

# VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> AND AMERICA'S FRIENDS AND ENEMIES ON CNN

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*Abstract:* This paper is an attempt to prove that images clearly depend on the will of the sign-maker, the photographer and editor in the case of TV news, and create a reality of their own that is not the mirror image of the reality being captured. Moreover, we will try to show that TV news images cannot only be considered as proof or paraphrase of the verbal text which they accompany because they create their own effect and that image reception highly depends on the context of the viewer.

*Keywords:* Cultural studies; multimodality; visual communication.

## SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup> IMAGES: BETWEEN THE HUMAN AND THE SYMBOLIC REALITY

On Tuesday September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 we were confronted with the image of one of the World Trade Centers World Trade Center towers in flames and we were informed that an airplane had slammed into it. The image of the crash we only got later on and it was taken by chance. At 9:03am, while we were watching the tower burning, we watched live a second plane crashing into the World Trade Center's south tower causing a massive explosion. Jet fuel and debris engulfed the towers. The shock didn't stop there. It was followed by the third one in the Pentagon and a fourth one that crashed in Pennsylvania. At 10:00am, weakened and billowing with smoke, the south tower collapsed. We saw bystanders, covered with ashes and white powder, fleeing from the site. At 10:29 the World Trade Center's north tower collapsed.

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The images available broadcast all over the world uncountable times appalled us. The multiple symbolism of the WTC towers and the significance of their destruction are very well summarized in a sentence by Buck-Morss. S. (2002, p. 12): "The World Trade Center towers were a symbol; but they were also a human and material reality, and the photographically mediated experience of the attack was of both the symbol and the real, antagonistically superimposed". CNN transmitted the pictures of the airplanes slamming into the towers, repeatedly during the first week after the event but also with a certain frequency later on. The power and effect those images of the airplanes crashing into the heart of capitalism had was enormous. To begin with, it was the first time the humanity experienced, directly or indirectly, this kind of action. Second, up until then Americans seemed protected and safe in their own territory.

The images of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the WTC, though horrifying, did not include pictures of the victims. Although people who were standing by and filming saw and recorded footages of dead bodies, of people jumping through the windows to save themselves from the flames that were engulfing the building and other terrifying horrors, CNN never broadcast these images. Sontag (2003, p. 61-62) suggests that "the frankest representations of war, and of disaster-injured bodies are of those who seem most foreign, therefore least likely to be known. With subjects closer to home, the photographer is expected to be more discreet". There is an ethical code that is followed and is used as guidelines by TV news channels over what viewers are allowed to watch. Thus, when the channel is part of the community where the atrocity takes place, discretion is required as a projection of respect.

People's response to photographs of an atrocity depends on the way they are politically positioned in relation to the participants in the events. Viewers get affected and respond to images whose participants are somehow meaningful to them and towards whom they are morally positioned. Viewers show pity for the suffering of people they feel something for. That is the reason why the same images of an atrocity seen by different people around the world "may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen" (SONTAG, 2003, p. 13). And the last response mentioned is the one usually taken by people who are not morally positioned towards the participants in the images. Thus, images do not have the same effect on each one of us and image reception is not something universal.

Another factor that influences the impact certain images have on us is the truth-value we attribute to them. Photos of catastrophes believed to be caused by an enemy, lead viewers to demand revenge and justice from their governments. However, if the spectators are shown "images offering evidence that contradicts cherished pieties" (SONTAG, 2003, p. 10) they dismiss them "as having been staged for the camera" (SONTAG, 2003, p. 10). As Robert S. McNamara, Defense Secretary of the United States from 1961-1968, points out in the documentary by Errol Morris "The Fog of War": "We see what we believe". For Rogoff (1998, p. 22), "spectatorship as an investigative field understands that what the eye purportedly 'sees' is dictated to it by an entire set of beliefs and desires and by a set of coded languages and generic apparatuses" and "space is always populated with the unrecognized obstacles which never allow us to actually 'see' what is out there beyond what we expect to find".

