Abstract. With the advent of mass communication the way we use images as references, the way we translate them constantly in order to subvert, understand or reinforce them has exploded – no image is innocent of that. Discussions about the originality, authenticity or uniqueness of the image are directly connected to their dependence on the intersemiotic function. We can conceive of no intersemiotic translation that is not iconic and linguistic at once. The fusion of words and images in Western culture since modernity cannot allow us to speak of verbal and visual signs as perceived separately from each other. Our examination of three examples of pictorial intersemiosis in mass culture relies on these premises, questioning Paolo Fabbri’s (2008) reluctance to realize the full potential of intersemiosis and his insistence to foreground and prioritize some purely linguistic semiotic system over the iconic/pictorial or the iconic/linguistic one. Furthermore, our inquiry opens up the issue of semiotic terminology, i.e. the relationship between icon, picture, image and the visual sign.

Keywords: intericonicity, intersemiotic translation, imagetext.

1. Introduction

The definition of intersemiotic translation, first offered by Roman Jakobson in 1959 [2004], though still the starting point for most studies on this matter, has been broadened so as to include, for most scholars, the transformations between non-linguistic semiotic systems. This position allows the translator to by-pass the most powerful semiotic system, which, according to linguists and semioticians alike, is that of language, and to invest in non-verbal forms of communication, which many scholars still consider communicatively incomplete or even illegitimate as types of translation.

Based on a critic of Paolo Fabbri’s definition of intersemiosis, the first part of the paper will examine cases of non-verbal intersemiotic translations in current artistic and commercial visual culture, i.e. cases in which one non-verbal expression has been translated into another non-verbal expression. This will make clear how the semiotic system of pure language has been rendered almost obsolete as an independent semiotic system. Instead, today's global culture operates on a system of semiosis where the registers of communication are mixed: they are pictorial (as defined by Sonesson, 1989) and linguistic at once, they incorporate motion, and they have produced a whole new definition of text.

Translations can thus occur across pictorial and icono-linguistic registers: From the photographs from the prisons of Abu-Ghraib to the video-clips of Bin Laden’s addresses, through to the different types of marketing for women’s health products across the globe, or of soil fertilizers in Africa, India and Europe, the intersemiotic
translation of images (as defined by Belting, 2001) has been a powerful tool in cultural communication. Many of the images generated today rely on a well-established system of signification with a rich cultural and ideological history.

The second part of the paper, resting upon the premise presented in the first, will attempt to show how a semiotic ontology can use the hermeneutically derived terms of iconicity and imagetext (as defined by Mitchell, 1994), reclaim intericonicity for semiotics, and discuss mass-cultural translation in a changing world. Indeed, if a lot of today's mass-cultural rhetoric rests upon a kind of participatory intermediality (blogging, videogames), where does this leave so-called intericonicity, i.e. the condition of translatability and play between images (or between imagetexts)? Is semiosis as open and arbitrary as ever, or is it more controlled and semantically limited within the global icono-linguistic, image-textual nexus of infotainment?

2. Semiotic systems and the question of primacy

The position of many linguists and semioticians advocating the primacy of the semiotic system of language is old and well known; a primacy that had been pointed out by the father of European Semiotics and Linguistics, Ferdinand De Saussure (1979, p. 45) already at the beginning of the 20th century. Saussure regards language as the most important semiotic system of all. Many leading semioticians, such as Jakobson (1970, p. 511), Greimas and Courtès (1993 [1979], p. 398), Eco (1994 [1976], p. 263), Barthes (1964, p. 40) have come to agree with Saussure’s point of view.

The cultural taxonomy of semiotic systems established by the founder of the Moscow-Tartu school of Cultural semiotics Yuri Lotman (2001 [1990]) is also based on the idea of the primacy of the linguistic system. Natural languages are, according to him, primary modeling systems. Sebeok (2001, p. 139) adds that “systems that have a natural language as their basis and that acquire supplementary superstructures, thus creating languages of a second level, can appropriately be called secondary modeling systems”. The language of art, cultural rules, religion etc. are secondary modeling systems, or more complex languages built upon natural language.

Those semioticians who insist on the primacy of the linguistic system do so on the basis of certain qualities they do not recognize in extra-linguistic systems. Fabbri (2008, p. 42) has summarized these qualities by pointing to one specific privilege of the linguistic system: “contrary to other systems, such as the optical, the kinetic, the musical or the spatial code systems, language has the capacity to not only define itself, but also other sign systems”.

