement *How to spend it* of *Financial Times* 4/5 Jan 2014

technology, watch's exclusivity (sold exclusively in selected places), watch's internationality (worldwide).

Non-coded iconic message: watch, iron filings spiraling around the watch.

Coded iconic message: watch's "greatness" (watch's picture is 22.5 cm. long and occupies most of the page), watch's "attractiveness" (iron filings gathering around it, physically attracted by the powerful force of magnetism), watch's power (gigantic, it attracts yet keeps at a distance the iron filings), watch's "preciousness" (within B&W yellow stands out alluding to gold), watch's "technologicity" (text + mix of B&W, metal and geometrical line= as algid as technology), elitist product (use of Greek alphabet Ω and participation in unique historical challenges), watch's "sacredness" (clear visual reference to Ka'ba (e.g. parasitic of fig. 2, fig. 3) + watch's colours of watch similar to Ka'ba's ones as per fig.3), brand's ubiquitous "greatness" (it pervades the image with carefully staged "omega"s and Ωs).

Rhetoric figures:

C1 Hyperbole: the magnifying of the size of the watch=> connotes "greatness" of the watch

A1 Repetition (#2): the repetition of "omega"s and of Ω's => affirms the absolute value of the brand

A2 Simile: "omega" replicates Ω and vice versa=>connotes elitist value of the brand

C5 Antiphrasis: the watch has substituted the Ka'ba thus implying a contiguity of content between these two different forms=> connotes sacredness of the watch (and of those who will wear it?)

Advertisements must convince consumers to buy; they are persuasive messages. Persuasion entails a supposed reticence from the listener to receive the message. Rhetoric, the art of persuasion, steps in to provide the sender with witty ways to embellish the message where a more direct communication would fail. Rhetoric figures are the artifices to camouflage the "difficult" message. Rhetoric perfectly fits the needs of advertising. Furthermore, at the heart of advertisement lies a phantasmagoric pact between the sender and the receiver of the advertising message. Such pact entails that the former will recur to artifices to emphasize its message (which has to be assimilated with the blink of an eye, thus needs to be strong), and the latter is fully aware of the unreality of such artifices (Durand, 1970, p.70). The Omega advertisement best exemplifies these features. It is full of rhetoric figures. It alludes a similitude between a watch and the most sacred Islam place of worship without running in censorship for blasphemy. Omega caresses watches' admirers with the idea of the object of cult whilst not upsetting Muslims for the parallel with the Ka'ba: such are the wonders of the subtleties of rhetoric within the phantasmagoric pact. Here the natural denotation of the photographs clearly "innocents" the connotation.

