

Millennium in a minute: celebrating our way of life

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The Millennium advertisement

In December, 1998, British Government's New Millennium Experience Company launched its advertisement aiming, according to the company's spokesperson, to 'get the people thinking about the millennium' (Gibson 1998). The minute-long advertisement, with the voice-over of the British actor Jeremy Irons, presents the millennium as one day and in such a way shows human achievements of the last 1000 years on a 24-hour time-line. The script (for the full text of the advertisement, see the Appendix) is set against the background of the sun rising and falling over the Easter Island and its famous stone figures.

My aim in this paper is two-fold. Firstly, I shall argue that the advertisement constructs the millennium as a predominantly British affair and it is predominantly the British perspective that is used in representing the events referred to. Moreover, I shall also argue that the Britishness of the construction of the millennium is conveying the 'British way of life'. Thus, while not 'flying the British flag' (Billig 1995) explicitly, the advertisement focuses on what it takes to be British in the everyday life.

Secondly, I shall also argue that there is a tension between the verbal and the visual modes of the text. While the verbal is geared towards imagining a community (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995), the visual is ambivalent between being concerned on the one hand with humankind in general, and, on the other, anchoring the British perspective. This tension arises from what I would see as a reversal of anchorage relationship between verbal and the visual discourses. I shall propose that in con-

trast to the commonplace assumption, visual discourse can also provide anchorage for the verbal one.

It is of course difficult to give a clear impression of the analysed text which is in fact a piece of filming, where the 'moving pictures' are at its core. The mode of a journal prevents me from showing one or two clips from the ad. Thus, a few more words about the visual aspect of the advertisement are necessary. As I said above, the scenery for the advertisement is the Easter Island and its megaliths. The visual narrative gives the impression of filming throughout one day, from sunrise till sunset. The filming, done with the ever-moving, very dynamic camera, appears to have been done on a sunny day, yet with some 'dramatic' clouds in the sky. The filming focuses upon the megaliths themselves, from a long, establishing shot, to the extreme close-ups upon the figures, showing them from a variety of viewpoints and angles.

Representation

The format of the advert – to squeeze in a thousand years into one-minute multimodal text presents the producers with an almost insurmountable task of what to include in the ad and how to present it. Indeed, the task of the selection process was also commented upon by the New Millennium's spokesperson, who claimed that the advertisement was partly designed to spark off a debate as to what exactly counts as a significant event of the last thousand years (Gibson 1988).

In this paper I am taking a social semiotic view of representation (see e.g. Hodge, Kress 1988; Kress 1989; Kress, van Leeuwen 1996; 2001). Representation, as Kress and van Leeuwen (1996: 6) put it, is

a process in which the makers of signs, whether child or adult, seek to make a representation of some object or entity, whether physical or semiotic, and in which their interest in the object, at the point of making the representation, is a complex one, arising out of the cultural, social and psychological history of the sign-maker, and focused by the specific context in which the sign is produced. Interest guides the selection of what is seen as the criterial aspect of the object, and this criterial aspect is then regarded as adequately or sufficiently representative of the object in a given context. In other words it is never the 'whole object' but only ever its criterial aspects which are represented.

It situates representation not only in constructionist but also, importantly, social terms. Discourse, whether verbal or visual, constructs the represented reality in a process subject to regimes of production and reception in which the sign-makers

are involved. The sign-makers' representational *interest* is subject to the social and discursive practices in which they partake. Furthermore, the representational *interest* is always part of a particular communicative situation (whether interpersonal or mediated), which is characterised by complex relationships between the communicators (whether individual or group) and, crucially, indicative of power relations between them.