Fabbri (2008, p. 100) also offers a historical explanation for the idea of the primacy of the linguistic sign system: “beyond the cases of homonymy or synonymy, language has long been considered to possess a different semantics than other systems. This is indeed true, since for a long time language has been thought of as ‘natural reason’/ ‘logos’, i.e. a distinct criterion upon which thought is grounded”. Fabbri (2008, p. 66) asserts that language is not the only semiotic system which carries significiation, and that it is possible for other forms of significiation to organize forms of content, i.e. signifiers which language cannot necessarily produce. This realization is hardly new, yet it was not part of the early theoretical framework of semiotics, which somehow assumed that it is only possible to think what can be uttered linguistically.
3. Intersemiosis and Intericonicity: different or equivalent?

If early semiotic theory did not account for non-linguistic semiotic systems, this does not mean the “era of intersemiotic translation” (Fabbri, 2000, p. 282) and the phenomenon of “infinite semiosis” (Peirce, 1931-1958, 4.127) had not already started. With the spread of visual and verbal literacy and the intensification of mass communication technologies, word-image interactions and the integrated collaboration of linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic systems were already at the crux of cultural signification in the early twentieth century.

What semioticians seek to conceptualize now is the space between, the interface and the overlap of semiotic systems. Sidestepping the problem of the primacy of the linguistic in signification, Petrilli (2003, p. 31) has attempted a distinction between what is and what is not a sign:

\[\text{T}rans-, inter-, dia- are prepositions and prefixes that specify the modality of being of the sign, the sign process, semiosis […] Semiosis is a transsign process, an intersign process. Something that is not capable of relating to something else that signifies it, utters it, translates it, interprets it, responds to it, is not a sign.\]

Torop (2004, p. 64), though speaking specifically of the arts, can assist here in reestablishing the position of linguistic systems in intersemiotic translation by repeating the idea of a “partial overlap” of signs in different systems: “[T]he intersemiotic aspect of culture is due to the partial overlap of signs and languages or sign systems of different arts – first, on the level of independent existence of these languages and texts created in them (e.g. film and theater).” The most characteristic description of such a thesis, supported also by many of the Moscow-Tartu scholars, has been offered by Toporov, though he does not escape from the Soviet academic reflex of presupposing an essentialist view of culture, Toporov (1992, p. 30) writes: “[Culture] is not only the place where meanings are born, but the space in which they are being exchanged, ‘transmitted’ and seek to be translated from one cultural language into another”.

The first to define intersemiotic translation was Roman Jakobson himself (2004 [1959], p. 139): “Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems”. His examples ranged from “verbal art to music, dance, cinema or painting” (ibid, 143). Jakobson might have been among the founding members of the International Association for Semiotic Studies with Algirdas Julien Greimas, Julia Kristeva, Emile Benveniste, Thomas A. Sebeok and Yuri Lotman, yet he was primarily a linguist. He never ceased to consider language as the primary semiotic system and thus never discussed the issue of intersemiotic transposition without placing language as one of the two poles in the translation process.

Neither did Greimas. He could not imagine an intersemiotic translation in the absence of language. According to Greimas (1966, p. 12), “every signifying totality [ensemble] which is by nature different [has a different character] than natural language can be translated, more or less accurately, in any given natural language”. He explicitly believed (ibid, p. 13) that “natural languages occupy a special position as the starting point of every transposition and as the end point of every translation”.

The question remains open: Could we imagine an intersemiotic translation that does not account for linguistic signs? Can we speak of intersemiosis between non-linguistic sign-systems and still subscribe to a “classical”, that is to say undiluted,
definition of the sign, or, to put it even more strictly, in a way similar to what Sonesson suggests (1992) to a clear definition of the sign that distinguishes between signs and non-signs or “no-yet-signs”?

4. Intersemiosis: excluding the primary semiotic system?

Eco makes a remark in order to suggest a new definition of intersemiotic translation whereby translation is to be understood as a metaphor, a transference or an adaptation. Within such an intersemiotic framework he can imagine the operation also of non-linguistic registers. More precisely, Eco (2001, p. 67) observes that:

[…] Jakobson [when discussing intersemiotic translation] was thinking of a version of a verbal text in another semiotic system […] but he does not deal with other cases of transmutation between systems other than verbal language, like for example, the ballet version of Debussy’s Après midi, the interpretation of Pictures in a Exhibition by means of a musical composition by Mussorgsky, or even the version of a painting in words (ekphrasis).

For Petrilli too (2003, p. 18), it is clear that “translative processes may be internal to the same language; they may occur from verbal sign systems to nonverbal sign systems and vice versa; or among nonverbal sign systems”, while Tomaszkiewicz (2005, p. 162) approaches intersemiotic translation as the transmission of the same message from a linguistic into a non-linguistic system or vice-versa.

