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Brand aesthetics in visual communication – a Polish case study of Disney's anniversary event
Estetyka marki w komunikacji wizualnej – polskie studium przypadku jubileuszowego wydarzenia Disneya

Abstract

In 2018 Mickey Mouse, an iconic brand hero of Disney, celebrated the 90th birthday anniversary in the National Film Archive – Audio-Visual Institute (Pol. FINA) in Warsaw, Poland. By this occasion, the global corporation positioned itself in the local public domain as a social agent through cooperation with the mentioned national institution. The glocalisation strategy has been reflected in the PR activities and has found its visual form in specific PR tools. The paper aims to analyse this case study as the exemplification of a successful implementation of organisational aesthetics in the public realm. The paper analyses the global organization's visual communication practice in the local framework.

W 2018 roku Myszka Miki, kultowy bohater Disneya, obchodziła 90. rocznicę urodzin w Narodowym Archiwum Filmowym – Instytucie Audiowizualnym (FINA) w Warszawie. Dzięki współpracy ze wspomnianą instytucją narodową globalna korporacja wykorzystała tę okazję do pozycjonowania siebie jako podmiotu społecznego. Strategia glokalizacji znalazła odzwierciedlenie w działaniach PR, a ich wizualną formę – w konkretnych narzędziach PR. Celem artykułu jest analiza tego studium przypadku jako przykładu udanego wdrożenia estetyki organizacji w sferze publicznej. W artykule przeanalizowano praktykę komunikacji wizualnej organizacji globalnej w kontekście lokalnym.

Key words

public relations, PR, visual rhetoric, glocalisation, media aesthetics, visual semiotics, Disney
public relations, PR, retoryka wizualna, glokalizacja, estetyka mediów, semiotyka wizualna, Disney

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Brand aesthetics in visual communication – a Polish case study of Disney's anniversary event

1. Introduction

The growing presence of visual artefacts in the media world demands scientific explorations. Zazil Garcia (2018) points out that contemporary visual rhetoric comprises "visual images and objects that are human created and culturally meaningful." It includes two-dimensional images, such as posters, cartoons or video advertisements, and three-dimensional objects such as museum exhibits or even performative art. All these are often created by commercial organisations and might facilitate the company's image management. In general, this article aims at explaining the visual mechanisms of meaning creation for institutional goals. For this study, the 90th birthday of Disney's Mickey Mouse anniversary event has been analysed. The event was held in September 2018 in the National Film Archive – Audio-Visual Institute (Pol. FINA), Warsaw, Poland. The paper focuses on how the distinctive Disney aesthetics was disseminated via various public relations (PR) tools during the event. An event – treated as a PR tool itself – is a form of instrumental action, which at the same time implements a long-term company strategy. By celebrating its iconic brand hero, the company used various visual channels as the means of persuasion to strengthen its organisational image. This is the example of how Disney's visual messages carry strategically chosen aesthetics, both in public and private spheres of social life. Arnold Berleant (2005, 2008), an American founding editor of "Contemporary Aesthetics" says: "The aesthetic is often considered a minority interest in the modern world, yet it offers a distinctive perspective, even on an activity that has mass appeal, and can provide insights that would otherwise remain undiscovered." Berleant (2005, 2008) points out in his works that in modern-day aesthetics one should dissolve the supremacy of a visible object and engage also the senses of contact. Public relations tools seem to be very useful for this purpose.

The Walt Disney company mission states that the corporation wants to "entertain, inform and inspire people around the globe through the power of unparalleled