Furthermore, signmakers' specific choices as to the actual design of the representation – whether verbal or visual – are indicative of the ideological choices they make. In other words, in the decisions as to which aspects of the represented reality to include in the message, discourse as a social practice reflects and reinforces the values and beliefs of the social groups which produce it. In this sense discourse is ideological, that is to say it (re-)constructs and reinforces the social (general and abstract) representations shared by members of a group and used by them to accomplish everyday social practices (van Dijk 1998; see also Billig et al. 1988; Fowler 1985). These representations are then organised into systems which are deployed by social classes and other social groups “in order to make sense of, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (Hall 1996: 26), and as such they are used to ‘iron out’ (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999) the contradictions, dilemmas and antagonisms of practices in ways which accord with the interests and projects of power and domination.

One British day – verbal discourse

As I said above, the format of the advertisement presents the millennium as one day. Despite its explicit location on the Easter Island, I would like to argue that it is not merely any day at any place. It is in fact, a day in Britain.

The advertisement divides the day into 5 elements – daybreak, breakfast, lunch, tea time, and the evening news, with ‘lunch’ and ‘tea time’ standing for eating occasions that cannot be easily translated into those for example in continental Europe. Tea time, of course, is just about one of the most British institutions, stereotypically associated with the traditional British, or perhaps even, English society. The potato and the sandwich are also referring to British eating habits, even though today it is chips that are perhaps eaten more often at dinner time, whereas sandwiches are lunch food. Parenthetically, Raleigh is said to have *brought back* the potato, with England being set as the orientation point, the home. The day ends with the evening news – a more or less set phase referring to main news bulletins between,

say, 9 and 11 p.m. (only the commercial Channel 4 carries its main news programme at 7 p.m.).

It is noteworthy that the Britishness of eating as represented in the advertisement has a clear class dimension. Tea at about 4-5 o'clock is now hardly ever taken, mainly because of predominant working practices, but, especially in some regions (such as Birmingham and the Black Country, to name one such mostly industrial region) working classes use the word *tea* to refer to their evening meal, rather than an afternoon snack. In the same way, *dinner* is used to refer to the early afternoon meal (the meal that middle classes will refer to as *lunch*), with the lunch supervisors in state schools being usually called *dinner ladies*.

In the same way, the clearly recognisable clearly recognisable voice of Jeremy Irons with a very 'posh' Received Pronunciation adds and reinforces the class aspect of the advertisement. This is the voice and language stereotypically associated with someone educated in a public (i.e. privately, rather than state-owned) school, someone who is very much *unlike* the most of us.

But the Britishness of the constructions is not merely constructed by the day schedule and the eating habits. The initial address to the audience *Imagine that the last one thousand years took place in just one day* – addresses the audience directly, the audience that must be assumed to be British. But the perspective of the audience is invoked twice again, and, interestingly, at the times the only two non-British characters are mentioned.

By late morning Michelangelo had shown us unimaginable beauty.

Florence Nightingale and, later, Mother Theresa showed us the power of compassion.

All the other characters are British (at least in today's perspective; of course it is impossible to classify Edward the Confessor as British, given that the concept was not yet due to be used for a few hundred years, see Davies 1999), and there is no need to include the national perspective in their cases. But both Michelangelo and Mother Theresa had to be made relevant in the context of the British audience.

Note also the way that the latter is introduced. She follows in the footsteps of another great Briton – Florence Nightingale, a precursor of modern nursing. The agency of the two non-British characters is therefore 'tamed' by the inclusion of the British perspective. They are not merely actors, their actorship is constructed as a relationship between them and us, the British audience. Showing, as an asymmetrical relationship, can presuppose the power of that who shows, as in the case of a teacher or parent showing something to a child. Here, however, it is not an act of te-

acherly demonstration, but, rather, it is a show of an 'actor' to a watching audience. And like in a theatre, the show is pointless if it does not have an audience.

Furthermore, the last three achievements of the millennium: landing of the moon, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the fall of apartheid are constructed through the mental process (Halliday 1994) ascribed to the audience. In other words, the sentence referring to these three events is not so much about what happened but, rather, about what we have seen happen, relegating the events to experiences of the British public.

