

“... the price we pay for peace”: Luba Lukova’s Poster Art

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Abstract

Placed at the crossroads of fine and applied arts, of advertising and reproduction, the poster is a hybrid visual medium which synthesises words and images to communicate its message through both semantic content and aesthetic features. Significantly, the poster’s visual cues are arranged into patterns that are powerfully direct and focused, meant to act on and trigger responses from the potential audience, while, through its manipulation of cultural codes, generalised meanings and beliefs, they can construct or deconstruct contemporary ‘myths,’ the same as other multimodal texts, like film, may do. Hence, the aim of the paper is to offer a semiotic analysis of Luba Lukova’s conceptual poster entitled War and Peace in order to demonstrate how, by means of a simple visual language, her work revisits and revises the myths of ‘war heroics’ and ‘blissful peace,’ imparting a strong social and political vision as poignantly and effectively as complex multimodal texts like Michael Cimino’s ‘The Deer Hunter’, Hal Ashby’s ‘Coming Home’, or Oliver Stone’s ‘Born on the Fourth of July’ did on the screen.

Key words: conceptual illustration, political poster, anti-war film, myth, semiotics, multimodality

Luba Lukova is a Bulgarian-born illustrator and designer, who emigrated to the United States at the beginning of the 1990s, to achieve international recognition and fame as one of the most compelling image makers of the present day. Often compared to that of the German Expressionists and Picasso, her work is one of the best examples for the tradition of conceptual illustration which combines “strong, original and thought-provoking ideas with personal vision and imagination” (Wigan 2008: 66).

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One of the artist's often resorted to means of communicating her themes (which bear on important social and political issues of the day) is the poster, as a medium through which Lukova can advance seemingly plain and iconic images that, nevertheless, have the ability to conjure a rich metaphorical and symbolic texture in the viewers' minds. Either exhibited in museums, arts galleries and other venues, or published as portfolio collections like *Women of the Bible* (1999), *Social Justice* (2008) and *Graphic Guts* (2011), her posters condense ideas, emotions and meanings into indelible visuals that de-familiarise the ordinary or deconstruct the commonplace to challenge her viewers' thought and examination of essential issues "that include peace, war, ecology, immigration, and privacy" (Desmond 2011: 189).

War and Peace, a poster produced by Lukova to be used as a promotional material for a personal exhibition held in 2004 at Villa Julie College (now Stevenson University, Maryland) (in Foster 2008: 122) [1], is one such outstanding example. If one excludes the functional typographic text on the right-hand side of the image which details on the circumstances of the exhibition (missing in the same poster's version which was included in her 2017 exhibition held at Museum of Design Atlanta [2]) (Flusche 2017), the piece first strikes the viewer through its apparent simplicity: against a blue hue background, the central compositional structure is made up of a block of black and white shapes, which merge with the negative space through thin blue lines used to detail the outlines of a seemingly incongruous juxtaposition of forms and objects which pile along the vertical axis of the image. From top to bottom, one discerns an almost trapezoidal-like black form with slightly curved side and bottom flanks to which what looks like a bell-shaped birdcage placed upside-down is attached and fastened on the left-hand side with a key resembling a winder. Inside the cage a white bird, which occupies almost its entire volume, flutters its wings and spreads its claws against the black wire mesh. The cage itself ends not with a hook (as its reversed position might prompt us expect), but with a black foot mount which protrudes in the leg opening of a similarly black man's boot tightened with laces.

Beyond this first-order (or denotative) meaning triggered by the immediate impact of Lukova's poster, at closer inspection, the visual cues of the composition arrange into a pattern that structure differently its understanding. In this second-order (or connoted) meaning, the white bird becomes a dove (culturally understood as a symbol for peace) which is imprisoned in the cage made up of a prosthetic limb that replaces the severed leg of a man, most likely a soldier (a metonymic representation of war).

In the 2004 version of the poster, the vertically-aligned text on the right-hand side spelled with a white 'all caps' font replicates and anchors this implied meaning, while Lukova herself confessed that: "I wanted to convey a message about the price we pay for peace. The idea for this poster came after watching a film about handicapped U.S. soldiers returning from the battlefields" (q. in Foster 2008: 122).

Though not specifically mentioning its title, one cannot fail to think about a host of war movies (most of them appearing in the aftermath of the Vietnam conflict) which dismantle the high 'heroics' of war privileged by the "Patriotic Era" Hollywood productions of the Second World War and the decades immediately following it. Seminal among them are: Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which unashamedly displays the "brutal, arbitrary and essentially incomprehensible nature of war" (Cinephilia & Beyond 2017) through its sombre story of three returned steelworkers and Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder; Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), which highlights the plight of paraplegic war veterans, epitomised by its protagonist's attempts to overcome the agony, fury and frustration of having been turned into a cripple, confined to the wheelchair and adapt to the diminished circumstances of his new existence); or, Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), which similarly strips off myths of a warrior's sacrificial glory through imaginatively re-creating the biography of a real "paralyzed antiwar veteran Ron Kovic" (Klavan 2008), whose physical and emotional journey from committed recruit to disenchanted peace militant has continued to ring true in the context of subsequent wars, be them in Iran, Afghanistan or Bosnia.

