



A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF POSTERS FROM THE *AMERICAN HORROR STORY* TV SHOW

UMA ANÁLISE MULTIMODAL DE PÔSTERES DO SERIADO
TELEVISIVO *AMERICAN HORROR STORY*

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Abstract: The present study, a multimodal genre analysis, investigates verbal and visual components of posters from the *American Horror Story* TV show in order to understand how this genre functions and maintains its social purpose. The corpus consists of three posters from the *American Horror Story* show, and each one stands for the first three seasons of the show. The Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) was used as analytical tool for the identification of meanings in visual language. Verbal language was analyzed through the recognition of information blocks (SWALES, 1990). Results showed that a mysterious atmosphere is built by representative and compositional meanings altogether. On the other hand, interactive meanings are responsible for the inviting and appealing features of posters, which aim at convincing people to watch the TV show.

Keywords: Multimodal Analysis; Multimodality; Multiliteracies; Posters.

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Resumo: *O presente trabalho, uma análise de gênero multimodal, investiga os componentes verbais e visuais de pôsteres do seriado televisivo American Horror Story (AHS), a fim de compreender como esse gênero funciona e mantém sua finalidade social. O corpus consiste em três pôsteres de American Horror Story. Cada pôster do corpus representa uma das três primeiras temporadas do programa. A Gramática do Design Visual (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) foi utilizada como ferramenta analítica para a identificação de significados na linguagem visual. A linguagem verbal foi analisada por meio do reconhecimento de blocos de informações (SWALES, 1990). Os resultados mostraram que uma atmosfera misteriosa é construída pelos significados representativos e composicionais juntos. Por sua vez, os significados interativos são responsáveis pelos recursos atraentes e convidativos nos pôsteres para assistir ao seriado.*

Palavras-chave: *Análise Multimodal; Multimodalidade; Multiletramentos; Pôsteres.*

INTRODUCTION

Multimodality comprehends communication as being more than verbal language alone. This inter/trans-disciplinary approach has been under study in different areas (Linguistics, Arts, Technology, Psychology, etc.), in various texts (printed, digital, spatial) and in multiple perspectives (JEWITT, 2009). In this sense, a social semiotic perspective is adopted in this study. The social semiotic perspective of language “highlights the importance of the social aspect in the construction of discourse” (ABREU, 2013, p. 50). Therefore, social semiotics differs from semiotics, as it is traditionally defined as the general study of signs.

The present study considers Multimodality as both a theory and an investigation method in order to analyze TV show posters in a Genre Analysis perspective (SWALES, 1990). Genre analysis (SWALES, 1990) is based on the recognition of patterns in exemplars of the same genre so that it is possible to describe its regularities in terms of, for example, rhetorical organization. Following this paradigm, the present work, a multimodal genre analysis, investigates verbal and visual components in TV show posters in order to understand how this genre functions and maintains its social purpose. In this regard, the underlying concept of genre in this work, which is considered as a

socially significant activity mediated by language (BATEMAN, 2008), coincides with the social semiotic perspective of Multimodality (KRESS, 2010).

The posters under analysis belong to the TV show *American Horror Story* (commonly referred to as AHS). *American Horror Story* is a horror-drama television show created and produced by Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk. It is an anthology, with each season taking place in a new setting and time. The series is broadcast on FX Networks and premiered on October 5, 2011 (AHS WIKI, 2021). The coming and going of actors in AHS is very common. Once each season has a different plot, actors usually return to play different characters. Sometimes, actors play different characters even in the same season. Nowadays, the TV show has already nine seasons released and the tenth has been confirmed. As time have gone by, some connections among seasons were made, which contributed for fandom anxiety to expect the show.

The results and discussions of this article try to answer the following main question: *How are AHS posters visually and verbally designed to attend their social purpose as a genre?* The next section presents the multimodal apparatus used to analyze the corpus.

1 LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Visual Language Analysis

With ideas based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (2004; 2014) (henceforth SGF), Kress and Van Leeuwen proposed the Grammar of Visual Design (henceforth GVD) or Visual Grammar, as it is also known. According to this view, images, as clauses in verbal language, also represent the world, establish an interaction with the viewer and have an arrangement (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 1996; 2006). The GVD sees language as having, just like the SFG, three metafunctions: representative, interactive and compositional. Those

metafunctions correspond to the three metafunctions, ideational, interpersonal and textual, from SFG respectively. The great difference is the semiotic mode which is described. The focus is transferred from verbal to visual language.

Representative meanings, according to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), imply the identification of the represented participants (which can be animate or inanimate), the processes or the activity described, the attributes or the qualities of the participants and the circumstances in which the action is being developed. In order to do so, Representative meanings can be divided in two structures: narrative and conceptual.

Narrative structures have vectors indicating movement, which are direction lines formed by eye-line, arms, body orientation, or even instruments that suggest movement, action or displacement (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006; MOTTA-ROTH; HENDGES, 2010; NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011). Narrative structures “develop experience as an event that unchains in space and time, that is, they portray participants making actions over other participants or involved in happenings” (NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 537). Narrative structures can point out Action, Reaction, Mental, Verbal, Conversion Processes or even Events.