Furthermore, the first noteworthy achievement of humanity is that of building a church. It is not only a Christian church, but it is also probably the most famous church in Britain and, finally, one in which most of English/British monarchs were crowned, including the present queen. Britain is imagined here in its 'traditional' make-up – as Christian monarchy, it is the 'true' Britons who are referred to here, rather than all those who came to the islands later. The 'we' in the direct address to the audience could now be seen as disambiguated – it is not the entire audience, it is the audience of the those who subscribe to the Britain of Christianity and monarchy.

Anchoring the verbal – the visual discourse

But the 'we' of the verbal discourse is never explicitly identified as the audience. And perhaps Jeremy Irons with his accent may well be talking to the likes of him. Perhaps the 'we' is exclusive (Mühlhäusler and Harré 1990), after all, and it does not embrace the average viewer. The conflation of the identity of addressee of the initial address and the group identified by 'we' is not explicitly marked in the text.

What I propose is that it is the visual discourse that provides the disambiguation of the ambivalence of 'we'. In other words, it anchors it and provides a clearer ideological platform from which to identify the referent of the first person plural used in the script.

Anchorage a term introduced by Barthes (1977; see also a recent account in Jaworski and Galasinski *in press*) refers to the use of written text to fix the relatively indeterminate and polysemous meaning of visual images. Language pins down the 'floating chain of signifieds' (p. 39) of visual images. Anchoring works in two different, but related ways: on the one hand, it has the power to identify what is in the visual message in order to help the viewer 'choose *the correct level of perception*' (Barthes 1977:39; emphasis in original); on the other hand, anchoring, compared by Barthes to a vice, prevents the viewer from arriving at multiple connota-

tive meanings. Barthes argues that the primary function of anchorage is ideological and states that

the text directs the reader through the signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others; by means of an often subtle dispatching, it remote-controls him towards a meaning chosen in advance. In all of these cases of anchorage, language clearly has a function of elucidation, but this elucidation is selective, a metalanguage applied not to the totality of iconic message but only to certain of its signs. The text is indeed the creator's (and hence society's) right of inspection over the image; anchorage is a control, bearing a responsibility – in the face of the projective power of pictures – for the use of the message. With respect to the liberty of the signifieds of the image, the text has thus a repressive value and we can see that it is at this level that the morality and ideology of a society are above all invested. (Barthes 1977: 40; emphasis in original)

Thus, while, after Barthes, it is normally assumed in the literature that an image is a set of floating signifieds anchored or disambiguated by verbal discourse, what I would like to suggest here is that in the Millennium ad, this relationship is reversed at the level of the ideological assumption of discourse. In such a way, the visual discourse can provide the verbal one with an 'ideological anchorage'. That is to say that the British perspective flagged up in the verbal discourse gets disambiguated and strengthened by the ideologies accomplished by the images. The ideological anchorage of the visuals is predominantly used to help the dominant British discourse to appropriate the non-British events and actors.

It must be noted, however, that this relationship is not carried through in the whole of the advertisement. I shall also argue that the visual discourse remains ideologically ambivalent with respect to the 'banal nationalism', the everyday habits of reproduction of the established nations (Billig 1995:6), of the advertisement. There is a hiatus between the visual and the verbal modes of representation. While the verbal is clearly set to imagine a community, the visual hovers between the achievements of humanity and those of Britain.

There are only three moments in the millennium advertisement where there is a clear relationship between the visual and the verbal. What is particularly interesting is that these three moments are those when the script refers to the events or actors that are not related to Britain: the appearance of the Easter Island megaliths, the masterpieces of Michelangelo and the work of Mother Theresa. What is also noteworthy is that it is in the latter two cases that the pronoun 'we' is used for the first two times (the third time is when it introduces the last three events by a mental process). In these cases, the visual discourse helps to reinforce the potentially am-

bivalent British perspective, and, more concretely, it identifies who is referred to with 'we'.

