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Russo-Ukrainian Selected War Images: A Semiotic Study of War Photography on CNN's Website

A B S T R A C T

The Russo-Ukrainian war is a highly complex issue, since it is a long-period conflict and because of the sensitivity of the regional, and international situations. War photography occupies a countable area in war discourse. In this conflict, it is exploited by American news channels, like CNN to reproduce unipolarity by covering one side of truth and by passing ideological messages. Starting from visual social semiotics and its usefulness in dealing with and analyzing images, the study adopts Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar to analyze three war photographs from the website of CNN. The results of the study show that the images are dedicated to the Ukrainians only and to express their conditions. It also shows that the visual meanings are used ideologically against the Russians.

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صور حربية مختارة من الحرب الروسية- الأوكرانية: دراسة سيميائية لتصوير الحرب

على موقع قناة ال سي ان ان

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المستخلص

تعد الحرب الروسية - الأوكرانية مسألة غاية في التعقيد، كونها إحدى الصراعات الطويلة الأمد و بسبب حساسية المواقف الإقليمية و الدولية . التصوير الحربي يشغل حيز لا يمكن نكرانه في خطاب الحرب. في الصراع المذكور، يتم استغلال التصوير الحربي بواسطة القنوات الاخبارية الأمريكية مثل ال سي ان ان لإعادة انتاج أحادية القطب وذلك بتغطية جانب واحد من الحقيقة و القيام بتمرير رسائل ايديولوجية. انطلاقا من السيميائية الاجتماعية المرئية و فائدتها في التعامل و التحليل فيما يتعلق بالصور، تعتمد الدراسة على نموذج كريس و فان لوين للنحو المرئي المحدث في سنة (٢٠٠٦) لتحليل ثلاثة صورة متعلقة بالحرب المذكورة منتدبة من موقع ال سي ان ان على الشبكة العنكبوتية. نتائج الدراسة تظهر بأن الصور كرسست لأجل الأوكرانيين فقط، لكي تعبر عن احوالهم. تظهر الدراسة كذلك بأن المعان المرئية موظفة ايديولوجيا ضد الروس .

الكلمات المفتاحية: سي ان ان ، الروس ، الأوكرانيين ، السيميائية الاجتماعية المرئية ، التصوير الحربي.

Introduction

The war photography is a worthy subject of study. From a historical perspective, war photography had a long heritage, since the early photographs of war had been taking by an unknown American photographer in 1847, in the Mexican-American war. War photography had changed during years depending on the committed ideologies of each era, the taste of the audience, and the intended purposes. In news channels and mass media war photography is a common item that corresponds and reflects the perspectives, the shared beliefs , the ideologies, and the partisan alignment of the owners institutions. Technically and psychologically, photos have much stronger senses and effects than texts, as Nazli, Akbulak, and Cat (2020, P.75), put out “ Photos have much stronger sensitization effect than texts. A single photo frame can be more effective and convincing than long line information because people see the news first then read it”.

The photography of the armed conflict and its effects on people and places is the main goal of war photography. The men who work as photographers find themselves spotted in harm's way. Even they may be killed in a try to get images of the war arena. The main goals, and purposes are :

1 - It teaches us all to do better and that society should think twice before entering into any war.

2- Information is relayed in a very fast way to the general public. For example, during the war of Vietnam, the photos from the battlefields got most of the Americans disgusted with the war due to the contents of these photos.

3 - The photographs relay the effects of war on common people, not just on the soldiers. On the other side, members of the community see the horrified soldiers so they understand the impact of war on these soldiers (Gabriner & Rothman, 2023).

It's impossible to overlook images; war stories might be avoided, but a striking image seen while passing by a newsstand cannot be ignored. Images are easily shareable and can be transmitted to millions in an instant through media outlets. Photos are clear and get straight to the point of the matter. During times of war, they play a vital role in recording and documenting events, which are then stored in historical archives for future generations to learn from. War photography is a part of war discourse and this is imposed by the governments for social and political purposes. Governments have known to censor photos during times of war in order to present a perspective that aligns with their goals. It is just as important to consider what is not shared as it is to consider what is shared. Conflict photography is intended for communication purposes, but the way in which the images are used - whether as truth or propaganda - depends on the distributor. Images can be manipulated through cropping, staging, or composition to convey a false and preconceived narrative that supports a particular agenda. Propaganda can be an effective tool to motivate individuals to support an unethical cause that they would not have otherwise supported (Roeder Jr, 2014).

