

Signification of the Uncanny: Frida Kahlo's Surreal Paintings against the Background of Semiotic Codes

In semiotics, codes, at the simplest level, are a systematic framework for interpreting the meanings of different kinds of communication in which the meanings are not easily discernible. In a Saussurean signified relationship, there are two requisite factors, namely the emitter and the receiver. The emitter encodes and the receiver decodes. For this reason, in socio-cultural communications, encoding and decoding are one of the most fundamental processes in interpreting the meaning and studying the meaning-making processes. The initial aim of this paper is to look into the set of four suggested communication codes by Arthur Asa Berger (metonymic, analogical, displaced and condensed) by reviewing their manifestation in advertising industry and next in order examine the function of this set codes, with a semiotic approach, in the paintings of Frida Kahlo the Mexican surrealist artist.

Keywords

Frida Kahlo, Arthur Asa Berger, Surrealism, communication theory, visual semiotics

Significação do Inquietante: os quadros surreais de Frida Kahlo à luz dos códigos semióticos

Em semiótica, os códigos, ao nível mais simples, são uma estrutura sistemática para interpretar os significados de diferentes tipos de comunicação na qual os significados não são facilmente discerníveis. Numa relação de significado saussuriana, há dois elementos necessários, a saber, o emissor e o receptor. O emissor codifica e o receptor descodifica. Por esta razão, nas comunicações socioculturais, a codificação e a descodificação são um dos processos mais fundamentais na interpretação do significado e no estudo dos processos de construção do significado. O objetivo inicial deste artigo é examinar o conjunto de quatro códigos de comunicação sugeridos por Arthur Asa Berger (metonímico, analógico, deslocado e condensado), analisando a sua manifestação na indústria publicitária e, seguidamente, examinar a função desse conjunto de códigos, com uma abordagem semiótica, nas pinturas de Frida Kahlo, a artista surrealista mexicana.

Keywords

Tempo, Narrativa, Imagem, Memória, Morte

Introduction

...since the life of signs does not stop, of course, with their fixation into objects...existential signs... are always in a state of becoming...pause is always temporary (Tarasti, 2001, p. 7).

Semiotics is, literally speaking, the science of signs. The word semiotics comes from the Greek root *semeion*, or sign, and is used to describe a systematic attempt to understand what signs are and how they function. Semiotics is probably the more commonly used term, but some students of signs use the term *semiology*— literally “words” (*logos*) “about signs” (*semeion*) (Berger, 1995, p. 73-74). When the first stones of semiotics were laid by its two founding fathers, Saussure and Peirce, it was thought of and treated as a subdiscipline of linguistics. However, most of the twentieth-century semioticians applied Peirce and Saussure’s theories to a diversity of fields and disciplines – art, psychoanalysis, anthropology, communications, and politics just to name a few.

Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher, published his theory of semiotics through conceptual application based upon photography. Peirce famously marked out three types of signs: iconic, indexical, and symbolic. This classification divides the meanings of visual semiotics for each viewer. Any visual material is potential to have a unified signification, viewing it through Peircean spectacles, or have multiple significations, being conditional on the viewer. One may argue that a visual aesthetic sensibility of an individual is bound to cultural determination; This particular sensibility is the consequence and by-product of mutual workings of semiotic codes and the social constructs in/by which those semiotic codes have become a convention. The field of semiotics saw a flurry of activity in the late 1960s when Roland Barthes, the French critic and semiotician, revitalized the field with his development of a cluster of associations, widely known as narrative codes. These five narrative codes, namely hermeneutic, proairetic, cultural, connotative, and symbolic are sent by a particular emitter, or in other words encoder, and received by the receiver, or otherwise decoder.

Studies of culture was the ground that semiotics maneuvered the most thanks to the tremendous influence of Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School. This tradition gained consequence to such an extent that Umberto Eco, distinguished Italian semiotician, maintained that culture as whole must be studied as a semiotic phenomenon and that only by studying it in this way can certain of its fundamental mechanisms be clarified (Eco, 1976, p. 22). The twentieth-century outburst of semiotics has become universal in the twenty-first century and semiotics is not Saussure/Peirce-centric anymore. It has been admitted to zoology, biology, cyber science, neuroscience, etc. and is pushing forward fast.