A factor that privileged the similarity-to-reality-effect of the September 11<sup>th</sup> images was the fact that the process of transmission of the events had been carefully planned by the masterminds of the attacks. TV networks and CNN viewers of the 9/11 attacks fell victims to the conscious manipulation of the forces of globalization by the terrorists. Cameras discovered themselves involuntarily advertising the enemy's deeds once they run to the spot in order to film the tragedy taking place in the north tower and unwillingly filmed live the attack on the south tower. Wright, C. (2002, p. 27) is bent on showing the interaction between the forces of globalization and actions of the 9/11 kind:

*This was the first event of a truly global reach since the forces of globalization made themselves so widely felt, and was moreover symptomatic of those forces. An occurrence of such magnitude was always destined to receive unprecedented coverage, yet the nature of the act was itself clearly intended to court such hyper-saturation. The twenty-minute window between the first and second planes (just enough time for camera crews to arrive and setup their equipment) may provide some indication of this intention. What is difficult to doubt, however, is that at the core of the terrorists's strategy was the attainment of an unprecedented order of visibility. After all, transforming passenger planes into lethal bombs by piledriving them into the most potent symbols of corporate and political America was always going to be a surpassingly cinematic act, one that would create its own instant international audience.*

The effect of each image is undoubtedly determined by the verbal context in which it is inserted. During the first days after the attack, images of the airplanes crashing into the WTCs are illustrative of speech. They are "informational" and serve as a guarantor of the discourse that describes the tragedy and its unthinkable consequences and are a reminder of the vulnerability of the Americans even on their own soil. Moreover, the repetitive pictures of the magnitude of the attack kept showing the Americans the size of hate the planners and executors of the action nourished towards them. The images made clear that the so-called terrorists were quite sophisticated and capable of the most unexpected deeds. In the beginning it was important that those pictures be shown many times so that people who missed them would have a chance to see them. But some days after the attack the pictures were still being broadcast with great intensity on CNN. By the way, it was the first time that images of the same event were transmitted with that frequency on the channel.

These images also have become the trademark of the beginning of a new era, a trademark that the humanity will never forget because it was decided by the media that this event is important and these images should be engraved in our minds and form consequently our ideologies for the years to come. A collective memory has been created and molded by the media because nowadays everyone can recognize these images that were the subject of conversation and thought for many days to come after 9/11. An impressive deed for a humanity that suffers from amnesia.

Images of "ground zero", the place where the World Trade Center towers used to stand, were also a common theme. However it was made clear by the reporters that in spite of the capacity of CNN photographers it was impossible for the cameras to show the size of devastation. This can be seen in the following quotation:

*CNN Reporter: "We've said a number of times over the last week or so that television perhaps doesn't do justice to the degree of damage despite the skill of the people shooting the pictures down there" (September 20<sup>th</sup>, 2001).*

Later on, images of "ground zero" continued being broadcast but followed a different pattern once they detached themselves from narration. Like in the case of the US attorney general John Ashcroft address to the House Judiciary Committee, proposing a legislative package of antiterrorism measures in the aftermath of the September 11 terrorist attacks. While he was shown live delivering his speech, the screen was divided in two boxes and in one of them the US attorney general was shown and in the other "ground zero" and the rescue works taking place there were transmitted. Various shots also of the American flag were shown in the Capitol Hill and in the "ground zero". This was a repeated pattern during the days that followed the Sep.11<sup>th</sup> attack. The anchor or other political figures and analysts were talking about terrorism related subjects and shots of the planes crashing into the WTCs were shown or the collapse of the towers or the works of the rescue teams. In this case images are used as a resource for justifying future actions.

