

The Interpretation of the Image: Between Memory, Stereotype and Seduction

JOLY, M. *La interpretación de la imagen*.

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At a time in publishing when most works related to university studies on communication end up acquiring the suspicious and pliable aspect of the most commercial of self-help manuals (there are a multitude of titles on how to write film and television scripts, measure audiences, produce films, etc.), we have to be grateful for the fact that the Paidós Comunicación collection, run with as much will as rigour by Josep Lluís Fecé and José Manuel Pérez Tornero, persists in demonstrating an indestructible academic vocation and, at the same time, updating our impaired publishing market of specialised bibliographies.

Reference 144 of this indispensable collection is entitled *La interpretación de la imagen*, a systematic study prepared on the basis of previous texts by the author, Professor Martine Joly of the Université Michel de Montaigne-Bordeaux III. The study approaches the thorny problem (because it has not been resolved) of the point to which the interpretation of the visual and audiovisual messages that surround us and which supposedly determine us symbolically depends on our system of deductive beliefs or affective memory rather than, as is usually thought, on unilateral transmission strategies (the old idea of the context of production and reception). In fact, the book's original title, *L'image et son interpretation (The Interpretation and Its Image)*, is more in keeping with the much more conceptual and abstract arguments developed in the book than suggested by the slightly distorted translation into Spanish, oriented (possibly for self-interested reasons) at promoting instrumentality (unfortunately, it seems the commercial shadow of the manuals is too long).

This review is not strictly speaking a critique, in that it does not coincide with the market appearance of a new title, as Joly's book has been published for more than a year. Rather, my intention is to make a parallel reflection on the

basis of the ideas proposed in this highly valued work and to take advantage of the scope of its stimulating arguments and more-than-heterodox conclusions in their most immediate application. There is no doubt that the issue the author tries to resolve, i.e., the problem of the interpretation and analysis of audiovisual messages, has already been looked at a thousand times before by all types of authors, from the most varied of perspectives and during different eras. Joly herself reviews some of the most important schools of thought which have since time immemorial devoted their epistemological efforts to a task that is as noble as it is thankless (because it is eternally incomplete), examining with true rigour both the successes and most notorious failures and, while she is at it, offering the uninitiated reader a type of guidebook critique in which reference works follow one another in perfect order and bibliographic agreement. Making clear at all times her formative debt to (early) semiotics, the author strives to update this damaged discipline without falling into the futile and uneasy debate about terminology, a debate that only immobilises the instrumentality it aims for. Rather, she proposes a critical attitude/activity which, while remaining rigorous at all times, is much more open and understandable to the potential reader. Because if there is any purpose at all to a work like this, it is that its proposals may eventually be reviewed, tested, judged and called into question by all the people that approach it with the hope of finding in it a definitive (i.e., applicable, confirmable and irrefutable) methodological model.

There is no doubt that recent years (three at least) have been particularly convulsive, extreme and contradictory in terms of audiovisual messages. Typically postmodern messages have acquired an indistinct and even interchangeable nature of warning, proof, hypothesis, propaganda or pretence ranging from the shocking sequences of September 11 in New York to the live, stage-managed broadcasts of war in Afghanistan and Iraq; from the mockumentaries that happily inundate and contaminate the field of fiction to Michael Moore's well-intentioned simplistic lampooning; from the development of a media circus around the US presidential campaign to the manipulation of the information about March 11 in Madrid; from the emergence of new representational information phenomena (videogames, internet) to television self-

regulation codes that are just beginning to take their first steps; from the unstoppable emergence of the new digital film to the death of the very concept of film authorship.

Joly supports her work on the basis of a thesis that is no less stimulating for being well known: that, against what is usually said, images acquire an unanticipated independence with regard to their final meaning in the eyes of viewers because they are texts that can be decoded. They acquire a meaning that the reader, converted into the capricious user of images, models to his or her taste beyond the interpretation expectations that the author had made available on the basis of the context of production or reception. As complex texts, images (of a literary, photographic, filmic or television basis) rapidly acquire their own life that articulates meanings, relationships or affective links that were not originally programmed, and become projects of meaning as autonomous as they are contradictory, the memorisation of which is modulated on the basis of complex identification strategies that only confirm their transcendent precariousness. Interpreting images does not mean just analysing them to uncover their final, unidirectional and hegemonic meaning. *Interpreting* images means firstly *understanding* how they end up establishing sophisticated reading commitments, i.e., use values that cancel out or displace their elusive and arbitrary potentiality, not just because they are obvious. Having established the problem from this perspective, Joly's methodological project clearly fills a special gap at a time when we are resigned to assuming the inconsistency of the meaning as a starting point and not, as has usually been done, as an accepted final renunciation.

