Abstract

Choices are ideologically constructed. Images are the fruit of choices. Therefore, images are an ideological way to represent both the world around us and the intentions of those who produce them. Through images we can tell our own narratives – what we are and where we are going to. The purpose of this paper is to explore the new literacies that could provide students with the necessary critical skills to perceive and understand the ideological bombardment to which they are submitted daily by media and hypermedia in contemporary society and which helps shape social identities. In this paper I discuss the concept of visual literacy and what semiotic resources are used to for production, strengthening and reproduction of social relations – an influential part in the construction of identity. The theoretical foundation is based on Kress & van Leeuwen´s social semiotics, whose insights orient the news photo analysis accomplished in the last section of the text.

Key words: literacy, visual text, stereotype, identity, representations.

Visual texts and the shaping of identity*

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Resumo

As escolhas são ideologicamente construídas, e as imagens são resultado de escolhas. Assim, as imagens constituem um recurso ideológico para representar não só o mundo em nossa volta como também as intenções daqueles que as produzem. Através de imagens podemos narrar nossas histórias – o que nós somos e para onde estamos indo. O objetivo deste artigo é discutir formas de letramento que poderiam preparar os estudantes para compreender o bombardeio ideológico a que são submetidos pela mídia na sociedade contemporânea, um processo que favorece a formação da identidade social. O conceito de letramento visual é discutido, bem como os recursos semióticos usados para a produção, fortalecimento e reprodução das relações sociais. Os fundamentos teóricos utilizados se baseiam nos trabalhos de Kress & van Leeuwen, cuja abordagem orienta a análise de fotos feita na última parte do texto.

Palavras-chave: letramento, texto visual, estereótipo, identidade, representações.

INTRODUCTION

This work is based on the general principle of confluence whose main idea is to promote the sharing of information from different sources and disciplines in order to maximise learning possibilities. Such a principle, an important trend in the last decade and the begining of this one, seeks an interdisciplinary integration that makes possible the sharing of perpectives for the understanding and strengthening of a wide range of issues, provoking a convergence across the curriculum and with real life "out there."

In the educational context, such a principle is incorporated, among others, in the concepts and theoretical orientations of the New London Group (COPE & KALANTZIS, 2000) about literacy, as well as in Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996, 2001) studies on Social Semiotics. Both sources provide necessary and important inputs for the discussion raised here about the contributions of visual texts to the building of a critical stance and ultimately of a social identity. Thus, drawing on such sources, this paper discusses how visual texts are shaped by society, portraying reality of the outside world and how they help shape what we are by constructing representations that function as resources or models throughout the process of identity formation. Finally, it deals with the pedagogical implications created by this shaping-being shaped continuum. The aim is to incorporate practical elements into the establishment of a broad and motivating pedagogical support for a critical learning perspective that inform and strengthen choices, favouring at the same time the exploration of "how people think about, understand and reflect on their own identities" (GAUNTLETT, 2006).

According to Munoz (1995, as cited in ULLMAN, 1997, p. 3), "[T]o study identity means to explore the story of identity – the narrative of identity – the way we tell ourselves and others who we are, where we came from, and where we are going" in a kind of self-defining process (cf. SCHANK, 1994, as cited in BERS, 2001) associated with our wants, and ingroup and out-group membership. In order to achieve that in a visual context, it is necessary that the curriculum provide space for the introduction and development of critical reading capacities of visual representations which could also privilege the "non-official" stories – stories of understandings of image reality other than those described by a middle-class world (MUFFOLETTO, 2001). Ullman posits that "teachers can try to support this complex process in a variety of ways." The project (*Critical Reading and Visual Texts - CRVT*) on news imagery, the source of the image analyzed in the last section of this paper, represents my own attempt to achieve that.