#### **THE ANCHOR: A COMPASSIONATE FRIEND WRAPPED IN THE COLORS OF PATRIOTISM**

After September 11<sup>th</sup>, anchors were depicted as they always are on CNN. They are looking straight at the camera and this creates a sense of interaction between the anchor and the viewer. Related to the perspective, we have a frontal angle which creates a greater involvement. The anchor's angle of gaze is frontal and we get a sense of equality because there is an eye level angle. The size of frame is close-up so we see the head and shoulders of the anchor (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 1996). All the aforementioned ways of filming the anchors are techniques that make the viewer get the impression that the presenter is a familiar figure, one of us. This brings us back to something Kress & van Leeuwen (1996, p. 119) stress that "visual communication also has resources for constituting and maintaining another kind of interaction, the interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image". The anchors' familiar faces and the trust viewers place in them reassured spectators after 9/11.

The newscast set where the anchors present the news, usually consists of computers, TVs and people working in a relaxed way, who don't seem to mind the fact they are on TV. After Sep.11<sup>th</sup> though, it is noticeable that the newscast set in many cases changed. Reporters were filmed outdoors where the background was sometimes the US Capitol or the White House or "ground zero". In our opinion, what is achieved by these shootings is a contextualization that enhances a feeling of nationalism and patriotism. The US Capitol and the White House are after all the most important landmarks of the United States. Those are the places where their government and heads of State convene and govern their country. They look at those places with great admiration and pride. Those are also symbols that escaped the terrorist attack and still stand where they used to. Their presence as background probably raised the moral of the Americans at a time they felt very vulnerable.

On the other hand when the “ground zero” is used as background it creates a feeling of absence, loss and need for retribution. This was the economic center of the United States, the heart of capitalism. It took just one hour and fifteen minutes for the towers to collapse. Their destruction and the grief and mourning that ensued created in the Americans a feeling of vulnerability and the opinion that they must react and pay the responsible for these actions with the same token.

Another visual component of the CNN news is the colors the story “slugs” or newscast slogans adopted after September 11<sup>th</sup>. This “slug”, before 9/11, uses white letters and has a blue background. After September 11<sup>th</sup> and before the war in Afghanistan broke out, the slogan written on the screen was “War against terror” in white letters. The background of the word “War” was red, “against” had a black background and “terror” had a blue background. The hues of the red and blue are the ones of the American flag. By using this technique CNN literally wrapped the news in the flag and enhanced the feeling of patriotism. The three colors, red, white and blue, of the American flag are a repeated and dominating pattern after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

During the first two days of war, CNN’s white anchors are dressed in blue and red items. Paula Zahn, a reporter hired by CNN after 9/11, is seen wearing a red turtleneck, white earrings in a blue newscast set. Veronica Pedrosa is wearing a red jacket and the anchor is wearing a red and white striped shirt. These color patterns with overt patriotic schemes strengthen the bond between viewers, anchors and news channel during this difficult time of national crisis and make feelings of reassurance, safety and national pride spring up from the screen. Moreover, they justify the ensuing war, since the nation received an attack and retribution is demanded even by the media.

### **VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF MUSLIM TERRORISTS ON CNN**

As has been mentioned before, the effect of each image is “overdetermined by every aspect of its content, layout and context” (TERDIMAN, 1985, p. 150-151). It is crucial to examine each one of these elements and detect how the resources of image were used in order to criminalize the 9/11 hijackers. The first images of the responsible for the September 11<sup>th</sup> we got on CNN a few days after the attacks. American viewers got to know their enemy’s faces from photos that were probably taken from their passports. These photos are more like mug shots once passport photos are never very flattering versions of the posing subject. This kind of visual representation of the Other serves to criticize, outcast, blame and convict the “suspected terrorists”. They look grotesque and contemptible. These photos justify and legitimize any action taken against people that look like the terrorists or use names similar to theirs: Mohamed Atta, Abdulaziz Alomari, Waleed M. Alshehri. The names of the hijackers look and sound unfamiliar and threatening. These mug shots also guarantee full support of the American population and the Western world for anything that is needed in order for the unthinkable not to happen again.

