Communication through visual art during wartime

Abstract:

During wartime communication appears to be an especially important and general condition for human activity, the fundamental basis of existence of society, being an essential part of social process. Visual art, as a means of communication, during the wartime is aimed at interaction, emotional response, and facilitates empathy to develop deeper. Analyzing posters created during the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2022 allowed us to conclude that the wartime poster bears verbal, iconic, graphical, and color codes. The semantic dominant of the text can be each code separately. Interacting with each other, the codes ensure the integrity and coherence of the semiotic text, strengthen its communicative effect, as combined different coded messages complement and explain each other.

Keywords: communication, information, visual art, Ukrainian wartime poster.

Słowa kluczowe: komunikacja, informacja, sztuka wizualna, ukraiński plakat wojenny

Introduction

Communicative and informational needs of society are constantly developing. During wartime, communication specifically rises as an essential and general condition of human activity, the fundamental basis of existence of society being a central part of social process.

Noteworthy is that the issue of communication has been studied using approaches and methods characteristic of various fields of sciences (T. Adorno, M. Buber, W. Weaver, N. Wiener, J. Habermas, M. Horkheimer, S. A. Deetz, R. T. Craig, M. Weber, N. Luhmann,
M. McLuhan, H. Marcuse, G. H. Mead, G. A. Miller, T. Parsons, C. S. Peirce, J.-P. Sartre, P. Sorokin, F. de Saussure, G. Tarde, A. Toffler, E. Hall, C. Shannon, A. Schütz, R. Jakobson. Contacts among people that presupposes exchange of information, certain tactics and strategy of interaction, perception and mutual understanding by the subjects of communication. Communication is the process essential for coordination of activities and intercourse, in the process of which information encoded in a language is transmitted in the form of signs, words the meanings of which contain experience of different individuals in generalized form.

Communication is as well an element and a tool for social integration, implementing of which requires the high level of cultural competence that includes, in addition to numerous elements, communicative competence as well. The latter presupposes that the communicating individual should be able to separate the grain from the chaff, for which one is to be able to analyze information, moreover (and it is a prerequisite) information from different sources. Receiving one-sided information from the source he trusts, the recipient will perceive as ‘correct’, not as one-sided. It is this principle of one-sidedness that underlies the propaganda policy of totalitarian regimes. The success of this policy depends on the ability of the government to do two things: exclude competing sources of information and maintain its reputation as a reliable source.

American psychologist T. M. Newcomb (1903-1984) mentions the propaganda policy of the Nazi German as the example of such type of communication, noting in particular:

Repeat a lie frequently enough and people will believe it. […] As long as the war was going well and the Nazis remained in complete control, the policies worked reasonably well. But when the fortunes of war turned against them, it became more difficult to exclude competing influences, such as ‘black listening’ (to enemy radio stations). And it became even more difficult to maintain their reputation for trustworthiness, in view of their previous assurances to their own people that victory would be theirs. (Newcomb T. M., 1960, 208).

This is what we actually observe in modern Russian propaganda.

If people believe a lie, it means that this lie meets their needs. For instance, the lie about greatness and power compensates for the complex of one’s own inability, poverty and worthlessness. The long-standing mantra of Russians about the greatness of Orthodoxy, the messianism of Russia, the statement about the poverty of the West, when “European culture is presented not only as insignificant, but also as expansive, as a threat (to Russian culture)”
The known fact is that the attitude of a person towards anything depends on their coordinate system. Try to imagine a conversation between a butcher and a Jain about the quality of meat. It is clear that communication will not take place, because they have different coordinate systems. “Common objects are perceived in similar (though not necessarily identical) frames of reference by those for whom they are common.” (Newcomb T.M., 1960, 221).

Detailed analysis of various factors that influence the development of the coordinate system presents the work of Newcomb called Social psychology (1960). In particular, the author analyses the influence of propaganda, social status, group categories based on professional, intellectual characteristics, etc. However, in addition to the factors mentioned by the American psychologist, there is another factor that, as a means of communication, also affects the coordinate system, especially during war, that is art, in particular visual art, which, as a means of communication, is oriented towards interaction, response, emotional response, and contributes to the deeper development of empathy. It is difficult to overestimate the value of visual perception of information, since a person receives a significant part of information about the surrounding world through vision.

The issue of the role of art as a means of communication that uses mediums during the wartime is currently little researched, and therefore relevant.

