

Zoi Tsiviltidou¹
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece

791.237.6(497.11);
791.221.4
ID BROJ: 202560780

THIS CITY IS MY HOME: MULTIMODAL STORYTELLING IN THE FILM HERE AND THERE

Abstract

*This article discusses the concepts of mobility and homeland in urban context as treated in the film *Here and There* (in Serbian *Tamo i Ovdje*) through multimodal storytelling. The protagonist experiences geographical and socio-cultural transitions which are analyzed in terms of semiotic modes of visual and textual media to understand how he (re)defines homeland and creates urban emotional topographies.*

Key words

mobility and homeland in cinema, urban emotional topographies, multimodal storytelling

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There are no strangers here. Only friends you haven't yet met.

William Butler Yeats²

Introduction

This article discusses mobility and homeland in urban context as addressed in the film *Here and There* through multimodal storytelling. The intention is to shed light upon the ways verbal and non-verbal resources in the narrative of the film such as language and body language become the fertile soil for urbanism to be impregnated with domestic qualities. The protagonist experiences geographical, socio-cultural and psychological transitions and creates emotional topographies which are part of his definition of homeland

1 tsivizoi@yahoo.com; ztsivilt@enl.auth.gr.

2 The quote appears at the link: <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/williambut383082.html>.

and analyzed in this article in terms of semiotic modes. 'Story exposition is shown rather than told; characters are revealed through behaviour, not dialogue' (Field 3). Dialogue and action will be examined to see how close Robert comes to the two cities he finds himself living in. As Kress and van Leeuwen claim about the interpretations of experience 'meanings belong to culture, rather than to specific semiotic modes' (Kress, Van Leeuwen 2006) thus dialogue and action will not be treated univocally³, but as part of the verbal and non-verbal resources of the narrative, as part of the culture each city offers to him and as part of the meaning-making processes that occur while he creates emotional bonds with the space.

According to Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, 'representation refers to the use of language and images to create meaning about the world around us, [...], [which may] not reflect an already existing reality' (Sturken, Cartwright 2001: 12-13). Language and imagery are systems of presenting a concept as well as of representing one. Because codes operate on an abstract level, the content of a narrative is essentially imagistic, a mental phenomenon relying on the people's imagination and perception. Stories are semiotic structures carrying autonomous signifying entities which communicate meaningful messages. 'A narrative is the semiotic representation of a series of events meaningfully connected in a temporal and causal way [...] through semiotic media: written or spoken language, visual images, gestures and acting, as well as a combination of these' (Onega, Landa 1996: 3). Stories become the powerboats that carry semantically and emotionally bound values and in the narrative of a film the instruments employed are the plot, the characters and the point of view with the embodiment of these elements to present flux densities and velocities.

For the author, storytelling signifies the conception and the delivery of a series of events put together in the set up/confrontation/resolution structure with a number of characters who present a dramatic need or/and an attitude therefore some action, narrated from a specific point of view and through semiotic media. Multimodal storytelling is defined as the integration of multiple semiotic resources in storytelling that of verbal or non-verbal nature such as language, imagery, sound, body language, gesture and positionality. As Ruth Page comments, 'multimodal theory distinguishes between context of situation (the localized situation in which words are uttered) and context

3 Thomas Schatz claims that 'iconography involves the process of *narrative and visual coding*' because 'the nature of filmic storytelling is to assign meaning to 'bare images' as the story develops' and 'extends to certain non-visual aspects' (Schatz, 1981, pp. 22, 24).

of culture; [...] [but] multimodal narrative analysis reminds us that such separation is illusory and that not only does all language operate within cultural systems, so narratives [...] are received in local contexts by actual audiences' (Page 2010: 5). In that context, the meaning of home is not to be found, but rather to be given to and to be imprinted on an urban environment by the processes of encoding and decoding implicit messages associated with socio-cultural and emotional situations.