At the opposite of narrative structures, whose focus is on events, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) identify visual representations whose focus is on the state of things: the conceptual structure. This structure is marked by the absence of vectors that indicate movement, so that conceptual representations “describe and/or classify participants in the image in terms of their individual characteristics, showing their identity, or of traits shared with other participants. This allows us to perceive them as members of a group” (NASCIMENTO;

BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011, p. 537). Conceptual structures can be of three types: Analytical, Classificatory and Symbolic².

Interactive meanings are concerned with the relationships between authors and readers of images. They are in charge of the representation of social relationships among producers, readers and represented objects (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 42). Harrison (2003, p. 52-53) adds that Interactive meanings are about the actions that involve all participants engaged in the production and reception of images. The systems considered to be in this perspective are the systems of contact / interaction, social distance and power.

Interactive meanings consider five main aspects. The system of Contact has to do with the presence of eye contact between represented participants and viewers of images. The system of Social Distance analyses the proximity built among represented participants and viewers. The system of Attitude regards how involved or detached represented participants are in the image based on horizontal angles. The system of Power considers how powerful viewers are placed in relation to represented participants based on vertical angles. Finally, the system of Modality has to do with veracity, credibility and probability images confer to readers.

Veracity, credibility and probability may vary according to what Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) call coding orientation for images. The Naturalistic orientation brings greater correspondence between the represented and the real world. Non-exaggeration is the rule. Colors are not very saturated, modulated or diversified and background is usually present. Sensory orientation brings subjective feelings and, consequently, more than real effects to images: vibrant colors, contrast and high saturation, for instance. Technological and Abstract orientations are concerned with effectiveness of visual representation and its

² The subcategories of both narrative and conceptual structures that were identified in the *corpus* of the study are better explored and explained in the Results and Discussion section.

generality for they are related to design plans or other technical drawings and to the reduction of the individual to the general, and to the concrete to its essential qualities, respectively. So, both Technological and Abstract orientations have their highest Modality when they are represented in black and white for these colors somehow place individual traces and peculiarities aside.

Lastly, Compositional meanings correspond to the meaning that the visual elements have according to their disposition. Such meanings come to relate the representational and interactive meanings to each other. The systems of analysis in these meanings are Information Value (position of elements in the image); Saliency (greater or lesser emphasis given to certain elements at the expense of others) and Framing (presence or absence of divisor lines that connect or disconnect elements in the image). Throughout the analysis, some categories will be resumed, exemplified, developed and better detailed according to the data found in the corpus.

1.2 Research on Posters

A common form of visual structure for visually publicizing information is the poster, whose current conception was developed out of lithography in 1860, when they began to be produced by artists from Paris and London for the promotion of plays (WEILL, 2004). According to Moles (1978, p. 20 apud MACEDO, 2008, p. 25), the poster

(...) in capitalist countries is an advertising mechanism linked to socioeconomic motivations, it is one of the elements that were once supportive and are henceforth the engines of the consumer society; on the other hand, it is one of the modern forms of art in the city (MOLES, 1978, p. 20 apud MACEDO, 2008, p. 25).

Moretto (2008 apud MACEDO, 2008, p. 25) affirms that the cultural areas that most demand the production of posters are the following: cinema, theater,

visual arts, music, circus and politics. Currently, it is possible to note the spread of movie posters both in public spaces, such as cinemas, and in virtual environments.

A movie poster has certain characteristics such as movie title, main credits, scene photography from the film itself or an image that refers to its plot or the message conveyed (TEIXEIRA, 2008). That is, there is a way of composition in movie posters that conveys particular objectives of this communicative situation through verbal and visual resources.

A categorization for verbal and visual elements that are present in movie posters is proposed by Moraes (2012). The verbal elements are Title, Names of main actors and/or directors, Casting (names of supporting actors, directors, producers, release year, etc.) and Taglines (Catchphrases that synthesize the movie's story or refer to an ideology present in it and situate the audience in the movie's ideas.). The visual elements usually represent a particular scene or a selection of scenes from the film. Artistic interpretations of a certain scene or the theme of the film can also be represented. Moraes (2012, p. 323) also states that "movie posters have a strong persuasive content, whose textures, colors, shapes, typography; in short, whose compositional elements in general work together to seduce the reader."

Magalhães (2013) mentions the same elements from movie posters proposed by Moraes (2012). The author says that "the visual message of a movie poster can tell us a lot about the content of the film because it offers various meanings." (MAGALHÃES, 2013, p. 22) and concludes that "[t]he imagery text dialogues with the story narrated in the synopsis and allows the viewer to build the plot of the film." (MAGALHÃES, 2013, p. 22).

By making an analysis of posters of children's movies, Fernandes (2018) points out that the visual structures of children's movie posters do not aim only at an invitation to entertainment, publicity and information on the theme of the

film. They also promote an exposure to a world of emotions, fantasies, adventures. Besides, they can awaken in children a desire to be like a certain character in order to achieve for-profit marketing goals, which originate in posters and end up at store shelves for sale.

Readings of movie posters in order to promote resources for Multiliteracy practices (ROJO, 2012) in elementary education are proposed by Leandro (2018). According to him, multimodal genres, such as movie posters should be better harnessed in classrooms. Additionally, theories of Multimodality and Multiliteracies offer educators a more real understanding of human interaction.