I argue that the visual texts chosen by the students for the CRVT project may have functioned as a benchmark of their beliefs, fears, conceptions and

perceptions (a result of their social, cultural, historical and political context) which may have hopefully been confronted under a "reflective and critical perspective" (Muffoletto, 2001). They may also have several as a reproduction tool of "the very elements that those visual texts portray" (Balkin, 1998, p. 3). In identity construction, therefore, there is "a tension between differentiation and identification: the need to find boundaries between self and others, and the need for integration into a major whole, constituted by family, culture and society" (Erickson, as cited in Bers, 2001, p. 12). In other words, visual texts mirror and construct students´ public and private realms, in what Balkin refers to as a "self-fullfilling representation", creating a virtuous/vicious cycle in the negotiation between media and society.

Conceptual framework

Old literacy – New literacies

The traditional perspective of literacy as reading and writing skills has undergone a substantial change in the last twenty years. The linguistic paradigm of literacy which used to characterize our western society is now seeking flexibility of its borders. Being literate these days means much more than just having a command of reading, writing, counting and memorization in the decontextualized environments of a chalk-talk-print relationship. In fact, being literate nowadays implies a refining of those skills, with the centripetal/centrifugal incorporation of the capacity to share information, knowledge, experiences and best practices with others in order to promptly and effectively answer the demands of modern society.

In our contemporary society, the reading of texts pressuposes the reader´s ability to understand them as accurately as possible. This means that to be a proficient comprehender, the reader must be able to understand, analyse, evaluate and modify situations of both verbal and non-verbal texts, as well as infer their real intentions, hypothesize and draw informed conclusions about what has been explicitly and implicitly written, even if such information comes in the form of pictures, charts, symbols and icons of different sorts.

Thus, the concept of literacy has been enlarged and now accomodates a broader conceptual spectrum including "visual, electronic, and digital forms of expression and communication [...] as object of study and analysis." (Hobbs, 2004, p. 1). That is what the term ´multiliteracies´ is all about. By extension, the very concept of ´reading´ has also been affected, including the ability to deal with complex texts which may incorporate multimedia in

an electronic environment, with different types of imagery, used in different genres and requiring more sophisticated skills to approach. In other words, reading nowadays presupposes multimodal skills on the part of the reader/communicator. This means that the concepts of reading and text have also changed to include:

- non-linear information in a multimodal configuration (graphic imagery, photographs, charts, symbols, gestures);
- text-context involvement;
- new learning processes, which include the social relations created among the elements participating in the text-context relationship.

Following the same perspective, the *Australian Council for Educational Research* (2004, p.8-9) recognizes that the new literacies considered important in the 21st century have been identified as the abilities to:

- read a range of print and non-print texts;
- master the new and evolving technologies and manage information;
- engage critically with media and other texts.

Visual literacy

According to Bamford's (2003) review of the literature (MESSARIS, 1995; AUSBURN & AUSBURN, 1978, p. 291; GIORGIS, JOHNSON, BONOMO, COLBERT et al., 1999, p. 146), the term "visual literacy" has to do with decoding, understanding, interpreting, appreciating, selecting and producing images. In like fashion, Sims, O´Leary, Cook et al. (2002, p. 2) acknowledge the consensus of the visual literacy community according to which visual literacy is defined as

> a group of acquired competencies for interpreting and composing visible messages. A visually literate person is able to: (a) discriminate, and make sense of visible objects as part of a visual acuity, (b) create static and dynamic visible objects effectively in a defined space, (c) comprehend and appreciate the visual testaments of others, and (d) conjure objects in the mind´s eye.

To Stokes (2002, p. 1), visual literacy is "the ability to interpret images as well as to generate images for communicating ideas and concepts." Thus, the same way we use value judgement, coherence and textual organization for traditional texts in order to communicate socially produced representations, so we could also deal with appropriate visual resources associated with adequate contexts and background knowledge in order to interpret and produce imagery. To put it another way, just like printed texts, imagery also presents discursive inter-relations through the use of elements such as angles, forms, space, light, texture, consistency, organization, unity, etc. associated

with specific knowledge of the world to communicate messages, provide coherence, efficacy, meaning and value judgement.

