



Reading Non-Verbal Cues in Jamie Uys's *The Gods must be Crazy*: A Subliminal and Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract

As a highly constructed media text, the filmic narrative most often integrates a variety of non-verbal cues masterfully deployed by the film director to subtly convey controversial, delicate or highly sensitive messages. Two of such non-verbal cues are subliminal manipulation and semiotics, most often deployed to imply taboos, sex, profanity or other issues that may be considered obscene or troubling to some extent. In this paper, attention is given to how Jamie Uys deploys these two forms of non-verbal cues (subliminal manipulation and semiotics) in his film titled “The Gods must be Crazy” in order to convey sex related messages and ultimately sexualize its filmic production. The paper specifically answers the three following research questions: how are subliminal manipulation and semiotics forms of non-verbal cues? How does Jamie Uys use them in his film to convey controversial messages and sexualize his production? How effective are the two non-verbal cues in conveying the specific sexual messages of the film director?

I. INTRODUCTION

The filmic text is carefully constructed. Movies are so craftily “cooked” or “engineered” that it may be extremely difficult for a layman – who generally views or consumes them uncritically – to perfectly capture all their dimensions, tropes, intents, messages and symbolic values. No doubt, in a seminal article devoted to the internal structure of films, Metz (1982) observes that “a film is difficult to explain because it is easy to understand” (p.9). In other words, the technicalities of a film are hardly discernable; meanwhile the superficial part of the medium is most often obvious. In the same line of argument, Goldberg (2015) concedes that given the fact that a film is systematically built with visual, aural, and linguistic components that are craftily “manipulated in numerous ways”, it is a serious challenge for the ordinary viewers “to take apart the totality of the film experience and to interpret how that experience was assembled” (p.56). With this, it wouldn't be hyperbolic to argue that only an informed and very “methodic” critic will be able to sufficiently explore a film – that is, only such a critical reviewer will be able to explore a film beyond the superficial level. Filmmakers have always struggled –

through the application or adoption of a variety of techniques and styles – to render invisible, the constructed nature of their (filmic) productions. Corroborating this observation, Bordwell (2015) principally associates filmmakers' techniques and styles of “masking” the constructed nature of the film medium, with the art of exploiting human psychology. He insightfully notes that:

We watch films with our eyes and ears, but we experience films with our minds and bodies. Films do things to us, but we also do things with them. A film pulls a surprise; we jump. It sets up scenes; we follow them. It plants hints; we remember them. It prompts us to feel emotions; we feel them. If we want to know more—the how, the secrets of the craft—it would seem logical to ask the

filmmakers. What enables them to get us to respond so precisely? [...] Throughout history, filmmakers have worked with seat-of-the-pants psychology. By trial and error they have learned how to shape our minds and feelings, but usually they aren't interested in explaining why they succeed. They leave that task to film scholars, psychologists, and others. (p.23)

In line with Bordwell's (2015) the above mentioned observation, this paper argues that one of the techniques frequently used by filmmakers to render invisible the constructed nature of the film medium is the use of a variety of non-verbal cues, particularly subliminal manipulation and semiotics. The paper goes on to demonstrate the above mentioned position, through a critical reading of non-verbal cues in Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must be Crazy*.

By definition, non-verbal communication is – as its name indicates – a nonlinguistic form of transmitting or sending messages. It is a complex process of message or meaning generation based on instruments or behaviors other than words, and facilitated by a well defined cultural context. These behaviors have basically been classified with respect to over nine determining factors including environmental determinants (architectural style, lighting smell, color, temperature etc), proxemics, kinesics, touching, physical characteristics (physique, breath, odor, height, weight, hair, skin color), paralanguage, artifacts, oculesis and chronemics.

Nonverbal communication scholars have equally provided classifications of these phenomena based on their vocal or non-vocal nature. In line with this, vocal forms of nonverbal communication include paralanguage (that is nonverbal cues surrounding speech notably pitch, volume, tempo and intensity of the voice). Meanwhile, non-vocal forms of nonverbal communication include issues like kinesics (otherwise called body language) which will include facial expression, gestures posture, and eye behavior and body movement). Non-verbal cues in a filmic text may be more complex than expected. Their reading – in such a context – may consequently depend on the consideration or application of relevant methods or theories. In line with this, this study will consider two

methods – namely subliminal analysis and semiotics – to examine the use of non-verbal cues in Jamie Uys's *The Gods Must be Crazy*.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

It appears imperative to conceptually define the two methods of analysis adopted for this study. In tandem with this, this section of the paper provides a conceptual framework involving the two phenomena of subliminal perception and semiotics.