Finally, a robust multimodal analysis of five posters from the Netflix show *Grace and Frankie* retrieved from the Facebook official page of the show is made by Terres, Torres and Heberle (2020). Along with the analysis of representative, interactive and compositional meanings, the authors relate their findings to the main events that happen in the first five seasons of the show. The authors also focus on how both protagonists of the show are represented as elderly women and how they have been transforming and changing along the seasons.

Based on previous literature, I may affirm that the abovementioned studies could agree on the most of the following:

- a. posters have publicizing and inviting features;
- b. posters are verbally concise and visually appealing;
- c. the Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) is an effective tool for analyzing posters;
- d. teachers may promote language teaching and Multiliteracies through the reading of posters and
- e. the social purpose of posters seems to be mainly related to publicity, they are warnings and invitations for people to watch movies/TV shows, regardless of where they are disseminated (internet, movie theatres, DVD covers, and video rental stores).

Although the present study focuses on the analysis of TV show posters and most of our literature review is on movie posters, it is noticeable that they share some similarities, which will be clearer as the discussion unfolds.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 About the corpus

The corpus of this study consists of three *American Horror Story* posters. Due to time and spatial adaptations, the other AHS posters were not considered in this analysis. Each poster in the corpus stands for one of the first three seasons of the show, which are presented in Chart 1. The posters in Chart 1 will also be reintroduced along the analysis with some rectangles, straight lines, arrows and ellipsis in yellow to facilitate readers' perception on part of the ideas proposed.

Chart 1: The corpus

Poster Reference	Poster #1	Poster #2	Poster #3
Poster			

Source: Elaborated by the author with information retrieved from:

https://americanhorrorstory.fandom.com/wiki/American_Horror_Story_Wiki

Besides, each season also has a second name, which is supposed to particularize its plot, since each season brings a different story - season 1: Murder House, season 2: Asylum and season 3: Coven. Originally, season 1 did not have a second name, but as new seasons were released, the second name Murder House became very popular over the fandom in the internet and it is currently used to refer to season 1. Chart 2 presents some information about the seasons whose posters are to be analyzed.

Chart 2: Information about the AHS seasons approached in this study

Season	Premiere	Number of episodes	Plot Summary
1	October 5, 2011.	12	The Harmon's face many conflicts going on in their new home; the primary one stemming from Ben Harmon's (Dylan McDermott) adultery, and the subsequent fallout with his wife Vivien (Connie Britton) and daughter Violet (Taissa Farmiga). Other conflicts include the intrusive behavior of the neighbors, Constance (Jessica Lange) and Adelaide (Jamie Brewer), as well as intrusions from one of Dr. Harmon's patients, Tate (Evan Peters). A parade of

			mysterious visitors to their haunted home, including the scarred Larry Harvey (Denis O'Hare), make the first year of the Harmons in Los Angeles very dangerous. The house seems to have a vivid history, ranging from brutal murders to demonic manifestations, and it seems to have its own agenda.
2	October 17, 2012.	13	In a New England sanitarium, presided by ministers of faith and science, the innocent and the mad run from greater dangers and their own pasts. Bookended by modern day explorations of the ruins, a darker mystery lies in wait for new victims.
3	October 9, 2013.	13	Over 300 years have passed since the turbulent days of the Salem witch trials and those who managed to escape are now facing extinction. Mysterious attacks have been escalating against their kind and young girls are being sent away to a special school in New Orleans to learn how to protect themselves. Wrapped up in the turmoil is new arrival, Zoe (Taissa Farmiga), who is harboring a terrifying secret of her own. Alarmed by the recent aggression, Fiona (Jessica Lange), the long-absent Supreme, sweeps back into town determined to protect the Coven and hell-bent on decimating anyone who gets in her way.

Source: Elaborated by the author with information retrieved from:

https://americanhorrorstory.fandom.com/wiki/American_Horror_Story_Wiki

2.2 Analytical Procedures

The procedures for analyzing the corpus consisted of the following steps and guiding questions:

1. Verbal language description through identification of information blocks; (What is written in the posters?)

2. Visual language description in terms of:

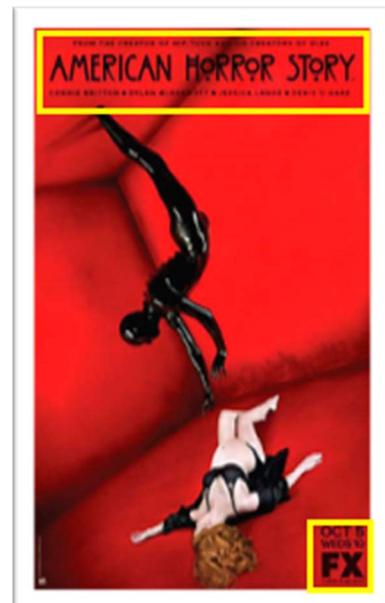
- a. Representative meanings; (What are the posters about? Who is depicted in the posters? How are they depicted?)
- b. Interactive meanings; (How do the posters relate to their readers? What do these relations imply?)³
- c. Compositional meanings; (How is information organized/distributed in the posters? Which elements are foregrounded and which are not? What does that organization imply?)