1. **Depiction of military conflicts as a means of communication**

The concept of medium/ mediums which in this context has several meanings should be explained. The first interpretation is an intermediary. Another applies directly to arts:

A medium is an intermediary. They translate the ideas, messages or impulses of artists through their skill and sensitivity. This is a means for art. Distinguishing media can help us classify art according to their different codes, languages, and characteristics. (Zoe Rivas Zanello, 2021).

The earliest examples of visual representation of human conflicts, as it is known, can be found in prehistoric cave dwellings. One of the first works of visual (medium) art, in which war is condemned, was a series of etchings Les Misères et les Malheurs de la Guerre (1633)
by Jacques Callot. Starting from the 17th century, similar works appear more and more. One can mention *Consequences of War* by P. P. Rubens (1637-1638), *Disasters of War* by F. Goya (1810-1820), *Barricade* by E. Manet (1871), *The survivors of the massacre are used as gravediggers* by P.-G. Jeanniot (1848-1934), *Guernica* by Picasso (1937), photographs by R. Fenton ‘A two-gun battery during the Crimean War’ (1855), and N. Ut ‘Napalm Girl’ (1972) as an example.

It should be noted that attempts to depict the horrors of war took different forms. Sure thing, some artists depicted the wounds of soldiers. Such illustrations were used to diagnose pathologies, assist in surgical practice, and assess disease progression and treatment. The *Horrors of Waterloo* (1815) by the Scottish physiologist, surgeon and artist Charles Bell (1774-1842) can serve as an example. Such images were intended not only to show physical suffering, but also to evoke sympathy in the audience.

Art is an important cultural constant in the understanding of war. Visual art during warfare plays an important role in both condemning and (unsurprisingly) promoting war. In the first case, the horrors of war and its consequences are shown, artists try to support compatriots with their creativity, to instill hope; in the second case, aggression is justified and supported, an ideological program of inciting war is developed, pro-war views are promoted, artists gladly celebrate violence. Meanwhile, both the first and the second in their work use the theme of civic virtues: bravery, love for the Motherland, the desire for justice in the protection of the weak and innocent, the clash of two civilizations as an eternal struggle between good and evil, and many more. However, it should be emphasized that the artists mainly address the themes of suffering and grief caused by military conflicts. Simultaneously, the topic of war is depicted ironically, satirically and grotesquely or through allegories. Regardless, artists try to tell the truth about the war.

Therefore, visual art is simultaneously a carrier of humanistic ideas, a tool of persuasion and manipulation. Since images of war and peace are generally simple in terms of mediumship (the way information is conveyed), they are understandable on an intuitive level to most people. Since the image is intuitive, it is read from the first seconds, which ensures a high speed of communicative exchange. Shall we focus on the analysis of posters created during military operations as an important element of communication.

A poster is well-known as one of the genres of modern graphic design, a graphic form of communication based on a cultural, socio-political, or advertising message expressed in an explicit visual form. Numerous studies have been devoted to poster art. Theorists touch on the artistic, communicative, and technological aspects of the poster, which are largely influenced
by factors of social development, mythology of mass consciousness and cultural stereotypes (D. Burnicoat, S. Wrede, M. Key, P.-D. Keith, B.-R. Collins, H. Mack, M. Misiak, C. Hiatt, A. Andreykanich, A. Vjunek, V. Okhonchyskyi, O. Mayevskyi, V. Polyakov, I. Shalinskyi, et al.). However, I would like to emphasize that the communicative aspects of the poster created during military operations have not been sufficiently studied. Moreover, the poster, as an extremely sensitive, active medium, is a barometer of changes, tensions, and social moods.

It is known that the poster has a long history. Its prototypes can be found in Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. In Egypt, posters were used as specific announcements for wanted slaves. Ancient Greece and Rome used them to announce a performance to be held or an interesting trade offer for the residents of their country.

The first ever poster is believed to have been printed by the bookseller Berthold in 1482 to advertise a new edition of Euclid’s Geometry. A 1491 poster advertising the chivalric novel The Fair Melusine has survived to our time. A Watteau’s (1684-1721) Gerssen Shop sign can be mentioned as a prototype of an advertising poster. In 1796, Alois Senefelder (1771-1834) invented a new method of printing images - lithography. This invention made it possible to create large-format posters.

The next stage in the development of poster art was in 1838, when Godefroy Engelmann (1788-1839) invented the chromolithography method. The technological process was even more simplified when, in 1865, the Austrian baron Eugen von Ransonne-Villez (1838-1926) invented the chromolithography method based on the application of a photographic image, which made it possible to obtain almost any color due to the three colors of blue, red and yellow. This technology has significantly expanded the possibilities of poster artists.