The primary aim of this research is to review and understand the four semiotics codes proposed by Asa Berger and then trace them in Kahlo’s paintings. Firstly, different kinds of codes in semiotics are briefly discussed. Following this, Berger’s codes with the help of some advertising samples are illustrated, and finally, drawing on these codes, four paintings from Frida Kahlo that embody the introduced semiotics codes are analyzed.

1. Codes and the Decoding Process

The Encyclopedic Dictionary of semiotics, Media, and Communications provides us with the two following definitions for ‘code’: 1. system of signs given certain meanings; 2. system of signs and structural patterns for constructing and deciphering messages. In the course of their history, societies grow a convoluted system of codes. Each sign is accordingly combined with another one to communicate complex ideas in the form of these codes. The concept of ‘code’ is the salient feature of structuralist semiotics. Saussure’s semiotic model of signs is dyadic, being made up of a kin of the sign i.e. the signifier and its meaning i.e. the signified. Saussure thought of this relation as being arbitrary in essence, driven only by social conventions (Saussure, 1916, p. 22). Roman Jakobson believes that codes (with a metalinguistic function) are one the determining factors of the formulation of semiotic communication (Jakobson, 1987, pp. 66). The emitter must encode meaning in an agreed upon framework and the receiver must read and decode the received text to achieve meaning. The utilized conventional code develops a framework in which sign gains meaning. The most effective fashion of communication occurs when both the emitter and the receiver are fully familiar with the utilized code, which can be local or universal.

Later, Stuart Hall in his Encoding/Decoding Model of Communication dismissed the textual determinism and explained that decoding does not necessarily follow the orders of encoding. He explained that the meaning of any text is somewhere between creator and the reader of the text and clarified the potential disparity between the author’s and the recipient’s understanding of meaning in this manner: “The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry - that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange depend both on the degrees of symmetry/a-symmetry between the position of encoder-producer and that of the decoder-receiver: and also on the degrees of identity/non-identity between the codes which perfectly or imperfectly transmit, interrupt or systematically distort what has been transmitted.” (Hall, 1973, p. 4)

Eco believed that for various reasons a message is possible to be decoded in an erroneous and misleading way. Then can happen, for instance, when a receiver does not know the language of the text, was born in another generation, is coming from a different culture or belongs to a different hermeneutic tradition. (Eco, 2003, p. 4) Different theorists have formed different taxonomies regarding the nature of function codes although no classification can be completely neutral and free from ideological assumptions. Daniel Chandler has divided codes into three broad groups: social, textual, and interpretive codes (Chandler, 2007, p. 147). Contrary to the aforementioned view which mostly focus on the nature and function of codes, Berger has sorted his proposed codes based on the scheme that the emitter uses for encoding and also based on how the meaning is materialized for the receiver.

2. Berger's taxonomy of codes

Arthur Asa Berger is Professor Emeritus of Broadcast and Electronic Communication Arts at San Francisco State University and a very prolific writer. This is what he says about himself on his LinkedIn profile: "I am the author of more than 100 articles in newspapers, magazines and scholarly journals and more than seventy books on humor, comic strips, television, advertising, consumer culture, media along with a number of academic murder mysteries in which I bump off loathsome academics while teaching my readers something about the subject of the mystery: Hamlet, postmodernism, identity, media theory, social theory, etc. I also draw cartoons and have illustrated my books and books by many other writers."

Berger thinks of codes as a system of interpreting obscure meanings in various means of communication and believes much of the cultural data that an individual receives in a certain culture bear some kind of a meaning. Due to unfamiliarity with the codes embedded in these messages, they tend to either be passed unnoticed or interpreted erroneously. We also tend not to be pay attention to the codes that we are familiar with because come across as something natural and not special; we are not conscious of the fact that when we find meaning in things or understand them, we are actually in the process of decoding signs. In this matter, Berger says, we are similar to Moliere's character who had not noticed he was speaking in prose the whole time (Berger, 1995, p. 82).