storytelling, reflecting the iconic brands, creative minds and innovative technologies that make ours the world's premier entertainment company" (Disney Mission s.a.). The analysed event exemplifies the operational actions which meet the company's objectives. This paper does not explore a marketing orientation of the PR activities; it is interested in the underestimated soft power of visual cultural interventions, tailored locally by the global company. Such a theoretical underpin situates PR in its socio-cultural paradigm as an important agent in everyday life meaning production (Edwards 2015). Modern public relations practice, originating from the late 19th-century America (Cutlip 1995), is considered here as a cultural industry, because it is concerned primarily with the production of symbolic significance, through a range of different artefacts, both verbal and visual. Usually categorised alongside marketing and advertising, PR is viewed differently by those scholars who search for its role as cultural intermediaries (see Hodges 2006). The institutional lens is still fundamental for communication range analysis, but the effects are investigated socially. As Edwards (2018, 3) says: "It's important to note that socio-cultural research on public relations does not ignore organizations; on the contrary, the point is to interrogate the kinds of influence that organisations have on the way we live our lives." The American company, by celebrating its brand hero in the Polish audio-visual institute (FINA), managed to become a part of social life. The location of this short-term event (it lasted for a couple of days in September 2018) was meaningful. It legitimised Mickey Mouse as an important part of a culture, namely a part of animated film heritage, which, in turn, embedded the event in the well-thought-out goals of the company.

Visual communication in organizational activities is a developing field of both theoretical and empirical analysis. In the paper, the PR theory, with its intentionality of glocalised communication, has been chosen as a trajectory to present visual messages analysis. The theoretical framework remains dichotomous and the two perspectives might never become merged satisfactorily enough. This interdisciplinary study, however, offers a perspective that is broad enough to capture organisational aesthetic dissemination phenomena. This study describes the means of situating the company's economic goals in the field of entertainment culture and social meaning production processes. This study attempts to show semiotic layers of meaning orchestrated by the American corporation for the Polish public during a specific local event. This paper seeks to illustrate the usefulness of the American media giant communication action for the analysis of promoting organizational aesthetics within a local market. As Hancock (2005, 30-31) puts it: "aesthetic (or aestheticized) coding or structuring" of organisational artefacts and activities, through their sensuality and materiality, provides "the capacity to enchant − seemingly to reach beyond and beneath intellectual cognition."

In terms of a successful amalgamation of socio-culturally oriented media studies and organisational management, the paper's attempt is to present a cohesive union of two epistemological approaches.

2. Visual rhetoric as a part of visual strategic communication

The concept of visual rhetoric has gained wide acceptance as scholars strive to capture the power of visual persuasion in 'texts' such as drawings, films or organizational websites. Petra Aczél (2016, 5) emphasises that contemporary media become "selective, creative, dramatic and strategic", thus situating visual rhetoric among recent trends, alongside virtuality. Karina Goransson and Anna-Sara Fagerholm (2018) studied how a visual perspective can be applied to strategic communication research. They described three kinds of a scientific approach that appear in the field literature: visual rhetoric, visual studies and visual communication. The first one refers to the studies of the mass media, everyday life and popular culture, especially in the framework of power, community and history. According to Goransson and Fagerholm (2018, 49): "visual rhetoric is a form of communication that uses images to create meaning and/or construct an argument." Involving theories of persuasion, interpretation and semiotics, it tries to identify how a piece of work can move an audience and make them identify with it. Visual rhetoric interrelates with visual studies (VS), which is more semantic of its kind, and visual communication (VC), which is more pragmatic. Although these two areas tend to overlap, VS is more likely to analyse society's access to images and how those images can be used to generate power. Visual studies involve representation theories and access to audience issues to a greater extent; they might require the use of anthropological methodologies. Visual communication, the third field seen as determining the company's strategic communication in "the iconic world" (see Mitchell 1994), provides the broadest understanding of how visual media works. VC focuses on the process of media creation, presentation and support. It involves theories of investigating visual framing; co-creation of meaning in the communication process; visual literacy. VC might require methodologies from the fields of media studies and media psychology.

Those approaches are most prevalent in the strategic communication that is focused on the visual realm (see Martin 2011). Goransson and Fagerholm (2018) present the literature review study of the years 2005-2015, using worldwide academic journals from the Web of Science database. According to the authors, VR, VS and VC are the dominant scientific fields for analysing a visual impact on organisational communication, which includes the public relations activities as well. The distinctive contribution of visual rhetoric makes it suitable for analysing the