The father of the poster in its modern form is considered to be the Frenchman Jules Cheret (1836-1932), a graphic designer and stage decorator, who founded a small lithography in Paris in 1866. He was the one who formulated the main principles of the modern poster, namely: catchiness (primarily due to contrasting and bright colors), the ability to perceive the image and text from the first seconds, brevity, concentration of attention on one main figure. J. Cheret created more than a thousand posters (advertisements of cafes-chantant, masquerades, exhibitions). In this genre, prominent examples of poster art are works by E. Grasset (1845-1917), L. Rhead (1857-1926), T. Steinlen (1859-1923), A. Mucha (1860-1939), H. Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901), E. Penfield (1866-1925), P. Bonnard (1867-1947), A. Beardsley (1872-1898) (Key M., 1899, 12-13).
Talking about Ukrainian poster masters, the work of A. Andreikanich *Anthology of the Ukrainian poster of the first third of the 20th century* (Kosiv, 2012) is dedicated to many of them. In particular, the author dedicates his articles to such masters as A. Akopov (1905-?), A. Alexandrovy (1894-1948), N. Altman (1889-1970), I. Acedańska (1906-1983), D. Bychenko (1901-1991), V. Balyas (1906-1980), A. Bogomazov (1880-1930), V. Bosenko (1945), V. Bura-Matsapura (1900-1991), M. Deregus (1904-1997), V. Kasiyan (1896-1976), O. Kulchynska (1877-1967), R. Lisovskiyi (1893-1982), A. Muron (Cassandre) (1901-1968), G. Narbut (1886-1920), S. Poderevyansky (1916-2006), B. Shippikh (?-?). Evidently, wartime posters are extremely simple from the point of view of informativeness. The purpose of such posters is not to convey multiple meanings. The poster should distinctly tell the viewer where the positive and negative poles are, i.e., form and strengthen the necessary evaluative judgment from the point of view of the existing matter. According to this principle, the poster uses only types of characters, plots, symbols, and metaphors that are unequivocally perceived by the recipient.

2. **Artistic and communicative features of the Ukrainian wartime poster**

It should be noted that the Ukrainian poster developed to a certain extent under the influence of the Polish poster. It is no coincidence that the Polish poster school is regarded as one of the strongest. Among its creators are a pleiad of outstanding painters, graphic artists and designers of world importance. The birth of the Polish art poster dates back to 1899.

That is exactly when the first poster of Stanislaw Wyspiański “Interior” was created, informing about the presentation of M. Maeterlinck’s play and the accompanying lecture by Stanislaw Przybyszewski. The restless artistic form, the nostalgic atmosphere is an artistic commentary on the reality of that time. Since then, the exquisitely shaped poster has acquired its special prestige. Remaining a street and social medium, he gravitated towards weighty content, setting the intellectual bar higher and higher (Polska Szkoła Plakatu, 2007).

The Polish poster, multi-layered in content, full of allusions, misunderstandings, knew how to grotesquely and amusingly tell about sad things and provoke serious thoughts. It always accompanied the Poles in the most difficult moments, moved, called, mobilized, “enjoyed moments of freedom or just desired regularity, shared everyday worries” (Polska Szkoła Plakatu, 2007). At the time of the loss of statehood, it reminded of traditions by
weaving folk and regional motifs into information or advertising content, during the interwar period it tended to the quality, honesty and culture of trade, and was the arbiter of elegance and competitive prices. During the occupation, it “went underground”. Ultimately, the poster survived several difficult post-war years of socialist realism “to finally outwit the censorship and shine as a phenomenon identified as the Polish school of the poster” (Polska Szkoła Plakatu, 2007). Prominent masters of the Polish poster are Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), Tadeusz Gronowski (1894-1990), Eryk Lipiński (1908-1991), Henryk Tomaszewski (1914-2005), Tadeusz Trepkowski (1914-1954), Waldemar Świerzy (1931-2013), Maciej Urbaniec (1925-2004), Leszek Hołdanowicz (1937-2020), Jan Sawka (1946-2012), and others.