The layout aspect of the photos is also important to examine closely. The background of the image is blue and has a wavy pattern that reminds us of the movement of flags. The background of “America’s New War” is black showing

the negative feelings war brings to any population. The black color enhances the sentiment that war is something undesirable. However, it has to be fought in order to protect the nation, represented in the blue, red and white colors that dominate the screen, from people that look like the evil hijacker. Moreover, the story "slug" reads: "The Investigation" and shows that the future war will come as the result of legal and democratic processes.

Our Western schema of Muslim terrorists is completed with the depiction of Osama bin Laden sitting in a cave in medieval clothes and a military jacket with a rifle next to him, preaching. His black and white beard and his daydreaming gaze do not reveal much of the madness this man is invested with in the western media. His footage does not seem to capture or represent in a clear manner the hatred this man nourishes for the West. In the case of his footage the verbal accompaniment seems to speak louder because it conveys the political affiliations of the leader of Al Qaeda. Though the movement of his index finger is interpreted as threatening by CNN, we could also see it as part of his preaching process. The fact that he is being filmed in a cave strengthens the alienation supposition that he does not know how societies work nowadays.

No doubt images construct the meaning the sign maker is willing to pass. Spectators tend to believe in images the way they are shown on TV and are unlikely to question their selection or their incorporation in the news and because of this the outcry of September 11<sup>th</sup> was immediate. In all the cases above, as Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, p. 162) affirm, "the photograph presents itself as a naturalistic, unmediated, uncoded representation of reality". In the process of constructing a pictorial representation of Muslim terrorists, viewers conduct a generalization and apply the characteristic of terrorist to any person who dresses as a Muslim or participates in the religious and cultural rituals of Islam. Even though verbal language keeps reassuring us that Muslims are friends of the Americans, meanings constructed through the visual code succeed in turning viewers into suspicious beholders of any Muslim. The visual representation of the terrorists makes every Muslim bear the negative consequences of their actions.

The confrontation of the visual representation of the terrorists with that of the grieving relatives of the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup> succeeds to stigmatize all Muslims by foregrounding values considered important in western societies. Terrorists need to hide themselves behind hoods while Americans willingly expose their faces to the cameras. Osama bin Laden and his co-fighters have become lone recluses when westerners valorize family and socialization. People that had their families hit by terrorism find comfort in the support of other family members and friends. Viewers identify themselves with the visual narratives that construct the Americans as social and compassionate, and they start creating feelings of pity, sympathy and compatriotism towards the Americans. On the other hand, we experience fear, hate and a sense of otherness for the people who were ready to sacrifice their lives for a cause we do not understand and those that helped them plan and carry out the deed.

In this article we have discussed TV news images as a socio-cultural/historical construction. We have analyzed and shown that CNN images of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks construct a reality of their own. Photographers and image editors are permeated by the journalistic discursive formation in which they are inserted and also by the rules imposed by the journalistic community that dictate what spec-

tators should consume. Moreover, image interpreters are situated in a certain culture that influences the connection they make between signifier and signified (SOUZA, 2004, p. 119). The images we have focused on foreground the intentions of the channel in representing signs in a way that conditions their understanding and interpretation by the viewers: the use of patriotic colors to comfort Americans, criminalizing depictions of the terrorists and alienating representation of Osama bin Laden.

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Resumo: Este artigo tem como objetivo provar que imagens dependem da vontade do criador-do-sig-no, o fotógrafo e o editor no caso de notícias televisivas, e criam uma realidade própria que não é o reflexo da realidade que procuram captar. Além disso, mostra-se que as imagens nas notícias televisivas não podem ser consideradas como prova ou paráfrase do texto verbal que elas acompanham porque têm efeito próprio, e que a recepção das imagens depende do contexto do telespectador.

Palavras-chave: Estudos culturais; multimodalidade; comunicação visual.