

Hegemonic Process of Signification in Photographs

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The present paper tackles questions that can be briefly formulated as follows: 1) how to visualise power?, and 2) does semiotics have anything to offer to researchers on the visualisation processes of power? One of the means by which power relations are established and reproduced in societies is through photographs. In the theoretical part of the paper, I will attempt to integrate the starting points of visual rhetoric and Roland Barthes's ideas, the theory of hegemony by Ernesto Laclau and the semiotics of the culture approach of the Tartu-Moscow school, especially that of Yuri Lotman.

Summary

The present paper focuses on distinguishing different strategies by means of which 'the people' as a homogeneous entity is constructed in photographs. I will proceed from the treatment of 'the folk' by the American anthropologist Alan Dundes and the concept of 'the people' by the discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau.

According to Dundes, the concept of 'the folk' can signify any group of people who share at least one *common* characteristic. The nature of this connective characteristic is irrelevant – it may be a common vocation, language or religion; what is important is that this group, whatever the reason it formed, should share some traditions that they consider their own. This is a relationship of similarity, which in turn differentiates the group from others who do not share these similarities. Although Dundes treats the identity of 'the people' as constructed, his definition of 'the people' remains simplified and under-theorized. In particular, Dundes fails to consider the situation in which one *common* and *shared* characteristic begins to dominate.

For Laclau, it is precisely these aspects of the process by which 'the people' is constructed that are the most relevant: the operation that constructs 'the people' is, for Laclau, the result of the logic of a hegemonic process of signification. This articulation requires that a particular difference loses its particularity and becomes a universal representative of the signifying system as a whole. In that way, *closure* for that system is provided. Since every system of signification is essentially *differential*, its *closure* is the precondition of signification being possible *at all*.

According to Laclau, the role of something like an anchor point is attributed to *some* components of the equivalence in the process of constructing 'the people', which will then differentiate them from one another. These anchor points – empty signifiers – will begin to signify the chain of equivalence as unity and whole.

The relationship between the empty signifier and the discourse as a *totality* is the relationship between a *name* and an object.¹ The unity or identity of the object is the result of *naming* it. Objects are (so to speak) *created* through naming.

In what follows, I will examine how 'the people' – as an empty signifier – is constructed by an act of visual naming in photography.

Strategies for constructing 'the people' in photography: visual naming

The concept of 'iconic photographs' in visual rhetoric refers to those photographs that, within a particular society (culture), 1) are recognised by everyone (they have acquired iconic status); 2) are understood to be representations of historically significant events; 3) are the objects of emotional identification for the members of the society; and 4) are regularly reproduced and republished by the media. In principle, these photographs establish a hegemonic relationship for constructing and representing historical events – they function exactly as what Laclau has called empty signifiers. It is through them that the discourse of 'historical reality' is constructed.

The Soviet Estonian media provide numerous examples of such photographs (one of the most famous ones is shown

in Fig. 1). As a particular temporal and spatial snapshot – a particular content in Laclau's terminology – it is drained of its concreteness and becomes a signifier for the entire discourse, or, rather, constructs this discourse during the act of *visual naming*.

In photos, we can also distinguish some internal hegemonic strategies of constructing 'the people'. One of these is dominant text.

Strategies for constructing 'the people' in photography: dominant text

One of the direct consequences of the intersection of different texts is revealed in cases where the invading text *subordinates* the prospects of the earlier text to generate new meanings. The typical consequence of an invasion of an alien text is 'text-in-text'. In such a case, the basis for the generation of meaning is the switch – based on some internal structural principle – from one system of semiotic understanding of the text to another. There is an exchange of the encoding language required for translation, which in turn brings about a rearrangement of prior textual structures.

During the time period under discussion, several important shifts, seldom seen in earlier photographic practice, were apparent. The first is a forceful injection of verbal text as an internal structural element of photographic images. From the 'June coup' of 1940 until the end of the Soviet period there was rarely a picture to be found of an assembly of the masses of meetings or public speaking events that were a part of public discourse – that lacked slogans and banners, usually quotations and slogans from Marxist-Leninist ideology. Here we have a case of encoding that Lotman has called *plural external*

¹ E. Laclau, *Ideology and Post-Marxism*. – Journal of Political Ideologies 2006, Vol. 11 (2), p. 109.

recoding, in which the meaningful totality is built up through translating several independent structures into a mutual relationship of equivalence. Verbal and visual text is translated into a total text.

Barthes calls the presence of this sort of a mandatory element in the structure of the picture the *studium*, which is opposed to the *punctum*.² The first refers to conventional elements and rules that allow for a simple and unambiguous coding of the meaning of the photograph. *Punctum*, on the other hand, represents the unintended part of the picture that activates the subjectivity of the viewer. All the mandatory slogans on the walls of the factories, on special platforms, on public honour boards, the banners and pictures of party leaders carried during parades, etc. – all these elements of the *studium* that adorned the Soviet cityscape – constructed the unity of ‘the people’ on the publicly circulated images. The number of potentially ambiguous details, the *punctums* that would stimulate the imagination of the viewer, was taken to the minimum.³ Or, to apply the vocabulary of the theory of hegemony: a particular element performs the function of the empty signifier, establishing a chain of equivalence between other elements depicted in the photograph, and dominates the entire totality of meaning depicted in the photograph.