Fabbri (2008, p. 113) mentions a lecture in which he discussed his own approaches to translation which echoes the same conflict in almost identical terms. Gianni Vattimo was present and reacted to Fabbri’s insistence on the possibility of iconic signifieds. “Vattimo”, Fabbri remembers, “supported the idea of the privilege of linguistic meaning over the meaning of other types of sign, and could not accept the idea of a meta-painting, i.e. of a painting that can not only formulate through language general theoretical hypotheses, but which can also function through clearly iconic signifieds, which cannot be expressed in words.” Then he adds, “Yet I did believe in this idea and will continue to believe in it”.

Though Fabbri relies more on a semiotic leap of faith in order to hold on to the idea of a non-linguistic sign that can be translated into another non-linguistic sign, he is certain that in the case of pictorial signs we can actually talk of intersemiotic translation. He goes so far as to speak of the “specific expressive essence, an ekphrastic form, which transmits a certain type of content organization” (Fabbri, 2008, p. 106). Barthes (1964, p. 40) has of course discussed the ambiguity of the image. According to him, only language could lift the amphisemy of the image. We shall pose the question again: What happens when a pictorial message is translated into another pictorial one? We shall try to address this question through a couple of well-known examples.

4.1. Intersemiotic translation from painting to painting

For Lotman (2011, p. 250-251), art is a secondary modeling system which is directly connected to translation due to its content: “[T]he content of art as a modeling system is the world of reality, translated to the language of our consciousness, translated in turn to the language of the given form of art”. In this phrase he allows for the possibility of intericonic translation that is completely unmediated by language.
If we take into account Lotman’s conviction that “there are two opposing tendencies in art: One relies on repeating something that is already familiar, the other is interested in creating something new”, we can establish the terms for intericonic translatability. The tendency to “repeat something that is already familiar” is actually the tendency to translate.

The two images (fig. 1 and 3) bear many resemblances. The second is definitely an interpretation of the first, and, is actually in the strictest possible way, its intericonic translation. Wong Hoy Cheong’s 2009 Days of Our Lives: Reading offers an example of an intersemiotic translation of Herni-Fantin Latour’s 1877 readers. Why are we not content with simply calling Cheong’s work a re-reading, or an interpretation? What do we gain by speaking of intersemiotic translation?

Wong Hoy Cheong’s painting chooses to reproduce the specific painting by Henri Fantin-Latour by keeping the general theme of two women, one reading at a table with a vase of flowers, another sitting next to first one: The relative size, the pose of the women, the composition of the picture are identical. Cheong has changed the clothing of the women, as well as the chairs, the flowers and the tablecloth, in order to create associations with a contemporary interior and two Muslim women, rather than a mid-1870s Paris living room.

Fabbri would definitely connect the issue of translatability with that of interpretation – indeed in his comparison of two paintings, one of which translates the other, he is indifferent to the specificity and strictness of intersemiosis, and relies instead on the terminology of hermeneutics:

[W]e could consider a hermeneutics of semiotic systems that are different to language: A hermeneutics of painting, a hermeneutics of cinema, of gesture etc…These semiotic systems can interpret themselves, but they can all interpret other semiotic systems through expressive concepts which (…) partially re-translate the meaning that was expressed in the initial system (Fabbri, 2008, p. 112).

Yet in this case intersemiosis is hardly a matter of the specificity of painting. The fact that Cheong chose to paint his picture and not simply manipulate Fantin’s image digitally, does heighten the effect of intersemiosis. Yet, the sign of the medium of painting, which enhances, by its association to the tradition of the medium, the gravitas of the subject-matter, is not the primary code used for intersemiosis. A similarly potent effect could be produced through the digital reprocessing of the 1877 painting.
What Cheong really did is painfully obvious, and it has been the task of images at least since Fantin’s time: He used the signifier of another image as a signified for his own – Fantin’s image is a readily identifiable set of signs, a combination in the pictorial code which Cheong manipulates in order to produce a new meaning, in the same register. Intersemiosis here aims to alienate from the original, nor to rehabilitate its meanings. It seems we have a clear case of translation from a pictorial sign system into another pictorial sign system, an extra-linguistic intersemiosis.

4.2. Intersemiotic translation in the mass media

The next two cases make this point even more clear. A set of visual codes (in our cases codes of visual composition) is being translated in a new set of visual codes. In the process of intersemiosis certain signs are being translated, yet the aim is to create an effect that recalls and at the same time subverts the original. In the case of Pamela Anderson from the action drama series The Baywatch (1989-2001) being referenced by Martin Lawrence in action comedy Big Momma’s House 2 (2006) the effect is humorous (fig. 3 and 4).

