

Multimodal Discourse: Critical Analysis within an Interactive Software Environment

O'Halloran, K. L., Tan, S., Smith B. A., and Podlasov, A. (submitted for publication, Dec 2009). *Critical Discourse Studies*.

Abstract

Critical discourse analysts are increasingly required to account for multimodal phenomena constructed through language and other resources (e.g. images, sound and music) and to relate higher-level critical insights on the social motivations of these texts to their realizations in lower-level expressive phenomena, and vice versa. In this paper we report on the development of interactive software resources for critical multimodal discourse analysis (O'Halloran in press 2009; O'Halloran et al. 2010) to help achieve these aims. The critical discourse studies field, being itself interdisciplinary, and with its holistic approach, is well placed to take advantage of interactive software, as these resources encourage the application, exploration and correlation of various analytical perspectives at different levels of description. Focusing on the analysis of a short video advertisement, we show how the interactive (multimodal) digital environment is one in which the discourse analyst can draw upon different traditions of analysis, including 'mainstream' and social semiotic traditions, as well as other traditions such as media studies, in a critically self-reflexive manner.

Keywords: critical discourse analysis; multimodal analysis; social semiotics; multimodal analysis software; interactive digital media

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1. Challenges to critical studies of multimodal discourse

From its infancy, the study of semiotics has identified the need to develop holistic and socially aware theories and descriptions of semiosis, applicable to all signs and sign systems but also capable of taking into account the specific characteristics of different semiotic phenomena. Saussure (1916/1974) foresaw the need for a 'science that studies the life of signs within society' (p. 16); while Barthes (1957/1972), calling for the 'development of a semiological science', observed: '[i]n a single day, how many really non-signifying fields do we cross? Very few, sometimes none' (p. 112). Such a science must also be capable of accounting for the interaction of signs within texts to create more complex signs and meanings: what Preziosi (1986, p. 45) addressed as 'the implications of a holistic and multimodal approach to semiosis'.

The social semiotics tradition (Hodge & Kress 1988), based on and adapted from Halliday's (1978) insight that language realizes and thus reflects in its internal organization the social functions for which it serves (language as social resource), has addressed such a need, positioning signs within the context of socially constructed discourse formations rather than as isolated phenomena. The broad social semiotic theoretical framework has contributed significantly to the development of the critical discourse studies approach (e.g., Fairclough, 1992), with its emphasis on the role of discourse in social empowerment and change, and has also formed the basis of work

within an emerging tradition of multimodal studies (e.g., Jewitt, 2009; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006 [1996]; O'Toole 1994), which has itself been informed throughout its development by critical discourse perspectives.

The study of multimodal discourse – discourse involving the interaction of multiple semiotic resources such as (spoken and written) language, gesture, dress, architecture, proximity (and in film for example) lighting, movement, gaze, camera angle, etc - received three major impetuses during the twentieth century. Firstly, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) observe, the long-term 'distinct preference for monomodality' in Western culture shifted, such that both the popular and 'high culture' arts began 'to use an increasing variety of materials and to cross boundaries between the various art, design and performance disciplines, towards multimodal Gesamtkunstwerke, multimedia events and so on' (p. 1). Secondly, as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) go on to claim, '[t]he desire for crossing boundaries inspired twentieth century semiotics. The main schools of semiotics all sought to develop a theoretical framework applicable to all semiotic modes, from folk costume to poetry, from traffic signs to classical music, from fashion to theatre' (p. 1).

The third major impetus to the study of multimodal discourse study during the twentieth century has been the increasing technological power, particularly of computers, to record, replay and analyze multimodal texts and phenomena. Advances in recent years in software tools for the study of complex phenomena, particularly those taken up and developed in application to the physical sciences (including, importantly, data visualization resources), offer further opportunities for those attempting to account for the immense complexities of multimodal communication and culture. Yet to date many of these software resources remain to be exploited by

social science communities in general, and have not been adapted for the study of semiotic (abstract) phenomena.

In this paper we report on the development of interactive software resources for multimodal critical discourse analysis (O'Halloran, in press 2009; O'Halloran et al., 2010). The critical discourse studies field, being itself interdisciplinary, and with its holistic approach, is well placed to take advantage of such contemporary software techniques, as these resources encourage the application, exploration and correlation of various analytical perspectives at different levels of description, towards the overarching goal of understanding and showing how texts reflect and enact social structures and practices. Two major challenges to contemporary critical discourse analysts are thus here addressed: on the one hand, to account for multimodal phenomena constructed through language and other resources (e.g. images, sound and music); and on the other hand to relate higher-level critical insights on the social motivations of text to their realizations in lower-level expressive phenomena, and vice versa.

We draw in the present analysis upon work within both the 'mainstream' and social semiotic traditions, as well as from other traditions such as media studies, showing, within the constraints of the printed page, how multimodal texts construct meaning by drawing upon a complex array of semiotic resources and strategies, and how interactive digital tools may assist in the critical discourse analysis of these meanings and their expression. Focusing on the analysis of a short video advertisement, we take Barthes' (1957/1982) analysis of the mythic sign in a static image as our starting point, applying his approach to the study of multimodal semiosis within a dynamic audiovisual text. We will show how the interactive (multimodal) digital environment is one in which the critical discourse approach can not only draw

upon different traditions of analysis, but can also be applied to one's own analyses in a critically self-reflexive view of one's own analytical practices.