The first use of the pronoun comes with the reference to Michelangelo who is said to have shown *us* unimaginable beauty. The reference to the artist is accompanied by an extreme close-up shot of the face of one of the megaliths, and the camera rests on the figure's cheek and eye. In such a way the camera establishes a relationship of intimacy between the viewer and the object/participant (for a detailed discussion of the 'visual grammar', see Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). Moreover, the moving shadow on the cheek of the figure gives an impression of actually revealing the beauty shown by Michelangelo, of drawing up the stage curtain for the viewer, rather than of the abstract unknown 'we'. The verbally announced act of showing is disambiguated into the act of showing to us, the British audience who are watching.

The reference to showing of compassion by Mother Theresa (*Florence Nightingale and later Mother Theresa showed us the power of compassion*) is accompanied by a low angle shot (i.e. the position of the viewer is lower than that of the represented object) of the figure. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) propose that a low angle shot of the object/participant indicates her/his position of power over the viewer. It is a perspective of a child, someone praying, or admiring the figure – this, incidentally, is why Christian churches have figures or paintings of Christ or Virgin Mary positioned higher than the public. Such a position gives them the (spiritual) power over us who view them or pray to them.

Now, the reference to the demonstration of compassion is precisely one to the power of the spirit. The viewing audience is constructed in a relationship with the viewed object. The show of the **power** of compassion is, once again, the show for *us* the British viewing audience.

The two images position the viewed objects in a relationship with the audience and in such a way disambiguate the process of showing referred to in the spoken script. They disambiguate who it is that is being shown things. The images are used to appropriate the non-British into the realm of Britishness. The non-British events and actors are by visual means constructed as experiences of Britons, not unlike in the case of the script stating that *We have seen a man on the moon....*

But let us also take a look at the visual construction of the appearing of the megaliths. Their 'deus-ex-machina' appearance is constructed through the verb *appear*. This is the first event which is referred to in the ad and it is not, at least on the surface constructed as British. The very long shot in which the figures are shown underscored that there is no relationship between the viewing audience and the represen-

ted object, it is completely impersonal (Kress & van Leeuwen 1996). From the point of view of the British public, the figures on the Easter Island are at best one of the mysteries of civilisations and this particular relationship is reinforced and anchored by the long shot. Incidentally, the first glimpse of the figures the viewer gets is preceded by the sun breaking through the clouds with its visible rays touching the ground – a very powerful reference to Christian iconicity and the symbol of God equipped with solar rays. The reference to Christianity, incidentally, will be reinforced immediately after by the mention of the construction of the Westminster Abbey.

Millennium of British power

All the achievements referred to in the advertisement are in one way or another to do with the realm of culture/way of life. The advertisement refers to the spiritual aspects of humanity, through literature (with Shakespeare being probably the most stereotypically English writer), to daily patterns and eating practices. Most of the achievements referred to are those of individuals. Linguistically, all the individuals are constructed as agents – discourse participants who are endowed with the power of purposeful action, who make things happen according to their design or intent (Halliday 1994; Fowler 1991).

British characters:

- Edward the Confessor had built Westminster Abbey
- Sir Walter Raleigh brought back the potato
- Shakespeare wrote sonnets
- Earl of Sandwich invented the sandwich
- Logie Baird invented television
- Florence Nightingale (and later Mother Theresa) showed us the power of compassion

Non-British characters

- Michelangelo had shown us unimaginable beauty
- Mother Theresa showed us the power of compassion

There is a distinction between the British and the non-British actors. As I indicated above, the two non-British actors are constructed in a position that presupposes the power of the addressee of their actions: you cannot show things if no one is watching! Alternatively the British characters (with, incidentally, only one Scot – Logie Baird – and no Welsh or Irish people among them!) are those whose actions are unfettered by relationships – whether symmetrical or not. Bringing back things, inventing or even writing sonnets presupposes an addressee taking up his/her action which can stand in its own right. The only exception – and a weak one too – is Florence Nightingale who could still be constructed as nothing short of a role model for Mother Theresa.

