

## Seeing is believing ... or is it?

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“I’ve been looking so long at these pictures of you that I almost believe that they’re real”  
The Cure

**Résumé :** *Dans un monde construit sur un réseau si complexe de relations, qui s’écroulerait sûrement par manque de communication, les stimuli visuels omniprésents sont impossibles à ignorer. Daniela Roventă-Frumușani [1995: 39] affirme : « il faut admettre que notre monde contemporain se situe presque entièrement sous le signe de l’image (qui domine les diverses pratiques sociales comme la publicité, la propagande et le mass-média en général) ». Dans le monde où nous vivons, le discours du journal télévisé a un nouveau statut, radicalement différent de ce qu’il était autrefois : une simple source d’informations est presque devenue une forme de divertissement. Le dernier temps, notamment après le 11 septembre, nombreux sont ceux qui mènent leur vie entre deux émissions du journal télévisé ou deux communiqués de presse. La presse écrite a dû adapter sa manière de présentation sous la pression croissante de la presse audio-visuelle ; ainsi intègre-t-elle l’image (évidemment statique) dans l’inventaire obligatoire du spécialiste du journal télévisé. L’en-tête d’un journal est lui aussi devenu le personnage-clé dans l’économie d’un journal car, dans la plupart des cas, l’attention du passant / lecteur est ainsi attirée (et de façon inévitable modelée du point de vue sémiotique). La recherche analyse les mécanismes qui déterminent le choix d’un en-tête et les significations possibles des éléments qui le composent.*

**Mots-clés :** *manque de communication, stimuli visuels, passant / lecteur*

### 1 Preliminaries

In a world built on so intricate relationships that it would undoubtedly crumble without communication, the visual stimuli have become a permanent overwhelming presence impossible to be ignored. Daniela Roventă-Frumușani states in one of her books [1] that “[...] we have to admit that our contemporary world is situated to a considerable extent under the sign of image (which dominates various social practices such as advertising, propaganda, and mass-media in general).” We live in a world where the news discourse has acquired a new status, radically different from what it used to be. From a mere source of daily information, it has almost become a form of entertainment; hence, the new term coined to refer to this new ‘reality’: **infotainment** [2]. Especially for the past two years or so, since September 11, many people have come to live their lives between two news bulletins. The effectiveness of this choice as well as the passive attitude towards news have been extensively dealt with and analysed by many voices in the fields of socio-linguistics and semiotics. For those who still have the taste of reading news instead of accepting it in a pre-digested form, there is always the alternative of buying a newspaper or a magazine. ‘Are these news transmitting vehicles free of subjectivity and partisanship?’ one might rightfully ask. The answer to this question can be only one: ‘Of course not!’ The written media are by no means a more secure and reliable way of getting informed, but the reader has a chance to go back and revisit a particular item of information, he/she can stop and filter whatever that article offers as news. In other words, provided the readers possess an inventory of recognizing and decoding ‘tools’, they might read between and behind the lines of a news report in an attempt to make a personal opinion about a certain event. The newspaper is a form of news communication that presents a display of codes which should provide the receiver with information of the world. The medium itself produces signs that readers can interpret at their leisure without a time constraint, unlike television or radio. This means that the reader can take time to interpret the codes and therefore give the information more scrutiny.

There are many elements in a newspaper or magazine that may bear semiotic relevance: the masthead, the front-page, the photographs (those on the front page as well as those inside), the headlines, the ads, the colours, the fonts, the title of the magazine, the layout, the texture of paper, the language adopted, the content of the articles, the tagline of a magazine, any possible motto of the newspaper or magazine and so on.

## 2 The analysis

Mastheads come in a dazzling variety of forms, shapes and colours but no matter how different they are, they play several crucial roles in the economy of the newspaper. To a certain extent, they are for the newspaper what the letterhead is for a business letter. As the name suggests, the masthead is situated at the top of the front-page. This is a very privileged position that confers the masthead first-degree priority in the eyes of the reader: as a rule, this is the first aspect that the potential buyers notice when scanning the newspaper rack. With the exception of those readers who are faithful to a particular newspaper (but even this category of readers must have been the ‘victims’ of the same mechanism when they first decided to buy that newspaper), most often than not the decision of buying the newspaper or not depends on the reaction it stirs in their mind and the visual and psychological impact it produces. The masthead establishes the tone and theme of everything else contained in that newspaper.

On the other hand the masthead should be self-sufficient as there is a second level to its synecdochical function: very frequently, lazy or rushing readers take a short look at the masthead and move on. Thus, the masthead (as the front-page for that matter) should have a story to tell, a message to transmit: “This is what I am! If you buy me, this is what you are going to find!” It is, therefore, essential that the masthead fulfil its mission effectively.

In order to do this, the masthead creators make use of several traditional elements such as colours, font (type, style and size), span, position at the top of the page (left, central, right), and some signs of heraldic nature to go with it (drawings, objects, animals, images, etc.). These elements are skilfully combined according to each designer’s ideas, on the one hand, and to the editorial ideology, on the other.

In spite of the diversity resulting from the combination of the elements enumerated above, mastheads could be classified in several overlapping categories:

- coloured vs. non-coloured
- uppercase vs. common case
- casual font vs. pretentious font
- bold style vs. regular style
- with extra elements vs. without extra elements

In order to see how these variables combine and what effect they may have, we have selected a number of mastheads belonging to newspapers from both sides of the Atlantic.