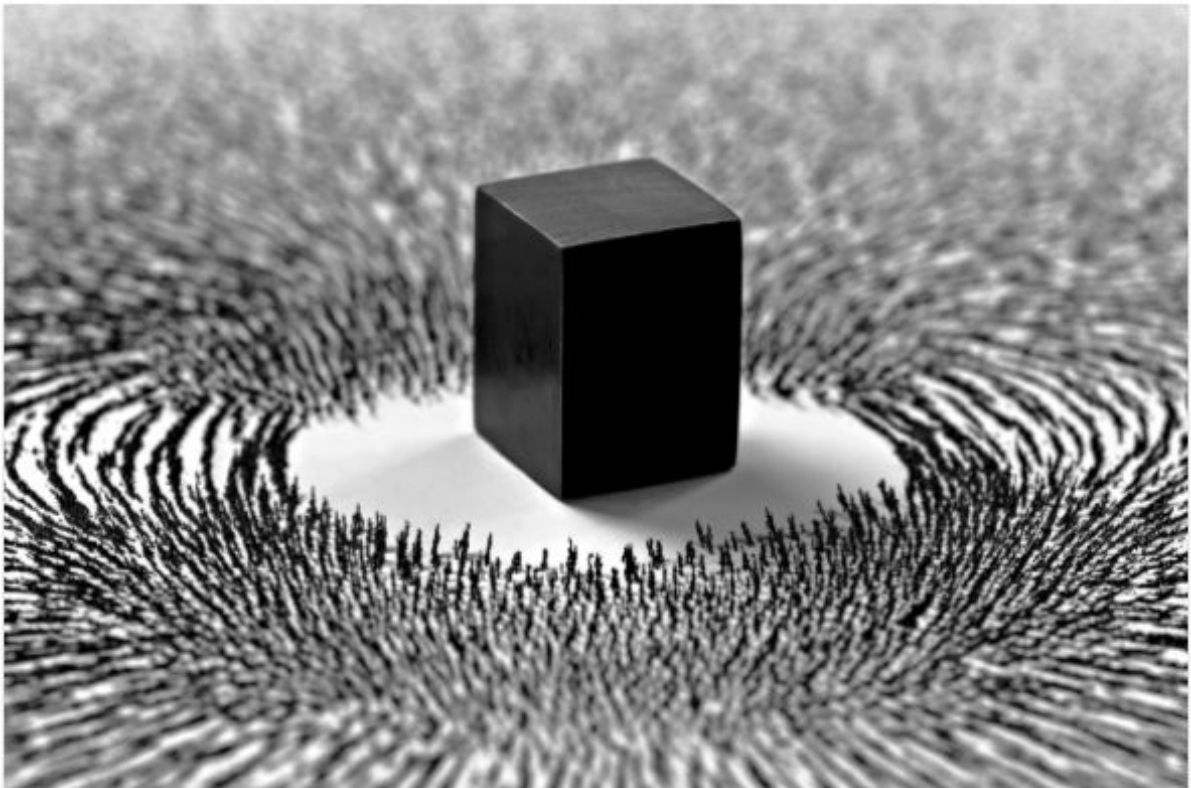


Fig.2 Mater, A., (2012) *Magnetism II*

Structural analysis:

Linguistic message: Mater, A./ 2012/ Magnetism II

denotational: name of the photographer, publishing date, it's a magnetic phenomenon

connotational: cuboid portrayed is very likely a magnet surrounded by metallic units

Non-coded iconic message: a cuboid, iron filings spiraling around it.

Coded iconic message: the magnet and the set of iron filings are two symbols. They might evoke respectively: centrality (magnet in the center, fully in focus, biggest object of the picture, only magnet vs myriads of tiny units), attractiveness (iron filings outstretching towards it), power (attractiveness yet out of reach as marked by the empty circle surrounding it), and multitude/crowd/masses (countless filings dissolving into infinity at the borders), anonymity (they are not identical yet undistinguishable from one another), subjugation (slaves to magnetism).

Rhetoric figures:

C5 Antiphrasis (#2): the magnet substitutes the Ka'ba and the iron filings the faithful different form and similar content=> Connotes the strength of Islam

A2 Simile: the innumerable units of the filings=> magnitude of Muslims

C2 metaphor: in-focus filings replaced by out-of-focus ones, from numerable "lines" to a continuous of blurred "points" => the infinity of Muslims

Islam is a natural law (physics) that forcefully attracts its faithful. A conceptual work rich in abstract concepts offers a much greater freedom to the signifying process of the viewer than the above advertising image.

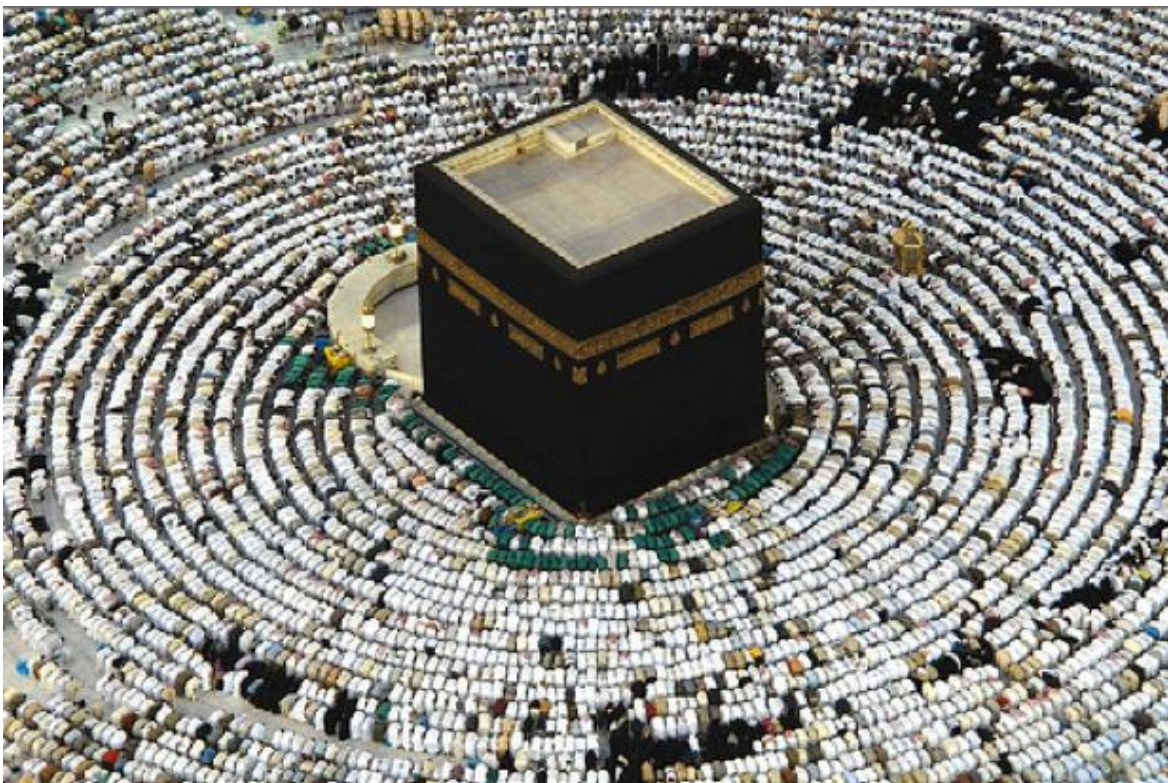


Fig.3 Ka'ba, unidentified photographer and title.

