Towards an Understanding of Visual Dialogism: Iwo Jima, Coca-Cola, and the African Postcolony

Abou B. Bamba
Hobart & William Smith Colleges

INTRODUCTION

The field of visual culture is traversed by myriad of theoretical concerns ranging from whether visual communication is possible to how to argue with visual artifact passing through the nature of visual syntax. These queries have received a relatively large scholarly attention in recent years. However, other issues, including the problematics of visual dialogism, have remained at the margins of the scholarship on visuality. In effect, few scholars have enquired whether it is possible to have a visual intertextual dialogue. If yes, how and where does one find visual dialogism? To come to terms with these questions, I designed and analyzed a visual artifact or rather a collage [see Fig. 1, next page], which I have entitled "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa."



Figure 1: "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa"
Source: This is a manipulative collage of two pictures: Joe Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph and a picture of a bottle of Coca Cola.

My claim throughout this discussion is that though the field of visual dialogism longs to see its Bakhtins and other Saussures emerge, one cannot fail to see the potentiality and actuality of conscious and unconscious dialogic relations between visual compositions. It is my belief that from the paintings of Picasso to the 1989 Polish campaign poster featuring movie star Gary Cooper, visual structures and particles have met and cross-

fecundated one another. Reviewing the literature on the dialogic principle will allow us to shed light on these claims.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dialogism or the notion that texts are always the rewriting of other texts is as old as people have engaged in discursive elaborations. The theorization of this particular understanding of texts is, however, usually linked to the writings of Russian formalist Mikhail Bakhtin. Later, Bakhtinian dialogic principle was to be reappropriated and popularized by Julia Kristeva when she enunciated her own theory of intertextuality. A key trope in the textual theories of these two theorists is that of the palimpsest, a legendary parchment whereon are inscribed the layered traces of diverse moments of past writings. The metaphor of the parchment radiates the possibility of multiple temporalities criss-crossing any given textual piece. Texts, in this light, become the loci of conscious and/or unconscious interchange between and within various discourses.[1]

In her synthetic monograph on the theory of intertextuality, Nathalie Piégay-Gros notes that the elusiveness of the notion should not deter scholars from engaging in a constant quest to map out intertextual practices. Thus she lists a typology of intertextual relations which includes, among others, direct citation, allusion, pastiche and parody.[2] Because of its subversive potential, parody has usually been used to ridicule those in position of power. Based on an understanding of imitation as departure, parodic ploys consciously attempt to embarrass the righteousness of recordation and reverence. This

[1] For a good introduction in English to these issues, see Anthony Easthope and Kate McGowan (eds.), *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

[2] Nathalie Piégay-Gros, *Introduction à l'intertextualité* (Paris: Dunod, 1996), 46-71.

understanding of parody intersects with Homi Bhabha's feted account of "colonial mimicry," which posits (post)colonial meanings and identities as "almost the same, *but not quite*."[3] In other words, the postcolonial theorist sees mimicry as the discursive gap between the normative vision of the metropolitan civility and its derivative colonial/postcolonial (mis)imitation. As Leela Gandhi skillfully suggests, Bhabha's description establishes mimicry as "the sly weapon of anti-colonial civility, an ambivalent mixture of deference and disobedience."[4]

The basic assumption in Bhabha's notion of mimicry finds its way into the theoretical rationale that sustains the artistic production of the Brazilian anthropophagic school of art. Still, while both strive to give agency to the colonial/subaltern subject, the Brazilian movement goes as far as to call for a proactive (as opposed to reactive) engagement with the culture and legacy of the metropolis. As Ella Shohat and Robert Stam clarify it, the notion of anthropophagy so dear to the Brazilian school,

> assumes the inevitability of cultural interchange between 'center' and 'periphery' and the consequent impossibility of any nostalgic return to an originary purity. Since there can be no unproblematic recovery of national origins undefiled by alien influences, the artist in the dominated culture should not ignore the foreign presence but must swallow it, carnivalize it, recycle it for national ends, always from a position of cultural self-confidence.[5]

As the case of the Brazilian art movement suggests the dialogic principle is not restricted to literature *solely*. This, to be sure, opens up novel possibilities for the reading of such visual artifact as "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa."

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[3] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86. (Emphasis in original).

[4] Leela Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 149.

[5] Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, "Narrativizing Visual Culture: Towards a Polycentric Aesthetics" in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 1998), 39.

ANALYSIS OF THE COLLAGE

From the outset, it can be held that visual parody is the key dialogic strategy at play in the collage under discussion. As a subversive trope, parody in "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa" relies on non-linear/multiple temporalities to displace the certainty so pervasive in the patriotic tradition that memorialize such icon as Rosenthal's *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima*.