![Figure 3: The Baywatch (1989-2001)](image1)

![Figure 4: Big Momma’s House 2 (2006)](image2)

In the second case, that of Burt Lancaster and Deborah Kerr in the drama film From Here to Eternity (1953) being referenced by a Notos Com advertisement (TO BHMA MEN, 8/2008) the intericonic transposition exploits the success of a compositional code (fig. 5 and 6). Here the question occurs: Are we speaking of purely visual codes as opposed to purely linguistic ones? Is the code of From Her to Eternity purely visual, i.e. independent from the linguistic/verbal investment of the film? And is Baywatch merely a series of montaged visual images? It is obvious that neither the still from the film nor the still from the TV series can be understood as self-standing images.
In fact Fantin-Latour’s painting is already pointing to an inescapable fact of perception, namely that there is no visual literacy without linguistic literacy. Rather than leading to an immediate conclusion that there is no primacy of the word over the image or vice-versa, we might like to think of the possibility of a sign that is at once coded as a word and as image.

All three, in fact all six images we presented are visual signs, yet they are heavily coded with verbal meanings too. Fantin is actually describing the act of reading as an opaque act of deciphering and decoding which the viewer and the painting cannot share simply by looking at the reading person. The environment around the reader (or readers, it is hard to say whether the second woman is participating in this act or not) tries to anchor some of the fleeting signifiers and provides information, albeit necessarily incomplete information, about the reading material itself.

Media theory has long realized that the perception of words on a page or on a screen is in fact determined by the page or the screen itself. This sensory (visual) experience is intrinsically connected to the decoding of the (verbal) sign, of the word on the page or the screen. The question about the iconicity of the verbal has long returned, yet now it is a question of whether we can really imagine words without images and images without words.

The iconic sign, from Eco through to anti-semioticians such as W. T. Mitchell, and most notably among media theorists such as Latour (1998) (from a non-semiotic point of view) or semioticians such as Lotman and Sonesson, do not make a distinction between the iconic/visual and an iconic/verbal sign. If Eco does so for analytical purposes, he still realizes that from the point of view of perception, a clear distinction is not possible.

Why are the three cases we examined semiotic transpositions between iconic/visual systems and not simple references? This paper has attempted to read Fabbri’s supra-linguistic approach to intersemiosis as wanting in its definition of the iconic sign. In order to read a tree transposition, and understand them as depending on some kind of intersemiosis, we have to allow for a definition of the iconic sign informed by perception theory and media theory.

Fantin’s painting offers an early allegory of the limits of iconic/visual significations. The poses, the gazes and the act of reading address the viewer with an enigma, but also with a series of clues to solve it and look the contradiction in the eye. Cheong’s reworking of Fantin’s image uses the mystery of the cross- and counter-signifying clues (the woman looking into the book interpreted as an act of reading, the other one looking elsewhere – interpreted as gazing into the void absentmindedly or maybe listening carefully).
Cheong reprocesses the dialectics in Fantin’s painting – absorption and attention versus absent-mindedness or theatricality, decoding practices involving words – on the part of the reading woman, and involving images – on the part of the viewer. Cheong deactivates the sign (the question mark) that is the listening or absent-minded woman. He does not pose the question of participation of the non-reading woman that is at the crux of Fantin’s work.

Cheong tames the ambiguity of the signs in the iconic/visual system of Fantin’s painting by adding the overriding signifiers of the Islamic headcover. The content of reading and the issue of absorption are not important anymore. The mere act of reading is lead ad absurdum. The participants in the act of reading are not offering their absorption for sensory consumption of the viewer. The Islamic dress code points to the importance of the late 19th century French bourgeois interior – the act of reading becomes an ironic comment against the universality of the liberal values of the Enlightenment: Yes, women are reading, Cheong seems to be saying, but their cultural refinement (associated with the Enlightenment project) hardly means they are liberated from other social constraints and repression.

As for the other two, much more obvious transpositions, we would have to point out that they share with the iconic/visual signs of the Fantin/Cheong transposition the immediacy of the sensual. In the case of Baywatch, the intersemiosis is trying to reverse the code of sensuality of Pamela Anderson’s pose. In the case of the Notos ad, the transposition simply modernizes and recycles the famous pose in From Her to Eternity.

5. Icon, image, picture

We do not claim for semiotics a status higher than that of a method. That is the most any approach could offer, (short of metaphysical and theological approaches – though even there, neuroscience, perception theory and biosemiotics can offer their insights). We have attempted a critique of Fabbri’s reluctance to deal with semiotics as a method that can be legitimately employed in terms far broader than the analysis of fundamentally and primarily linguistic registers. Semiotics has followed developments in the analysis of visual and verbal communication that has not only enabled its critical and creative dialogue with other methods, but have made this dialogue indispensible.