Visual literacy is considered by Karabeg (Online, p. 2) as "the ability to decode and design *implicit information*." By implicit information he means the information which is not explicitly stated as a fact but implicitly present in a picture, artifact, sound, movement, choice of words etc. He argues that while explicit messages (legislation, education, ethics) are predominantly verbal, visual messages tend to be implicit. That is why "implicit information is liberally used to direct or misdirect our views, preferences and values [...] and most urgently requires a literacy" (p. 3).

With the strengthening of instructional technology, visual texts changed status, moving from mere illustrations of word-focused texts, solution to ambiguities of the written text, or source of additional information to the reader (KIRSH. No date), to a creative informational channel, with a variety of concepts and strategies of their own, able to adapt to different cognitive styles, purposes and learning environments. In fact, Stokes (2002, p. 10-11) acknowledges the "separation between illustrations and type after the printing press was invented, with illustrations often falling by the wayside", but also claims that "recent history shows a reversal in this separation with greater reliance on visually oriented approaches to information presentation." Sankey (2002, p. 1-2) reinforces this view, arguing that

> the creative use of images in story telling, communicating concepts and as a means of providing evidence, is no longer an added extra for a text, but a vital link in the cognitive processing of information and essential in the creation of sound pedagogy.

School curricula need to provide opportunities for the students to learn how to identify important features of the visual communication that could spot and describe "meanings usually referred to as emotive, affective, aesthetic, and the kinds of meaning referred to as semantic, rational, logical, ideational" (KRESS & VAN LEEUWEN, 2001, p. 28).

In Brazil the visually oriented trend is still a non-issue in terms of country-wide practical pedagogical implementation. However, instructional materials writers, policy makers and educational researchers have already given signs that the concern with visual literacy is mandatory and represents one of the keys to successful communication in today's teaching and learning. In fact, the official documents issued by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (Parâmetros Curriculares Nacionais – PCNs, Brasil, 1998, p. 7-8), for example, when setting the aims of the initial eight years of education (Fundamental level) state the need to:

• use different languages – verbal, musical, symbolic, graphic, plastic and corporal – as a means to produce, express and communicate ideas, interpret and profit from cultural productions in public and private contexts, so that different intentions and situations of communication be reached;

• develop a critical, responsible and constructive stance to the different social and cultural situations, enhancing dialogical capacity so that conflicts can be mediated and decisions collaboratively taken.

Visual literacy: broadening the existing concept of literacy

Being one of the modes of communication pertaining to the current multiliteracies trend to represent/communicate meaning, our concern with the inclusion of visual issues in the curriculum is supported by at least three claims. The first has to do with the increasing proliferation of imagistic features in the several different sectors of activity boosted by the Internet and other information technology tools (from motion pictures to computer-based tutoring systems). As a result, it was necessary to bring the principles of visual communication to the classroom sharing with the linguistic perspective the educational aspects related to critical reading of texts and of the world. As Macken-Horarik (2004, p. 6) observes, learners are becoming very much used to such tools and now it is necessary that they be given access to "analytical tools which make the potential and limits of these modalities more apparent and more open to challenge and redesign where necessary."

Secondly, such a position is also corroborated by Lowe (2000, p. 2) when he acknowledges that there are some forms of visual information used by scientists and technologists which are far more complex than those familiar graphic symbols used, for example, in airport schedule panels. Therefore, it is important that today's students "engage in specific learning activities that help them to develop the knowledge and skills required to interpret these [unfamiliar] types of visual representations."

In addition, the imposition of a contemporary iconic paradigm (photography, charts, signs, maps, mail coding, telling machine screens, weather forecast charts, nutritional facts tables, clothes labels, airport information panels and other non-linear illustrations) represents an expansion of the concept of text and is an alternative representation of reality and meaning construction. Consequently, it should also be part of the concerns of the school curriculum.

Thirdly, the literacy which is being configured nowadays is a critical one that demands access, contextualization, questioning and transformation, in order to seek explanations for social interrelations. Therefore, one of the

concerns of the critical visual perspective is related to the way images (and their authors) shape their messages and how readers interpret such messages considering the socio-cultural context in which they are involved. As Hobbs (1996: 1) points out, the following are powerful questions as far as images are concerned:

- Do images tell the truth?
- What meanings do different people see in images?
- How do words shape the meanings of images?
- How do the authors of images shape their messages?
- Why do images arouse us emotionally?