Iwo Jima, Iconicity and Parody

In the history of war photography, the story of Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph is a familiar one. On February 23, 1945, Joe Rosenthal—a photographer sent by the Associated Press to cover the Pacific War, captured in 1/400th of a second the image of five Marines and one Navy corpsman straining to raise the U.S. flag against a stiff wind. The photograph's composition, lighting, angle of the flag, and the outstretched arms of the servicemen all came together to produce in the words of Joseph H. Alexander, an "immortal" picture.[6] In the lapse of two days, Rosenthal's photograph became a sensation which, subsequently was reproduced innumerable times. The patriotic tradition that arose with these reproductions has turned *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* into an icon, which, as Karal Ann Marling and John Wetenhall have demonstrated, has "taken on an independent life of its own."[7] As a now sacralized image, Rosenthal's picture can be addressed as a surreal phenomenon that lends itself to a multiplicity of iconic representations.

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[6] Joseph Alexander, "Review of *Heroes of Iwo Jima*," *Naval History* 15, 4 (Aug. 2001): 59.

[7] Karal A. Marling and John Wetenhall, *Iwo Jima: Monuments, Memories, and the American Hero* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 8.

Iconicity in *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* is not captured exclusively by the artifact's content; for recognizability can also be attained through a judicious deployment of the image's formal design. In this vein, Paul Messaris, reporting the findings of a research carried out by Hartmut Espe and Martin Krampen, notes that sharp-angled shapes conjure up power and dynamism in the eyes of the viewer.[8] If Messaris is correct in his conclusion, then the viewers of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa," by virtue of association, will not find it farfetched to parallel the triangular shape of the collage's composition with the soldiers' ability to slice through local opposition and resistance to establish a U.S.-backed regime of truth.

The deployment of the notion of iconicity to characterize the simulated Iwo Jimas calls for a definitional clarification though. For if Iwo Jima flag-raising has become a fixed moment in the collective memory of many people in the United States largely because of the secular sacredness of its aura. Yet it is no less true that its simulated alter egos, because they emphasize the quality of resemblance (as opposed to identity), open the possibility for parodic visual dialogues. The numerous parodied versions of Rosenthal's photograph that Edwards and Winkler have studied in editorial cartoons are good cases in point since they demonstrate how iconicity actually paves the way for parody.[9] Still, cartoonists do not have the exclusive right to remobilize *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* to fit their iconoclastic endeavors or to simply re-signify its meaning; very much the opposite. It is rather the case that oftentimes; the use of other techniques of re-

[8] Paul Messaris, *Visual Persuasion: The Role of Images in Advertising* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 61.

[9] Janis Edwards and Carol Winkler, "Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997): 289-310.

signification along with the deployment of a non-linear temporality in a dialogic context achieves similar disruptive results.

Multiple Temporalities as Index to Visual Dialogism

In a book devoted to postmodern (literary) culture and the politics of seeing, Josh Cohen asserts that spectacular culture is "characterized by an opacity and an indeterminacy which manifests itself in […] an allegorical impulse […] rooted in a discontinuous, non-linear experience of time."[10] Though formulated in the context of U.S. culture, Cohen's insight can be applied to many postcolonial discursive deployments. In the case of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa," the disruptive displacement of linearity is suggested by the *co-presence* of three temporalities in the composition. Indeed, though graphically in the same visual frame, the collage indexically exudes the temporality of Joe Rosenthal's Iwo Jima photograph, the temporality of Coca Cola's offensive marketing campaign as well as the reactive postcolonial/anti-hegemonic temporality of the designer of the collage.

Familiarity with the historiography of the Iwo Jima flag-raising forces one to see the temporality of Rosenthal's photograph as a complex one. For the image not only retraces the time of the collective efforts of the men who were deployed in the Pacific Front during the Second World War but also testifies to the time of the officials and the shapers of the heroic narrative who have turned *Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima* into a patriotic icon. In this sense, the temporality of the Iwo Jima photograph, not only has to

[10] Josh Cohen, *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing* (New York: Pluto Press, 1998), 5.

be "seen in the context of a *perilous time*" as Marianne Fulton has it,[11] but also in the context of a people in search of heroes and a patriotic tradition.[12]

In a move reminiscent of the strategies deployed by the artists of the Brazilian anthropophagic school, the designer of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa" has substituted the flagpole so characteristic of U.S. patriotic tradition with a giant bottle of Coca Cola. And this introduces the viewer to the temporality of U.S. consumer culture, that is, the culture of unlimited want. The choice of Coca Cola is far from being fortuitous. Indeed, since its modest inception in 1886, Coca Cola has exercised a fascination on the imagination of the people of the United States to the point of becoming identified with the nation. As J.C Louis and Harvey Z. Yazijian affirm, Coca Cola, more than any other industrial company, has "enjoyed an unsurpassed identification with the heart and soul of America."[13] The temporality exemplified in the Coca Cola image is that of an expansionist culture which portrays itself as polycentric.

