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SUMMARY

Paper activates discourse on visual communication and graphic design along the thesis on individual and collective identities as inevitable elements of information creation and consumption in contemporary societies. The thesis relays on the idea of avant-garde as artistic and ideological fact which is used for analytic insight into mechanisms that drive and guide visual communication on various levels: as a sign, letter, book or urban signage systems. In the discussion the identity issues are considered as means to recognize individual and collective particularities, as cognitive and manipulative mechanisms. Within such a framework the conclusion is brought with the proposal for comprehensive approach to these two faces of contemporary visual environment, within which the symbolic value of personal and social identity is being negotiated.

IDENTITY AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

Visual communication and graphic design activities of are usually concentrated on the domain of the letter, sign, design of printed matter – especially books – and urban communication, too. Let this simple starting point serve as the basis for a possible approach to a verbal presentation of the content which is realized, however, mainly in the area of the visual. In this relation, of course, limitations of written words to describe the cultural context, creative potential and artistic achievement of visual communication are obvious. With even such relatively useful instruments as words are, I shall try to present one segment of modern tradition of visual communication. More

precisely, I want to depict identity issues being relevant and formative for visual exchange of ideas. The basic guidelines and fields of research here are: the letter as a visual sign, the book as a group of visual facts and the city as a system of identities. These three levels interpenetrate each other in the creative profile of visual communications in the way it has been codified in the West-European culture since the twenties of the twentieth century, i.e., since the time of historic avant-garde in the domain of cultural artifacts and arts (Dilnot, 1989;204).

THE CONCEPT OF AVANT-GARDE AS A DISCURSIVE MODEL

But, is it still possible to use the concept of avant-garde in the discourse and be persuasive enough in verbal presentation of visual arts? Taken into account that in the times of scattered modernization centers the dominant idea of socio-economical process has dispersed into an infinite number of local narratives? (Rogers, 1974;78-86). So, it seems that a considerate foundational effort is required in order to use the concept of 'avant-garde', or sign of avant-garde to designate a meaning close to the original one. Or does avant-garde mean something else nowadays?

On this occasion we focus on describing the profile of visual communications, thus the appropriate frame for describing this phenomenon must include the following themes: the concept of avant-garde, progress as an idea, modernization as a process, the idea of modernity, relation between corporative and individual, and finally the book as a set of visual facts, and the city as a system of identities, with both the book and the city as communication models (Bolz, 2001: 66-69).

The concept of avant-garde is historically bound. It is closely connected to the basis of civil democracy and to the idea of the individual as a carrier of cultural transformations. As these transformations intensified during the industrial revolution, on the wave of mass production and consumption, the concept of avant-garde – what we can today understand as practice in actual

historical time – got more complex and more dynamic (Greenhalgh, 1990). This dynamics is exactly the point of difference which distinguishes modern culture from the traditional one marked with long-term stylistic formations. Strictly theoretically speaking, avant-garde as a category could be attributed to different and various functions in the community, based on the relationship between individual and collective identity. In the practice of different disciplines in the humanities, however, it has become common to talk about avant-garde as a sequence of artistic directions – primarily in architecture, fine arts and literature, all in the period of the last quarter of the 19th century to the middle of the 20th century. Strict and critical historians would narrow down this span of time because they do not all agree on categorization (Walker 1989). However, most of them would agree on the claim that time of historical avant-garde has passed. That is because the connection of arts with social and political activities has utterly changed the course of its influence during the last fifty years. Let us not, however, forget that avant-garde as an attribute was related to the ideological practices.

SOCIAL IDENTITY ISSUES

Recalling this meaning of the concept of avant-garde directs us to the relation of progress as an idea and to the modernization processes, too. One does not have to stress here that general modernization efforts created a basis for establishing the idea of economic development as a primary social category. Moreover, the idea of progress, from the beginning of use of the steam engine in production processes, and from the time of the French Revolution, has penetrated into different social spheres: from politics all the way to the arts. The crucial factor was a mechanistic world image of perpetual machine production, which always has to produce more for the needs of an increasing number of people (Buck Morss 2002). Or was it the other way around, first needs and then production? The process of modernization in the Western society, perfection of capitalism as a new civic formation, describes progress

as a brand new ecological fact, including nature as well as social environment. Resources for exploitation in such progressive approach to society gathered (and still gather) all that is natural (men included), and all that transforms itself into different artifacts during this constant modernization efforts. These artifacts are mass products and artworks (Habermas 1983:3-16).

