

**CNN'S CONSTRUCTION OF THE REALITY OF SEPTEMBER 11TH:
unveiling in the classroom the ideology behind words and images**

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ABSTRACT

This article is situated on the challenging border between multimodal analysis of texts and a socio-cultural framework of discourse and visual culture. By analyzing in the classroom the CNN language and images on conflict and war during the aftermath of September 11th, the students can interpret the discourse of the channel not as a natural phenomenon but as a reconstruction of the realities being reported. The students-interpreters can evaluate how the context in which news is told is something assimilated to the verbal and visual text and influences it from within. The aim of the project is to bring news visual and verbal language to the classroom environment and show its “constructedness” according to the ideology that permeates the channel. The perception of reality, as something objective to be grasped by a neutral mind and eye, can be expanded and give way to the “unrealities” of our reality.

Keywords: Visual. Verbal. September 11th.

RESUMO

O artigo situa-se na fronteira desafiadora entre a análise textual multimodal e a estrutura sócio-cultural do discurso e da cultura visual. Através da análise dentro da sala de aula da linguagem e das imagens sobre conflito e guerra da rede CNN após os eventos de 11 de Setembro, os alunos podem interpretar o discurso da emissora não como um fenômeno natural, mas como uma reconstrução das realidades que são relatadas. Os alunos-interpretetes podem avaliar como o contexto no qual as notícias são narradas é assimilado e influencia de dentro o texto verbal e visual. O objetivo do projeto é trazer a linguagem visual e verbal das notícias dentro do ambiente escolar e mostrar que ela se constrói de acordo com a ideologia que permeia o canal. A percepção da realidade como objetiva a ser captada por uma mente e um olho neutro pode ser expandida e render-se às “irrealidades” da nossa realidade.

Palavras-Chave: Visual. Verbal. 11 de Setembro.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Why would it be of any interest to write something on September 11th almost fifteen years after the event that shocked the Western world, occurred? One of the reasons is that the media are such a powerful means of controlling the way we think about others and the reasons they lead us to believe that war is the solution to conflict. The study of the visual and verbal discourse on conflict and war inside the school environment and the manner it is constructed in the media can teach our students to deconstruct news discourse that makes us see reality through certain lenses. The study of the verbal and visual code of meaning-making in the context of media discourse is seen as a challenge in times when magazines such as Charlie Hebdo are attacked because of their discourse on the Other.

The relationship among curriculum, schools and society (GIROUX, 1988, p. 27) calls upon practitioners to link classroom studies to the study of the larger society and the manners in which the social construction of meaning is achieved. A discussion and analysis of news visual and verbal discourse in the classroom can make students understand the ideology behind the construction of journalistic discourse and the interest this dominant discourse had in seeking to perpetuate the discourse of conflict and war.

The students can recognize through the interpretations constructed in the classroom that although the sign (the reality in the case of news discourse) seems to be unique, the signifier (the discourse that comes to represent the reality) is always constructed and the signified (the meanings this discourse acquires) are determined by situated TV viewers. Students can come to realize that like all narratives, CNN's news discourse has a surface structure and a deep structure (TERDIMAN, 1985). In the surface structure, which is characterized by the discursive practices that CNN uses to relate the events, perspectives of different sides are heard and different voices and discourses are shown. This makes the channel acquire and transmit an air of fairness and equilibrium among the variety of views our world consists of. Thus, the surface structure is permeated by a democratic and liberal sense. On the other hand, in the deep structure, which are "the codes by which dominant discourse regulates understanding of the social world" (TERDIMAN, 1985, p. 149), dominant discourses help neutralize all alternative discourses that come from people that oppose American or more generally western views and come to represent the world from a different perspective, or *locus* of enunciation. As we see it, the paradox is that what is *not*

silenced in surface structure is actually negated in deep structure. This way counter-hegemonic dynamics, counter-discursive practices are barred from institutionalization.