3. Interpretation of data based on studies of the genre (literature review) and on the plots of the seasons themselves.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Verbal Information in the posters

When it comes to verbal information in publicity posters in general, it is assumed that there is not a large quantity of material to be analyzed. However, it does not mean that verbal language in such genres is disposable. Poster #1 has two verbal information poles, the first one at the very top of it and the second one at the bottom and to the right side. The top pole foregrounds the name of the TV show in terms of font and size. It also presents previous works from the creator of AHS and some actors that are in the show in a different and smaller font. The right bottom pole brings some



³ The discussion on Interactive meanings is slightly more extensive in this study than the ones on Representative and Compositional meanings because, besides analyzing the five main interactive aspects proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), I also considered issues on modality inside interaction, coding orientation and color more precisely.

information about the date that the show premiered and identifies the channel that broadcasts it. All this verbal information is presented in black, which suggests a connection with other elements that are also in black in the image. These connections are discussed in a coming subsection.

Poster #2 also has two verbal information poles in the same places Poster #1 has. Nevertheless, Poster #2 does not present all the same information in relation to Poster #1. The top pole, for instance, brings very visible information about the name of the show (which matches Poster #1), but it foregrounds a second name for the show in terms of color, a name that characterizes the second season: Asylum. There is not any information about either previous works from the creator of the show or the names of its actors. This absence is justifiable in a second season poster because the creator of the show and many of its actors are already known to the audience to a certain extent. The case was not the same in the first season poster. This is why such kind of information was there (in Poster #1) and is not here (in Poster #2). Just like Poster #1, the right bottom pole also brings information about the premiere date and identifies the channel that broadcasts the show. This verbal information is presented in two different colors: black and red. The functionalities of these colors are explored in a coming subsection.



The verbal information in Poster #3 is not divided in top and bottom poles as it was in the previous exemplars. It is now concentrated at the bottom half of the poster. Just like Posters #1 and #2, Poster #3 presents very noticeable information about the name of the show, but it foregrounds (as Poster #2 does) a second name for the show in terms of color, a name which characterizes the third

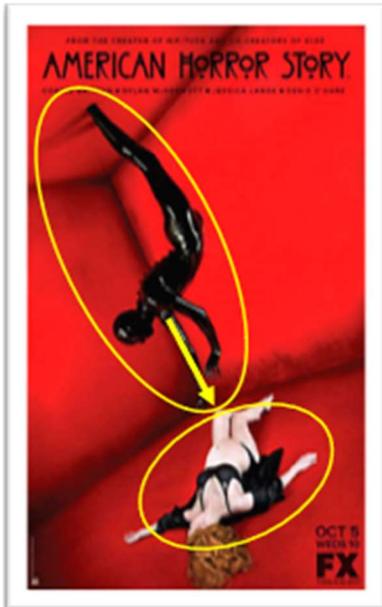
season: Coven. Right below and to the right of the second name for the show, there is information about the premiere date and the sponsoring channel (just like in Posters #1 and #2). Right above the name of the show, there are the names of its actors portrayed in a smaller font, similarly to Poster #1, but not to Poster #2. The reappearance of this kind of information is tenable because in the third season there are new actors whose characters lead or are very relevant to the plot. This verbal information is presented in two different colors: white and red. The functions of these colors are later commented.



If a relation between the verbal information found in AHS posters and the posters analyzed by the studies mentioned in the literature review is made, there is a similarity when it comes to verbally concise information. In fact, AHS posters convey even less verbal information in relation to Moraes's (2012) notes. Casting, for instance, is considerably smaller and Taglines are absent. Verbal information provides mostly technical information about the show (TERRES; TORRES; HEBERLE, 2020). This could be thought of a tendency for TV show posters, but that assertion would require more studies on different TV show posters from different directors, producers, channels, subgenres, etc. However, what one might interpret so far is that the less verbal information AHS posters have, the greater can be the mysterious atmosphere conveyed by them.

3.2 Representative meanings in the posters

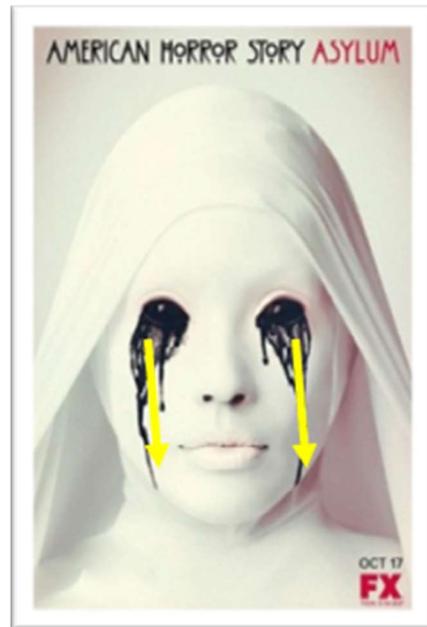
Representative meanings in the corpus can be complex and have different interpretations. In this sense, I elucidate possible perspectives of analysis in this



subsection, mostly based on Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006). Representative meanings are concerned with what the image portrays (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN; 2006). Poster #1 has two Participants, possibly three. There are a supernatural-like creature and a pregnant woman. The baby in her belly could be considered the third Participant in the image. These Participants are involved in an Action Process. The supernatural-like creature is the Actor and the pregnant woman (and/or the baby in her belly) is the Goal. What suggests this view is the vector that seems to be marked by the supernatural-like creature's arm towards the woman. This Action Process may indicate a sensation of, for instance, "getting", "reaching for", "wanting" or "taking" the baby. Besides, the supernatural-like creature is represented as having more power than the woman, as it is in a higher position and able to reach for her while she is in a lower position and lies down with her arms wide open in a vulnerable position like an easy target. Her head bended to the left may be seen as a sign of not wanting to be involved with the supernatural-like creature, but her knees pointing to the creature suggest that this involvement may be inevitable. The image has a Circumstance of place: the scene seems to be happening in a room, although it is denaturalized by the predominance of red. One cannot identify what kind of room they are in, which contributes to build an atmosphere of mystery for the horror-drama show.