Subliminal Perception/Analysis

Subliminal perception is a complex process whereby audiences receive and respond to information and instructions without them being aware of it. This process is methodically created by communication experts bent on manipulating messages on very sensitive issues such as sex, religion, violence, drug, food and fear among others. Subliminal perception involves – or is derived from – the use of oral artifacts/elements (such as voices and sounds) or visual artifacts (such as pictures or written words), presented either extremely fast or very obscurely so as to bypass the audience's conscious awareness (see Images 1, 2 and 3 below). For example, if the phrase "*Black is beautiful*" is to be subliminally embed into a music track or displayed in a video, it will be so rapidly presented that the conscious mind will not have enough time to logically hear or perceive it. However, the phrase will be clearly perceivable from the subconscious mind. The constant repetition of the phrase or similar coinages may help rewire (create new neural pathways) long thought patterns and may cause one – particularly audiences of the black race – to have a favorable impression about the black race, and negate stereotypes associated with such a race. The above illumination perfectly indicates that subliminal perception lies in the subconscious mind. This is so as subliminal messaging systematically operates below the level of conscious awareness. Messages derived through this process are delivered in a way as to be perceived by the subconscious mind.

As has earlier been alluded to, the human mind is divided into two interacting parts namely the conscious and the subconscious. Though the conscious mind has an appreciable role to play in the general functioning of the human body, the subconscious is considered the most important part of the human mind. To speak metaphorically, the conscious mind can be equated with the tip (over 5%) of the iceberg seen on the surface of the sea while the subconscious part of the mind is the remaining part of the iceberg hidden under the sea (see Image 4 below). This is so as, being constantly activated, the subconscious systematically regulates everything in the

body, character and speech of each and every individual. The subconscious equally receives and processes information irrespective of what we do. The determinant function of the subconscious in the context of subliminal perception is demonstrated by the fact that any consciously perceived phenomenon can be evaluated, criticized, discussed, argued, and possibly rejected; meanwhile, anything programmed subliminally to our subconscious mind meets no resistance. This subliminal information or instruction is stored in our brain and is capable of influencing our judgment, behavior and attitudes (Janine 2015, Chang 2015). The subconscious part of the human mind operates below the level of conscious awareness. It controls all reflexes, automatic functions and handles the processing and storing of incoming information and instructions for which we are not aware. It is even believed that the subconscious mind is capable to process over 20,000 bits of information simultaneously, while the conscious mind can deal only with 7 ± 2 bits of information at the same time (Chang 2015, Fieldsien 2014). Given such an immense capacity of the subconsciousness, tactful communicators such as advertisers, filmmakers, propagandists, craftily use subliminal messaging to deliver specific messages and control the mind of their audiences. Such communicators inextricably exploit the subconscious of their audience, and “therefore violate their duty to them. This type of influence seeks to bring opinion to some of the baser parts of the human psyche, playing off of the instincts beneath the surface of thought” (Fieldsien, 2014).



Image 1 : Subliminal Manipulation of the Word “Sex”



Image 2: Smoke forming the word “SEX”



Image 3: Celebrity with “SEX” in the hair



Image 4 : Profile View of an Iceberg

Subliminal communication is, in many respects, considered a non-verbal form of communication or a non-verbal messaging system. Such a position is justified by the fact that subliminal communication inextricably involves a lot of unspoken realities. It involves the use of visual or oral artifacts which speak volumes, far more than the written or spoken words that could have been used to convey the intended message under normal circumstances. Corroborating this view, Driver (2014) notes that, in a context of subliminal messaging, there is a huge probability that we communicate “much more without saying a word than we think. Much, much more. See, on a subliminal level, we convey who we are without even knowing it. For some people (and you know who you are), this is a problem because whether you want to or not, you are constantly saying something without your lips even moving” (p.18).

Semiotics as a Method and a Non-Verbal Form of Communication

Semiotics otherwise called semiology or style-content (Watson, 2003) can be defined as the scientific study of signs and sign systems; or the social production of meaning by sign systems. Semioticians identify verbal language as just one of the multiple systems of meanings. They argue that gesture, clothing, architecture, colours and the like constitute other systems of meaning worthy to be studied, the same as verbal language. As an approach to the study of meaning production (and a general theory of sign), semiotics has been applied not only to linguistic, but equally to graphic, visual, cinematic, cultural and culinary systems.