The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War is a highly complex international conflict that has been raging since February 2014. The conflict began after Ukraine underwent a revolution and Russia subsequently annexed Crimea from Ukraine. Following this, pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas region of Ukraine began fighting against the Ukrainian military, with Russia providing support to the separatists (Russo-Ukrainian War, 2023). Over the course of the past eight years, the conflict has included a range of incidents, including naval confrontations, cyber warfare, and heightened political tensions. The situation escalated significantly in February 2022, when Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine and began occupying more of the country. The invasion has resulted in a humanitarian crisis, with many civilians being forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. The conflict continues to be a major global issue and efforts continue to be made to find a peaceful resolution (2023).

2 . Background

2. 1. Previous Studies

There are many studies conducted on war photography. Griffin (2010) elaborates on how photographic images have been utilized to emphasize and give credibility to war reporting since the beginning of the 1900s. In the 1930s, depictions of the Spanish Civil War in picture magazines set new standards for visual coverage from the front lines, creating unprecedented expectations. He also assesses how the Vietnam War has impacted the

portrayal of American conflicts in print and television photojournalism, and how it has led to an unrealistic expectation of media performance during wartime, while also fostering a trend of collaboration between the US government and the media.

Paschalidis (2015) investigates the historical development of war imaging. He starts his chronological account of visualizing war since the Renaissance. He explores the effects of the technical developments in highlighting the light on all possible events that usually come with war. He also provides his critical view of contemporary war images. For him, there is a complicity between the images of war and the war itself, particularly about its moral neutralization, its legitimization.

The study of Dursan, Yildiz, and Bulut (2019) focuses on the effects of war on social structures as can be presented by the images. For them, wars hurt local, national, and global levels, and they violate the fundamental rights of living beings, causing irreversible casualties. Because war affects life itself and the entire social structure and institutions, it is a phenomenon with far-reaching consequences. While the physical, psychological, and fatal consequences of war are widely recognized, its macro-level damage to the social structure is often ignored. Additionally, the mass media tends to focus on the obvious consequences of war while overlooking its structural impact on society. The study applies content analysis to the images of the war theme awarded in various categories by the World Press Photo Organization, towards inquiring to what extent possible impacts and consequences of wars are represented via such images.

2. 2. Semiotics and Social Semiotics

The field of semiotics has undergone a significant transformation, moving from merely examining signs in isolation, devoid of any context, position, event, surrounding elements, action, genre, or interaction, to a more comprehensive science that considers all of these factors as semiotic and social dimensions. This new approach was coined by Halliday and Hassan (1989, p. 23), as "social semiotics". Miller (2016, p. 4) states that "social semiotics is an approach to the analysis of popular culture which distinctively emphasized social dimensions of meaning, systematically crossing major boundaries that are often taken to constitute different forms of popular culture".

The founder of social semiotics is Michael Alexander Kirkwood Halliday (1925-2018). The reason he is considered the main founder is that the main figures of semiotics, Pierce and De Saussure, did not use their thoughts to analyze any kind of text or aspect of popular culture or anything else. They did not recognize the importance of the social dimension of signs in use. However, Halliday, in the 1970s, saw social semiotics as a way to analyze the full range of signifying systems and practices that make up all forms of culture (Miller, 2016). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) demonstrate that principles of systematic-functional linguistics, as proposed by Halliday in the later 1980s, were used by those who supported semiotic studies applied in literature (Threadgold, Thibault), visual semiotics (O'Toole, Kress and Van Leeuwen), and music (Van Leeuwen).