2 Of “victims” and “victimizers”: the role of story “slugs” on the screen

Our point of departure is the story “slugs”, also called newscast slogans that are shown on the lower left side of the TV screen and are used by CNN to summarize every event being reported. By focusing with our students on the story “slugs” adopted by CNN on September 11th and during the two months that followed the event, a research of how the series of events were summarized can be conducted and the relationship between action and reaction in our society might be unveiled.

After the airplanes crashed into the World Trade Center, CNN broadcast with the newscast slogan “America under attack”. America, the nation was being attacked and with this title CNN assumed the victimhood status and declared that after this event “the world will never be the same again” (CNN, September 11th). It is important to notice that the word used in this title is not the United States but America and all the meanings this word carries for Americans, such as freedom and the American way of life. The incorporation of the word America in most of the story “slugs” CNN used related to 9/11 and its aftermath reflects the patriotic mood of the nation. As Pres. Bush reiterated in his address to the nation on September 11th: “America was targeted for attack because we are the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining” (CNN, September 11th).

The newscast slogan used after September 11th until the strike on Afghanistan is “War against terror”. This story “slug” is as vague as the actions taken against terror could have been. As Vidal (2002) proposes: “...we declared war on terrorism-an abstract noun which cannot be a war at all, as you need a country for that” (p. 39). First and foremost, terror embraces many more meanings than terrorism. So, together with the war on terrorism the channel declares America’s war on the feeling of extreme fear as well as on someone or something that causes extreme fear. CNN’s use of this slogan, somehow seeks to incorporate those meanings.

During this period, between the 9/11 attacks and the war, other story “slugs” like “America mourns” were shown that also work on the acquired victim status that is declared in Pres. Bush’s speech: “Tonight I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve,

for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened” (CNN, September 18th). On the other hand, the “America responds” title works on the strong nation status. As Bush said in the same address: “A great people has been moved to defend a great nation”. All those “slugs” were shown in parallel with the standard title of “War against terror”. On October 6th, one day before the beginning of the war, the opening signal for the news changed and the title became “Target: Terrorism”.

On October 7th the newscast slogan changed to “America strikes back” and “Strike against terror”. The verb strike carries in this case meanings that bring back what happened in the United States, since Americans were struck by the hijacked airplanes. Undoubtedly, they were hit sharply and forcefully and attacked with sudden force. So, by using the word strike CNN declared that this war will be a response to those attacks and it will have the same shape and form. However, pieces of information coming from utterances of high US officials reveal that this is a war and contradict the idea of *strike*. Ronald Rumsfeld, the US defense secretary said: “The fact is that in this battle against terrorism there is no silver bullet. There is no single thing that is going to suddenly make that threat disappear. Ultimately they are going to collapse from within” (CNN, October 7th). But the word *strike*, used in the “slugs” mentioned above, passes meanings that this sudden attack will solve the problem.

Although the U.S operation in Afghanistan was called “Anaconda”, CNN dubbed it “Infinite Justice” and in a way this cycle of attack, mourning, response and strike back is coming to a close. These story “slugs” follow the western narrative of crime, revenge and justice, which can be opposed to the oriental narratives of passive defense. The events could not have developed in a different way because we and our actions are conditioned partly by our history and our social existence and we have learned to respond in the same way we are treated and in this way we think we are seeking justice. From an early age we learn “tit for tat” and we are surely formed by these concepts and act according to them. Although many interpretations of the following passage from the bible have been given, in the core of it lies the message that punishment must fit the crime: “And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Exodus 21: 23-25).

The pattern also fulfills what White (1990) calls “the demand for closure in history”. And he explains:

The demand for closure is a demand, I suggest, for moral meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama. Has any historical narrative ever been written that was not informed not only by moral awareness but specifically by the moral authority of the narrator? (p. 21)

This closure gives reality a sense of “meaning, completeness and fullness” (p. 21). Students can grasp by doing an analysis of the story slugs our need for events to have a beginning, middle and end. This is the structure we understand and apply in the narratives we construct of our reality, even if reality itself does not possess this structure. In the case of the story slugs on September 11th, the moral element played a significant role in the way the sequence of events was constructed.