dimension of persuasion in communication. To deliberate resemblance of images to "reality" (the iconicity of signs), the quickness of reception, the rapidity of physical message decoding – they all serve as mediating factors for visual imaging (see Suh, Biernatzki 1999). Images are assumed to travel across cultures more easily than words do. Their iconicity, as a semantic property of images, helps to conceive similarity to the original object (e.g. the visitor, with the Mickey Mouse ears attached, looks "just like Mickey"; one may say: "it is our Mickey"). Another semantic characteristic feature of images, enhancing its persuasiveness, is its indexicality. Gillian Rose (2007, 83-84) describes the modes of signification in the classic Charles Sanders Peirce theory. In an indexical sign, there is an inherent relationship between the signified and the signifier. The signs of a brand hero produce a corporeal trace of immaterial objects. The mask of a Disney hero on a human face, the gloves resembling Mickey's "hands" become persuasive, as they stand visually for the "objective correlates" of e.g. brand and entertainment.

In terms of syntax (compared to verbal texts), the images may lack an indication of causality or analogy. However, if presented both in motion or in groups (like during the event), and in the chronological order, the images may overcome this constraint. Sandy Bulmer and Margo Buchanan-Oliver (2006) emphasize that although rhetoric originates from the study of verbal language, recently the concept of "message" has been broadened and the understanding of "text" has spread to the visual dimension and its influence: "Studying visual themes and noting their incidence within particular contexts and mapping their relationships with similar or opposing themes is a means of gaining insights into the motives of the communicator/persuader" (Bulmer, Buchanan-Oliver 2006, 55). Effective tools for informing, reminding and persuading might include images, thus creating a pictorial field with marks and symbols arranged for the primary purpose of persuasion. That is why the visual rhetoric might be a beneficial approach for describing the circulation of particular images during the Mickey Mouse birthday celebration with FINA.

3. Global and local dimensions of communication

"Public relations" is defined by the professionals most commonly as "the management function guiding interactions with publics" (Tench, Yeomans 2017, 6). It is an umbrella term, comprising many smaller sub-functions such as media relations, community relations, public affairs or investor relations, etc. The paper focuses specifically on the part that The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) describes as strategic communication management, strategic PR or corporate communication.

Democratisation and globalisation have brought organizations to seek international outreach. Koichiro Matsuura, the former Director-General of UNESCO, pointed at international dimension of PR industry: "As the 'voices' of organizations and groups pursuing their specific interests and ideas, professional communicators find themselves at the interface where institutional concerns and public responsibilities meet" (Matsuura 2003, XXI). Even though international companies act locally (they use sociocultural variables to contextualise public relations practice for the specific local public), they still implement their global goals. Perhaps that is why Sriramesh (2003), one of the authors of *The Global Public Relations Handbook*, questions even the existence of domestic PR.

As Pamela Nölleke-Przybylski et al. (2019) note, when venturing abroad, media companies need to reconcile conflicting demands and use both diversification strategy and consideration of local environments. The authors state that cross--border growth ideally provides opportunities for synergy and economies of scale for the global media conglomerates. It might refer to transnational corporations such as Disney as well. In the web section describing the "social purpose" of the organizational activities of The Walt Disney Company Europe, the Middle East and Africa division (which Poland is part of), the following statement is provided: "Globally, our vision is to be an honourable company that delivers comfort to those in need and creates inspiration and opportunity for those who want to improve their world. Across Europe, Middle East and Africa (EMEA) every day we strive to create world-class experiences and entertainment that promote quality moments of togetherness and inspiration. We believe that it is the power of these moments that can make a difference. Through our brand, storytelling, and characters we can inspire" (Disney.eu).

Disney aesthetics can be disseminated worldwide not only through its productions (e.g. films) and franchising products (e.g. toys) but also through special events, where the company's brand is being exposed and promoted. The global corporation informs on a list of celebrations and actions located, among all, in France, Spain, the UK, and Italy (e.g. Disney Italia Celebrates the 80th Anniversary with Disney VoluntEARS).