In his books and articles on cultural criticism and media analysis, Berger, lists four types of codes for visual communications: metonymic, analogical, displaced, and condensed codes (Lester, 1997, p. 66). In light of the fact that these codes are used abundantly in forming the different layers of the graphic of advertisements, the examples to clarify each of these signs are taken from this line of industry.

2 - 1. *Metonymic code*: A metonymic code is a collection of signs that cause the viewer to make associations or assumptions. A photograph in an advertisement that shows the signs of a living room with expensive paintings on the walls, real wood paneling, richly upholstered furniture, subdued lighting, and a fire glowing under a mantle would communicate metonymically the prospect of romance or comfort for upper-class residents (ibid). These kinds of codes mostly include extra-textual references and drawing on socio-cultural conventions they try to usher the receiver's thoughts to their intended direction. Most advertising campaign make clever use of metonymic codes.

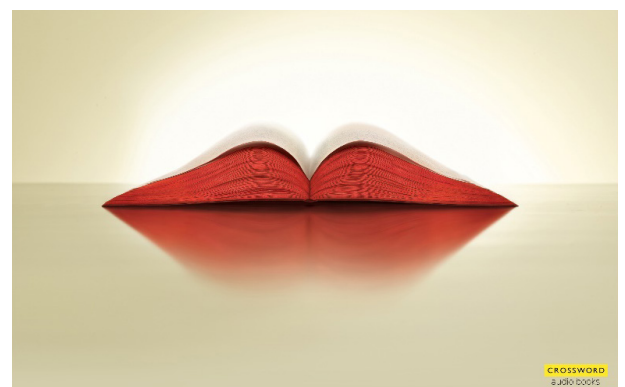
Figure 1, an advertisement for McDonald's Happy Meal, is an ideal example to show how metonymic codes are used to create assumptions on the receiver's end. Happy Meal is the reason for the jovial mood, bonding, and the happiness of an allegedly working class family. The happily protective look of the mother, who know what is good for her baby, directed to the child insinuates that she is satisfied with what her baby girl is eating. The child sharing her food with her happy father gives us to understand that the delicious Happy Meal is gratifying for both children and adults' taste buds.



Figure 1 – Metonymic Code

Courtesy of <https://internationalhealthstudent.wordpress.com>

2 - 2. *Analogical code*: An analogic code is a group of signs that cause the viewer to make mental comparisons. Analysis of this type of code uses the terms metaphor and simile. A metaphor suggests equivalence, whereas a simile suggests only that the signs have similar features (ibid). In other words, only after making comparisons the meaning is made clear.



Picture 2 – Analogical Code

Courtesy of www.bestadsontv.com

In figure 2 we can see how Crossword Bookstores are promoting their audio books via a poster in which the book resembles a pair of fleshy lips at the point of opening in order to talk. Only at the point of making comparisons does the meaning materialize for the receiver: talking books.

2 - 3. *Displaced code*: Displaced codes are those that transfer meaning from one set of signs to another. In the movie *Dr. Strangelove* (directed by Stanley Kubrick), rifles, missiles, airplanes, and other phallic shapes were photographed purposely to communicate the idea of sexual tension among certain military characters. Images of penises

are not acceptable pictures for most members of society and so are displaced by other symbolism (ibid).



Picture 3 – Displaced Code
 Courtesy of degradationofwomen.weebly.com

Figure 3 shows Burger King's advertisement for its new 'super seven incher'. Both phallic and yonic symbols are plain to see in this advertisement. The deliberate combination of the words 'blow' and 'seven incher' make the subliminal message stronger for the receiver.

2 - 4. *Condensed code*: Finally, condensed codes are several signs that combine to form a new, composite sign. Televised music videos and the advertisements inspired by them have unique and often unexpected meanings. The signs of musicians, dancers, music, quick editing techniques, graphics, colors, multiple images, and the like all form a complex message (ibid). Condensed code seems suitable and relevant for anyone within the culture that message is intended for. However, for the ones outside that culture, condensed code looks to be irrelevant, random, and unpurposeful.