3 WAR AS A VIDEOGAME AND THE VISUAL CONSTRUCTION OF THE BATTLEFIELD



Fig. 01: CNN 20/9/2001.

The visual construction of reality and the analysis of the ideology behind the images shown on TV news can make our students aware of the meaning-making processes they use when they interpret images. Different contexts ask for different visual constructions that make viewers use certain meaning-making processes and not others. A multimodal analysis of TV news as texts inside the classroom can research how meanings are constructed in these distinct modalities: the verbal and the visual.

The grouping together of CNN's images of war and the creation of different categories of images by the students together with the teacher can make these interpreters perceive the regularities in the strategies of depiction of war in each category and how meaning is constructed by the viewers in each category.

The first images of war were shown on CNN two weeks after the 9/11 attacks and were “the different scenarios of war”. Major General Donald Shepperd, a former National Guard commander explained the course of action by showing two animated three-dimensional scenarios of war.

In the first one we see an aircraft flying from the Arabian Peninsula above Iran and then Iraq. The horizon is pink and the sky is blue. The image of those scenarios of war has full color saturation and color differentiation that help reduce the naturalistic modality of the image³. The way the aircraft is depicted, its movement and the impression we get we are in it, make us sense that everything is a game. It’s not a war General Shepperd is talking about but just another videogame kids play. Thus, the image transmits the impression that there is no blood or real people’s lives involved in this operation. However, the use of this representation technique reminds us of Fiske’s (1998) declaration that “no knowledge system is nonpolitical” (p. 157).

The similarity these images of the scenarios of war have to a means of pleasure that is such a widespread pastime of teenagers in the Western world drains war of its mortal aspect. Viewers’ response to this mode of representation of war is decisive once the techniques used for the creation of such videos have the power to turn spectators into sympathetic supporters of the cause being fought. Furthermore, videogames as cultural signs communicate an infatuation with technological advances that have become permanent fixtures of every middle class household in the western world. Viewers might also expect this kind of technological advances for equipment used for war. And this is the way that lethal weapons, like “land attack cruise missiles”, are introduced to news spectators; not as killing machines but as scientific breakthroughs.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) pointed out that “reality is in the eye of the beholder; or rather, what is regarded as real depends on how reality is defined by a particular social group” because “the eye has had a cultural training, and is located in a social setting and a history” (p. 163). Images are a form of cultural communication and modality markers contribute to our perception of the images of the different scenarios of war as video games. Image is not something literal and modality expresses different degrees of truth. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (1996):

³ Terms adopted by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996)

modality is 'interpersonal' rather than 'ideational'. It does not express absolute truths and falsehoods; it produces shared truths aligning readers or listeners with some statements and distancing them from others. It serves to create an imaginary 'we'. It says, as it were, these are the things 'we' consider true, and these are the things 'we' distance ourselves from (p. 160).

Obviously, people have always been interested and curious about wars happening somewhere else. Previously, people had only a chance to read about them in newspapers and later on, listen to their discursive description on the radio and then on TV. However, nowadays, TV viewers get to quench their curiosity by being able to look at images of war. They get a feeling through pictures of what it must feel like to be among the participants in horrific events. At the same time, those pictures feel like power and transmit a sense of luck, because the beholders are far away and do not bear the consequences of the calamities being shown in the images. I believe that knowing what is really happening during a war just by watching its pictures on TV can be questionable.

Many well-known photographers have gotten interested in covering wars since these struggles represent the center of innumerable and grotesque violations of human rights. In a way, these are photographers obsessed with revealing the consequences of war to the world. Undoubtedly, war photography is the only type of picture-taking that involves danger since in many cases we have heard of photographers being killed in wars or captured and held as hostages. Unfortunately, though, armed fighting has turned into a banality on our TVs nowadays and media ethical codes have started dictating what needs to be filmed. Sontag (2003) focuses on the way image selection works in the American media:

In the era of tele-controlled warfare against innumerable enemies of American power, policies about what is to be seen and not seen by the public are still being worked out. Television news producers and newspaper and magazine photo editors make decisions every day, which firm up the wavering consensus about the boundaries of public knowledge. Often their decisions are cast as judgments about "good taste"-always a repressive standard when invoked by institutions (p. 68).