Semiotics uses the term “sign” to make reference to the ways that meanings are socially produced. Quoting De Saussure, Watson (2003) further explains the link between the term “sign” in and the phenomenon of the social production of meaning.

De Saussure spoke of language as a ‘profusion of sign’. This was not just a picturesque way of describing things. It proposed that we see the whole of communication and behavior as assemblies of signs, governed by codes, or sets of rules, which by careful observation and analysis furnish clues to the decipherment of meaning. The relationship of signs,

the interaction between them is called by De Saussure, *valeur*, was the determinant of meaning. (p.39)

This clearly indicates the existence of a link between semiotics and communication in general and non-verbal communication in particular. In fact, a perspective drawn from communication studies, views communication as a manifestation of a semiotic system. Semiotics is, in this wise, conceived as constituting a descriptive tool in communication study (Soukup, 2012). Communication is facilitated and rendered effective by the use of signs when these signs are used according to codes (guidelines, rules). The codes may be arbitrary, fixed or flexible. Transmission is meaningless in case of “violation” of these codes. Watson observes that a sign is always considered a member of a set of contrasting signs which function within a specific cultural context. He argues that “we may feel inclined to mix, for example letters, numbers and musical notes in random order. The signs are all genuine but in combination; they are meaningless (unless, of course, they are assembled according to a secret code)” (Soukup, 2012, p.41).

Semiotics has explored visual and (non -) verbal representations of information and has come up with three principal types of signs namely iconic, indexical and symbolic signs. To this three, a fourth category is often added, namely arbitrary signs. The iconic sign (for instance photographs or map) resembles that which it describes. There is a physical similarity between an iconic sign and the thing it stands for. A good drawing or picture of a cat – for instance – is very much physically similar to most people’s sight of the animal (the cat). An indexical sign acts as a kind of evidence of something; that is it, works by association with something connected to it for example sweat is an index for effort, smoke is an index for fire, crown an index for kingship and the like. Symbolic signs on the other hand are visual signs (typically arbitrary in nature) which are linked to referents. In tandem with this, Watson counts letters of the alphabet among examples of this category of signs. He Concedes that “the symbol [symbolic sign] may have no resemblance to what it purports to signify. The letters of the alphabet are symbols. Their meaningfulness as signs exists through common consent and their use is governed by code such as grammatical rules” (Watson, 2003). Other example of symbolic signs may include flags (symbolizing a country) or the cross (symbolizing Christianity) and the half moon (symbolizing Islamism).

The value of signs can change over time. This indicates the arbitrariness existing in the relationship between the signifier and the signified. Most change in values have often been from symbolic (less familiar nature or highly arbitrary) to indexical. Branston and Roy (2006) make allusion to this trend when they note that “thirty years ago, the road sign used to warn drivers to take care near a school was the image of the ‘torch f learning’: it was meant to stand as symbol of the place where that learning happened. But this conventional symbolic meaning became unfamiliar, and the sign was changed to the ‘two children crossing’ sign, to a more iconic sign” (Brandston and Roy, 2006, p.21). This may suggest that, because they are more arbitrary, symbolic signs are generally more difficult to decode than iconic and indexical visual signs. Brandston and Stafford’s observation may equally mean that signification of sign is never secured or fixed and that there is possibility that there be struggles over how a sign be ‘officially’ read. Brandston and Roy (2006) further give examples to illustrate this trend when they note that “the traffic sign for ‘caution, older people crossing the road” signified by stooped stereotypical figures of ‘old’ has been objected to (a ‘struggle over the sign’ began) by some groups of older people” (p.24).

Jamie Uys’ *The God must be Crasy*: A Brief Presentation

Jamie Uys’ *The God Must Be Crazy* is a 1981 Hollywood movie mainly shot in Africa. It is a humorous film narrating what happens when people from an aboriginal or primitive background try to come to terms with symbols and idioms of (Western) civilization and modernism. The film is principally based on the story of an aboriginal tribe (the Bushmen of Southern Africa) who, through one of their sons, receives a Coca-Cola bottle thrown overboard by a White pilot who was flying across the Kalahari Desert of Botswana. From the onset, the tribal group defines the bottle as an awesome gift from the gods as the object turns out to have numerous virtues. The bottle is actually of great utility to most, if not all the primitive industries of the community. However, the tribal group soon discovers the destructive characters of the bottle and resolves to get their community rid of the bottle. It sends one of its members to toss the evil bottle over the edge of the earth, a distance estimated at twenty days-walk away from the village.