In addition, Muffoletto (2002) points out that in such a context, other and perhaps more relevant questions are to be asked of an image: Why were you made? Who made you? Why do you show me what you do? Who benefits from your existence? What is the meaning of this? Is there another way of representing what you re-present? In other words, "critical readers and viewers are aware of the *constructedness* of media messages and explore who produces texts, their motives and purposes for communication and expression, and the role of media institutions, economics and ideology in the construction and dissemination of cultural messages"(HOBBS, 2004, p. 4).

When Kress and van Leeuween (1996, 2001) move Halliday´s systemic functional theory to the realms of visuality, they acknowledge both that semiotics has crossed boundaries, from monomodality to multimodality to speak about disciplines, and also the space that imagery communication occupies in everyday discursive practice. As they point out (2001, p. 1),

> one language to speak about language (linguistics), another to speak about art (art history), yet another to speak about music (musicology), and so on. [...] More recently this dominance of monomodality has begun to reverse. Not only the mass media, the pages of magazines and comic strips for example, but also the documents produced by corporations, universities, government departaments etc., have acquired colour illustrations and sphisticated layout and typography.

In support of this view, Thesen (2001, p. 134) claims that "discourse analysis suggests that not only are the functions of visual and verbal modes changing, but also the boundary between the two is increasingly difficult to detect [...]." That is a very characteristic sign of our contemporary world where convergence, blurring, amalgamation, divergence and re-organization are part of a continuous centripetal-centrifugal movement in most fields of knowledge.

Developing visual literacy skills

According to Hobbs (1996), there are four basic abilities which are valid both for traditional and visual literacies: 1) accessing; 2) analyzing; 3) evaluating; 4) communicating. In addition, other more sophisticated abilities are used that empower the learner as he or she deals with a text: how to assess the level of credibility of the work under focus; how it is included in the real world; what social contexts are present to justify it; which power relations are created; which voices are heard. In other words, that is critical literacy being overtly exercised. Such abilities were to be inserted in the three dimensions of literacy proposed by Green (as cited in CALLOW, 2005) in the eighties and updated at the beginning of this decade: the operational, the cultural and the critical dimensions. (Figure 1). Thus, questions such as "Exactly what am I looking at?" "How is it structured?" "How is it represented to me?" "How am I going to represent this?" (BROWN, 2002) are included in the critical-cultural-operational triad pointed out by Green and may help create and strengthen internal and external individual identity.
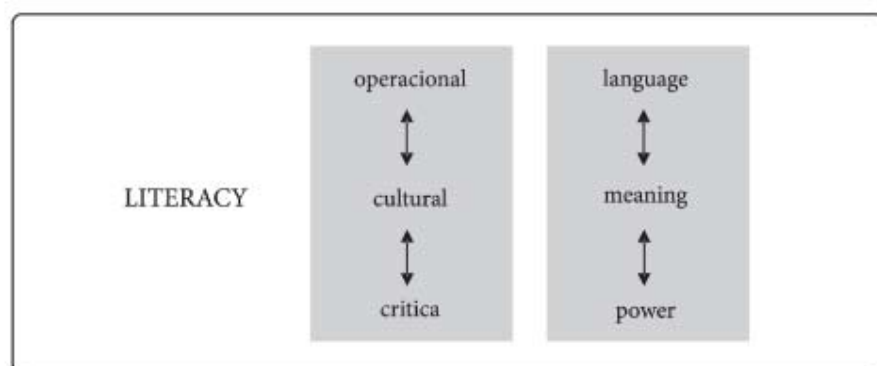
		LITERACY		operacional

LITERACY

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Figure 1. The dimensions of literacy (GREEN, 2002. In: CALLOW, 2005, p. 12).

This model finds a parallel in Halliday's three meta-functions (ideational, interpersonal and textual) which have inspired Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) Visual Semiotics. Such an approach supports the image analysis conducted in the next section of this paper. It employs a critical approach and should be seen as a way to practice the metalanguage of visual literacy principles associated with the possibilities of identity construction.