In-Between Two Urban Environments

NYC is one of the two urban spaces in which the film unfolds its story. The other is Belgrade. Both cities engage in a reciprocal relationship of preserving spatial profiles, protecting insecurities and fears, and projecting fragmented and juxtaposed narratives. The urban localities become providing ground for our character to fence with the notions of journeying, displacement and homeland; notions which do not assemble a static profile of urbanism but rather a constantly transforming and evolving one. Robert is living in New York and then leaving for Belgrade. Mobility for Robert is not a delight. He has no one and nothing to keep him home. He embarks on a transatlantic journey not for pleasure, but for business in a nothing but an exciting mood. 'Travel is a rich source of information and altered perspectives, [...], suggest[ing] possibilities yet undreamed of, improvements previously unimagined' (Grayling 2002: 192). But Robert does not feel this way. He is challenged to redefine the concepts of homeland and belonging throughout the film. Transition sounds like a beguiling siren song to surrender rationality to spontaneity and to rescue his narrative of today from the waves of the past.

New York is the metropolis that undermines his mind of state and well-being as he leads a life of no passion, any public or personal engagement, of surrender and detachment which add to his unstable feelings of belonging. For instance, in the first couple of scenes, Robert bumps into George, an old friend and former colleague, and his response to the warmly attitude of George is 'I am alive I guess.' This statement speaks volumes about his life and questions the relationship he has established with the city. Robert experiences socio-cultural citizenship from a distance. He used to be a saxophone musician socially engaged and creatively inspired. Now he feels indifferent and detached from a life that no longer belongs to him living in a place that his heart no longer belongs to. Thus, when the opportunity appears, although being slightly reluctant he decides to move to Belgrade.

Nomadism [...] implies a set of attitudes about place and dwelling; and it is used to refer to 'civil countries' and not only exotic lands distant in time, space, or culture [...] and it denies the dream of a homeland, with the result that home, being portable, is available everywhere; [...] [whereas] exile locates the home in a homeland that is distant and for the time being unapproachable. (Peters 1999: 31)

There is a counterbalance between the concepts of nomadism and exile. None is experienced solely and fundamentally exclusively by Robert. Yet both axes shape his physical and psychological states. Neither exiled from New York but feeling disheartened, nor consciously a nomad but voluntarily a seeker of freedom and wonder, he sets for Belgrade.

His journey hosts his explorations as he navigates a life attempting to redefine, revisit and perhaps revive the concept of homeland in a shadowing remembrance of shaken identities. Nostalgic longing and belonging are not the usual melodramatic elements which suffocate the narrative; they encompass a template of subtle emotional struggle on which the protagonist learns about himself by viewing afresh the idea of feeling at home in a new city. Leaving his city and moving to a new, different and unexplored city empowers him to rediscover values and principles that he had forgotten about. Wandering in ambivalent moods and intersecting routes with his roots, he is challenged to define anew what the idea of home is. Territoriality is throughout and thoroughly underpinned and what is questioned in the film is the statement: 'it is possible to be able to return and choose not to do so, [...] [and] instead continue to dream of and imagine a glorious return' (Naficy 1999: 3). The encounter with Belgrade becomes an interplay between suspense and surprise, between soothing comfort and uneasy realizations, between carefree explorations and the hardships of coping with reality, responsibilities and truly heartfelt feelings. 'There is a trend which gradually emerges, [...] the growing interest in far-away places, in interacting with barely known peoples and, in general, in making new localities imaginable' (Iordanova 2001: 261). *Here and There* does not relate superficially with this concept but rather it pushes Robert to experience the 'far-away' space, to mingle with the ordinary people, to sense in its totality the life style and to see the same things such as the substance and value of the human contact with fresh eyes.

New meanings are the aftermath of his mobility, new bonds with a new urban space which grant him the opportunity to find truth in human communication, affection and love. These newly perceived notions drove him to rediscov-

er his purpose in life and start playing saxophone again which instrumented the resolution of his ambivalence, lack of belonging, depression, angst and loneliness. Although 'the 'stay or leave' dilemma is equally pressing for those trapped in Belgrade' (Iordanova 2001: 266), the wealth of the experiences he had living in this city is valued beyond temporal dimensions. In the end, he may leave Belgrade but his heart is aware of what this city means to him and of what homeland includes because he established meaningful bonds with the space and the people and emotional topographies have mapped out for him the breadth and depth of homeland.