But viewers cannot grasp the essence of war just by looking at images of it. Sontag (1977) insists upon this point when she explains that "the ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: "There is the surface. Now think-or rather feel, intuit-what is beyond it, what the reality must be like if it looks this way" (p. 23). Images only reveal layers of reality and not a total and straightforward reflection of the events being photographed or filmed.

Images on CNN of the war in Afghanistan can be divided in different categories according to their theme. The first category is made up of images of the US machinery of war.

In the beginning of October 2001, CNN starts reporting and showing images of their military buildup. Carriers are shown moving towards the Indian Ocean with US soldiers on them. We get images of war helicopters, airplanes and bombs and have their functions closely explained.

When the strikes start, the first images the Pentagon releases are these of cruise missiles being launched from two aircraft carriers. The lights of the aircraft engines are shown in the darkness. The technology of war impresses American CNN viewers and makes them proud of their country's advances. Also images of green anti-aircraft missiles are broadcast that are reportedly in Kabul. Since the Gulf War in 1991, CNN has adopted the following pattern of war transmission: images of the missiles being shot from the ship platforms and light-traces of missiles on the dark sky over cities inhabited by millions of people.



Fig. 02: CNN 8/10/2001.



Fig. 03: CNN 7/10/2001.



Fig. 04: CNN 7/10/2001.

All these footages prove the military superiority of the Americans on the one hand and on the other hand have the videogame effect. Said (1994) supports that during the broadcasting of the operation Desert Storm the “anachronistic and singularly bloody aspect was largely kept from the American television audience, as a way of maintaining its image as a painless Nintendo exercise, and the image of Americans as virtuous, clean warriors” (p. 365).

On the fourth day of air strikes the common night images of continuous green light flashes (Figure 4) are shown on CNN and the anchor says: “Pictures somewhat grainy but these are the clearest pictures we have seen so far”. There is, in fact, nothing in this footage that is clear or clearer than the images we had seen up until then. These live images and the absurdity of their oral accompaniment prove that reporters and viewers long for more action and violence in the life of people that make the news. As Gripsrud (1998) points out in his article:

Liveness is particularly important to newscasts, since ‘news’ as a genre is based on getting as close to immediacy as possible. US television in particular often takes this idea ad absurdum when reporters talk to the camera-‘live’, ‘on the spot’ – at a dark place where nothing is happening (any more). The reason for this is an equation of ‘live’ with ‘real’: liveness means reality. Live is taken to mean ‘not staged’. The capacity for transmission of ‘reality in the raw’ is what separates television from other media, and it thrives on what seems to be an almost insatiable demand for reality in modern societies (p. 19).

Even when viewers can observe and understand nothing from the image, the knowledge that the transmission is ‘live’ compensates and quenches the viewer’s interest for information.



Fig. 05: CNN 22/11/2001.

Images of airplanes cruising the sky over Afghanistan are broadcast and sometimes they are shown throwing missiles. The effect these images have is clear-cut; they prove

the American military superiority. Nevertheless, even the most naïve viewer imagines that these missiles are falling on people who might be Al Qaeda supporters, Taliban fighters or Afghan civilians.



Fig. 06: CNN 8/10/2001.



Fig. 07: CNN 15/10/2001.

The second category consists of images of destruction caused by the strikes. The battlefield becomes the cities of Kabul, Kandahar and Jalalabad since the American airplanes are attacking Taliban airbases and infrastructure inside these cities. The first images of the ruins of the attacks come from Kandahar that is described as a “Taliban religious stronghold in Afghanistan”. A crater is shown, probably made by missiles, and people picking up stones. Some houses, made of stone and mud, are seen in the background. No victims are shown. Other times when civilians are hit, people are shown crying and mourning for their dead relatives. The aftermath of each bombing with the craters created by the bombs and the destroyed neighborhoods are transmitted but after the victims are removed. Sometimes a body covered with a sheet is shown as the dead proof that war always causes civilian casualties. Other times images of unexploded bombs are released and the craters they create.