The last two UK newspapers that we shall analyse are among the first most read five newspapers in the country: *The Herald* (see Figure 1) and *The Scotsman* (see Figure 2). Since both of them are Scottish, in the perpetual struggle with the major newspapers in England they represent the same ideology (in spite of the easy-to-guess competition that exists between any two major newspapers). Consequently, the designing work behind the actual building of the mastheads has lead to extremely similar results. Both mastheads are situated centrally and at the top of the front-page; blue is present in both mastheads; both are printed in bold, large size letters; both are composed of only two words (to maximize the effect); both titles act synecdochically in relation with the Scottish nation; and, finally, both mastheads make use of a graphic symbol.

Figure 1



In the case of *The Herald*, the reader is faced with a drawing that shows a man (most likely a printer wearing a protection apron) who is pulling vigorously from the handles of an old printing press. The man and the machine are wrapped in some kind of a sash on which it is written “Est. 1783 GLASGOW”. The metaphor is rich with multiple interpretations. It could symbolize the victory of man over the machine, the struggle that lies behind the printed word, it could attempt to make the newspaper look like the bringer of the word, the bearer of wisdom, etc. It is worth mentioning that whatever interpretation we choose, the light that it casts upon the newspaper is always a positive one. As for *The Scotsman*, the decoding is much simpler since the symbol they use is also the national symbol: the thistle. The intention of the editorial staff is clear: the team behind *The Scotsman* wants the paper to be

Figure 2



perceived as the representative of Scotland, in the same way in which the thistle stands for Scotland itself. Another similar feature is the mutual claim of being “Scotland’s National Newspaper”; the fact should be mentioned here that, as far as *The Herald* is concerned, the editors went even further and added some pre-modifiers claiming that we deal with the “best-selling quality” newspaper in the country. Moreover, the colour used to mention this is orange which symbolizes optimism, activity, and vitality.

The differences between the two Scottish newspapers, though little, are still worth interpreting. Thus, the lack of adornments in the case of the capital letters used for the title of **THE SCOTSMAN** might denote honesty and professionalism, while the somehow bulky bold letters in **The Herald** suggest strength and determinacy. In conclusion, one might say that both newspapers ‘convey’ a similar message; they promote the image of strong, reliable, ready-to-fight newspapers (an allusion to the stereotyped image about the Scotsmen’s temper perhaps).

We cross the Atlantic again, for the last time in this section, to analyse six more mastheads. The first two of them are from two New York publications, *The New York Observer* (see Fig. 3 and 4) and *The New York Sun* (see Fig. 5). Both of them display a similar layout, i.e. an image is inserted in the middle of the title, both images make use of the sunrays in the background and both mimic the old air of the newspapers from the 19<sup>th</sup>

century, probably in an attempt to give more credibility to the newspaper by claiming to have a long tradition and, consequently, experience. However, the similarities stop here and we shall focus now on what distinguishes them and how these features can be relevant from a semiotic perspective.

The title of *The New York Observer* is printed in bold large size black capital letters with the exception of the definite article which is placed at the middle of the page right above the image inserted in front of the word *Observer*. The tallness of the letters is tightly connected to

Figure 3



the height of the skyscrapers that can be guessed in the background of the image. This one shows a man that seems to watch something very carefully while holding a newspaper under his right arm. Because the sample we scanned is rather small, fact which makes the reading of the image rather difficult, we added a second photo (see Fig. 4) presenting the man in larger details hoping that this will help understanding the manner in which the masthead is organized. It is in fact an invitation to subscription in which the man is clearly displayed.

Figure 4



dressed like in 1950s or maybe even earlier. The character has a mysterious air as if concealing something or not wishing to be noticed while ‘observing’ a certain activity. The newspaper under his arm could be felt as a tool (if not a weapon) useful in his enterprise; hence the message: read our newspaper to have the ‘informational’ weapons to protect against the avalanche of events taking place around you. The placement of this detective-like individual in the middle of those impressive skyscrapers could be interpreted as (i) either a scene from one of those highly in fashion detective movies in which an apparent insignificant character (with whom the viewer of the movie and, by extension, the reader of the newspaper, identifies) manages to solve all kinds of mysteries and win in the end, or (ii), on a

higher metaphorical level, as an isolated man in a suffocating jungle out of which one can get only if well equipped with efficient survival tools (here, the information available in the newspaper).

In the case of *The New York Sun*, the message seems to be more optimistic. This effect is ensured by the presence of burgundy-red whose significance we have mentioned already (see the analysis of *The Daily Telegraph*, p. 114), on the one hand, and by the rising sun right from the middle of the masthead. The editors have found an interesting manner of suggesting the

Figure 5



special geo-economical status that New York has acquired over the centuries. The two women flanking the sun rising in the background are facing west and east, respectively. The two cardinal points are metaphorically suggested by means of a train pulled by a steam engine towards west (the allusion to the saga of building the transcontinental railway needs no supplementary comments) and by a ship jointly propelled by sails and again a steam engine sailing towards east. One has to admit, though, that the geometry of this arrangement is at least questionable if not illogical. If left means west and right means east, then why is the sun rising in the north? Of course, it is an error of design but, for dramatic purposes, one has to accept that placing a bunch of sunrays springing from the heart of the picture with the name of the city bent at the end of these sunrays manages to send a catchy image after all.

#### References

- [1] Rovența-Frumușani, D., *Semiotica discursului științific*, Editura Științifică, București, 1995, p. 39.
- [2] Marcheteau, M. et al., *Engleza pentru economie. Business and Economics. Metoda LAROUSSE*, Translation by Daniela Nicolescu, TEORA, București, 2000, p. 75.

<sup>1</sup> See URL: <<http://www.magma.ca/~daoust/colours-meaning.html>>.