Poster #2 presents only one Participant: a nun-like being. This Participant has very erased facial expressions and details due to its white coloring. The white coloring is also present in the background of the Participant, which may serve as a confusing element between an unidentifiable scenario (Circumstance of place) and the Participant itself. The contrast between the massive whiteness and the

black portion of the image contributes to foregrounding what is in black: the nun-like being's eyes and the black ink coming from them (probably a metaphor for crying). Once there is a foregrounded black ink coming out from an all-white inexpressive nun-like being's eyes functioning as downwards vectors, a focus on this very action is made. Thus, this narrative structure may be interpreted as an Event since the Participant can be seen as in partial anonymity.



Poster #3 has one main Participant: a snake and three secondary Participants: two white women and one black woman, whose depictions are limited to parts of their faces, specially their lips in red lipstick. Besides being a Participant, the snake itself can be interpreted as a vector that is going through the women's mouths (Goals). So, this narrative structure can be viewed as an Action Process. The women's teeth and lips might also be seen as vectors going towards the snake, as one could say they are biting it. That would be another, maybe secondary, Action Process in the image. No Circumstances could be identified in the image portrayed in Poster #3.



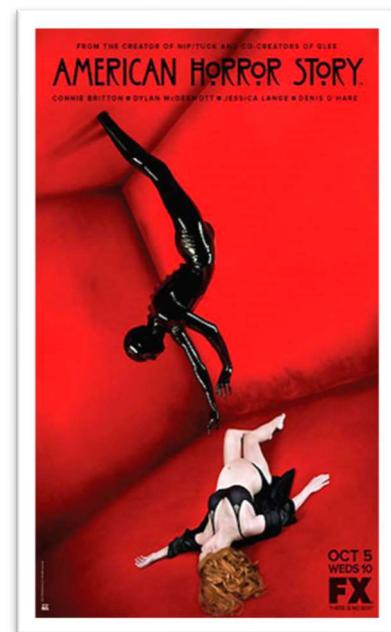
Concerning representative meanings, some peculiarities in the AHS posters can be pointed out. According to Moraes (2012), the visual elements usually represent a particular scene or a selection of scenes from the film and artistic interpretations of a certain scene or the theme of the film can also be

represented. In the case of the AHS posters, the images do not portray scenes from the show because the represented participants of the images are not the actors of the show playing their own characters. They are representations related to the themes of the seasons of the show, referring to the plot (TEIXEIRA, 2008). Nevertheless, the audience can expect that there might be scenes in the show that will resemble the representations conveyed by the posters. This nuance in the representation also contributes to the atmosphere of mystery in the show because it does not clarify how the actors in the show itself will enact the representations of the posters. This clarification usually happens in movie posters in general because the posters bring the very actors of the movie for depiction (MORAES, 2012). In this sense, when it comes to movie posters, the audience usually knows who is going to play whom; this forethought does not happen when AHS posters are observed, though.

3.3 Interactive meanings in the posters

Interactive meanings deal with the relations between image authors and image readers (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN; 2006). Poster #1 has an image that brings an Offer since there is not eye contact between the Participants and the readers. The represented Participants are put for reader contemplation (HARRISON, 2003). Concerning Social Distance, the long shot in Poster #1 implies impersonality and distance between Participants and readers. Regarding Attitude, the oblique angle in the Participants indicates detachment in relation

to readers; the high angle places readers as having power over the Participants



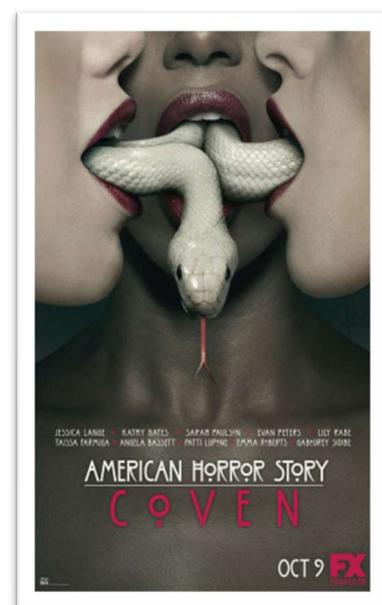
in the image. Considering a sensory coding orientation, the image in Poster #1 presents a high modality due to the high color saturation, contrast between red and black and illumination in one of the Participants. Besides being used for generating contrast so that the verbal text can be visible, the color black in Poster #1 may also function as an element of connection among Participants. For instance, as much as the pregnant woman seems not want to be involved with the supernatural-like creature, her black lingerie, which matches the creature's color, suggests that this involvement is going to happen anyhow. Still concerning red and black, their choices do not seem to have been random. The red may be associated with blood, desire and sensuality denoted by the pregnant woman in lingerie and her eventual childbirth. The black may be linked with mystery and mysticism, which are very much present in horror plots, and with night, when horror usually takes place.