This strategy is revealed in all its instrumental plenitude when systematically applied to the film medium, a field of particularly unstable significance given its ethereal nature and the multiple contaminations and interferences from which it suffers. Against all predictions, filmic interpretation is strictly speaking an activity much more closely related to the hermetic drift than the positivism of the scientific method. This idea, broadly accepted by researchers across the world, today continues to be questioned, if not openly rejected, by what we could call the *critique community*, the highly corporatist professional group that exercises the unconscious but very vehement task of conceptual trench from those pulpits of guiding consumption that newspapers,

specialist journals and programmes that discuss these issues on radio or TV have ended up becoming. Removed forever from their romantic roots (Baudelaire, Benjamin, etc.), depoliticised to the point of nausea and dominated in their irreversible process of de-ideologisation by the iron-fisted *jurisprudence* of the market, contemporary criticism is mainly limited to serving as the diligent transmission belt between industry and the public. For their part, the public seek in all criticism a type of consumer guide or authorised opinion to guide their cultural investment (or even immersion) and to, broadly speaking, draw the values and meanings they suspect any work/text may hide, and which must serve as the basis both for ensuring their personal enjoyment (now no longer non-transferable) and inserting them in a current of opinion, preferably a majority opinion, that awards them in their exercise as a consumer a certain type of identification signals or adherence to a particular community of the initiated. This explains the increasingly more obvious predisposition of critics in all types of media to issue interminable lists with the best and worst of any genre, year, style or trend as if they were dealing out quality certificates. Far from being limited to the sphere of the specialist press, this practice has unfortunately ended up affecting the bibliography market in our country, as can be seen by the example of the publishing market devoted to the increasingly congested and superficial world of the cinema, where best-selling titles usually aim to be encyclopaedic volumes that happily announce the '100 best films of such and such a genre'.

Criticism and interpretation are therefore presented to the public as almost mutually exclusive activities, as every interpreter must assume from the beginning a future but dignified defeat when it comes to definitively decoding or uncovering the hidden meaning of any work. Critics, on the other hand, try to make up for their bad conscience by proclaiming the uselessness of this hermetic vocation (incomplete and unsatisfactory almost by defect), knowing they are being observed from a distance by the consumer/user (their true public) who only wants immediate codes and previously masticated and easy-to-swallow McOpinions. Importance and analytic rigour are today considered synonyms of academic tediousness and antiquated cultural consumption, tools and attitudes made by elitists for elitists.

That is why it is really stimulating that a work like Joly's should grab the bull by the horns and demonstrate that the interpretation of the texts that inhabit and saturate our iconosphere today is not and should never be an exact (quantifiable, verifiable, dogmatic) science and that the variables that condition the longed-for final result (the revelation of a truth hidden under the surface of something else) are so permeable, unsuspected, elusive and difficult to predict that any attempt to submit them to the dictates of a restrictive methodology can only end in the most disheartening of failure. The practice of interpretation, whether we like it or not, goes far beyond the limited field of analysis that academic methodologies have got us accustomed to. The symbolic and perceptive links that any image (whether a picture, piece of advertising or photo or a literary, film or info-graphic image) establishes with our imagination respond to factors of identity/identification based directly on our memory, a particularly capricious, sinuous and evasive territory with regard to feelings and indifferences. Trying to interpret any text while leaving this previous consideration aside is like, and forgive me the bourgeois simile, trying to decipher the nature of time by disassembling clocks and reassembling them without having parts left over. The end meaning of any text responds in the final analysis to the use value it manages to achieve among the people at whom it is aimed, beyond even the legitimate intentions of its author or the obscure motivations of its distribution channels. Very rarely, for

example, is the *ageing* of the (original) meaning of any work questioned. We would have to be able to deduce the development the text has undergone from the moment of its creation, in which the author's intentions meet the production conditions or first phase of reception. The *tradition* of the product is nearly as important as the forecast of its rapid ageing. Only in this way, if we are able to assess it, will we be capable of arriving at the possible *essence* (immobile, non-transferable and unquestionable) that seems intrinsic to all artistic work. Without understanding this point, we will not be able to even scratch the surface of phenomena like cult films, fandom, indie music, counterculture or intertextuality, i.e., deconsecrating forms of artistic expression and reception that make the work not just a unit of fate but a real writing degree zero. Because the whole process of reading begins, as quite a few artists and increasingly more specialists know all too well, with a previous process of rewriting.

Seen from this perspective, Joly's book, without reaching any port at the end of the day, continues to call for us to navigate through texts and to get lost (rigorously, resignedly and almost ascetically) in the ocean of meaning. Nobody should expect this book to be a user's manual or a framework of references that can be easily extrapolated to other texts and other spheres. The image, regardless of its nature, format, channel or vehicle, continues to refuse to award us, even today, the possibility of having the last word.