Picture 4 – Condensed Code
 Courtesy of fromtheadtotheworld.weebly.com

Figure 4 is a prime example for condensed code. This advertisement draws on cultural codes, which most probably would seem confused and unpurposeful for a receiver outside the French cultural semiosphere. The saucisson, which is a chunky, dry-cured sausage in French cuisine, is a kind of charcuterie which is very much popular and loved among the French. However, it is only found in France. Cochonou, a saucisson company, in this advertisement jokingly refers to the French who cannot live/leave without saucisson.

3. Frida Kahlo

MAGDALENA CARMEN FRIDA KAHLO Y CALDERÓN, the third daughter of Guillermo and Matilde Kahlo, was born on July 6, 1907, at eight-thirty in the morning (Herrera, 2018, p. 13). Known for her physical and emotional pain and suffering, passionately displayed on canvas in self-portraits, Frida Kahlo lived a life that is increasingly of interest to the art world. Her works describe her tempestuous relationship and two marriages to the famous muralist Diego Rivera, as well as her ongoing malaise after being in a trolley-bus accident at the age of eighteen that crippled her for life. Kahlo is also recognized for her ties to the Communist Party and Mexico's indigenous culture, as well as for her elaborate dress and her flamboyant personality. Although she was not well known when she died in 1954, she has since achieved superstar status among art lovers and critics. Though she had only two solo shows during her lifetime, her works are now exhibited around the world (Congdon & Hallmark, 2002, p. 126).

Although she rejected the label of surrealist and later became a harsh critic of the surrealist art, Kahlo's works are widely considered to be surreal in nature. Born with André Breton's 1924 manifesto, surrealism was claimed to be "based on the belief in the superior reality of certain previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the disinterested play of thought" (Breton, 1972). In 1938, the French poet and the 'pope of surrealism' André Breton and his wife, visited Mexico in order to make contact with Trotsky and, in the meanwhile, met the Kahlo-Riveras. Breton was taken by surprise when he saw Kahlo's unfinished 'What the Water Gave Me' and he labeled Kahlo a self-created surrealist, and offered to organize an exhibition for her in Paris (Herrera, 2018, p. 106). This was the beginning of Kahlo's affiliation with the surrealist movement.

It is not uneasy to see why so many observers and critics have branded Kahlo as a surrealist. Her self-abasing self-portraits bear a surrealistic stress on the pain and suffering she underwent in various stages of her life and a concrete suggestion of erotic suppression. Her depiction of hybrid figures, the Little Deer being the most prominent example in this case, is something that is ubiquitous in the iconography of surrealist artists. In addition, the recurrent motif of hollow, severed or opened up parts of the human body in Frida's works are reminiscent of the works by surrealist painters such as Dali, Ernst, and Magritte. Her use of background scenes and spaces that are infinitely large and open spaces, which have no connection with everyday reality, is also possible to be understood as a surrealist technique to detach the receiver from the reasoned world of consciousness.

4. A semiotics investigation of codes and coding in the works of Frida Kahlo

There are 143 officially registered paintings by Kahlo in Frida Kahlo Foundation, roughly one third of which are her self-portraits. Among these, 4 of her paintings are chosen based on purposive sampling in order to be analyzed through the medium of Bergerian signs.

4 - 1. Self-portrait with Cropped Hair 1940; Metonymic Code



Picture 5 – Self-portrait with Cropped Hair 1940
Courtesy of frida-kahlo-foundation.org

Considering the fact that signs only work in correlation with other signs, it can be conducive to analysis purposes to distinguish between two types of signs in visually perceived materials: paradigmatic and syntagmatic. The following definitions of the abovementioned signs are suggested in Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies* (2001, p. 78) "Syntagmatic signs gain their meaning from the signs that surround them in a still image, or come before or after them in sequence in a moving image." "Paradigmatic signs gain their meaning from a contrast with all other possible signs." Kahlo's figure, as the centerpiece of her paintings tends to bear a syntagmatic significance as it gains its meaning against alternative signs in the piece, be it the materialization of certain figures such as Diego Rivera, Stalin, passengers on a bus, Doctor Farill, etc. or the eerie backgrounds against which she generates sense and meaning. Her masculine looks in *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair*, however, is a paradigmatic sign compared to all her other painting in which she appears with traditional Mexican Tehuana. This contrast is encoded metonymically. *Self-portrait with Cropped Hair* was Kahlo's first self-portrait after her troubled marriage with Diego Rivera ended in a bitter divorce. This painting is the most atypical of her