The last three achievements of the passing millennium are constructed as events that have not been achieved by anyone in particular:

And in the few minutes before bedtime we've seen a man on the Moon, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid.

But, interestingly, the three events are not even rendered as actions, but as things, with all the action having been backgrounded (van Leeuwen 1996), in the extreme case by the phrase the man on the Moon. The two nominalisations, in turn fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid render the events static and reify them. All three renditions not only background any possible agency, but also, as I have remarked earlier, they construct the events as experiences of the British public. Moreover, the relationship with the British spectators is that between performers and spectators. In such a way even the three patently non-British events are actually appropriated and imagined within the ideology of the British (or perhaps English?) nation.

The millennium is constructed through the British and very powerful perspective appropriating the events occasioned by non-British agents. The British way of life that underpins the advertisement is shown not merely as something that is an option or a possibility among other ways, but as that which is in fact the one only feasible – this is where the power is.

The only event, as I have signalled before, that is not constructed through the British eyes is the first important event of the millennium – the appearance of the megaliths on the Easter Islands:

At daybreak these remarkable figures appeared on Easter Island.

But also here any agency has been deleted and actually precluded by the use of the verb appear. There is no external force in bringing the figures to existence, they

did it, so to say, on their own, appeared out of thin air. While it has not been done by English or British actors, it has not been done by anyone else. The power of Britain is not undermined by any other nationality.

In such a way, the only event that has not got any relationship with the imagining the British nation is the appearance of the mysterious megaliths. But then, the mysteriousness of the figures does not undermine the powerful British perspective underlying the verbal discourse of the ad. What it does, however, is provide a base for the rest of the visual side of the advertisement. This time it is a story of mankind, well, perhaps 'Europe-kind'.

Humanity of the visual

As I said above, only three moments of the millennium advertisement could be seen to have a direct relationship with what is being said in the advertisement. I would like to argue, however, that apart from the instances I have already discussed the visual mode of representation is in its remainder at odds with the verbal discourse and its main themes: culture and the civilisation – the way of life, seen through the British perspective.

I would like to argue that it is not so much the Easter Island and its figures that are at stake here. It is also about the centrality of human qualities of the megaliths. The constantly moving camera rejects the implication of a fixed, anchored point of view for the viewer. The only constant of the film are the figures themselves. By looking at them from all perspectives, the camera is celebrating the human being – 'individuals' devoid of any national or racial qualities. The Easter Island figures are the epitome of humanity. The centrality of the humanoid figures is achieved by their constancy with regard to the ever-changing environment: the fast moving sun, the quickly vanishing and reappearing shadows.

Note, that the filming itself is not stylised to be a documentary of any kind, the dynamism of the camera forever shifting perspective and viewpoint prevents any associations with, say, the BBC's natural history filming. This itself, suggests that, the visual aspect of the advertisement is not designed to show the audience what the Easter Island or its megaliths 'are like'. Rather, it might suggest a rather loose relationship to the location and the actual physical artefacts and their pretext-like character.

The celebration of humanity is also stressed in two particular moments: remarkably, once again at the time when it is the non-British actors are talked. In the first one, the moment of the reference to Michelangelo, the image is that of an extreme

close-up of the eye of the figure. The close-up with its connotation of personal distance and intimacy (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996) focuses on the part of the human face that 'deals' with beauty. Eyes are for looking at beauty in a highly personalised relationship. After the close-up the camera immediately shows the entire figure. The rapid switch in the shot is suggestive of the eye looking at the figure – the human being celebrating her/himself.

The other image is that related to the reference to Mother Theresa and her showing *us* of the power of compassion. Once again, the viewers see the extreme close-up, except this time upon the mouth of the figure. Compassion is made, again, a highly personalised act. Furthermore, the focus of the mouth suggests that an act of compassion can be an act of speech. The celebrated human being's language should be compassionate?