THE STUDY: CRITICAL READING AND VISUAL TEXTS PROJECT

The image analysed here emerged from a project (*Critical Reading and Visual Texts - CRVT*) on news imagery conducted in 2005, in the

discipline *English for Specific Purposes (Reading)*, at University of Brasília, Brazil. The project had the following aims:

1. Provide a meaningful environment in which students could discuss the basic principles of critical reading.

2. Provide opportunities for students to internalise concepts of visual text.

3. Make students familiar with general strategies used by the media to create social representations and how they are portrayed in imagery.

4. Provide opportunities for the students to "engage in self-reflection and introspection" (BERS, 2001, p. 191), exploring how identity is constructed through the way people address their own concerns about the social world.

5. Introduce the concept of 'bias'.

A group of seventy first-year university students majoring in areas as different as Computing, Arts, Translation Studies, Letters, and Engineering took part in the project whose main activity was to spot the presence of some kind of non-neutral positions in a variety of visual texts of their own choice. They were supposed to survey recent media visual texts (print or electronic sources), analyse them following a 'Guide to the Project, handout as to the presence of bias of any kind, and report the results in individual ten-minute sessions in class. The idea was, first of all, that by discussing the imagery brought into class students would have the opportunity to elicit and explore their own perceptions, beliefs and values about the world around them. Secondly, that the exploration of the aspects portrayed in the images could somehow be enlarged to a macro perspective for the understanding of identity construction encapsulated in basic principles such as ´who we are´, ´where we come from´, and ´where we are going´" (ULLMAN, 1997). These claims also find support in Gautlett´s (2006, p. 1) research on creative approaches "which enable people to communicate, in a meaningful way, about their identities and experiences and their own thoughts through creatively making things themselves, and then reflecting upon what they have made."

Image analysis

This study is essentially qualitative research based on a corpus of images chosen by the students and brought into class for individual analysis/presentation. The image sources were newspapers and magazines (electronic and print). The genre photojournalism was chosen because it is a very popular informational medium in Western society in general and has shown to be particularly appealing among Brazilian students. Most of the images chosen portrayed scenes related to corruption, violence and poverty issues. Politics,

gender (sexism) and football were the most popular themes involving such issues..

One of the images brought by the students serves as my case study here. Such an image has already been quoted in another paper (OLIVEIRA, 2006) whose aim was to introduce a panoramic view of the basic terminology related to some aesthetic (compositional) and affective issues in contemporary photojournalism. Thus, aspects such as a new concept of text, the value of colours, positioning of photographer, etc. were the main focus of attention at that moment.

For the present paper the scope has been broadened and the image selected was explored following Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) visual semiotic theory (Figure 2). Its status has also been upgraded from a side character – just an example of imagery supporting general visual literacy principles – to a central role in my discussion. Thus, the photo was analyzed according to the following social-linguistic structures:

A. Acknowledgements

Genre: photojournalism
Source: Folha Imagem - online (2004)
Author: Ana Carolina Fernandes