Fig. 08: CNN 10/10/2001.



Fig. 09: CNN 15/10/2001.

The third category of images depicting the war consists of long shots of bombs exploding on the ground in the middle of the night. They are reportedly taking place at the outskirts of Kabul and they are hitting Taliban targets. A big ball of fire can be seen but the target cannot be defined or clearly seen by the spectators. Other images of the aftermath of strikes include long shot of something burning behind dwellings and trees. It is impossible to know what is burning. A very common pattern is to show long shots of the smoke that rises after the bomb is thrown. We listen to the sound of bombs and see the sand rising. The camera focuses on the sky and the rising smoke.



Fig. 10: CNN 01/10/2001.



Fig. 11: CNN 30/09/2001.

The fourth category of war images is made up of the Northern Alliance ground forces. Men dressed in the traditional Afghan outfits are seen firing from a tank. No resemblance with the Western concept of an army. The Northern Alliance is fighting against the Taliban and although the fighting is reported as fierce, the images broadcast show 6 or 7 North Alliance fighters dressed in medieval clothes firing missiles from machines that seem completely obsolete in a background that appears arid and deserted. As far as the enemy is concerned, it is not to be seen. Though the sights and sounds of war do not seem as vivid as our concept of war created by movies, we are sure that a fierce reality is concealed behind its image representation.

4 FINAL WORDS

In this article, we show the importance of bringing TV news' verbal and visual language to the school environment and treated its production and reception as a construction that depends on its *locus* of enunciation and, therefore, cannot be considered

as a reflection of truth. We have also shown that although journalism is an important narrative, it cannot be considered the absolute truth since both verbal and visual languages on TV news try to capture a reality that is impossible to retrieve. We state the importance of studying such discourse in the classroom since it can make our students aware of the verbal and visual means that the society uses to justify its ideology.

Our analysis, based on the verbal and the visual code of meaning-making, shows how ideology is ingrained in different representations of reality and this proves the 'constructive' quality of news discourse. Students can realize during the analysis proposed that one of the important characteristics of news discourse in general and that of CNN in particular is the absence of historical contextualization; a *sine qua non* condition for the representation of events in the news. TV channels are interested in talking about events taking place at the moment, in the immediate present. However, the causal relationship between these events and the context in which they are inserted is almost never analyzed. Therefore, the analysis of events in the news ends up being superficial and fragmented, with no connection to any political, social, economic or cultural context.

The students-interpreters can study the strategies CNN employed to capitalize upon the tragedy and work towards solidifying public opinions and annulling all criticism directed against the decisions made by the American government. For the Americans, a crime had been committed and reacting to it was thought to lead to justice.

Through the analysis, the students can reflect on questions of verbal and visual representation and their potential for meaning-making. Students, analyzing news discourse, can research how the two different kinds of expression - verbal and visual - interact in the multimodal TV news text, in order to construct a reality that is the consequence of the ideology of the channel. In the aftermath of September 11th, the discourse and images on conflict and war condone the actions taken by the American government. In the case of the story "slugs", the crime-revenge-justice theme justified the ensuing war against terrorism.

Moreover, it can be analyzed in the classroom the representation of the War in Afghanistan and how it bleached out the reality of what it was supposed to be a reflection of. Both the verbal and visual representation of the war tended to wither its colors and create a reality that was more imaginary than real. Students can perceive how images of war were highly fictionalized but they were received as true because, in fact, they partly represented what was happening in Afghanistan.

The importance of this kind of analysis in the classroom is that it represents an attempt to show how news discourse promotes and perpetuates ideologies. This kind of research can made students become more aware of the ‘unrealities’ reported in the news and also more critical of the visual and verbal codes that are used to represent ‘realities’.

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