'Migrations triggered by the break-up of Yugoslavia, [were] often conceptualized along the traditional lines of painful and undesirable experiences or from the nostalgic viewpoint of displacement and irretrievably lost homelands' (Iordanova 2001: 265). Nonetheless, the film's atmosphere does not exhale such negativity. On the contrary, the idea of leaving gives birth to the idea of re-living and leading a new life. The Balkan metropolis becomes physically, mentally and emotionally a place for rebirth. Rebirth is triggered by the new experiences and the new images. 'It is the cinema, of course, which more than any other art reveals the power of the image to express temporal, narrative, and discursive orders' (Mitchell 1974: 5). Robert meets Olga and accepts her hospitality. Cross-stitched over the powerful game of expectations and realizations, meeting the Balkan city space charged with expectations, he reaches a state of a deeper realization. Stereotypes may be socially and culturally specific, but their creation is attributed not only to the complex wheels of socialization but to each person's realization of their power to generate images. Propagating is one side of the coin where the other one lies in the personal sphere of action and reaction. Social behaviour is a product of multiple and interdependent issues circled around the individual with the realm of reference subjected to the battle between subjective and objective views. Deeply connected to ideology, our ideas about the normalcy and the accepted mannerisms are empowered by the ways we articulate what we see and experience. A. H. Maslow wrote in *A Theory of Human Motivation* 'first, comes the desire to know and then, the desire to understand' (Maslow 1943).

The creators of *Here and There* made a supreme effort to cope with the issue subtly challenging the notion of Orientalism insofar as the content would permit. The myth: 'Belgrade as a 'state of mind' translates into images that speak of a tragic and destabilizing loss of substance, a loss enhanced by the rejection of emigration' (Iordanova 2001: 269) is insightfully revisited. One can argue that stereotypes describe the preconditioned mental images that

interfere with our perception of reality simplifying, generalizing or even distorting the subject matter. Stereotypical notions help us collect and select pictorial information about the subject matter but the filters are often constructed in order to guide, control and shape our way of seeing, judging and thinking. 'How you view the city varies according to who you are, where you come from, your culture, your status, your life stage and your interests. Yet some experiences of the city are the same for everyone. The city announces itself a long way off through the senses; sight, sound and smell' (Landry 2006: 27). Robert explores Belgrade with all his senses.

Edward Soja (1996) elaborated on Lefebvre's ideas on spatiality and stated that space, and in our case urban space, is a combination of materially built space (the perceived), of imagined, calculated or abstract space, the space of images (the conceived) and of social space in which people experience things (the lived). *Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City* concentrates on how the concept of intimacy can be applied for urban sites. 'Intimate is a term used in conjunction with objects or ideas that are held close –ones that are worn next to the skin, or that lie within the recesses of the mind or heart; but it also implies an unveiling of the self, a sharing of hopes and fears' (Di Palma, Periton, Lathouri 2009). Dr Nevena Daković in *Cityscape and Cinema* draws upon the relationship between Serbian cinematography and the urban narratives in contemporary Belgrade film productions. Cinematography depicts the city's narratives and 'describes the story going on in the urban setting [...] charting the city topography' in 'coherent urban discourse about popular culture, ideology, life-style, events, morals, identity and representations of sense and sensibility'. In the film, Robert invests emotionally in the encounters with the space and the people. His wandering around Belgrade lacks the opportunistic flair of a tourist. He connects with the city in the way Tony Hiss describes perceptibly as 'our sense of ourselves now has more to do with noticing how we are connected to the people and things around us –as part of a family, a crowd, a community' (Hiss 1990: 21-22).