That demonstrates the glocalisation trend, which means tailoring global goods and services to various regional markets. Glocalisation strategy, in terms of communication challenges for contemporary fluid identity and particularity, is thoroughly described by Roland Robertson (2012). The author sees glocalised communication practice in the sociological paradigm, "an extensive, potentially world-wide, basis to an 'international' perspective" (2012, 191), useful for the analysis of organizational performance. An adequate balance of economic standardisation and cultural adaptation is particularly rewarding for the cross-border

activities of media organizations. Meant to be a part of the world visual industry history, the Disney organizational aesthetics is presented as acclaimed, not only naturalised. However, it displays also its local character. Therefore, Disney is employing Polish illustrators to co-create the updated, modern versions of USA-rooted images, owned by the giant from Burbank, California.

4. The Mickey Mouse 90th birthday anniversary's event and its PR tools

An event as a PR tool is considered to be one of the most common techniques. Alongside media relations, it is definitely suitable for implementing the PR idea, that is establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relations between an organisation and stakeholders on whom the organisation depends (see Cutlip, Center, &Broom, 2006).

The Polish Mickey Mouse anniversary's event was located in the public space of the headquarters of The National Film Archive and the National Audio-Visual Institute, which represents the audio-visual institutional dimension of the Polish cultural heritage. The national, public agent as the coordinator of the Disney corporate event, was meant to enable not only the technical capabilities during the event, but also the more efficient transfer of knowledge, and know-how.

Mickey Mouse as the main theme of the signage was prominently present in many carefully selected visual messages. The visual channels and forms of messages varied, but the brand hero was central for the communication. Throughout the event, seen as the tool of strategic communication rather than a publicity tool, the organizational messages circulated among the target audience. The designed images inserted the specific nature of Disney visual realm in the public domain.

The audience was offered numerous attractions for free, which, for this paper purposes, will be called as PR tools and will be analysed as a part of both the visual rhetoric and corporate communication strategy. In the following section, there is a brief description of the sub-events presented[1].

Tool 1: the invitation to come dressed as Mickey Mouse (MM) film hero, which served as the embodiment of the Disney iconic symbols in the space of the event. It was accompanied with a location-based game called "Hidden Mickey" on the FINA premises, where the participants could act as MM and look for MM signs. Not only did the marketing messages (posters, billboards, balloons, gadgets, etc.) signify the Disney realm at the event venue, but also the participants themselves carried the company's symbols (e.g. Mickey ears, etc.).

1. The tools were listed according to their chronological presentation in the event's web site (FINA 2018).

Tool 2: the exhibition curated by the Polish artist, Patryk Mogilnicki[2], where the works of professional Polish top illustrators[3] were presented. They prepared the artistic reinterpretations of the iconic Mickey Mouse form (e.g. Mickey as Mona Lisa, Mickey as the Jeff Koons' gold balloon, etc.).

Patryk Mogilnicki prepared a quite subversive visual piece – a drawing showing the author while taking a selfie. The smartphone's MM-shaped case covers the author's face. This work promotes the Disney image, and, at the same time, it provocatively indicates an overwhelming place of this image in the contemporary media iconosphere.

The graphic illustration seems to have a critical interpretative dimension by reflecting the works of the visual master Ai Weiwei (see Sooke 2017). The Chinese artist has distinguished himself through his provocative use of the selfie with his middle finger included in the composition aside or even instead of his own face. Whereas for Ai Weiwei, it constituted a formidable communication tool to denounce the abuses of the cultural and political regime, for Mogilnicki it might indicate the ambivalent attitude to Disney's icon which hired him to coordinate the exhibition and create the illustration. Furthermore, as an artist he might indicate the reproduction of specific aesthetics that becomes dominant, covering his identity, signified by screening his face in the selfie-structure of representation. In the press interview the illustrator admits to his motivations: "Here I wanted to get a good frame, Mickey Mouse's proportion to the rest of my body, so that it covered my whole face. I chose the contrast of black and white against the browns because I wanted his (Mickey) face to shine. After all, he is the star. The person taking the selfie, which is me, is behind him" (Prodeus 2018).

Tool 3: the film screening. Classic short animations, dating back to the late 1930s and 1940s (e.g. "Brave Little Tailor" from 1938), were an introduction for the famous full-length "Fantasia". It was released for the first time in 1940 as the third Disney animated feature film – and the first in stereophonic sound. That is why the viewers were equipped with the headphones so they were able to disconnect from the noisy surrounding and immerse in the Disney film experience. One might say that the history met the contemporary realm – the past and the present emanations rejoined through old and new visual messages conveyed during the event.