As such, the story that films as those mentioned above tell remains basically the same: "Young, idealistic men enter foreign wars for patriotic reasons, have their bodies destroyed, and return to a mixed response from the country that sent them — adulation in the form of widespread parades and incredibly lousy treatment in Veterans Affairs hospitals" (Marche 2014); or, in Lukova's words, "the price we pay for peace."

Even if both films and posters are multimodal texts, which integrate diverse methods of communication to convey meaning, the former are considered more complex, since they rely on a dynamic combination of "the semiotic systems of moving image, audio, spoken language, written language, space, and gesture (acting)" (Education and Training, VSG 2018) to deliver their message. Yet, though seemingly placed at a disadvantage by it being categorised as simple multimodal text, which resorts to fewer

communication modes – “still image, and spatial design” (Education and Training, VSG 2018), to which written language is sometimes added – the poster could be no less effective than the filmic text in getting its message across to the viewer.

To prove the above, a semiotic analysis of Lukova’s *War and Peace* might further clarify how her work revisits and revises the same myth related to war heroics, which formed the thematic core of the three filmic texts mentioned above. As such, the key sign of the poster’s image is the caged bird, foregrounded by occupying the mid-position within the main volume of the image, and brought into focus by the contrasting interplay of white and black against the mediating blue hue. Its signifier (the shape that the thin curved and decorative lines of a slightly warmer hue of blue delineate as that of a bird with white plumage, a small bill and a round delicate head above a larger and compact body with stretched out wings, tail and legs) refers us to a signified conceptualised not only as a species of birds known as ‘the Columbidae’, but as a specific variety within it, namely that of “the white domestic pigeon, the symbol known as the ‘dove of peace’” (Raferty 2019). Hence, in Peircean terms, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is both iconic (there is a perceived resemblance between the visual shape and the bird known as a dove), and symbolic (since the association of ‘dove’ with ‘peace’ is “purely conventional”, “agreed upon and learned” (Chandler 2007: 36) as a cultural code.

In addition, representing the dove with fluttering wings, fluffed tail and spread-out claws inside the cage turns it into an index of arrested movement, panic and pain, an ‘un-natural’ state for its inborn instinct to fly. The wired enclosure, in its turn, is both an icon of a cage and an index of captivity, limitation or oppression. Yet, by being shaped as a prosthetic leg, its value is modified, while the transfer of meanings from cage to prosthesis (working on the analogy between the bird’s and the mutilated soldier’s fate) turns it into a metaphor for human imprisonment in an ‘un-natural’ state, suffering and missed opportunities.

This meaning is reinforced by the spatial arrangement of the composition (with the unexpected anchoring of its visual structure along the top horizontal base line, and the negative space left between the boot and the bottom line of the poster) - symbolic of both instability and reversal, as well as by the functional contrasts established by the work: organic (curved and squiggly lines, the dove) / inanimate (straight lines and geometric forms, the cage/prosthesis); natural (bird, leg)/un-natural

(cage, prosthesis); light (white dove as peace) / darkness (black cage/prosthesis, black boot for army, war); life (peace) / death (war).

In conclusion, beyond the apparent simplicity and accessibility of Luba Lukova's *War and Peace*, its strong imagery pivoting around the central conceptual metaphor of peace arrested by the debris of war puts forth a strong social and political artistic vision, proving that "[i]t is a form of communication that can impart a direct or subtle message without the support of words" (Brazell & Davies 2014: 88), dismantling myths of heroic war and blissful peace as effectively as complex multimodal texts (such as its three filmic precursors) did. Yet, as distinct from film, Lukova's clear and concise, yet sophisticated and complex images create an aesthetic experience which is universal and international, transcending linguistic or cultural barriers, at the same time at which it compels the viewers to change perception and empathise with the humanity of her chosen subject, not least proof of the fact that "[p]osters bring a kind of humanness and emotion that the screen-based media can't provide yet" (Lukova in Foster 2008: 116).

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Notes

[1] Luba Lukova, *War and Peace*. Poster for 2004 Villa Julie College exhibition. 68.58 x 99.06 cm. Reproduced in Foster, J. (2008) *New Masters of Poster Design. Poster Design for the Next Century*. London: Rockport Publishers, p. 122.

[2] Luba Lukova, *War and Peace*. Poster for 2017 MODA [Museum of Design Atlanta] exhibition. 68.58 x 99.06 cm [online]. Available from: <https://designobserver.com/feature/can-a-design-museum-change-the-world/39633>. [Accessed: 20 March 2019].

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