2. Multimodal analysis within the software environment

Barthes' (1957) famous analysis of the mythic sign in "Myth today" was presented through the analysis of a static visual image, significantly contextualized with respect to Barthes' own personal first experience of the text presented as present-tense narrative: 'I am at the barber's, and a copy of Paris-Match is offered to me. On the cover, a young Negro in a French uniform is saluting...' (Barthes, 1957, p. 101). Such texts were in Barthes' time more accessible to study than dynamic audiovisual texts in two ways. First, one can look at a static image longer than any particular part/frame of a dynamic visual text; hence it's possible to remember more details of a static image. A scholar in Barthes' time could look repeatedly at a static visual image (by buying the magazine and taking it home) whereas repeated viewing of most dynamic audiovisual media in those days was not readily available (it is a question whether, from the evidence of his discourse, Barthes was working from memory or with the text in front of him). Second, the meanings, although multiple, one can read into this image are realized through the limited semiotic resources (sign systems) of one form of expression, the static visual mode in which language combines with image. In a typical multimodal dynamic audiovisual text, many semiotic resources are co-deployed to make meaning, as we shall demonstrate in the following analysis, making the analysis more complex. One issue we address then is the extent to which Barthes' analysis of the mythic sign can be extended to the analysis of a video text.

Our video text is HSBC's 2004 "Easy Rider" motorcycle television commercial, which formed part of the bank's three-year-long "Cultural Collisions"

advertising campaign launched in 2002, which was designed to stress the importance of local knowledge and cultural differences across the globe, and to reinforce HSBC's brand-image as 'The world's local bank'. According to the bank's website¹, the campaign underpins 'HSBC's philosophy that the world is a rich and diverse place in which cultures and people should be treated with respect', and was developed on the basis of 'worldwide consumer research which found that, while people appreciate the value of international organisations and services, they question the prevailing "one size fits all" global model'. As the bank's spokesperson proclaims, HSBC is 'not a "one-size fits all" organisation ... This new campaign makes a clear and powerful statement about what HSBC stands for. I believe it will differentiate the HSBC brand not just from other financial organisations, but from other global brands'.

This particular advertisement shows a biker riding through a variety of mostly remote, sometimes desolate, scenes within South America (see the film strip in Figure 1-A), over the soundtrack of a cover version of a Jimi Hendrix song (1971), "Ezy Ryder". The song and many of the scenes will resonate with listeners/viewers familiar with the iconic film *Easy Rider* (1969), starring Peter Fonda, and with popular 1960s counter-culture in general. The advertisement discourse revolves around differing culturally-determined interpretations of a sign: the biker, on his travels, repeatedly receives and makes a gesture (see Figure 1-B) which, the narrative voice-over informs us, means 'everything's OK' throughout South America – except, we hear, in Brazil, where 'it's really rather rude' (see also Table 1).

Table 1. Transcript of voice-over narration

00:37	All over South America (.)
00:39	this gesture (.) means everything's OK (mmh) (mmh)
00:42	Apart from Brazil (.) that is (•) (•)
00:45	Where it's really ra::ther ru::de (•) (•) (•) (•) (•) (•)
00:50	We <u>never</u> > underestimate < the importance of local knowledge (•) (•)
00:54	> HSBC (.) The world's local bank <

At this point the biker, eating in a café in a remote location, makes this sign (see Figure 3-A), the music stops, and in the almost complete silence (one can hear, faintly, cicadas, and the clinking of a plate) several locals stare menacingly at the biker (see Figure 3-B). The voiceover narrator proclaims 'we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge', the bank logo appears (see Figure 3-C), the loud music starts up again, and the final scene shows the biker leaving town, wobbling along on a flat rear tire, no doubt courtesy of the offended locals (although he does get off more lightly than the character Wyatt in the *Easy Rider* film).

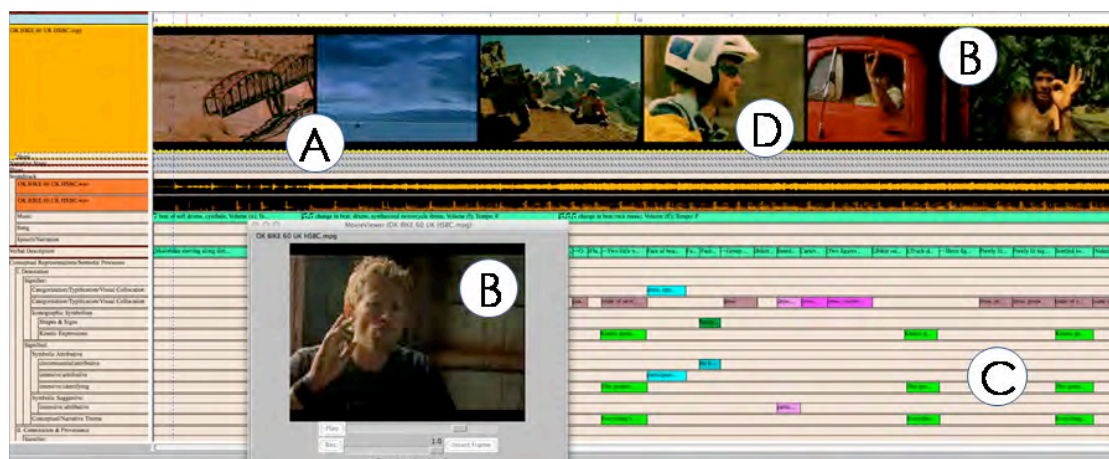


Figure 1. 'Everything's OK'

Corporate television advertisements generally fall within the sphere of non-product advertising, which is used predominantly 'to communicate a name, presence, or even the philosophy of a company' (Arens, 2002, p. 357). According to Budd, Craig and Steinman (1999), corporate advertisers seldom tell us directly that we should buy their products or services. Instead, they try to associate their products or services with 'intensely held values and emotions' by 'appealing to the more vulnerable realm[s] of feeling and association' (Budd et al., 1999, pp. 88-92).