Structural analysis:

Linguistic message: Ka'ba

denotational: identification of the building

connotational: high sacrality of the place

Non-coded iconic message: a building, people orderly prostrating in circles around it

Coded iconic message: important Islam place of worship (abundance and simultaneous prostration of faithfuls + richness/elegance of the building), centrality of the building/worship (in the center of the picture within concentric circles people prostrating), order and uniformity (orderly circles of people mainly wearing white), stillness (crowds are rarely so orderly frozen in a identical and unusual position), vastness of Islam (faithfuls fill the visual space and seem to continue beyond the frame of the photograph), submission (all faithful prostrating simultaneously as if remote-controlled), Islam=sun (yellow center with white rays stemming from it).

Rhetoric figures:

C3 Synecdoche: (Durand, 1970, pg. 86) the whole is replaced by its part, i.e. the square by its center =>the focus is on the faithfuls and their gathering and they look never ending

A2 Simile: repetition of praying faithfuls=> emphatic expression of multiplicity

C3 Metaphor: substitution Ka'ba /sun=> Islam enlightens and irradiates energy to and through his faithful.

The structural analysis brings forth many hidden meanings of an apparently eminently documentary photograph. The rhetoric figures identified here are somehow embedded in the image thanks to the skills and sensitivity of the photographer who was able to "steal" them out of reality. Having seized this "natural" rhetoric figures, the photographer has probably managed to connote it more powerfully. Thanks to the structural analysis, it is possible to explain why this picture might stand out amongst many others of the Ka'ba. Rhetoric and structural analysis X-ray a posteriori the 'secrets' of the skill and creativity of a photographer to the benefit of other photographers and professionals of the image.

The structural analysis and the rhetoric of the image are two distinct set of tools. The latter pre-requires at least a rudimentary employ of the former, and it is a much harder practice to master.

Both kits would provide a solid framework for the making of advertising photograph because advertisement thrives in persuasion and allows long times to construct an image. When it comes to less staged contexts, where pictures rely on the fleeting moment, the tyranny of immediacy renders both kits prohibitively lengthy, thus unusable directly. That said, a greater familiarity with them could only cultivate a sharper sensibility for the subtleties of the image, hence be, although indirectly, still beneficial for the making of any photograph.

They are also quite useful in the editing of photographs (a grey area suspended between the making and the understanding of the image) regardless of the domain considered. Obviously the more exposed (reasoning in shadings from private to public audience) the image, the more crucial the kits' use. It is worth noticing that nowadays this does not only apply to mass media professionals: how many private individuals now take editing decisions about very public divulcation? What about teenagers with hundreds of Facebook friends, for example?

Finally, as highlighted with the above examples, both structural analysis and rhetoric do offer a relevant contribution to the understanding of any image.

Bibliography

Barthes, R., (1977a). *The photographic message*. In S. Heath (ed.) *Image-Music-Text*, London: Fontana.

---- (1977b). *Rhetoric of the Image*. In S. Heath (ed.) *op.cit.*

---- (1984). *Elements of Semiology*. In *Writing Degree Zero and the Elements of Semiology*. Reprint, London: Johnatan Cape.

---- (1994). *The old rhetoric: an aide-memoire*. In: *The Semiotic challenge*. California: University of California Press.

Burgin, V., (1982). *Photographic Practice and Art Theory*. In Burgin (ed.) *Thinking Photography*. London Macmillan 1982.

Chandler, D. (2013). *Semiotics for beginners*. Available at:
<<http://users.aber.ac.uk/dgc/Documents/S4B/sem12a.html>> (Accessed: December 2013)

Durand, J., (1970) *Rhétorique et image publicitaire*. *Communications*. 15, 70-95.

Oxford Dictionary (2013). Available at:
<<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/rhetoric?q=rhetoric>> (Accessed: December 2013)

Images

Fig.1 Omega Advertisement(2014) From the supplement *How to spend it*.of *Financial Times* 4/5 Jan 2014

Fig. 2 Available at < <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/18043>> (Accessed: December 2013)

Fig. 3 Available at < <http://www.interfaithshaadi.org/blog/?p=5018>> (Accessed: December 2013)

tab. 1 Burgin, V., (1982). *Photographic Practice and Art Theory*. *op.cit*