2. 3. Visual Social Semiotics

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1990, 1996, 2006) have applied Halliday's Principles of Social Semiotics and Systematic Functional Grammar to develop visual analysis. They have used Halliday's ideas to analyze visual texts within the frame of social semiotics. They announce

" Just as grammars of language describe how words combine in clauses, sentences, and texts, so our visual 'grammar' will describe the how depicted elements – people, places and things combine in visual 'statements' of greater or lesser complexity and extension ".

Visual semiotics for Kress and Van Leeuwen, as explained by Jewitt and Oyama (2001), centers around the interpretation of images and other visual forms of communication in a given society. Kress and Van Leeuwen's approach to multimodal analysis involves examining visual text as a composite of written language, graphic and sound elements, and layout, all of which work together to form a cohesive whole. Their work has gained recognition for its focus on visual design as a unique mode of communication that relies

on multiple semiotic modes operating simultaneously. This is because visual design's communicative value is derived from the interplay of multiple modes.

2. 4. CNN : The Allied Media and Balkanization

CNN is a major player in the new wave of American mass media, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. It is one of the cornerstones of what is known as the "allied media." This type of media is designed to promote and amplify party messages and create new avenues for party communication. The allied media is characterized on the national level, whether in newspapers or news channels (Hayes, 2010).

CNN also plays a role in what is called "Balkanization" in the American media. Balkanization as it is stated by Velu (2018, P. 42):

Became a description of many phenomena and processes that were born as attached to the 'Balkans' as a region, but then grew to be attached to political and social situations as detached geographically from 'Balkans'. Among the above-mentioned decontextualized notions, diverse features added to include class, race, and ideological differences.

According to reports in the American media, CNN has been criticized for providing a platform to partisan commentators, primarily those who hold pro-democratic views and ideologies. This has resulted in a situation where individuals find it challenging to engage in productive conversations with those who hold different ideological positions. As a consequence, it has become increasingly difficult to have constructive dialogues with people who possess opposing viewpoints. (Lazere, 2013).

2. 5. CNN and Russia Since 2014

The roots of the presenting Russia in a negative way by CNN concerning the conflict with Ukraine started in the middle of the last decade, particularly in 2014. This is the year of two important events in the region, the Ukrainian Revolution and the shooting down of the Malaysian MH17. The Ukrainian revolution has been received negatively by the Russian government because it declined the pro-Russia Ukrainian regime and such an outrage rises fear in Moscow because the Russian minority in Ukraine can be treated offensively by the Ukrainian revolutionaries (Der Pijl, 2018).

The Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 was shot down on 17 July 2014. This led to a standoff between Nato and Russia and it initiated a new era of East-West confrontation. This event and later ones in this area were reflected in a biased way in CNN's coverage. CNN represents only one viewpoint, and the Russians have always been represented as the

aggressors who are sneaking into Ukraine to destroy its army and to stand beside the Russian minority. CNN coverage distorts the image of the Russian President Putin as he has always been represented from a single pattern, and ideologically loaded with everything that arouses Western approval.

His personality is always described in an attachment to his previous job as a KGB officer, thus he is a liberally seasoned person with malice. CNN has always been criticized not just concerning its coverage of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict but even on national wide. CNN's nonpartisan direction is always questioned because it always has a liberal bias in the presidential elections. (Lazere, 2013).

3. Research Questions

The study discusses the following questions

- 1 – How are the social sides reflected in the selected images?
- 2 – How the ideology can be constructed through the visual meanings ?

4. Data and Method

The data is three images on the Russo-Ukrainian War on the CNN Official Website on Internet. The study adopts Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual grammar to analyze qualitatively the war photographs that are edited by Almond and Roegiers (2022) on the CNN official Website.

4. 1. Visual Grammar Model

The images and other visual tools can have three types of meaning, namely representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings. The representational meaning is concerned with the relationship between objects depicted in the images and is further divided into two structures, namely the narrative and the conceptual structures.