The complex nature of corporate advertisements is further compounded by the fact that they typically draw on a variety of different film forms, types and genres, and may even combine a number of these within a single text. For example, corporate advertisements may present their information in the form of a filmic *narrative*, complete with a main protagonist, and cause-and-effect relationships. Alternatively, they may prefer the factual qualities of a *documentary*, or the simple developmental patterns of *categorical* film form. In addition, corporate advertisers may wish to benefit from the eloquence of *rhetorical* form, especially if they want to present a convincing argument and/or persuade their target audiences to adopt a particular point of view. Here, the connections viewers are encouraged to make in will tend to be associated with, or guided by, a host of ideological concepts, values, and beliefs, which may be established in terms of visual qualities and other techniques that are comparable to the concept of myth and metaphor (see Bordwell & Thompson 2004, pp. 154-157).

All of these techniques appear to be amalgamated in the HSBC-text. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1981 [1935]; 1986) notions of heteroglossia and intertextuality, the HSBC-text speaks with many 'voices', mixing and invoking multiple genres, ideological concepts, values, myths and beliefs, and inviting multiple readings by a

(projected) heterogeneous audience. We will examine the text both in terms of a denotative reading and of some of the multiple connotative readings suggested in (our interpretation) of the text.

As noted by Chandler (2008), '[t]he semiotic analysis of cultural myths involves an attempt to deconstruct the ways in which codes operate within particular popular texts or genres, with the goal of revealing how certain values, attitudes and beliefs are supported whilst others are suppressed'. Consequently, to demystify the 'language' of corporate television advertisements and to discover the 'key' to their relationships, one needs to look closely at the semiotic systems and the synergistic processes that operate to make meaning in such texts. The challenge it poses for the analyst in the digital age is to show how these synergistic processes operate, individually and multiplicatively, and how they interconnect.

This type of interpretative analysis can, of course, be carried out either discursively, or by way of page-based templates and frameworks, which is still current practice in much multimodal, social semiotic research (cf. Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Thibault, 2000; Tan, 2009). Page-based methodologies, however, are not only extremely laborious and time-consuming to construct, but often remain inaccessible for the reader. Moreover, in page-based analysis, the onus will always be on the analyst to conceptualize semiotic processes for the reader, either textually or graphically, which, in fact, always involves an abstraction of what is actually represented on screen.

In contrast, the application of interactive digital software offers the analyst the opportunity to explore how meanings are instantiated, individually and multiplicatively, and how they interact. A digital platform enables the analyst to approach this task interactively, multimodally, and topographically, by drawing on

vertically ordered annotation strips within the analysis interface template, in addition to horizontally time-aligned colour-coded annotation bars or 'nodes', that together represent precisely which semiotic choices are activated at a certain point, and how they unfold sequentially along the timeline and in relation to one another, both paradigmatically and syntagmatically (see Figure 2-A).

The semiotic choices are selected from a pre-defined network of 'nodes' of possible signifiers and signifieds in the systems browser (see Figure 2-B), which not only helps to semi-automate the analysis, using a point-and-click interface, but also serves to render the analysis graphically and textually visible at the same time.

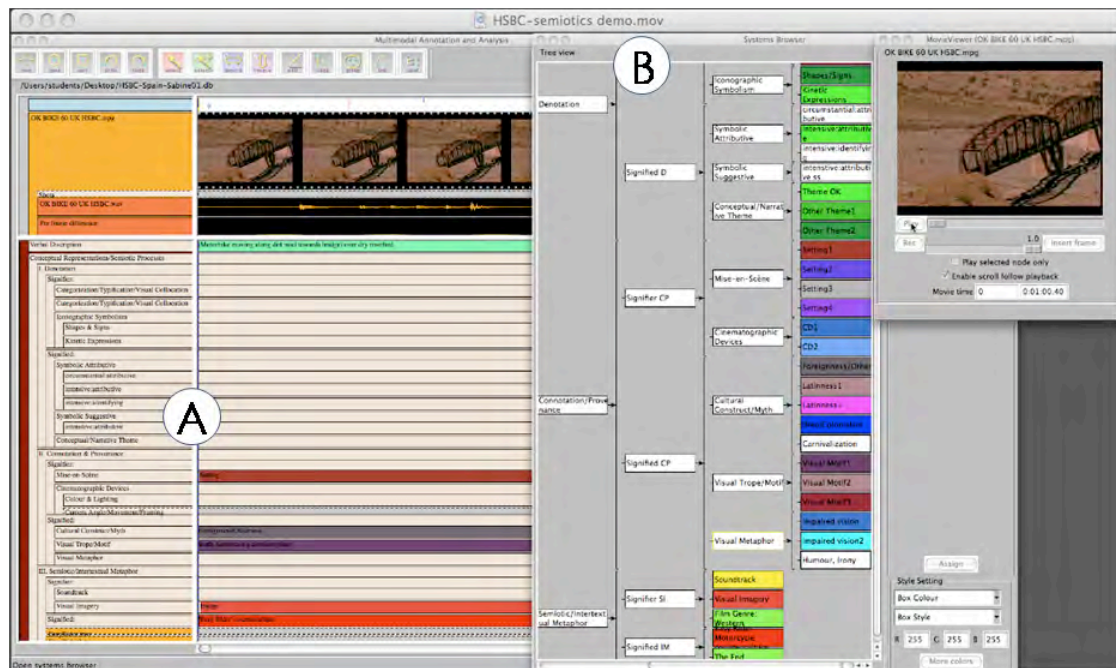


Figure 2. Digital analysis interface template

3. Denotation analysis

As outlined above, the interpretation of corporate television advertisements rests on the proposition that they do not acquire or sustain their meaning potential in isolation. According to van Leeuwen (2001), the 'key' to unraveling the mysteries (or