The theory of media and of perception have shown, both on the level of developmental psychology, and on the level of cultural history, that we can indeed communicate with signs that are not linguistic, but also that we cannot divorce a complex pictorial sign from an understanding of culture that has been moulded in and created through language, i.e. a linguistic semiotic system in a strict sense. The question of intersemiosis, in linguistic-iconic and/or pictorial-iconic registers, also becomes a historical question.

On the level of individual perception, for intersemiosis to work in the examples we have provided, the viewer requires a degree of media literacy that is by no means merely a linguistic affair. It might still be an open discussion at which stage infants actually produce and perceive of signs rather than merely interact with their environment and to which extent capacity for sign production differentiates humans from other animals (Donald, 2001, Sonesson, 2012), yet experimental psychologists and biosemioticians agree have shown how hard it is to distinguish pictorial from linguistic signs, given the representational character of both.
On the level of the technological structure of media today, networks of communication and features of participation and perception in these networks have again undergone a great change, and it is getting harder to speak of pictures isolated from words, or words from pictures. It has become obvious that pictures cannot be discussed separately from their screens or the surfaces upon which they appear, unless they are theorized as images, forming a conceptual triangle with media and bodies (Belting, 2001). The sign of the image can only be separated, in terms of perception, from the materiality of its medium and the perceiving and/or carrying body, when the specificity of the medium and of the body are acknowledged.

The images we have seen are all transferred from one context to another, yet what would context be in this case? Would it simply mean medium? And what would medium mean in each case – would it merely refer to the materials aspect of the image or to the social practice that would include materials, as well as the technology of the communicative act, including viewers and makers? The still from From Her to Eternity becomes a printed advertisement. Fantin-Latour’s painting becomes Cheong’s painting. In the first case the material medium (the carrier so to speak) of the image has changed. In the second it is the same.

Yet in both there is a historical distance and there is also a conscious reference of the later image to the former. The original images are taken for commonplace knowledge (a part of media literacy) and the new images that occur through the self-references add information, while also retaining, information and thus generate another combination of meaning. Which part of the content of the sign remains constant? Furthermore, both the new images have a communicative function also without reference to their sources. In cases of parody and self-reference or self-reflexivity, like in the examples we presented, then, the reader should actually be informed about the original source, that upon which the self-reference or the parody relies on. In that sense he or she is already reading a sign that is supra-linguistic and supra-image at once. That unicum of a sign, an amalgam of pictures and words, a unit of perception, often with an incorporated perception of time, is the iconic sign, the icon, a term that might derive from the Peircian icon, yet is invested with many more functions, indexical and symbolic, and can also incorporate imagetext (Mitchell, 1994).

6. Pictorial intersemiosis as intercultural communication

In the case of the 2012, much discussed, IKEA advertisements (fig. 7), the problem of supra-linguistic intercultural communication is posed in clear semiotic terms: The visual sign “woman” is replaced by the visual sign “IKEA product”, just like a word could be replaced by another word in the context of a phrase. Here, the intericonic exchange functions equivalently to a linguistic one. The alleged primacy of the linguistic or the often assumed directness and sensuality of the visual are of secondary importance in the function of the signifying system of this advertisement: Those viewers/readers who will notice the omission of women and their replacement by pieces of furniture or other advertised commodities will feel the absence of the sign as relying on its connotation with desire and objecthood – they will know that a closet is as desirable as a woman and will thus acknowledge the targeted political message of the company! Those who are not familiar with the original advertisements will not know there has been an omission. The advertisement will nevertheless transmit its message, and this message is as much visual as it is verbal, pictorial as much as linguistic: IKEA sells furniture and the representation of gendered
individuals has a culturally defined and therefore commercially significant anchorage function.

Figure 7: IKEA advertisement (2012)

7. In lieu of a conclusion

Where is the pictorial/linguistic conjunction here? Words and images are inseparable in these cases – and that is indeed why all pictures are not just similar images presupposing one another but actual semiotic transpositions. Like with every intericonic incident, intersemiosis between pictures (visual signs) and images (on different media) points to the constructedness of the pictorial and the linguistic signification underlying and cross-supporting it.

It is beyond the paper’s scope to discuss the dependence of visual literacy on verbal literacy and of word/image perception to media technology. Yet the point we would like to suggest is that intersemiosis, even when it occurs between pictorial sign systems, is heavily dependent upon the joint perception of word and image.

References