B. Aspects approached

• *Overall description of the image*
Urban scenario. A street in Rocinha, a violent shanty town in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The photo displays a bar, with dirty walls and floor. Garbage is on the sidewalk. Near the door of the bar, in a central position, there is a poster advertising a beer maker. The picture in the poster shows medium eye-level view of a scantily dressed girl holding a beer can. She looks sensually at passers by (potential viewers). On each side of the poster there is a uniformed policeman holding a gun. Both are looking at the poster. The caption underneath the photo reads: "*policemen keep patrolling Rocinha shanty town*".
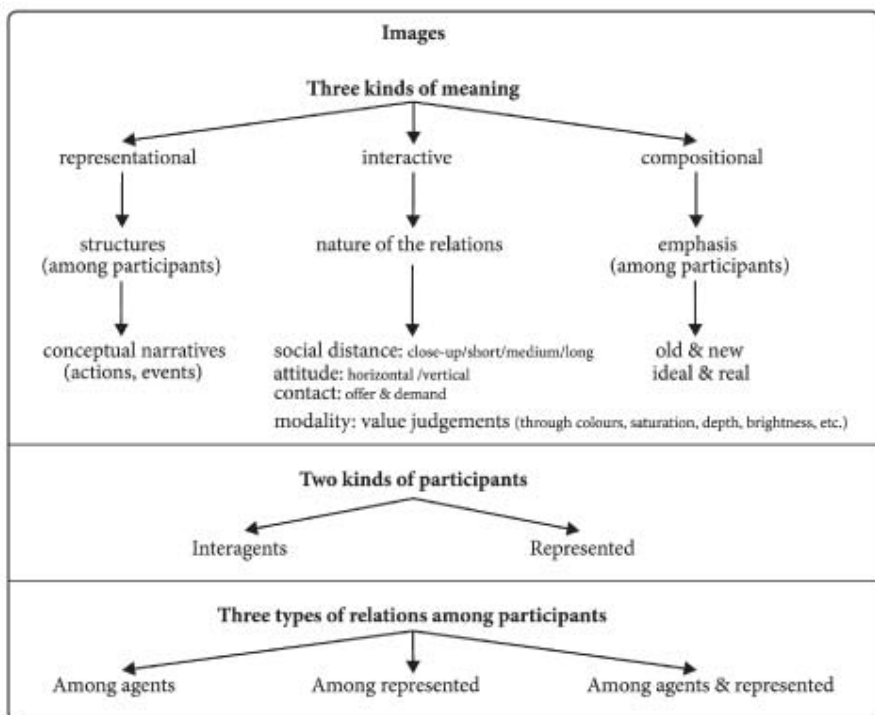
Figure 2. How images express meaning – summary based on Kress & van Leeuwen's (1996) visual semiotic theory.

• *Representational meaning*

Inter-agents: in the photograph the agents are viewed within a transactional narrative, i.e. they do things whose targets are the other components of the image and vice-versa. Each agent represents a certain position. In the present case, each agent represents explicitly or implicitly different social positions. Some kind of action is expected:

   - two policemen (government: offer security system);
   - the girl in the poster (market forces: offer goods & services);
   - the viewers (population of shanty town: demand government services);
   - the journalist/photo-journalist (producers of goods & services);
   - the readers of the newspaper (consumers of goods & services).

• *Interactive meaning*

1) Contact system

According to K&vL, contact system has to do with gestures, body language or facial expressions of the inter-agents. Arrows mark the directions

of offer / demand among inter-agents. In the present image, the two policemen are positioned beside the poster and their faces are directed to the centre of the image displayed in the poster. They look straight at it in a position of demand (the beer can or the girl).

The girl is in the centre of the photograph. She seems to be the target of the interaction between the policemen and the panel. However, she does not participate directly in such an interaction as she is looking at the viewers. Her look is not a straightforward one. She smiles and seems to be in an offering position (a beer or perhaps something else...) in relation to potential viewers. The interaction happens a) between the girl and the potential viewers; b) between the girl and the readers of the newspaper (Figure 3).
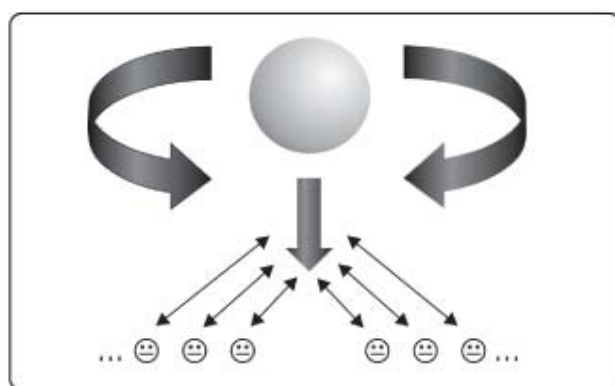

Figure 3. Schematic drawing of the relationships established among participants.

There are also non inter-agent participants: the bar and the neighborhood

Other participants, although not represented, are implicit potential inter-agents:

- The viewers (poster spectators): external & implicit participants.
- The journalist who wrote the report: external & implicit participant.
- Photo-journalist, author of the image: external & implicit participant.
- Newspaper readers external and implicit participants.