Polish and Ukrainian posters, as it was previously mentioned, have something in common. Similarly to Ukrainian poster artists who after the October Revolution of 1917 fought for the souls and minds of Ukrainians trying to build and maintain their statehood (such as Bohush Shippikh), the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1919-1920 for Polish artists was not only a military one, but also about propaganda. Russia, especially Bolshevik, Soviet and post-Soviet, has never begrudged when it came to propaganda both among its enemies and its own population. At the same time, propaganda for Russia has always been more important than bread for the needy. As Małgorzata Misiak writes, quoting the words of the adiutant Józefa Piłsudskiego: “Wstąpiłem na jednej z ulic [Lidy] do biura propagandy bolszewickiej. […] Obok za oknami tego składu cuchnie gnojówka. Podłoga schlapana atramentem. Na ścianach zgniłe plamy wilgoci. Doświadczac się potwornego wrażenia, patrząc na te olbrzymie zapasy zadrukowanego papieru, zgromadzone tu dla ludzi nie umiejących czytać. Jakby ktoś niesłychanie przewrotny rozpocząć miał złośliwą zabawę, obliczoną na to, że ludzie zamiast chleba zaczną jeść papier”. (Misiak M., 2021, 56).

The authors of the 1919-1920 posters were prominent Polish artists (in particular, Edmund Bartłomiejczyk, Bohdan Nowakowski, Edmund John, Kamil Mackiewicz, Stanisław Savychevsky, Felicjan Szczęsny-Kowarski), who were engaged not only in graphics, but also in painting, illustration, or interior design. Their work is evidence of the participation of the artistic community in the efforts of the entire society to protect the independence of the country. It was a war for the existence of Poland on the map of Europe. It can be linked to the present because Ukraine in 2022 is also defending its statehood, its Europeanness not only on the battlefield, but also in the mental sphere. Ukraine responds to the enemy’s information war with its own information war, a poster is one of its tools. A surge in poster art always accompanied any major political upheavals, playing one of the main roles in shaping public
opinion, establishing certain judgments and assessments. In addition, the poster is also a means of visualizing history.

The communicative purpose of the poster genre during military operations is to critically interpret the events taking place and the actors involved in military operations in one way or another. The poster maker can construct or deconstruct certain images, even manipulate mass consciousness. Regardless, the author offers his own interpretation of events. The recipient must have a certain set of knowledge about the subject of the image, in order to adequately perceive the meaningful message in the visual work, which, in turn, can cause an emotional reaction (positive or negative) and form an appropriate civic position. One can notice the intertextuality of the posters, which is contained in both verbal and non-verbal codes. In this respect, the color decision is of great importance, the direct or indirect borrowing of certain quotes, which allows the recipient to evoke a whole series of associations. Shall we talk about it in more detail.

“The Bolsheviks were pioneers of total propaganda and the art of big lies” (Misiak M., 2021, 55-56). One can argue that modern Russia has refined Bolshevik propaganda techniques. Since the military conflict in Transnistria (1992), the First Russian-Chechen War (1994–1996), aggressive propaganda posters have been created in Russia to justify military actions on the territory of Chechnya and the killing of civilians. The same thing happened in Abkhazia (1992-1993), then in the Second Russian-Chechen war (1999-2009), in the Russian-Georgian war (2008) and in Ukraine, starting from 2014.

Shall we consider a few of them. So, in April 2017, an exhibition of works by young artists and designers of the “DPR” (Donetsk People’s Republic) was organized in Donetsk. The authors of some of the posters were obviously inspired by posters from the times of the USSR. For instance, the poster “We beat, beat and will beat” is copied from a Soviet poster with the same verbal content. The poster of the DPR titled “Ordinary Day of the State Leader of Ukraine” is a copy of the Soviet poster “State Leader of Modern Germany”. Meanwhile, certain posters distributed on the pages of the “DPR” communities in social networks are copied precisely from Nazi originals (Bodnar A., 2017). Thus, the poster “For free Donbas! Our brotherhood is stronger than lies” is an iteration of the poster of Nazi Germany “Wir arbeiter sind erwacht! Nationalsozialisten”.

Simultaneously, with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian war, many posters appeared all over the world aiming to support Ukraine and Ukrainians. Many such posters are paraphrases of posters created in the 1930s and 1940s. (“The men are ready”; “Jap trap”/“Ukrainian trap”; “Maneater”, “Liberation”, etc.).
In their poster work, Ukrainian artists also address numerous topics: raising morale, patriotism, national security and defense, as well as mocking the enemy. The symbols of the Russian Federation, ideology, along with the so-called “gestures of goodwill”, a caricature of the leaders and propagandists of the Russian Federation are presented sarcastically (Nikita Titov’s “Russian warship go f*** yourself”, “Putin’s favorite dish”, Mykola Kovalenko’s “Russian warship go f*** yourself”, “Helping brotherly people”; Maksym Pavlenko’s “Putin and the patriarch”, Matryoshka the grenade, “Putin-ship”, Yuriy Zhuravel’s “Hitlerkaputin”).