obviousnesses) of visual semiotics is developing an understanding of the different layers of meaning. The first layer, he proposes, is the layer of *denotation*. Denotation, he claims, is often favored in situations 'where the producers of the text have an interest in trying to get a particular message across to a particular audience, and in such cases there will be signs to point us towards the preferred level of generality' (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 95). As Barthes pointed out (see Chandler 2007, p. 138), denotation can be seen as nothing more than a naturalized or widely held connotative interpretation.

We find that in our text the visual narrative themes which project that 'All over South America, this gesture means Everything's OK, apart from Brazil that is', and which affirm 'HSBC [as] the world's local bank' (e.g., the assemblage of red triangular shapes which individually symbolize HSBC's logo and collectively signify a map of the world), are all realized at the level of denotation. In symbiosis with the narrative voice-over, they represent the text's main rhetorical messages which serve to stress the importance of local knowledge, and reinforce HSBC's brand-image. Both message-elements (the visual and the verbal) are presented to the audience as denotative 'fact' and incontrovertible information, signified in the software analysis interface via time-aligned nodes (see Figure 1-C).

An analysis of the meaning potential conveyed by the synchronous filmic narrative, in turn, will focus on the layer of denotation that realizes the literal message of 'what, or who, is being depicted here' (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 94). This type of meaning potential may be achieved through *conceptual representations*, or *relational processes* (see Halliday, 1994), which convey information about the represented participants' qualities, their social status, race, class, type, and/or position. These denotative meanings are generally presented as 'self-evident' information through the

processes of *categorization* or *typification*, by means of visual stereotypes (e.g., in clothing, hairstyle, physiognomic attributes), or *symbolic attributive* processes which encode 'what a participant means or is' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 105). For example, in the HSBC-text, the biker's identity is first established through visual collocation with his bike, which is characteristically salient and placed in the foreground (cf. Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). His identity is then further refined, whereby stereotypical physiognomic attributes or 'object signs' (cf. Thibault, 2000; van Leeuwen, 2001), such as the helmet, scruffy beard and sunglasses, which together function to identify him as a certain type, namely, a biker. Subsequently, the viewer is afforded a glimpse of the biker's cultural affiliation that is signalled denotatively through a process of *iconographic symbolism*, which relates the ideas and concepts attached to the 'object-signs' or 'shapes with symbolic value' (van Leeuwen 2001, p. 107), such as the European Union insignia on his helmet, for example (see Figure 1-D).

Symbolic suggestive processes, in contrast, 'represent meaning and identity as coming from within' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, p. 112). In the HSBC-text, they are near-mental, 'ascriptive'-type qualities concerned with sense-perception (see Halliday, 1994, p. 120), and are realized by the figures' kinetic expressions, such as the gaze (e.g., the menacing stare of the male figures in Figure 3-B), intimating that participants are either angry/hostile/intimidating, or (as shown in Figure 4-A), sensual/sexual/alluring.



Figure 3. Denotation and symbolic suggestive processes

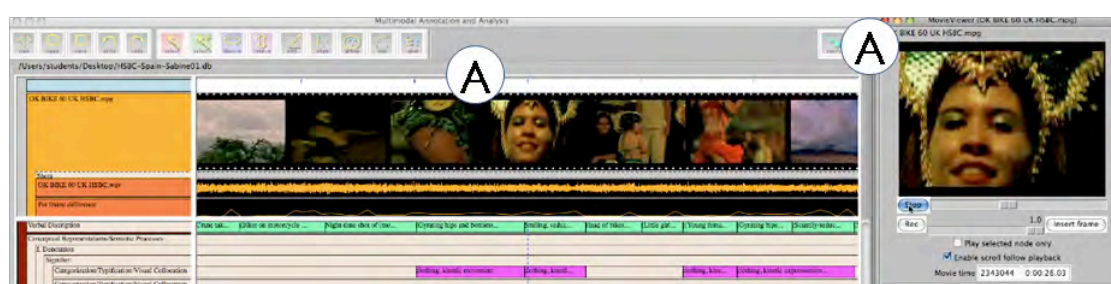


Figure 4. Symbolic suggestive processes: the cinematic gaze

The latter reading is, of course, reinforced by the subjectivity of the cinematic gaze in mainstream Western narrative film (see Mulvey, 1988), where the central narrative is generally constructed around what the male protagonist sees, involving the complex dynamics of narrative syntax and voyeuristic pleasure. According to Neale (1993, pp. 16-17), in mainstream Western cinema, it is the hero who functions as the bearer of the voyeuristic look, whereas the body of the woman as the object to-be-looked-at is seen as a perfect product which, stylized and fragmented by extreme close-ups, then becomes the direct recipient of the spectator's look.