In many respects, the critical distance of the designer of the collage challenges the heroic and affirmative tradition inherent in both Rosenthal's politicized Iwo Jima photograph and Coca Cola's global marketing campaign. Rooted in an era saturated with doubt and uncertainty, the designer's temporality is the time of questioning the binary opposition strategically embedded in the verbal proposition "unlike the Europeans, we're…" In fact, given the opacity of visual syntax, many scholars in the field of visual culture have stressed the importance of words as a means to turn a visual mosaic into an

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[11] Marianne Fulton as quoted in Mitchell Landsberg, "Fifty Years Later, Iwo Jima Photographer Fights His Own Battle" at http://www.ap.org/pages/rosenthal.html. (Emphasis added).

[12] Julie Reuben, "Patriotic Purposes: Public Schools and the Education of Citizens," in *The Public Schools*, ed. Susan Fuhrman and Marvin Lazerson (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2005), 1-24.

[13] J.C. Louis and H. Z. Yazijian, *The Cola Wars* (New York: Everest House, 1980), 13.

argument.[14] In the case of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa," the verbal proposition subtly ironizes the soldiers' effort which, obviously, is not geared towards building. Rather they are shown to be putting the finishing touches to the transplanting of the hegemonic U.S. icon into the postcolony. Because he/she has lived and experienced the time of (neo)colonialism, the designer's postcolonial temporality is a moment of disbelief or, better still, a moment of parodic deconstruction. To be sure, this trope adds up a second layer to the dialogic regime of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa."

Visual Parody as Dialogic Strategy

Some visually-oriented scholars tend to view visual analogies in terms of an effective co-presence of the respective poles of the comparison. However, in instances such as visual parodies, some of the entities (to be compared) might exist in the visual extra-discursive world of the viewer. Parodies often allude strategically to this larger visual culture. According to Messaris, a key reason for advertiser's increasing fascination for parody is that its self-referential quality and often-ironic tone "can give viewers a flattering sense of being hip and media conscious."[15] Assuming that the viewer has a previous media experience of Rosenthal's photograph, one can claim that he/she will detect the manipulation (flag replaced by a Coke bottle) at play in "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa." The distortion is purposely deployed so as to attract the viewer's attention. But the manipulation assumes more as it is meant to parody Rosenthal's famous, if not, sacralized picture.

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[14] Messaris, *Visual Persuasion*, 219.

[15] Messaris, *Visual Persuasion*, 21.

Piégay-Gros defines parody as the "transformation of a text whose noble subject is applied to a vulgar one without sacrificing the style."[16] In the case of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa," the presumably noble task of flag-raising has been debased into the rooting of a bottle of Coca Cola. The ludicrous regime of this manipulation is all the more obvious since, in normal circumstances, the relocation of transnational corporations (MNCs) is not carried out by the army—at least not in broad daylight. The parody is further enhanced by the dissonance between the verbal proposition "building the African postcolony" and the rubble in the image. In the Eisensteinian tradition, one can claim that creating these disjunctions or conflicts helps produce the meaning of "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa." By mimicking the raising of the Stars and Stripes, the visual artifact alludes to the presence of the United States in the African postcolony. Such a dialogic strategy is a subtle critique of the U.S. government which does the groundwork so that U.S.-based MNCs can exploit the postcolonial states in Africa and the so-called Third World. In this light, there is little difference between the European formal colonialism and the U.S. informal empire—a fact acknowledged by numerous scholars.[17] In this light, "Transplanting the American Dream in Africa," as a subversive redeployment of Iwo Jima, brings home Bhabha's notion that mimicry is a disruptive weapon at the disposal of subaltern subjects.

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[16] Piégay-Gros, *Introduction à l'intertextualité*, 180.

[17] Many scholars have denounced the collusion between the American government and MNCs. For these scholars, such a situation led to the subsequent debasement of U.S. foreign policy. For details, see William A. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (New York: W. W. Norton, [1959] 1988); Emily S. Rosenberg, *Spreading the American Dream: American Economic and Cultural Expansion, 1890-1945* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982).

CONCLUSION

It is a truism among Marxist scholars that societal superstructure is shaped at the level of the base, that is, the plane of economic relations. To quote Marx and Engels's now famous formulation at length, one can suggest that the ideas of the class in power "are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force." Furthermore, the social group which "has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it." The field of visual culture seems to confirm the Marxian claim. This is not because the subaltern is voiceless. Rather it is because his/her voice is constantly drowned in the high-speed streams of corporate advertisement; not because the subaltern cannot be visually productive, but because there is virtually nobody to visualize his/her concern(s). In this light, a visual parody might be powerful, but to what avail? If the subaltern's visualized claim cannot reach the public at large, how is he/she going to persuade?

The complexity of these questions should not overshadow the fact that it is possible to have dialogism in the field of visuality. As we have seen, a visual artifact can establish dialogic relations with other loci of discourse. In the case of "Transplanting the American Dream," such dialogue is done through a judicious deployment of multiple temporalities and parody. Thus, *a* lack of theorization should not lead one to conclude to *the* lack of potential or actual presence of visual dialogism. An understanding of this might mean that it is high time scholars of visuality prolonged their journey in search of theory. In so doing, they will be able to withdraw the theorization of visual culture from the tyranny of the linguistic model.

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