self-portraits. In this work, she portrayed herself wearing a loose-fitting dark men's suit—very similar to the suits Rivera would wear— and a button-front crimson shirt. This is visually important because Kahlo's audience is used to seeing her in her vibrantly-colored traditional Mexican Tehuana dresses. She has just cropped the long hair that Diego praised short. She holds a strand of her cropped hair in her left hand as if she wanted to show off the remaining sign of the sacrifice she made. In the other hand, she has the scissors with which she butchered her femininity. There are strands of her black hair covering the barren ground surrounding her as far as the eye sees. Contrary to her typical self-portraits having the canvas loaded with ornamentalism. Above her are the lyrics of a popular Mexican song that read – "Look, if I loved you it was because of your hair. Now that you are without hair, I don't love you anymore." The combination of the suit, short hair and the lyrics, has the receiver to make assumptions about notions of femininity and masculinity and in what way and to what potential short hair is associated with masculinity and the fact that a woman can lose her charm by being deprived of her long hair. The abstractedly confident look on Frida's face might give the receiver to assume that she has mutilated her femininity as an act of defiance and a feminist can possibly read confrontation with gender conforming notions of beauty and female empowerment into it.

4 - 2. The Wounded Table 1940; Analogic Code



Picture 6 – The Wounded Table 1940
Courtesy of Frida-kahlo-foundation.org

Signs in a particular visual material can be both denotive, including Diegesis—the sum of the denotive meanings of an image— and connotative. The latter is the sign that is marked with a range of higher-level meanings and references. (Barthes, 1977) Intertextuality, which is the term to refer to the fashion and quality that the significations of any text—in its semiotic sense— rests on not only on that particular text, but also on the significations present in other texts. Intertextual elements are pivotal tools for semiotics connotation and the 'The Wounded Table' is a prime example of how intertextuality generates paradigms of meaning, and in the case of this particular painting, by means of analogic coding. 'The Wounded Table' has always been considered as a surreal rendition of Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' carrying various intertextual links through analogic coding. The work got to make its debut in Mexico City in January 1940 in International Surrealist Exhibition. It vanished in 1955 in Poland on its way to an exhibition in Moscow and has not been located to this date. There are only three pictures available from this work taken between 1940 and 1944. In this painting, a wooden table of considerable length, which has human legs and is bleeding on several spots, occupies most of a theater stage around

which there are seven figures: Frida herself, the Jesus-like sufferer, is seated in the center of the table. On the right hand side of Frida, we see a tall yet disproportionate Judas figure, which seems to symbolize the betrayal of Diego. On the other side of the table we see two children who have been claimed to be Isolda and Antonio, the children of Frida's sister Cristina (We know Frida loved to have children and lost one in a miscarriage). On the other side of Frida, we are able to see a Nayarit figure, whose hand being knit with Frida's suggests Frida's attachment to Pre-Colombian culture, and a skeleton, which is depicted with all the injuries that Frida had underwent in the years before: the amputated right foot, sore vaginal area, and the hole in the middle of the stomach. At the end of the table there is her favorite pet deer: Granzio, which occupies the place of Simon the Zealot in The Last Supper and is as recurrent yet as negligible as him. 'The Wounded Table' abounds in connotative signs around the main sign, which Kahlo herself, and as matter of usual course, Kahlo's figure constitutes a syntagmatic signification, gaining its meaning by means of its surrounding signs.