4. Multiple readings within the interactive software environment

Viewed through the digital analysis template (see nodes in the bottom half of Figure 5-A which are colour-coded in the software), it becomes immediately apparent that in the HSBC-text conceptual representations fulfil a much larger semiotic role than discussed in the previous section, by drawing extensively on the signifying principles of the second layer of semiotic meaning construction, that is, the processes of *connotation* and *provenance* (see Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). In contrast to denotative processes, which realize the literal message of 'what, or who, is being depicted' (van Leeuwen 2001, p. 94), connotational processes conceptualize much wider socio-cultural ideas and values, where the represented participants 'stand for' or 'are signs of' something else (van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 96). Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) notion of *provenance* derives from Barthes's (1972; 1977) concepts of 'myth', which function by importing 'parasitical signs' from other contexts (another era, social group, and/or culture) into the system: in other words, 'signs which use an already formulated "literal" or "denotative" sign and load [them] with a secondary or connotative meaning which then pushes the literal, denotative meaning into the background...' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 72; cf. Chandler, 2002). Provenance invokes the meaning potential of cultural myths and stereotypes, which, on their own accord, can signify whole discourses together with the (positive and negative) values and ideas attached to them (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, p. 73). Connotational signifiers are 'never neutral', they point out, but always 'invested with affect' and a 'strong sense of positive or negative evaluation' (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001, p. 73).



Figure 5. Connotation and provenance

There are a variety of connotative readings possible in the text; but as Chandler points out (2007, p. 139), such readings are inter-subjective and therefore finite in number, ‘determined by the codes the interpreter has access to’. We can thus analyze the text in terms of a cline of denotation-connotation: for example, for those familiar with 1960s youth popular (counter-) culture many of the connotations we authors read into the text, below, will be reasonably transparent and thus could be considered more denotative in nature, while for others, who do not have access to the requisite intertextual knowledge, such readings may not be available or may be open to interpretation. Indeed, multiple readings of such connotative meanings – for example, of the various representations of Latin American people and landscape in the text – are always possible. As Chandler (2008) rightly observes:

[t]he task of ‘denaturalizing’ such cultural assumptions is problematic when the semiotician is also a product of the same culture, since membership of a culture involves ‘taking for granted’ many of its dominant ideas. Nevertheless, where we seek to analyse our own

cultures in this way it is essential to try to be explicitly reflexive about 'our own' values.

For example, many of the conceptual representations in the HSBC-text function to introduce a host of embedded and interrelated semiotic tropes or motifs, all of which seem to invoke a (neo-) colonial discourse loaded with cross-cultural stereotypes such as '*latinidad*' (or *Latin-ness*) and '*carnivalization*', as identified by Caldas-Coulthard (2003) in her study of cross-cultural representations of 'otherness' in the print-media. From this perspective, the HSBC-text appears to exploit the very same 'icons' in the construction of 'foreignness' as observed by Caldas-Coulthard (2003), most of which tend to portray Latin-ness in terms of negative values (signified in the digital interface in the muted shades of dark blue, grey, brown and purple; Figure 5-A). In the HSBC-text, images of barren landscapes, ominously dark skies (Figure 1-A), dimly-lit, sparse interiors, poor children, and half-naked South American natives predominate (Figure 5-B), transmitting a discourse of third-world poverty and isolation (cf. Caldas-Coulthard 2003). In case of the HSBC-text, the natives' position of inferiority is further heightened by the adopted 'point-of-view' (as conveyed by the high angle shots), which effectively emphasizes their diminutiveness and/or powerless (third-world) status (Figure 5-C).

Although in some shots South America appears to be contextualized as a 'happy place' (cf. Caldas-Coulthard, 2003), in particular, as signified through the images of beautiful, smiling women in colorful and glittering costumes, keeping in line with Bakhtin's notion of *carnival* (see Stam, 2000, p. 18), the extreme close-up shots of the female body ultimately serve to reinforce the negative stereotype of women as objects of sexual gratification (e.g., see Figure 4-A).

It is important to note, however, that the 'recontextualizer' in this case is not the producer of the text (that is, HSBC, or its advertising agency), but the text's main protagonist, the biker, who is re-contextualized as a neo-colonial 'trailblazer' (one shot depicts him literally 'trailing a blaze'). The visual narrative is presented predominantly from the viewpoint of the biker whose 'colonial' way of seeing is reflected in the text's subjective representations.

Seen from another perspective, the scenes of the Latin American landscape and cultural life serve predominantly to realize a discourse of the 'otherness' of the world the 'easy rider' in assuming he can effortlessly explore a new world, reminding us of its geographical, social and cultural remoteness and exoticism, which feeds into the myth of the 'easy rider' and global traveller.

The clear intertextual references to the *Easy Rider* film become apparent when certain scenes from both texts are closely compared, e.g. shots of the biker on the road exploring 'foreign' regions and culture, gestural communications with locals while riding past, and the music (see Figure 6-A for a comparison of an *Easy Rider* scene and its counterpart in the HSBC advertisement). These references invoke the narrative and themes of that film: travelling and being geographically, socially and culturally outside of one's own world and into that of the 'other' (symbolized at the start of the HSBC advertisement by the rider crossing a bridge, e.g., see Figure 1-A), with potentially tragic consequences (the final scene of the *Easy Rider* film has the main characters making a gesture at a truck driver which brings violent retribution); and the overarching mythic theme of 'freedom' (its attainment and consequences). The myth of the global traveler is thus invoked, who turns his back on the wealth and security of mainstream first-world culture ('Self') to explore and take part in the culture of the 'Other' (e.g., 1960s hippies, dropouts and backpackers).