2) (Social) Distance

The photo has been taken from medium distance. The policemen are foregrounded, standing, and appear in full length. Such a position indicates proximity with (undisclosed) viewers. The panel a little bit backgrounded portrays a girl in underwear, in a sexy sitting position. The girl gazes at viewers in an inviting way: a kind of 'It's-only-me-and-you' atmosphere. The panel is placed in the middle of the two policemen. It is colorful, bright, attractive,

contrasting with the two policemen whose uniforms are dark, covering all their bodies. It creates an almost post-modern tenebrist aesthetics, reminding us of oppositions such as 'light vs. dark', 'attractive vs. non-attractive'; 'interesting vs, boring'; 'pleasure vs. pain' etc.

3) Attitude

The three participants are in frontal position, which represents involvement, although with different elements: the policemen are involved with the beer can or the girl (ambiguous demand position); the girl seems to be involved with the viewers in an explicit attitude of offer and provocation.

The attitude of the policemen in relation to the panel could indicate the progressive distancing of the State from its basic functions (provider of security, infra-structure, education, etc.). The girl represents the attraction that the market exerts on the population, imposing a stance of consumerism regarding goods and services.

The viewers do not appear in the image. However, the absences are also important. It could imply the System's policy of denial in relation to poor people. It could also signal a paradoxical feeling of fear deprived people tend to have in relation to the police. After all, it is well known that when the police search for criminals in shanty towns the honest citizens are the ones to suffer the consequences of the violent confrontations.

The readers of the newspaper, usually well educated people, are external and implicit participants of the context here described. Probably they get involved with the triangulation 'policemen-girl-viewers' (State-System-Citizens) shown in the billboard, questioning the metaphor that the total composition (image + caption) offers: 'What does the population of a shanty town need?' and 'What does the State offer?' 'How does the market behave in such a context?''As citizens of a democratic country, how do we want to be treated?' 'What do we want?' 'What is the State offering us?'

• *Compositional meaning*

The image composition follows a central pattern: the focus is the poster (central position in the image) and more precisely the girl. The policemen create the compositional balance on each side of the panel – are marginal – leading the readers to metaphorically think of a portrait of the wider social disarrangement marked by deviation from duty, so common in the Brazilian security system.

In fact, the intimacy of the State with illicit activities is notorious and denounced in newspaper headlines almost daily. Policemen are caught working as security guards in night clubs, as bodyguards for businessmen and drug dealers; they are involved in drug trafficking, robbery, homicides,

bribery, blackmailing. Therefore, the image allows the reader to make inferences about the promiscuity between legal and illegal activities, between the public sphere and the private one. Those are issues that weaken the System, lead to corruption and diminish police credibility.

• *Relations established among participants*

The relations involve the image itself and its participants, explicit environment and implicit historical-political-social context. These relations are probably mediated and this mediation conducted by the billboard image and its elements: the girl and the product advertised. Such a mediation could be read in the following way: the security system (police) of a city like Rio de Janeiro depends on forces like:

• the market – represented by the product advertised in the panel;

• the local police – represented by the two policemen; and

• contravention – represented by the contrast between the holding of guns (to protect) and the position angle of the policemen (looking at the panel / girl / beer).

C. Violations

Incongruencies or interruptions in the dialogical relations in the visual text are called violations here. At least three violations have been spotted in the image under discussion:

1) The non-correspondence between the word ´patrulhamento´ (patrolling) in the caption and the two policemen´s body language.

2) The non-correspondence between the caption and the central focus of the image (the scantily dressed girl). In other words, the contrast between the explicit (official) discourse and what reality demonstrates.

3) Ideal versus real: the disconnection between what is expected from the police (security – ideal) and what the State is effectively providing (deviation from dirty – real).

To sum up, the panel is the element that "interrupts" the expected transactional narrative in the photograph, both explicitly (the fulfillment of a duty: patrolling of a shanty town) and implicitly (the power relation between the State and the community: the State has no capacity to provide security to the population), posing an implicit question about the credibility of the State.