4 - 3. *The Wounded Deer* 1946; *Displaced Code*



Picture 7 – *The Wounded Deer* 1946
 Courtesy of frida-kahlo-foundation.org

We may initially examine 'The Wounded Deer' with the aid of Peirce's order of signs. In fact, the illustrated hybrid beast is the conjunction of icon, index and symbol. It is obviously an icon due to its association with the signified (deer) via its physical resemblance. The arrows piercing the deer/Frida figure are the indexical signs as they insinuate the presence of an alleged venator. Apart from the fact that the deer was held sacred by gods of Greek mythology, Artemis in particular, it generally symbolizes instinctual energy, gentle independence, and regeneration (which is afflicted with arrows of pain). Notably, the displacement encoding has taken place at icon level—it is hard-displaced codes are hard to imagine at indexical and symbolic levels. Paintings of surrealist tradition, of course, have made use of displaced code quite frequently, *The Son of Man* (1964) by Rene Magritte being the most famous one. As a hybrid between a deer and a woman, the innocent Kahlo is wounded and bleeding, preyed upon and hunted down in a clearing in the forest. In this work, which has the word 'Carma' meaning 'fate'—the fate that she cannot escape the same as this deer—on its lower left corner, as a hybrid between Granzio and herself, Frida is mortally wounded by a bunch of arrows and her face is not as unflustered as

other self-portraits of hers. From Barthesian point of view, the term 'Carma' has a relay-function in this work of art. In the background lies a lifeless forest with dead trees and broken branches, which suggests despair and dread. On the far side, we can see an angry lightning-lit sky, which can be her salvation from this forest of hopelessness. However, she will never be able to reach it because of her fatal wounds. By depicting antlers and prominent testicles, Kahlo has given an androgynous character to the deer in distress. This painting is often associated with Kahlo's failed back surgery in New York.

4 - 4. *Girl with Death Mask* 1938; *Condensed Code*



Picture 8 – *Girl with Death Mask* 1938
 Courtesy of frida-kahlo-foundation.org

For Barthes visual materials can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, stands the level of the 'studium', which basically refers to a culturally aware reading of the image, one that is capable of interpreting the signs. On the other hand, he maintains that some visuals, photographs in particular, elicit a different response in the receiver, which is the second order in Barthesian reading, by constituting what he defined as a 'punctum'. A punctum is beyond intentionality and generalizability; it is a subtle and sensitive element in a text which stings and disturbs the receiver out of their ordinary viewing habits. (1982, p. 51) Studium and punctum are both indispensable to encoding and decoding of condensed codes as in this particular painting which is in the context of the Day of the Dead festival. *Girl with Death Mask* is kept at Nagoya City Art Museum. The traditional understanding of death from a Mexican point of view runs in the motifs of this painting and the main elements of it belong to the Mexican cultural semiosphere. In this yet another enigmatic work, Kahlo depicted a baby girl, a syntagmatic sign in the painting, who can either be Frida herself at the age of four or the baby that died as a result of miscarriage at the time. She is wearing a white skull mask, which is a toy used in the annual Mexican festival 'Day of the Dead'. Condensed

codes tend to be culture-bound and familiarity with the aforementioned cultural phenomenon is of the essence for the receiver. The brightly colored dress suggests the festive mood of the 'Day of the Dead' during which death is celebrated rather than mourned. The mysterious girl is holding a yellow marigold in her hands which is a flower Mexicans place on graves at the Day of the Dead festival. The hideous tiger mask by her left feet is there to ward off evil. The macabre setting, the girl's isolation and the masks (The punctum in painting that startle the viewer) seem to be not appropriate and child-friendly but this is the miserable destiny she cannot escape from.

Conclusion

Communicative codes can be studied and taxonomized from different perspectives. In this research, Arthur Asa Berger's suggested four-part set of codes was studied with some of their sample manifestations in advertising industry. Contrary to most other theories regarding codes in communications which mostly focus on the nature and function of codes, Berger has sorted his proposed codes based on the scheme that the emitter uses for encoding and also based on how the meaning is materialized for the receiver. In his books and articles on cultural criticism and media analysis, Berger, lists four types of codes for visual communications: metonymic, analogical, displaced, and condensed codes. In 'Self-portrait with Cropped Hair' (1940) metonymic code, in 'The Wounded Table' (1940) analogic code, in 'The Wounded Deer' (1946) displaced code, and in 'Girl with Death Mask' (1938) condensed code were discovered and analyzed with the aid of intertextual elements and alternative semiotic signs such as the signs in Peirce's triadic model, and syntagmatic and paradigmatic signs.

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