However, the HSBC-text does more than just reproduce a discourse of ‘freedom’, ‘otherness’ and remoteness. Rather, it presents it for critique: it is the producer of the text (that is, HSBC and its advertising team) that presents the text’s main protagonist, the biker, as a neo-colonial ‘trailblazer’ and ‘seeker after freedom’, and then mocks this character for his presumption, ignorance and arrogance. By deploying the resources of connotation and myth, the HSBC-text effectively transposes the concept of the ‘Other’ unto the biker/easy rider, who thus functions by implication as a collective metaphor for the institutional ‘Other’, that is, HSBC’s potential competitors who – as the voice over narrative implies – sometimes, if not always *‘underestimate the importance of local knowledge’* through flawed readings of the local culture. For example, in his encounters with the ‘other’ (i.e., the local), the biker/easy rider often passes (rapidly) through scenes with his gaze averted, masked by sunglasses, or artificially obscured by cinematographic techniques, which may be interpreted as a visual metaphor (connotative signifier) for his ‘impaired vision’ or ‘flawed’ way seeing the world (see Figure 6-B).

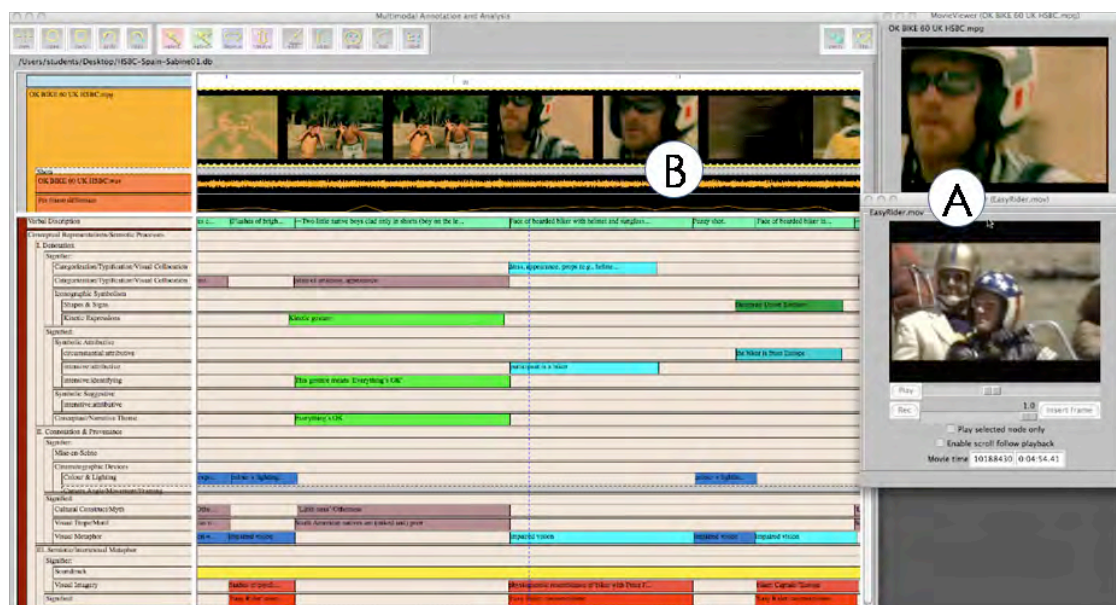


Figure 6. The ‘Easy Rider’

As Arens (2002) points out, corporate advertisers often rely on 'institutional copy to promote a philosophy or extol the merits of an organization' with the explicit intent 'to lend warmth and credibility to the organization's image' (p. 418). It then follows that, to achieve their purpose, 'broadcast commercials must be believable' (Arens, 2002, p. 422). Budd et al. (1999) remind us, however, that television '[r]ealism is not real. It is a signified produced by signifiers, and effect of a set of technical choices made by producers to enhance the credibility and authority of their product' (p. 108). Moreover, filmmakers may not always want the high credibility of institutional copy, preferring instead the documentary quality of the handheld camera (see Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). According to Bordwell and Thompson (2004, pp. 128-129), a documentary, or documentary-like film, asks us to assume that it presents factual and trustworthy information 'about the world outside the film', which may be manipulated for specific effect. Consequently, the multitude of out-of-focus shots, shots with insufficient lighting, imperfect framing, under- or over-exposures, and whip pans which predominate in the HSBC-text challenge the high fidelity approach of a 'professional' documentary film and instead suggest a connotative rather than denotative (factual) reading of the text, imparting an amateurish quality which reinforces the characterisation of the biker someone who lacks relevant knowledge and experience (cf also the low-budget style of the *Easy Rider* film – another intertextual reference).

The truth value or credibility of a television commercial may also be accentuated (or denied) by the authenticity of on-screen characters. As noted by Ian Mills in a video on the analysis of a television commercial by the Australian Film and Television School (1982), the actors who appear in a television commercial may be

chosen explicitly on grounds of their appearance; i.e., they should represent figures of authority that are credible, believable, but also personable. This view is shared by Allan (1998), who claims that clothing and appearance will 'not only help to create the impression of personal integrity and trustworthiness' but 'ratify the authenticity' of the message as a whole (Allan, 1998, p. 125). Accordingly, the credibility of the HSBC-text's main protagonist, who – from an organizational viewpoint – seems to be portrayed rather negatively in terms of dress and appearance (i.e., casual, rough and rugged), effectively diminishes his authority as an institutional spokesperson, thus creating space for the invisible narrator to promote HSBC's credentials through the proclamation '*we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge*'.