Unlike Poster #1, which portrays an Offer, Poster #2 presents a Demand since the nun-like being establishes eye contact with readers. In this case, one can infer that the Participant is inviting readers to watch the show. Concerning Social Distance, the close shot in Poster #2 implies intimacy and personality between the Participant and readers. Regarding Attitude, the frontal angle in the Participant indicates involvement in relation to readers, which contributes to the invitation set by the Demand; the eye-level angle places readers in a position of equality (equal power) in relation to the Participant in the image. Considering a sensory coding orientation, the image in Poster #2 presents a high modality due to the high color saturation and the contrast between white and black. The black used in the verbal text in Poster #2 also appears in its premiere



date, in the flowing ink and in the nun-like being's eyes, as well as in the verbal text used in Poster #1. However, since Poster #2 presents a secondary name for the show: Asylum, this name is put in red so that it is highlighted from the general name. Furthermore, the red applied in the secondary name connects to the red used in the name of the channel that broadcasts the show. Again, colors are used as connecting elements and do not seem to have been chosen randomly. The white in the nun-like being may be associated with purity, simplicity and peace. On the other hand, the black in its eyes and "tears" denotes mystery and secret. Therefore, the black coming from inside the white suggests that things may not be as pure and peaceful as they look like, and impurity and disturbance eventually come out.

Just like Poster #2 and unlike Poster #1, Poster #3 presents a Demand, since the main Participant (the snake) establishes eye contact with readers/audience. In this case, one can also infer that this Demand is an invitation to watch the show. Concerning Social Distance, the close shot in Poster #3 points to intimacy and personality between the main Participant and readers. Regarding Attitude, the frontal angle in the snake indicates involvement in relation to readers; the eye-level angle places readers in a position of equality (equal power) in relation to the main Participant in the image. All these systems converge to the invitation set by the Demand. Also considering a sensory coding orientation, the image in Poster #3 (just like in Posters #1 and #2) presents a high modality due to its illumination and brightness play. Poster #3 does not have as saturated colors as Posters #1 and #2 do. Unlike Posters #1 and #2, Poster #3 has the name of the show (and the names of the actors) in white instead of black. This choice was probably made for two



reasons. The white connects the verbal text to the white tone of the snake, to the white skin of the two women and to the white in the premiere date of the season. Besides, it also contrasts with the dark skin of the woman, who serves as a background for the verbal text.

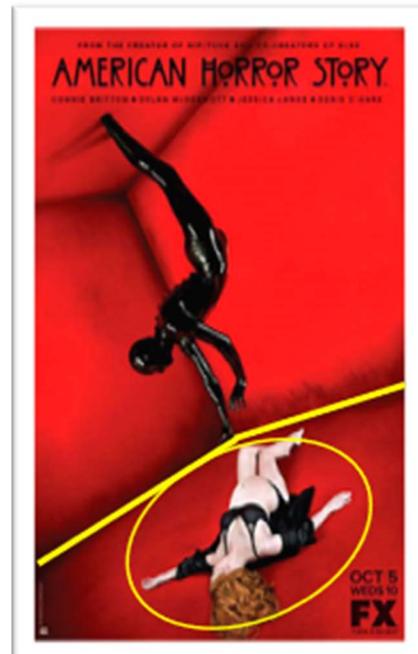
Red is also present in Poster #3 just as it was in Poster #2: in the secondary name of the show (Coven), highlighting it from the general name in white, and in the name of the channel. Red may also be seen as a connecting element among the secondary Participants. Although there is an ethnic difference among the women, they are connected by their lips in red lipstick and somehow by the snake itself. Despite not being extremely saturated, the red in the women's lips can still be associated with sensuality, danger or prohibition. The very position of the snake suggests that the next mouth it will go through is the viewer's, which contributes to an involving atmosphere and the Demand to watch the show.

Regarding Interactive meanings, AHS posters are similar to movie posters in general (MORAES, 2012; MAGALHÃES, 2013; FERNANDES, 2018) in the sense that they commonly have interactive elements to attract viewers to watch the movie. These elements can be Demands, Close Social Distances, Frontal Angles and High Angles, for instance. In the case of AHS posters, such elements are also present: High Angle (Poster #1), Demand (Posters #2 and #3) and Close Social Distance (Posters #2 and #3). This resemblance might be shared because of a possible similarity in the communicative purpose of movie and TV show posters. However, more extensive studies have to be conducted in order to affirm that. Concerning Modality, it is interesting to point out that movie posters in general, except animated feature films (FERNANDES, 2018), display images under a naturalistic coding orientation and convey a high modality. On the other hand, AHS posters convey a high modality through a sensory coding orientation. They were all considered under such orientation because of two main reasons: publicity context and color affectivity. This difference of coding orientations in

posters is debatable once image edition can put at stake the naturalistic orientation of movie posters in general.

3.4 Compositional meanings in the posters

Compositional meanings are concerned with the ways an image can be organized (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). Considering Information Value, Poster #1 has a top/bottom configuration. Despite not being fully straight, the very line that separates the floor from the walls can function as a division between top and bottom poles. The pregnant woman put at the base suggests that she is accessible, concrete, observable and material (real). On the other hand, the supernatural-like creature at the top



gives the idea that it is, inaccessible, abstract, less observable and spiritual (ideal). Regarding Salience, the pregnant woman is more salient because of both her white skin and illumination. As for Framing, the very top/bottom line can function as a framing device that disconnects the Participants, portraying them as belonging to different worlds.