Historically, graphic design as a discipline developed just on the boundary between mass production and artworks. Any discourse on visual communication thus have to look for relations that connect both of these two social categories. I would say that it is possible to look for this relation in the discrete and creative intervention into the reality of media or the urban and architectural structure in which, or for which, it was created. Graphic design is mostly created to follow the mechanistic laws of production-consumption model, therefore it communicates almost like natural fact, as if the means of communication were always a part of the context in which they are found. This fact witnesses the communicational sensitivity of the authors who cautiously enter into the communication process fully aware of the influence their work has on that process. And this precisely is the place of interaction between individual and collective identity.

THE IDEA OF MODERNITY: FOUNDATIONS OF SYMBOLIC VALUE

This relation is of great importance because there is a specific interactive link between modernization efforts and avant-garde visions which could be marked as resistant, that is, which typically describes avant-garde art as modernistic reaction to the processes of modernization. Modernity becomes the result of a gap between effort and resistance, as an infinite reservoir of ideas and concepts: from positive and negative utopias to today's anti-globalization movement. Is it possible to depict modernity as a phenomenon with a more permanent semantic definition? Not easily at all, one would say, just because of this continuity, that is, progression itself. Both processes which modernity encourages, and contents which are

created in this way (with resistance), are in a constant flow themselves (Bonsiepe 1999:26-37). The idea of modernity, however, is primarily of literary character, although it is possible to observe it today from various levels of cultural production. The concept of avant-garde within the concept of modernity is probably the most productive segment of the now already historic narrative on the creation of modern Western culture. In other words, because in a short period of time – mostly from the beginning to the middle of the 20th century - so many new contents have been created in a number unparalleled for centuries, just in the spirit of Morus' idea "about a century in which there will be more history than ever before." More precisely – there is awareness of history and cultural production (Julier, 2000). As this awareness was mostly triggered by exceptional development of mass media, which is another area of modernization process, particular avant-garde cultural tendencies have developed from works of visionaries to general cultural facts. As such they are presented in mass produced books, reachable and usable in various strategies of public communication today. Post-industrial culture, which is frequently called philosophy of post-Fordian economy, stresses symbolic values of the product as the most important (Baudrillard, 1989:171-183). At this level of functionality, contemporary artistic experiments have become a part of general cultural repertoire.

INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE

One must not, of course, forget the relationship between individual and collective, that is, the relation between individual and society. This relation of "self" and "us" is crucial, because the most part of visual communication is based upon it. The book as a group of visual facts, and the city as a system of identities, function along this relation. Avant-garde movements put this relation forward, through subordinating individual's identity to the identity of the group. But the book has, even in avant-garde movements and throughout the entire history of modern graphic design, remained – the book, a means of orderly interaction of letter signs (Flusser, 1999:17-22). The thing, however,

that distinguishes the avant-garde tendency of book design from traditional tendency is the awareness of visual meaning, and the experiment in that area of meaning. The city as a system of identity is the product of avant-garde visions which are on the micro-plan based on the idea of a high level of letter-sign articulation. All of this done for a more efficient functioning of community in a constant exchange between the capital and the labor, between individual and collective identity.

But what kind of self recognition could a person achieve within production-consumption model, other than that of consumer? Is there a different position for any personal identity other than that of taking part in society of “knowing consumers” of material goods, as Banham once have described it. Are contemporary visual communications anything other than mirror of inevitable interplay of capital-work exchange?

CONCLUSION

As contemporary visual communications are mostly dedicated to designing informative systems in printed (Gutenbergian) and urban (Virilian) space, the possible conclusion could be – the city as a book, or the book as the city. But contemporary visual communication to the book user or city dweller is often connected with ‘avant-gardism’ of mass media, therefore graphic design of today is often questioning of the relation between collective modernization efforts on the one hand, and the resistance of the individual, on the other. Identities that are created along this effort with their discrete presence, experimental intentions and finally humanistic attitude towards man and culture, sometimes overpower and are much stronger than the simple-minded exploitation of word and image (often used for ideological purposes) by contemporary mass media. Other face of this efforts are the identities of mass media manipulation. Between these two faces of contemporary visual environment, the symbolic value of identity is being negotiated, for individual and for the collectives too.

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