Uys’ movie is cited as an excellent example of branded entertainment. The film is considered by many critics as one of the most popular illustrations of cultural transfer through the instrumentality of the cinematic medium. As Gienow-Hecht (2002) insightfully concedes,

Uys's movie enjoyed such a spectacular popularity on the international market that its producers created a sequel. “*The Gods Must Be Crazy* offered a conspicuous sample of American consumer imperialism and its victimization of the Third World [...] The film struck a vital chord in the middle of what has come to be known as ‘The Grand Debate’: Have Americans become cultural imperialists? Do manufacturers, policymakers, and other interest groups attempt to conquer and corrupt the rest of the world by flooding it with consumer products made in the United States of America?” (Gienow-Hecht, 2002, p.23).

Non-Verbal Cues in Uys’ *The Gods Must be Crazy*

As earlier indicated, this study will explore incidences of non-verbal cues in the film under study, from a subliminal perception of the cinematic text and through the application of the structuralist and semiotic tools of analysis. Based on the above, this section will be organized in two principal sub-sections: (i) incidences of non-verbal communication through subliminal manipulation and (ii) non-verbal cues from the semiotic perspective.

Non-Verbal Cues Through Subliminal Manipulation

In his movie, Uys makes an extensive use of sexual subliminal messages in the various shots that constitute his production. In the context of the film, subliminal manipulation by Uys often consists of the rapid presentation of sexualized visual materials in a way as to be perceived exclusively by the unconscious mind of views. An example is given in the scene involving Image 5 below, in which Mr. Steyn and Miss Thompson repeatedly kiss each other. Images in this scene are rapidly presented and fine-tuned in a way as to “insinuate” that the act of kissing is unintended (accidental); that is it occurs as a result of the fact that the two characters’ natural attempt to beat the noise produced by the Land Rover through coming and talking nearer to one another. A similar subliminal manipulation occurs in the scene involving Image 6 below. In this scene, Mr. Steyn does a “copious” hand job on the Miss Thompson intimate organs (her genitals), while pretending to help her search her shoes supposedly found under the waters. The sex implicit images contained in this scene are equally presented so rapidly that the averagely conscious viewer will hardly perceive them with his senses. However, the sexual subliminal message remains clear, particularly to the unconscious mind of the viewer. While the dialogues between the two characters constitute the verbal elements in the above mentioned scenes, the sexual subliminal messages constitute the implicit or the non-verbal and indexical communication which of course contribute to the aesthetics of the film.



Image 5 : [38 :50] : The 'unintended Kiss' !



Image 6: [43:04]: A hand Job under the Waters

More egregious examples of sexual subliminal messages are given in the scene represented by Images 7 and 8. In the one represented by image 7, Mr. Steyn and Miss Thomson actually have sex, but the images are rapidly presented and made to be somehow obstructed by the bushes (see Image 7 below) and structured in a way as

to once more suggest that the act happens more by accident than by the design of the two characters. On surface, the scene is of course, somehow ambiguous but sex remains implied in it. Despite, this image manipulation, the unconscious mind is likely to gather the implicit sex material that forms the non-verbal part of the

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director's message. A similar scenario is presented in the scene represented by Image 8. In this scene, Mr. Steyne's

views Miss Thompson's nudity. But the whole event is once more presented as a mere accident.



Image 7: [44:15] : An obscured sex scene.

The various instances of subliminal manipulations are incidences of non-verbal communication in that, they facilitate the expression of a variety of unspoken realities.

In the context of the movie, sexual acts (or a series of innuendoes) are made to subtly spice up the plot.



Image 8 : [1:02:31] Mr. Steyn Viewing the Nudity of Miss Thomson "Accidentally".