5. Multimodal discourse analysis in the digital age

Critical perspectives on discourse motivate the analyst to reject the simplistic 'face-value' interpretation of signs and the assumptions such interpretation makes, by making the analysis answerable to the social practices which underlie and construct both signs and their use within discourses. However, ultimately, whether explicitly acknowledged or not, critical insights into text are dependent upon both the texts themselves and the readings applied by analysts, and here the analyst's own metadiscourse becomes the site for critical 'self-reflexion' (making one's own analysis the site of further critical analysis). Furthermore, such insights must be implementable in and answerable to empirical analysis, a challenge that becomes even more apparent when working within an interactive digital environment.

There are many complementary theoretical and analytical readings of the text possible in addition to the brief observations given above, some of which may be considered relevant to a particular reader, some not; while some analyses may be

relevant only at particular points. For example, from the domain of applied film studies we find, with respect to the montage effect in the first part of the advert – a succession of images with a loud rock music soundtrack – the following observations by Holman (2002, p. 195) to be relevant, that the '[m]usical score alone usually distances us from the picture content, because there is no synchronous [diegetic: the authors] sound...to make things seem real'. This effect, in our video, then sets up the context for a dramatic return to denotative 'reality' when the music is switched off - literally, on a tape player within the café where the biker commits his faux pas, leaving the 'easy rider' alone with his hostile audience. This music thus creates a sort of prosodic affect that dictates how we should interpret the succession of images: not individually, nor in purely denotative terms as a narrative sequence (as in, say a travelogue or documentary), but mythically and affectively as a whole, in terms of the multiple (intertextual) readings discussed above.

The point at which the music stops is particularly significant for the understanding of the text, by creating a marked break in the narrative flux in which the diegetic space is momentarily (and rather unexpectedly) shared with the viewer (cf. Goodman & Graddoll, 1996, p. 59). This is the point in the narrative where the myth of the easy rider ends (for the biker, that is). Here the creators of the text wish us to 'tune in' to the text as a (denotative) narrative sequence of events: the traveler has made a social faux pas in a potentially dangerous remote setting. The shift from connotative to denotative reading is engendered by the soundtrack.

The emotive impact created by semiotic choices in the soundtrack is further evidenced by the narrative voice-over which enlightens the viewer that the committed cultural faux was indeed '*really ra::ther ru:::de*', where the narrator not only dramatically lengthens the vowel sounds, thus adding a layer of '[h]eightedened

dramatic truth' (van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 171), but simultaneously plays on listeners' emotions through *phonological symbolism*, by evoking their intertextual knowledge of the poetic function of language through the process of *alliteration* (i.e., the repetition of the initial consonants /r/), and the melodic patterning of the vowel string [ɪ] [ɑ:] [u:] (see Figure 7). This phonological playfulness helps realize a tone of superiority in the narrative commentary on the biker's plight and folly.

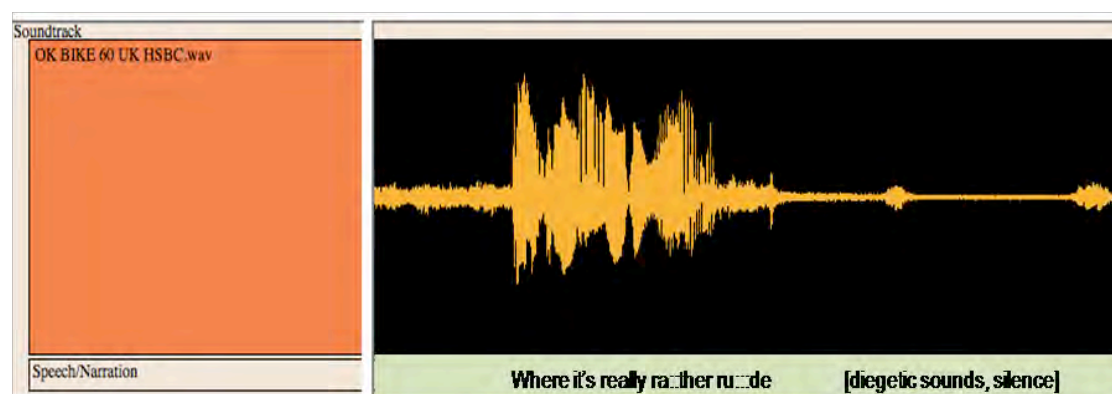


Figure 7. Phonological symbolism

For instance also, the declining prosodic melody of the above utterance (see Figure 7), coming at this significant moment in the text, is not only characteristic of the tone of definitive statements, but also carries associations of authoritativeness, finality and closedness (van Leeuwen, 1999, pp. 98-102), which are further amplified by the physiological modes of speech production (i.e., in terms of tongue position, which is high or rather 'closed' on enunciating the final vowel [u:]) (see van Leeuwen, 1999, p. 147), and reinforced by the marked silence that follows. All this adds commentary to the visual narrative unfolding at that point of sudden dramatic tension as the biker awakens to the reality of his predicament (the shift from the naïve dreaming of the 'easy rider' to the sinking feeling (realis) of having offended locals in a remote location). Of course one could also apply a variety of musical analyses to

explore this text. With the introduction of the voiceover (a variety of) further linguistic and vocal analyses also become relevant, for example to take further account of the haughty smugness in the voice.