Why has the student chosen such an image to be presented in class? My assumption is that his choice was based on content that echoes his value judgement attitudes. That means some kind of relationship between his own values (fears, expectations, likes and dislikes) and the reality described in the image. By doing so he might be attempting to establish his own identity

within specific contexts – "the contexts through which we are understood by others and in which we come to understand ourselves" (CLARK, 1996, p. 2): 'that's me, that's what I look like / believe/expect/dislike/disagree/live with', etc in relation to what is going on in the outside world.

That process of constructing identity certainly involved posing questions such as: "what does it mean to be a [Brazilian] citizen?" "Are poor [Brazilian] communities getting what they deserve from the State?" "Do I believe the State is doing the best for me/the community where I live?" "Do I have access to basic services such as education, infra-structure (sewage, water, roads)?" "Are there any shared preferences in the image that make me feel part of a community/group?" "Which role would I like to perform in that power relationship protrayed in the image?" "How much is the image reproducing/naturalizing/re-shaping my reality?" "What values, explicit or implicit, in the image do I want to internalize/identify with?"

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It has become a cliché that images do not exist or speak by themselves. It is also well known that images are the fruit of choices and these choices are shaped by the way we think and what we believe. Therefore, images are an ideological way to represent both the world around us and the intentions of those who produce them. Through images we can tell our own narratives – what we are and where we are going to. In other words, it is ideology creating representations and shaping identities, be it the photographer's, the newspaper editor's, or the readers'.

Do our students recognize such implications when they see an image in a newspaper? Do they have to? Perhaps the answer should be, respectively, 'probably not' and 'certainly'.

It is a fact that visual literacy principles are still a very incipient issue in the curricula of Brazilian schools and universities. This explains why students neither recognize images as textual representations nor reach a more ellaborate understanding about them. On the other hand, it is imperative that they become aware of the role images play in varied contexts, question the photographer's intentions and how those intentions are realized through the use of colours, positioning, angles, distance of shot, as well as examine what ideological interests are involved; which unveiled criticisms to the system are intended and, finally, who gains and who loses with the publication of an image.

Finally, what kind of pedagogical implications could be suggested as a result of such a discussion? First of all, perhaps it would be important to mention the interesting association between the research on visual literacy

metalanguage and the defining features of constructivism pointed out by Stokes (2002) in her review of the literature. No doubt, the stimulation of learning based on active processes contextualized in social environments, as constructivism postulates, is an element that can perfectly walk hand in hand with critical visual literacy in the classroom. The pedagogy of projects involving issues concerned with visual representations in the media communication process appears to be a profitable opportunity to aggregate constructivist principles of social contextualization in which the identification and transferring of concepts, interaction among peers and commitment to tasks would pave the road to practising skills of comprehension and production of visual texts.

Secondly, the use of contemporary themes, like the spotting of bias, gender issues, as well as power representations in media visual contexts such as advertisements, political photojournalism, political cartoons and body language seem to be very appealing as far as students'interest is concerned and could be used to encourage and refine the ways they see and understand reality _ their own and that of the social context around them. In fact, it is Pettersson's (1989) view that still pictures have functional, attentional, cognitive, affective, compensatory, social, and decorative functions. In a later work (1998) he lists many more functions. Some of them are:

- Increasing learner interest, motivation, curiosity, and concentration;
- Impacting emotion;
- Encouraging the expression and clarification of opinions;
- Spanning linguistic barriers.

No doubt, the massive selection of images with representations of corruption, abandonment, violence, delusion presented by the students in the project metaphorically reveals feelings, values, beliefs and behaviours which they perceive as being deeply ingrained in individual and interrelated groups' attempts to build social [Brazilian] identity. Their reaction to such perceptions was ambiguous: there was dissatisfaction (denial) in relation to the representations on the part of some students; however, there was also an attitude of acknowledgement (naturalization and acceptance) on the part of other students. That is why a critical stance is so important pedagogically speaking: it creates doubt, questioning, which hopefully will lead to good answers.

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