Tool 4: was created in cooperation with another international brand – LEGO. There was a special entertainment zone with Duplo bricks seemingly meant for the young audience. However, it is worth adding that for Mickey's anniversary

2. He is the editor of the recently published compendium for Polish graphic design (Mogilnicki 2018).
3. Hanna Cieślak, Gosia Herba, Ola Niepsuj, Ola Szmida, Daniel Gutowski, Tymek Jezierski, Kornel Nurzyński, Dawid Ryski.

LEGO released a special edition of LEGO® Ideas 21317 Steamboat Willie. The fans could create Willie and his boat from "Steamboat Willie" classic animation from 1928. The cartoon is considered to be the debut of the Mickey Mouse hero and his girlfriend Minnie. The "Steamboat Willie" was acclaimed as one of the most influential cartoons in the world (see Beck 1994). In 1998 the animation was selected for preservation in the United States' National Film Registry for being culturally, historically and aesthetically significant. The limited LEGO edition includes mini-figures, each with a special silver-coloured decoration. The set is meant both for kids and adults to recreate scenes from the original monochromatic Mickey Mouse cartoon which introduced Mickey into the world pop-culture.

This is an example of the cross-promotional collaboration, where the partner brands cooperate to strengthen their messages through various media channels cohesion. Both Danish LEGO and US Disney globally spread the specific aesthetics among "kidults". It is an example of blurred semiotic borders for different target groups and mingling the denotations of visual signs from different decades. The black and white animation becomes the inspiration for the LEGO brand with its products – the traditionally colourful bricks for children. Due to the cooperation, they become monochromatic to "celebrate" the distinctiveness of Mickey Mouse as a visual and pop-cultural icon.

Tool 5: adapted the past to the present again. The participants were invited to play the motion-controlled music rhythm game "Fantasia: Music Evolved" (Xbox/Kinect). The gaming production was inspired by Disney's 1940 animated film "Fantasia" and its 1999 sequel "Fantasia 2000".

Tool 6: the workshop on comic books – under the supervision of Szymon Teluk, a Polish comic book artist, different comics creation techniques were presented.

Tool 7: "Secret 360 VR Cinema" workshop that aimed of spreading the Disney realm in the virtual reality, by showing the newest animation techniques. By this means another visual channel was engaged.

Tool 8: the stop motion animation workshop (run by Magda Bryll, the animation creator and a professional tutor) – was in opposition to the newest technologies shown during the VR workshop.

Tool 9: the "Dubbing Kids" workshop, where children were invited to create the dubbing for the "Mickey and the Roadster Racers" animation. As a result in one episode, the animated Disney heroes do speak with the voices of Polish kids.

Tool 10: the workshop on 10 golden rules of Disney animation under the significant title: "How to Draw Everything". It might be interpreted as a quite straightforward declaration of the visual dominance.

Tool 11: might be treated as an interesting summary. The piece of exhibit called "Mickeyphone" (Mikifon in Polish) was presented to the event's audience. It is an interactive, kinetic audiovisual sculpture, which "listens to the sounds in the surroundings, rotating in the direction of the sound sources and samples them to create and playback rhythmic patterns based upon them" (Pangenerator.com). It was created by panGenerator artistic group (Poland) for Disney in 2015. It is a substantial example for the semiotic abundance of Mickey Mouse in one material sign transmission. Before the event, this both piece of art and a captivating medium was exhibited during the Łódź Design Festival (see: image 1; ŁDF 2016) and in other cultural spaces in Poland (e.g. the Ethnographic Museum in Warsaw in 2015).

Image 1. The Mickeyphone at the Łódź Design Festival exhibition as an example of transfer of "high-culture" connotations to the corporate brand hero symbol (*ŁDF 2016*).