The overall meaning potential of filmic representations can be further enhanced by the semiotic value of 'parasitical signs' or myths that are imported from other domains, contexts, or cultures. In this case, the soundtrack and the images together can act as 'mythical' signifiers, or extended semiotic metaphors, where new layers of meaning are continuously added to the original representation. The complexity of such multiple analyses can only be managed via the holistic critical discourse perspectives on the text as a whole in terms of higher-level meanings, social practices, and ideological or mythic constructions. For example, at its most basic level of signification, the initial *auditory motif* which accompanies the introductory phase of image track, i.e., the hum of the motorcycle drone, is merely evocative of the innocuous documentary-type trope of cross-continental travel. At another level, however, the auditory 'motif' is further expanded by yet another layer of meaning, especially for viewers with the requisite intertextual knowledge of the 1960s counterculture movement: that is, the intertextual references in the image track to the *Easy Rider* film, and the 'sound-image' of Jimi Hendrix's cover version of "Ezy Ryder". Drawing on Barthes's (1977) concept of *anchorage*, it could thus be argued that, in the HSBC-text, the deictic reference in the soundtrack lyric 'There goes Easy Rider' fulfils a particular identifying role that seems to 'anchor' (or constrain) the preferred reading of the advertisement in a particular way.

As such, the biker, who does indeed bear a marked resemblance to the screen character portrayed by Peter Fonda in *Easy Rider* (see Figure 6-A), is invested with the additional connotations of flawed individualism, naivety and misplaced self-

confidence, in other words, the very same attributive qualities that are associated with the character Wyatt played by Fonda, and thus fulfill a distinctive re-contextualizing role that effectively underpins the ideological presumptions and myths that motivate this advertisement and provide the context for the shift into denotative narrative and statement of the bank's own commentary.

Chandler's (2007, p. 138) construal of Barthes observations on the denotative sign is particularly important here: 'the process of naturalization...leads to the illusion that denotation is a purely literal and universal meaning which is not at all ideological, and indeed that those connotations which seem most obvious to individual interpreters are just as natural'. It is therefore at this point – the shift from connotative to denotative discourse in the text - that the viewer is most susceptible to the connotative meanings projected by the HSBC advertisement. It is within the context of the narrative constructed in this final scene that the crucial voiceover stating the bank's credentials occurs - '*we never underestimate the importance of local knowledge*'. The advertisement's makers thus use the move from mythic to denotative discourse as the context for the creation of their own mythic theme, that of the 'glocalised bank' who understands local culture (see Koller, 2007), also signified in the denotative bank logo '*the World's local bank*', which has the effect of transforming the verbal proposition into shared socio-cultural knowledge, and elevating HSBC's status in the process.

These multiple interpretations derive from very close, repeated viewing and analysis of the text as audiovisual data, in such a way not readily available prior to the development of sophisticated interactive computational playback and interface/annotation resources. A variety of analyses, discursive and categorical, and the use of colour and other visual techniques applied to represent such annotations in

the interface, allows the user analytical access to the minutiae of signifying phenomena in the audiovisual signal and to show their functions within signs and signifying discourse. The software environment allows the analyst to collocate within the interface a variety of different analyses in multiple configurations, such that larger patterns and correlations of patterns emerge. In this way semiotic phenomena that may be otherwise accessible and presentable only through intuition and discursive analysis can be subjected to empirical analysis of specific features of the text – signs, and their manifold and complex interplay within the text.

Most importantly, the interactive digital environment makes the analysis itself into a 'text', via multiple representations, resemioticizations and visualizations of patterns within different interfaces, which then becomes more readily subject to critical analysis itself. This meta-analytical recursivity lies at the heart of the interactive digital analytical process, as one's own discourse formations become open to interpretation and reinterpretation within further analytical perspectives. Digital semiotics can of course, be readily applied or interpreted as reductionist, particularly when automated analyses of low-level features such as shot and pitch detection, event, speaker, face and optical character recognition and detection are considered, but also in the application of coding schemes such as systemic analysis. Yet the analysis must ultimately answer to the holistic higher-level perspective on a text as a discourse, as a social practice, and herein lies the challenge to critical discourse studies presented by such software resources. Analysis within the digital environment challenges the semiotician to turn theoretical and descriptive insight into applicable analytical schema, and to relate lower-level and higher-level features of a text, to close the 'semantic gap' between the different levels dealt with by computer science and discourse analysts.

Digital analysis of course must always occur in tandem with more traditional ways of working, and will draw upon those for its materials and methods: one cannot hope for a digital software program that will automatically produce insights such as those of Saussure, Barthes, Halliday, or van Leeuwen. But digital semiotics makes such insights more accessible to testing and application through empirical analysis, and provides a much greater capacity for insight into phenomena not readily accessible with the 'naked eye', thus providing an opportunity to advance our theoretical understanding of multimodal semiosis. Digital software is semiotic technology: with it, we find new ways to conduct semiotic research, create semiotics discourse and advance knowledge. In this sense, we are expanding the potential for discourse analysts to create multimodal meta-discourse about (multimodal) discourse, and to critically reflect upon and enact metadiscursive academic-social practices.

Notes

1. <http://www.hsbc.com/1/2/newsroom/news/2002/new-campaign-for-the-worlds-local-bank>

Acknowledgements

The research for this article was supported by Media Development Authority (MDA) in Singapore under the National Research Foundation's (NRF) Interactive Digital Media R&D Program (Grant Number: NRF2007IDM-IDM002-066, Principal Investigator Kay O'Halloran).

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