Non-Verbal Cues from the Semiotic Perspective

Uys uses variety of signs, symbols and archetypes to facilitate indexical, iconic and symbolic communication in his movie. As a non verbal cue, semiotics is viewed in the movie in the director's use of sign communication in various instances. Sign communication is for instance viewed in some instances where Whites such as Mr. Steyn have to communicate with indigenous or aboriginal characters. In one of such instances, Mr. Steyn and Miss Thompson inquire from some indigenes (Touala people from Southern Africa) whether it is true that rhinos will always manifest hostility to fire by quenching any flame they see in the forest and these indigenes answer yes in

their dialect but by nodding negatively. Miss Thompson who does not understand their dialect misunderstands their answer as they seem to have said no by body language. In this same scene, semiotics is seen in the fact that the touala people clap their hands before greeting in their dialect. The clapping of hand is a non-verbal cue and a sign which is actually part of the greeting ritual. This particular non-verbal cues help the director give local color to his film. In various instances in the movie characters are made to use various signs and body language to guarantee mutual comprehension, particularly when dialogue involves interlocutors from different races or tribe. This particular fact is viewed in the scene containing Image 9 below.



Image 9: [1:38:43]: A multilingual communication complemented by hand signals

Uys also uses a number of archetypal sounds or images. For instance, in the scene containing Images 10 and 11 below, the director uses a mix of archetypal sounds

(both sex and pain cries) to subliminally suggest sex and non-subliminally depicted bodily pains.



Image 10: [52:19]: A Shot Accompanied with a Mix of Sex and Pain Cries.



Image 11: [52:24]: Shot Accompanied with a Mix of Sex and Pain Cries.

In this scene, while trying to dress up, Miss Thompson is trapped by a thorny plant. She begs Mr Steyn to come to her rescue and free her from the plant. While Mr. Steyn is removing the thorny stems of the plants from the skin/body of young woman in distress, the latter formulates both sex and pain cries. Archetypal sounds pertaining to sex are here used complementarily to imply that both Miss Thompson and Mr. Steyn derive some sexual pleasure as they try to get rid of the thorny plant.

Uys also uses a number of symbols. One example is the Coca-Cola bottle which symbolizes the Western culture which though attractive – as it has potential to facilitate human and economic development – is accompanied by a number of terrific consequences, one of which is a “brutal” disruption of the African traditional system. The Coca-Cola bottle –which the aboriginal group receives therefore stands for the (Western) exotic technology the White man has brought to primitive

Africa. Besides having some uses this technology has turned out to be a curse in disguise. No doubt, the aboriginal community promptly plans to get rid of it in order to save its traditional system and values. The unspoken message which may derive from this symbolism is that the western civilization and technology are certainly of great utility to the African aboriginal communities; but they (the civilisational and cultural imports) have serious side effects which, if not well controlled may lead to a chaotic situation in the aboriginal communities.



Image 12: Aborigines Looking at the Coca-Cola Bottle

Similarly, Sam Boga's rebellion and attempted coup against the President is symbolic of the Western contribution to the political destabilization of African countries. In the movie, Sam Boga is a White, who leads a number of Black rebels in a military derby against the President. His action is somehow symbolic of the support the West has often accorded insurgents and rebellions in Africa against governments.

III. CONCLUSION

As a highly constructed media text, the filmic narrative most often integrates a variety of non-verbal cues masterfully deployed by the film director to subtly convey controversial, delicate or highly sensitive messages. Two of such non-verbal cues are subliminal manipulation and semiotics. In this paper, attention has been given to the subtle ways in which Jamie Uys deploys these two forms of non-verbal cues (subliminal manipulation and semiotics) in his 1981 film titled "*The Gods must be Crazy*" to convey sex related messages and ultimately sexualize its filmic production. The paper has specifically answered three research questions: how are subliminal manipulation and semiotics forms of non-verbal cues?

How does Jamie Uys use these two instruments in his film to convey controversial messages and sexualize his production? How effective are they in conveying the specific sexual messages of the film director?

The paper argued that in his movie, Uys makes an extensive use of sexual subliminal messages in the various shots that constitute his production. In the context of the film, subliminal manipulation often consists of the rapid presentation of sexualized visual materials in a way as to be perceived exclusively by the unconscious mind of views. These instances of subliminal manipulations facilitate the expression of a variety of unspoken realities. In the context of the movie, sexual acts (or a series of innuendoes) are made to subtly spice up the plot and ultimately sexualize the whole film.

The paper also argued that the film director deploys archetypal sound pertaining to sex in view of subtly sexualizing his film. This is complemented by symbols, aimed at showing the introduction of western technologies and civilization in aboriginal African communities which is not without asphyxiating political and cultural effects. The film director tend to suggest by the use of western technology related symbols that the

introduction of western civilization in aboriginal Africa may turn out to be a source of chaos there.

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