Considering Information Value, Poster #2 has a center/margin configuration. The more centered an element is, the more relevant, foregrounded and important it is. In this sense, Poster #2 highlights the nun-like being's eyes and the black ink, followed by its face and then its veil. Regarding Saliency, the nun-like being's eyes and the black ink are the most salient elements in the image because of their black contrast with white. Although the nun-like



being's saliency in terms of size cannot be ignored, the most prominent elements in the image are its eyes and the black ink because of their color contrast. As for Framing, no framing devices could be identified in Poster #2. Just like Poster #1, one can state that Poster #3 has a top/bottom configuration. Right below the snake's tongue, a straight line that somehow separates the verbal text from most of the visual text can be traced. In this sense, ideal concepts are placed at the top, whereas information that is more concrete is located at the bottom. Nevertheless, I feel obliged to recognize that another Information Value interpretation might be made in relation to the three women as organized in a triptych form. However, this would be the case of a secondary compositional meaning to be thought after/inside the top/bottom organization I have just mentioned and not a primary or immediate interpretation. Regarding Saliency, the snake is prominent because of both its white tone and centrality, the black woman is foregrounded because her body is more evident in relation to the white women and the women's lips are salient because of their red color. Besides the top/bottom line, no framing devices could be pointed in Poster #3.

As for the Compositional meanings in movie posters, they can be varied and complex (MORAES, 2012; MAGALHÃES, 2013; FERNANDES, 2018). They

are varied because there is not a mapped pattern or tendency for organizing information in posters, since most of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) proposals have been identified in them at some point. Based on Moares (2012) Magalhães (2013) and Fernandes (2018), Compositional meanings in movie posters are multiple because some of them display a combination of organizational patterns (top/bottom with center/margin, for example). Another complex feature of compositional meanings in movie posters is the presence of more than one image. When that happens, images are sometimes overlapped or framed by lines, which can be formed by verbal texts. This combination of images generates more than one interpretation because one can analyze the organization of information in each isolated image, in the combination of the images, or even in both ways. Although the corpus under analysis in this study is small, the variety and complexity of Compositional meanings are shown by AHS posters once Posters #1 and #2 have different ways of organizing and foregrounding information and Poster #3 might be seen as having combined Information Value configurations.

3.5 *American Horror Story* Posters and Season Plots

To close this section on results and discussions, I would like to reintroduce the three posters under analysis and establish some possible connections between their representations and the plots of each season in Chart 3 as follows.

Chart 3: Possible connections between posters and their seasons

Poster #1	The representation in the poster refers to an important scene of the season in which Vivien Harmon is raped by the ghost of Tate Langdon thinking that she is having sexual relations with her husband, who would be dressed up in a bondage suit. Vivien later learns she is pregnant with twins. When she eventually delivers the twins, the audience gets to know that one of them was sired by Tate's ghost and the other by Vivien's husband. Vivien has great difficulty
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giving birth to the babies, losing her husband's boy to stillbirth while the ghost's boy causes her to bleed internally to death, but he lives. In the end of the season, the audience learns that the survivor baby has evil behavior when he kills his babysitter with the age of three.

Poster #2



The representation in the poster indicates the character Sister Mary Eunice, an innocent nun who is possessed by the devil after an exorcism performed in a teenage girl at the Briarcliff asylum. The possessed Sister Mary Eunice then begins her corruption of the asylum. She kills a female patient, called the Mexican, who senses that she is possessed. Next, Sister Mary Eunice tries to seduce Dr. Arden, and then drives Sister Jude nearly insane by hinting at her past transgressions. In the end of the season, Monsignor Howard takes the fight to the possessed Sister Mary Eunice, eventually pushing her off the third floor. The creature in the poster alludes to this apparent naive nun who has the devil himself inside her or to the seemingly trustworthy mental institution, which hides terrible atrocities within its walls.

Poster #3



The representation in the poster illustrates the two witch covens in the season: the Salem coven, of the white witches, and the Voodoo coven, of the black witches. The Salem witches, led by Fiona Goode, clash with the Voodoo witches, led by Marie Laveau. The red lipstick shared by the witches in the poster along with the snake that goes through their mouths suggest their eventual union in the season when they join forces to fight witch hunters off after one of them slaughters many witches from the Voodoo coven.

Source: Elaborated by the author with information retrieved from:

https://americanhorrorstory.fandom.com/wiki/American_Horror_Story_Wiki

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Horror_Story:_Murder_House

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Horror_Story:_Asylum

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Horror_Story:_Coven

FINAL REMARKS

This paper aimed at investigating verbal and visual components in AHS posters under a social semiotic approach for Multimodality (KRESS, 2010). Although it was an initial analysis, the small corpus was able to demonstrate how complex, multifaceted and polysemous images in posters can be, especially in the context of AHS, where images are highly manipulated and edited.