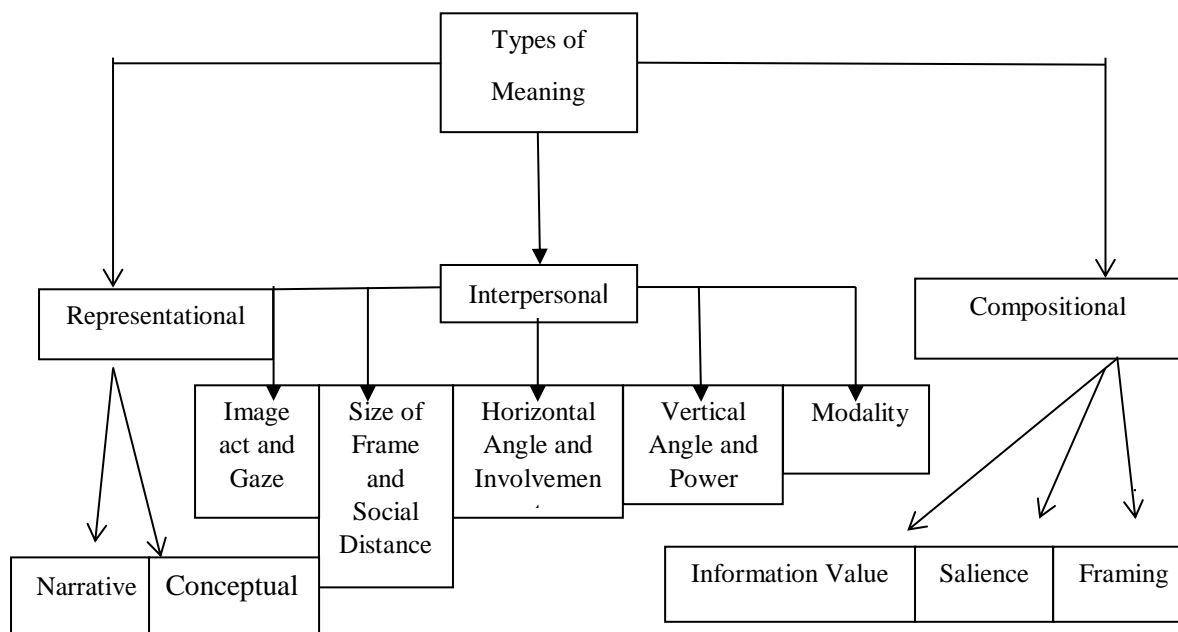
The narrative structure creates a representation of the images by introducing unfolding actions, processes of change, spatial arrangements, and events processes, which activates the participant's vector to establish a relationship between the represented participants in the image or to create a feeling of the vector narrative in the interactive participants' side. The conceptual pictures' depicted elements do not establish a vectorial relationship as there is no vector in the conceptual images, which is a salient feature of this kind. Ultimately, the participants derive their values from the samples' generalization to give the sense of the less stable and timeless essence, in terms of class structure or meaning, which distinguishes conceptual structures from narratives (Chen, 2019).

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) explain that interpersonal meaning pertains to the capacity of any semiotic mode to establish relationships between the creator of a complex sign and the recipient or reproducer of that sign. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) identify four fundamental dimensions that can produce diverse meanings in interpersonal meaning: image act and gaze, frame size and social distance, perspective - the horizontal angle and

involvement, and perspective - the vertical angle and power. Additionally, modality is an additional dimension of the interpersonal level that relies on color techniques, background, and depth.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) state that a semiotic mode is formed by the coherence between what the represented participants signify (the representational meaning) and what the signs behind them signify (the interpersonal meaning). This mode can create texts through the systems of compositional meaning. Compositional meaning pertains to complexes of signs that cohere internally, such as the emphasis on the color of a certain represented participant, while these complexes of signs can cohere with the context externally. The composition of representational and interpersonal meanings is based on three interconnected systems: information value, salience, and framing. The model can be visualized as :

(Kress and Van Leeuwen's Model Framework of Semiotic Analysis, Visual Grammar, Adopted from Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006).



5. Aims

The study aims to clarify the abilities of the images to reflect different social aspects. It also aims to reveal the ideological perspective of the visual meanings.