The Mickeyphone's black mirror-like surface reflects the surrounding, reacts to the audience sounds and samples them back. It is captivating in its visual form and has a well-recognisable shape of Mickey's head. However, lacking eyes and mouth,

it is oddly distressing with its dark sensuality. That is why it may evoke a wide range of emotions: aesthetic pleasure, a sense of sublimity, mystery, playfulness, and responsiveness at the same time. Interactive and visually appealing, it might be treated as a cyber toy, but also as an enigmatic piece of art. It is multimodal, it reflects moves of the audience, samples sounds, and catches the eye with its aesthetics. The Mickeyphone visual form, accompanied by multimodal features of the interactive sculpture, offers an exceptional spectacle experience.

The paper analysed the "90 years of Mickey Mouse" event in Warsaw's FINA using visual semiotics methodology. Different material forms and "carriers" of visual signs (e.g. plastic bricks, paper posters, fabric costumes) as well as different visual media (illustrations, graphic design pieces, comic books, sculptures, various digital forms of visual expression on computer screens, VR) were indicated. They created a multi-layer visual platform for connotative meaning. Cultural domain was captured through the art exhibition and workshops and teaching "how to draw everything." The design animation was meant to educate and the games were meant to entertain (puzzles, quizzes, brick constructions etc). It has been discussed how the implementation of visual messages meets organizational strategic communication objectives.

The dominant categories of meaning that the Disney images implemented during the event may be orderly presented using the following dominant binary oppositions; each category is accompanied with a distinguishing example from the PR tools described above:

- **adults** (an art exhibition) – **children** (LEGO zone)
- **the past** (classic Disney animations) – **the present** ("Mickey and the Roadster Racers" production from 2018 and contemporary screening techniques, e.g. tablets, Kinect)
- **public** (the national audio-visual institute as the event's venue) – **private** (Mickey Mouse is a trademark owned by a corporation and its shareholders)
- **common** (open for the general public) – **individual** (personal visual experience)
- **artistic** (the Mickeyphone installation) – **pop-cultural** (the cartoons with Disney heroes)
- **creative** (the workshop techniques and various visual realisations) – **repetitive** (the workshop topics and some constantly circulating Disney motives).

The list is not an exhaustive presentation of the opposites that combine the realm of cultural signification process conducted by the Disney's public relations.

As William J.T. Mitchell (2013: 369) pointed out, "visual culture encourages reflection on the differences between art and non-art, visual and verbal signs, and ratios between different sensory and semiotic modes." The co-created culture determines human way of perceptual activities, which are discursive and interpretative, but also figurative and emotional. The latter might be achieved through thoroughly orchestrated communication process. Laura Oswald (2012, 2015), a marketing communication theorist, argued that semiotics can be used to refocus, extend, reposition a brand, to better understand a company's stakeholders and align organizational communication with target market identity, expectations, or even dreams. Those fields are combined and executed in strategic organisational communication conducted by the American corporation.

5. Disney aesthetics and the production of meaning

The phenomenon of Disney lies in something that Philip Hancock (2005, 34) defined as the "feel good aesthetic". It is a type of visual arrangement that "will encourage both consumers and employees to associate corporate beauty with goodness and decency, which in turn should cement loyalty and commitment in those same minds" (Hancock 2005, 34). Disney has become a global agent promoting specific cultural values and the notion of beauty. Further interpretations of aesthetic description and visual semiotics might illuminate mechanisms of pictorial communication persuasion. The subsequent PR tools used during the event in the Polish National Film Archive and Audiovisual Institute might be treated as a kind of persuasive arguments, which constitute binding relationships between the company and the public.

Such an analysis offers an alternative epistemological strategy for researching an interdisciplinary phenomenon of visual influence of the corporation's images on people. Philip Hancock (2005) refers to a similar process as the dissemination of organisational aesthetics. Material artefacts (e.g. the Mickeyphone) "visually belonging" to market institutions, can be understood as media, "purposeful interventions into the realm of cultural economy that operate by virtue of their ability to mediate the space that exists between the intellectual and the aesthetic, the conceptual and the non-conceptual" (Hancock 2005: 30). More aestheticized coding of social reality results in lower resistance to organisational promotion and the influential techniques of the company's image-shaping process in the minds of the public. Engaging directly, sensually and even somatically through creation of specific iconosphere makes institutional communication more efficient and effective.

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