In order to try to answer the main question proposed in the introduction - *How are AHS posters visually and verbally designed to attend their social purpose as a genre?* - I may state that, in these posters, publicity maintenance towards audience attraction is made by an arrangement between a mysterious atmosphere and appealing resources. The mysterious atmosphere is built by representative and compositional meanings together as Participants are portrayed unclearly and somewhat unidentifiably occupying advantaged positions in the posters (foregrounded information). On the other hand, interactive meanings are responsible for the appealing resources in AHS posters as they make use of compelling means for captivating the audience to watch the show: high modality, position of power over Participants, intimacy (close shots) and demand (eye contact). Therefore, this analysis corroborates previous studies on posters (WEILL, 2004; MACEDO, 2008; TEIXEIRA, 2008; MORAES, 2012; MAGALHÃES, 2013; FERNANDES, 2018; LEANDRO, 2018; TERRES; TORRES; HEBERLE, 2020) in the sense that it also identified that the social purpose of this genre is mainly related to publicity regardless of the fact that they are TV posters and not movie ones. Despite this verification, AHS posters do not work with naturalistic images as most movie posters do, which may strengthen a feeling of curiosity in the audience towards what is actually going to be presented by the show. Besides, a lower use of naturalistic images is justified within the horror theme, which is extremely fictional.

From the viewpoint of social semiotics (KRESS, 2010), the AHS posters analyzed in this study (as well as posters in general I dare say) are texts that function and fulfill their social purpose in a multimodal way. It would be odd and unpractical, for instance, to picture posters containing verbal information only. If they existed, they would probably not call people's attention the way they do just like they are in our society nowadays.

In this sense, Social Semiotics is able to say something about each semiotic mode that comprises a multimodal text. In the case of the AHS analyzed, I now address aspects on verbal language, image and color. Verbal language provides all AHS posters with some identity and ownership by informing the name of the show and the channel that owns it, respectively. Besides, the premiere date information, which is also carried out by verbal language, is something unpractical to be expressed by another semiotic mode, since Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) did not map circumstances of time location in the form of images.

Images (visual language) are the core of posters mainly because of their amount in relation to verbal language, which is considerably bigger. Visual language materializes a glimpse of the story (plot) that is going to be explored in the show. When it comes to colors, I do not consider them as a semiotic mode apart from visual language in the case of AHS posters, but as one supplementary to image. Colors intensify what visual language portrays, escaping naturalistic coding orientation and reaching a sensory one as well as establish verbal/visual and visual/visual connections among elements. The overuse of color brightness, saturation and contrast gives AHS posters the mysterious fictitious feature, which is going to be present in all seasons of the show. These semiotic modes, each one with its specialization combined with the others', collaborate to fulfill the social purpose of posters, which is to publicize and attract audience.

In addition, AHS posters are also attractive because they are able to awaken the imagination and memory of North-American horror culture built

along the years. An alert horror fan may notice some slight references to other horror productions within the three AHS posters: *Rosemary's baby* (1968) (Poster #1), *Agnes of God* (1985) (Poster #2) and *Salem Witch Trials* (2002) (Poster #3) to name a few movies.

Albeit these considerations are sustained, I would like to remind that the corpus under analysis was significantly limited in terms of number. In this sense, future research on either TV show/movie posters should include a greater number of posters for a more consistent genre analysis (SWALES, 1990). Other interesting perspectives for coming studies could be the separation of posters according to their movie or TV show subgenre: drama, comedy, adventure, investigation, fiction, etc. and even a comparison between TV show and movie posters to check to what extent they differ and coincide. These divisions might show some influences or patterns subgenres and production contexts have over posters. Furthermore, considerations related to intersemiotic relations (relations between the verbal and the visual) (UNSWORTH; CHAN, 2008; CHAN, 2011; DALY; UNSWORTH, 2011; MARTINEC; SALWAY, 2005; ROYCE, 1998; 2002; 2007; 2015; UNSWORTH; CLÉIRIGH, 2009; MILANI, 2018; 2020) in posters should also be pointed out by upcoming studies, since they would be able to indicate how TV show/movie posters function as a genre, considering that images and words are interconnected and dependent on one another in the construction of meaning.

Along the publishing process of this article, two of my three reviewers suggested that my analysis might have been quite structuralist, which could be a kind of solvable “problem” if context were more explored in my viewpoint. Indeed, structuralist views go against the principles of Social Semiotics. However, in my own defense, I must say that time, space, analytical delimitations and the level and amount of textual detail I dealt with in this study did not allow me to go further in the context of AHS posters so far and this might eventually

sound structuralist for readers. Nevertheless, my analysis was not a decontextualized one, I was limited to the fictitious context of the show as Chart 3 pointed out. Future and broader studies should find ways to consider the actual context of production, distribution and consumption of AHS or of any other posters in order to be more aligned to Social Semiotics or other contextual perspectives such as Critical Genre Analysis (MOTTA-ROTH, 2008; MOTTA-ROTH; HEBERLE, 2015).

Finally, based on the literature review and on the analysis presented here, I would like to suggest that TV show or movie posters may well be used in language classes (additional or not). A good strategy for using them could be in pre-reading activities, especially if teachers plan to watch the movies or TV shows with students (viewer discretion is advised). The elements on the posters enable students to predict some information on the plot or theme. In this respect, a pre-reading activity using a poster may generate a better understanding of movies or TV shows themselves. After some poster readings and analyses, if students are able to produce any audiovisual material for school subjects/projects, language teachers may want to challenge them to produce concrete or digital posters to publicize their work. These are few examples of posters and pedagogical practices that incite the development of Multiliteracies (THE NEW LONDON GROUP, 1996; ROJO, 2012).

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