6. Analysis

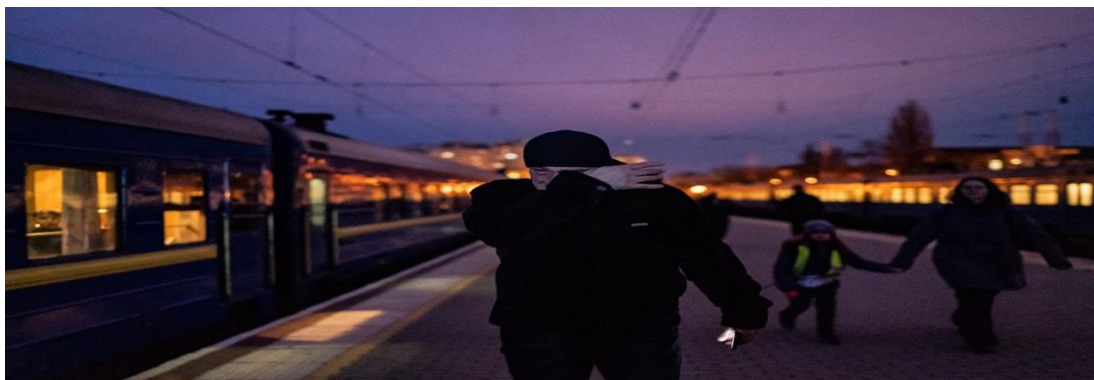
Helena is a wounded woman, she works as a teacher. She stands outside the hospital on February 24 in Chuhuiv, a town in eastern Ukraine, that was the target of an attack.



Our protagonist is depicted in a Hollywoodian way as is proved by the representational meaning. The ordinary thing in movies is that the actor communicates with his/ her situation inside the movie. The narrative structure is constructed by the non-transactional action of action, thus the image has one actor, one participant, but no goal or direct communication with the viewer. This makes the viewer in a powerful sense of empathy with the state of Helena. The focus of the color denotes Helena and her critical condition as a wounded sorrowful Ukrainian woman.

In the interpersonal meaning, the camera offers Helena's condition to the viewer, as if it tells him " come one and see the conditions of the poor Ukrainians ". Moreover, the image has an imposing power over the viewers. The head and face are only in the scene, in a very close shot, so the viewer in an intimate distance. This makes the viewers feel nearness to the represented participant Helena. The plasters, traces of blood, and the pale side help in highlighting Helena's feelings. The ideological construction is confirmed by the horizontal angle and Helena on the same level, in the same class as the viewers. This ingroup relation can be interpreted as an obvious invitation to save our brothers and sisters in Ukraine from Russian tyranny.

The representational meaning with its dedication to empathy on the side of the viewer, and the interpersonal meaning which is employed for ingroup ideological practices are interconnected in the compositional meaning. Helena is the source of the information value as the center and nucleus of the event and she implies all the surrounding situation. By her salience, she captures the attention of the viewer. The train slowly moved away from the platform. Keburia walked alongside it, crying. His family headed to Poland and he stayed back to fight, like many Ukrainian men.



The narrative structure of the representational meaning is created and delivered by the vector of Keburia's right eye. Keburia as the actor creates a non-transactional action of action because the vector of the eye line is not intended to other participants in the image, but here the direct interactive participant is the viewer. The participants in the background make transactional action of action, as they communicate with the focus of the event, Keburia by the eyeline. Both actions in the background and foreground aim to create a powerful sense of empathy and identification with Keburia's state.

The interpersonal meaning and the relation between the represented participants and the viewers are constructed on the dimension of the image act and gaze on two types of meaning, a demand and an offer. On the demand level, Keburia make a relation with the viewer, and the viewer is invited to appreciate the state of Keburia and his condition, it is a relation between an inferior relating to a superior. The man's tears and direct gaze can evoke various emotions in the viewer, such as empathy, concern, or discomfort. Direct eye contact can create a sense of intimacy and connection. The man's tears might evoke empathy in the viewer, triggering an emotional response due to shared human experiences or understanding of pain. The iconicity of scene is highlighted by the medium long shot, which can show many people and the surrounding space. It delivers part of the Russo-Ukrainian war, trains, crying people, and interconnected feelings between people depending on the shared knowledge. The woman and child can easily now the meaning of crying in such situation. The medium long shot can make the viewer in the place of the represented participants and it is a source of contemplation, so the viewer asks what is ahead, and what is going on.