But then, it is precisely at these moments when, as I argued above, the visual is at its most clearest in supporting the Britishness of the millennium. It seems that the two non-British characters are at the very core of the ad. The advertisement firmly holds them outside the dichotomous world of Britishness vs. non-Britishness and forcing them out of this bi-polar world, the text gives them a special character (for a discussion of ambiguity and liminality, see e.g. Leach 1982), with the voice-over appropriating them for the British audience. Even though special, those escaping categorisations are in fact those performing for *us*, the national audience of the United Kingdom.

Conclusions

What is particularly interesting about the millennium advertisement is the textual importance of the construction of the non-British actors. It seems that the visual elements accompanying the reference to Michelangelo and Mother Theresa are of particular significance and, at the same time, torn by what Billig et al (1988) would call ideological dilemmas. For while appropriating the non-British into the realm of British, these are the moments which also are at the peak of celebrating humanity. The British perspective is lying right next to the universal.

Whatever the dilemma, however, the advertisement is an instance of perpetuating what Billig called 'banal nationalism' (Billig 1995:6). Britons, or more concretely and predominantly, the English, are not only those who achieved most in the last one thousand years, but, Britain is the viewing centre of the millennium. Britain is at the heart of the millennium.

But the millennium ad is not a way of celebrating the British way of life. It is a means of celebrating a British way of life, a very particular version of it. A version, in which, the most popular, according to the previous British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, British dish, the Indian chicken tikka-masala, does not fit.

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Appendix

The text of the millennium advertisement.

Imagine that the last one thousand years took place in just one day.
At daybreak these remarkable figures appeared on Easter Island.
Before breakfast Edward the Confessor had built Westminster Abbey.
By late morning Michelangelo had shown us unimaginable beauty.
Sir Walter Raleigh brought back the potato just in time for lunch.
Shakespeare wrote sonnets in the afternoon and Earl of Sandwich invented the sandwich round about tea time.
Florence Nightingale and later Mother Theresa showed us the power of compassion.
Logie Baird invented television in time for the evening news.
And in the few minutes before bedtime we've seen a man on the Moon, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of apartheid.
Imagine what we can do tomorrow.

Milenium w minutę. Celebrowanie brytyjskiego stylu życia

W grudniu 1998 roku rząd brytyjski rozpoczął kampanię reklamową, której celem było zwrócenie uwagi obywateli Wielkiej Brytanii na zbliżające się nowe tysiąclecie. W kampanii wykorzystano minutową reklamę, przedstawiającą mijające milenium jako jeden dzień. W przestrzeń czasową od świtu do zmierzchu wpisane zostały najważniejsze osiągnięcia ludzkości.

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki analiz tego filmu reklamowego. Autor zwraca uwagę na jego dwie podstawowe cechy. Po pierwsze wskazuje, że ukazane w filmie drugie tysiąclecie przedstawia przede wszystkim osiągnięcia brytyjskie, a sama reklama przez odwołanie do codziennych czynności osadzona jest mocno w 'brytyjskim stylu życia'. Po drugie, argumentuje, iż w filmie występuje silne napięcie pomiędzy jego warstwą werbalną i wizualną. O ile warstwa werbalna konstruuje społeczność narodową, o tyle warstwa wizualna operuje pomiędzy odnoszeniem się do ludzkości w ogóle a wspomaganiami warstwy werbalnej w konstruowaniu brytyjskości narzucanej perspektywy. Owo napięcie wynika z odwrócenia relacji „zakotwiczenia” (*anchorage*) dyskursu werbalnego w dyskursie wizualnym. W omawianym filmie to sfera wizualna zakotwicza werbalną.

Autor poddaje analizie także ramy ideologiczne dyskursu prezentowanego filmu. Dowodzi, iż perspektywa narzucana przez ten tekst jest tylko jedną z możliwych „brytyjskości”, w których omawiana reklama mogłaby zostać zanurzona.