The hyperbolized image of Putin’s features, which makes him resemble a devilish creature, on the one hand emphasizes his true nature, and on the other, prompts (at least should prompt) Russians to think about the essence of their leader.

Certain posters-illustrations to famous Russian works are also worth mentioning for being interpreted in the context of military aggression. Thus, the work “The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish” by Oleksandr Nikityuk depicts a goat dressed in the colors of the Russian flag sitting on a bomb near a broken trough in the image of an old woman (a reference to Alexander Pushkin’s fairy tale of the same title). The space around the old goat is surrounded by barbed wire, symbolizing isolation of the Russian Federation from the world.

“Mumu” is another work by this artist that refers the viewer to the well-known work of the Russian writer I. Turgenev that goes by the same title. The poster depicts the Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation S. Shoigu in the image of Gerasim, who, sitting in a boat named “Russian Ship”, throws a Russian soldier into the river (an allusion to Mumu) to drown him. Behind the shoulders of Gerasim-Shoigu, the viewer sees many of the same Mumus.

The peculiar carnivalesque nature of visual communication is connected with society’s need to transform political characters and events into objects of laughing perception. Sarcasm and irony in the posters contribute to the release of emotional tension in the recipients.

The accusation of the inhumanity of the war is one more theme of the posters. Artists use emotional symbols and emblems, such as the national flag, national symbols (Dmytro Zhuravel, Nikita Titov’s “Ukraine. Babyn Yar. 1941-43 - Nazis, 2022 - Russians”, “Mariupol”; Mykola Kovalenko’s “Ukraine will win”). Russian symbols are played here as an element or symbol of torture. The image of Ukrainian soldiers in a beam of light against a dark background as well has its own iconic intertextuality. The theme of the struggle of light forces against the forces of darkness is represented here.

European and Ukrainian artists use allusions to biblical themes as well. One such example is “Kyiv Madonna in the Subway” by Maryna Solomennikova. The history of this
poster is quite interesting. The photo of a young woman nursing a baby, leaning against the cold marble wall of the subway in Kyiv, was taken by A. Feldesh, the Hungarian journalist of the Teleks publication. A photograph of a woman with a baby hiding from bombs inspired artists. The Ukrainian artist M. Solomennikova depicted this woman (Tetyana) against the background of the Kyiv Metro Map with a golden nimbus above her head. After that, M. James, a consultant of the Vatican secretariat for public relations, published an illustration of Maryna on his page with the following text: “Our Lady of Kyiv, pray for us.” (James M., 2022).

In numerous posters from the time of the Russian-Ukrainian war, one can see an image of an angel in the colors of the national flag of Ukraine, which protects a child, and a home, covering them with itself. At times the angel symbolizes the souls of fallen children, women, and soldiers.

Certain artists put the portrait of the Ukrainian poet and artist T. Shevchenko into the modern context, adding lines from his poetry that still sound relevant today (“Fight - win!” by Vyacheslav Kazanevskyi, works with the same title by Mykola Honcharov and Olena Pavlova, “Kobzar” by Maksym Lazor, “Borodyanka’s Rushnyk” by Katya Lisova, “Borodianka 05.06.2022” by Maryna Borovikova).

I would like to emphasize that the restoration of peace and justice for Ukraine is the main theme of Ukrainian wartime posters. Undoubtedly, the wartime poster forms a certain cultural code related to the desire for peace in Ukraine.

3. Conclusions

The specific genre-forming features of the wartime poster are associated with the wide use of various elements, including the following: a) color scheme used in both the iconic and verbal components; b) variation of fonts; c) lines that underline or cross out the text; d) graphic means of other semiotic systems that replace verbal signs; e) means involved in text organization and thematic segmentation. The poster combines the originality of the creative idea, the simplicity of the artistic solutions, the letter text and the figurative series, the laconic but expressive color scheme. The poster is able to dynamically, flexibly, vividly, comprehensively and at the same time concisely reflect the most relevant events, to form and support public opinion regarding the success of the efforts of the Ukrainian military, and to strengthen the confidence of Ukrainians in victory. The combination of verbal and non-verbal, pictorial means of transmitting the information forms a creolized (mixed type) text. A wartime poster is characterised by the presence of verbal, iconic, graphic, and color codes.
Each code separately can be the semantic dominant of the text. Interacting with each other, the codes ensure the integrity and coherence of the semiotic text, strengthen its communicative effect, because the combination of different coded messages complement and explain each other.

References