Another photograph (Fig. 2) depicts a mass of people, consisting of different individuals in their particularity, all carrying banners proclaiming Soviet ideology. But it is precisely because of the banners that the crowd becomes ‘the

people’. The slogan ‘We demand that Soviet Estonia join the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics’ functions as the empty signifier, which, although it is a particular signifier (a single element among those depicted in the photograph), it nevertheless signifies, in the process of photographic signification, the ‘entire people’, who are constructed out of the crowd of people around the idea presented in the banner. It is a slogan that is shared by all the different people in the photograph; other distinctions between them (e.g. differences in clothing, physical appearance etc.) lose their relevance. Essentially similar is the second group of cases, in which the other text is another visual image, for example pictures of Soviet Party leaders that were carried around during demonstrations. Here, signification converges around the Party leaders.

We can also distinguish principles of organisation in the process of signification that operate in a more concealed manner. Two of these principles are the code-text and dominant language.

Strategies for constructing ‘the people’ in photography: code-text

A culture with a mythological orientation is characterised by the appearance of an intermediary between language and text – the code-text. Whereas on the first level of analysis the relationship of equivalence is constructed by external shared characteristics – a crowd of people is constructed into ‘the people’ by their *common* work (e.g. people working in a factory, in the fields, voting at meetings, see Fig. 4), activities (e.g. parades, salutes to the Party leaders standing on a tribune, people reading the constitution together), clothing, the satisfied look on their faces etc., where these *common* characteristics

2 R. Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflection on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981, pp. 25–27.

3 P. Linnap, *Kadreeritüd tõde: fotograafia stalinistlikus Eestis*. – *Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi* 10. Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, 2000, pp. 219–252.

overshadow concrete differences between the members of 'the people' – in the case of code-texts the situation is more complicated. A code-text is not an abstract collection of rules required for constructing a text, but a syntagmatically constructed totality, an organised structure of signs that is not expressed directly, but is realised as variants in the lower level texts in the hierarchy of the culture. For the inhabitants of a culture, the code-text is nevertheless monolithic, compact and unambiguous, organising memories and defining the limits of the possible variations of the text. Thus, we can distinguish, during this time period, a code-text that defines the depiction of the relationship between those in power (usually a particular Party leader) and the common people. Naturally enough, in public discourse this was presented as the unity of the Party and 'the people', but a unity with a strongly determined internal organisation. These formal relations determined the manner in which the characters depicted in the photographs were related to one another, and how they were related to the environment and other elements that comprise the picture – e.g. the placement of the characters with respect to the vertical division of the picture, the relationships between speakers and listeners, the direction of the gaze, the active-passive relationships of the subject derived from these etc. (Fig. 3).

The code-text is clearly revealed in various photographs that depict work. The activity of groups of people has been made so synchronous that the picture-people stand together like visual equations, mathematical formulae or sculptural ensembles. The hegemonic logic of the code-text is in operation in a more concealed manner than in

previous coding strategies. By imposing specific mutual relationships between the positions of the subjects and the conditions for their depiction, it functions as a dominant process of signification, since it establishes some positions as active and others as passive, allows some positions to engage in relations with other elements in the picture and denies this to other positions etc. (e.g. when decisions are made, Stalin always participates and is positioned hierarchically higher than 'the people' in the vertical arrangement of the photograph, even if he is only present as a picture). Neither can we find a photograph of a vote where all hands are not raised (Fig. 4) etc.

Strategies for constructing 'the people' in photography: dominant language

From the perspective of self-reflection of the ideologies of totalitarian regimes, politics performed the subordinating function *par excellence*. This is clearly revealed in photographs. 'The people' are always politically charged, to a greater or lesser extent. All the aspects and topics (sub-languages) that are important for 'the people' have been visualised with a political dominant. Thus, in Stalinist photography, work is depicted with a markedly military and competitive character and no longer has anything to do with the ideology of the work ethic prevalent in the Republic of Estonia (1918–1940). Concepts such as 'socialist competitiveness' and 'triumphs of labour' indicate the permanent presence of the enemy; metalworkers are dominant among the workers, guaranteeing that the land will be industrialised and that the capitalist adversary will be crushed. Work can no longer be considered separately from political language: it comprises its sub-language. By means of this

dominant language, different elements found in photographs are encoded into a meaningful totality – a text.

This paper has attempted to distinguish certain hegemonic strategies of encoding for depicting ‘the people’ in the photography of the public space of communication during the Stalinist period. It seems that the Soviet public *scopic* regime was characteristic of the type of culture that Lotman has characterised as a collection of texts, as opposed to the type of culture that *creates* a collection of texts. In this type of culture, the content of the culture is pre-given with respect to the self-understanding of that culture; it consists of the sum of normalised, ‘correct’ texts: ‘iconic photographs’ that have been encoded according to a unitary canon.

Summary by author

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