The compositional meaning is informative, as the focus of the event is in the centre. Keburia attracts the other represented participants inside the image and the viewers outside the frame. The meaning of the colors on the representational level is saturated. It is in a gradual move from Keburia to the other participants in the image. In the interpersonal meaning, the modality is under question, because the image is ideologically constructed. There is an intentional implication of children on both sides of the image to be overload sensitively, and the other participants in the background had been covered.

The concentration of the viewer is limited to certain items in image. In the image, there are four empathetic gestures, and all are represented by four represented participants.

A mother and son rest in Lviv, Ukraine, while waiting to board a train to Poland on March 12. There were hundreds of people at the train station that day. The angelic face, brilliantly framed, is the center of attraction in this image. The narrative meaning in this image is conveyed through the eye line, and here the process involves the presence of a non-transactional reaction. This process means that the meaning creates a strong sense of sympathy and identification with the son and the mother. The mother's gesture towards the child creates transactional action of action, and thus the goal of this mother and any mother in the world is the son or children in general. Colors were used skillfully here to move from the mother to the little girl gradually as if moving from the past to the present, which is hoped to be bright for childhood.



On a personal level, the participating actors were professionally depicted. The viewer is invited to examine the emotional situation in which this fatherless family exists. With all manufactured spontaneity, the viewer is invited to look into the bewildered childish eyes of the mother clinging to her son. Mainly the son and the mother are in a close personal relationship with the viewer, and these close personal shots give the viewer a real feeling of a sympathetic friend. Colors, on a personal level, work in parallel. The mother's hair stands out and is the most dynamic and prominent point in the state of sleep, and thus it moves from the source of security (the mother) to the source of anxiety and anticipation, the son.

At the compositional level, a text is created by the harmonious integration of its representational and interpersonal aspects. The empathetic atmospheres of a text are often constructed by positioning the represented participants at the center of the image. This serves to accentuate their emotional presence and highlight their significance within the text. Additionally, a text can also use sharp focus as a technique to convey meaning. For instance, consider a text that depicts a father and son amidst a battle. The sharpness focus can be used to emphasize the son's innocence and vulnerability in contrast to the brutal and violent nature of war happening around him. By doing so, the text creates a sense of tension and urgency, urging the audience to empathize with the boy and feel the need to protect the sacredness and purity of childhood.

Conclusions

The study concludes an answer to the first question ; How are the social sides reflected in the selected images? From the social side, the producer of the images focuses on how war can affect lives of the ordinary people. The selected images correspond to and reflect the types of images on the website of CNN. The major area focuses on depicting the results of war on common, ordinary people. The images mirror stories in the manner that they show feelings, hopes, and fears. Presenting the social sides is produced by the modes of meanings that can highlight different perspectives on war and how the individuals deal with war and coexist with it bitterly. In the representational meaning, there is a considerable concentration on the narrative structure. The close shots and salient represented participants are employed in the interpersonal and compositional meanings in

succession. All these processes in different meanings can create social communication and relations with the viewers. Concerning, the second question; How the ideology can be constructed through visual meanings? The cognition and ideology of the staff and owners of CNN are reflected through the visual meanings. The adapted ideology depends on dramatizing the human crisis for the sake of the very American unipolar, without any consideration of the viewpoints of the Russians. CNN makes this By arousing feelings and sympathy with the Ukrainians in all images related to the war, even if it is forced to make a deliberate choice and pre-arrange the visual situations. Emotionally loaded images are an excellent ideological tool used by CNN in its coverage of events in the region to mobilize American public opinion through hearts and emotions, not through guns and bombs .

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