Feeling at Home

To secure a life of love, care, recognition and belonging, a life at home, individuals build for themselves a shared life either punctuated by spatial borders or deliberately transcending any territorial notion. A birthplace, a family house or even an office can be the places where people feel safe, comfortable and intimate. When it comes to a city, the atmosphere created out of certain

situations cannot become an adequate marker of bonding between the space and the inhabitants. There are, however, some patterns of intimacy and settlement that can be identified as vectors of the appreciation of domesticity in an urban context. For instance, there is this scene where Robert and his new male friend in Belgrade, Tosha, wish to walk a little bit in the neighbourhood of Dorcol, drink and chat. Tosha introduces Robert to this lady that keeps a shop at the street with ice-cream. Robert thinks that his friend will get him some free ice-cream and he gets confused and positively surprised when the man takes out of the basket some beer ‘for special occasions only’ as he comments. The two men sit somewhere outside drink and chat. This scene depicts how Robert grasps in an evening’s drink the atmosphere, the temper and the lifestyle of the new city. He is a homing pigeon which wanders around the urban landscape and excavates intimate moments from shaken psychics.

Paddling along empirical psychology means to move through the emotional waters of experience to try to understand how personal stories are interpreted by both mind and soul. Paul Ekman studied the nature of emotions and argued that emotions are responses to stimuli energizing appraisal mechanisms which operate almost automatically in order to respond to events. Despite the unique physiological patterns of each emotion, emotions have basic common principles and they create identifiable informative signals. Emotional experiences were analyzed in terms of actions, bodily reactions, facial expressions and appraisal mechanisms. Bower and Gilligan (1984) researched cognition and emotions and stated the following:

- Emotions are units or nodes in a semantic network, with numerous connections to related ideas, to physiological systems, to events, and to muscular and expressive patterns.
- Emotional material is stored in the semantic network in the form of propositions or assertions.
- Thought occurs via the activation of nodes within the semantic network.
- Nodes can be activated by external or by internal stimuli.
- Activation from an activated node spreads to related nodes. This assumption is crucial—it means that activation of an emotion node (e.g., sadness) leads to activation of emotion-related nodes or concepts (e.g., loss; despair) in the semantic network. (Bower, Gilligan 1984, 10-11).

Naturalist theorists believe in a biologically grounded existence of emotions (Hogan, 2003) whereas constructionists argue that emotions appear to be culturally specific (Stearns, 1995). Emotions operate in interrelation with behaviour and several cognitive states as they are responses to stimuli. Schachter and Singer proposed in 1962 the cognition-arousal theory of emotion which deals with emotion generation. 'According to Schachter, an emotional state is the result of the interaction between two components: physiological arousal and cognition about the arousing situation' (Reisenzein 1983: 240). Criticism posits that 'an emotion is actually a result of arousal and *two* cognitions: one that characterizes the situation in an emotional way, and a second that connects the emotional cognition with the arousal' (Reisenzein 1983: 240).

First, we usually have a conscious awareness of our emotions: when we are happy, we know it. Second, emotions typically affect our physical state: we show how we feel on our faces, in our voices, even in our posture; given the role emotions play in social networks, these physical manifestations are especially important. Third, emotions are associated with specific neuro-physiological activity. (Christakis, Fowler 2010: 35)

Empirical psychology deals with our senses and experiences. Wilhelm Wundt's theories systematized physiological psychology. Explicitly, he argued that 'the only certain reality is immediate experience' (Blumenthal 1975: 1081). Tony Hiss wrote about the experience of place that 'sights, sounds, smells, and sensations of touch and balance, as well as thoughts and feelings' work in interplay stimulating our 'simultaneous perception [which] helps us experience our surroundings and our reactions to them, and not just our own thoughts and desires' (Hiss 1990: 3-4). 'Through one system of perception we see ourselves as observers of an environment composed of separated objects, but at the same time, through another system of perception, equally active, we look for ways in which we are connected to or are part of our surroundings' (Hiss 1990: 22). Yi-Fu Tuan concentrated on the cultural philosophies of place and argued that 'the place incarnated the experience' (Baldwin et al, 2004: 141) and the other way around, the experience defined the place. Cultural geographies or topographies deal with how we conceptualize place, space and cultural meanings, how people understand and respond to the surrounding environment.

Robert creates emotional topographies as he meets both the place and the people. Every exploration leads to a new cultural encounter. Although a tourist, he is warmly welcomed to become part of the place. He is emotionally

challenged to engage, share and contribute to the meaning-making process of homeland. Feeling the city as your home means feeling every part of it, knowing and accepting every aspect of it. Situated cognition theories affirm that knowing is doing because of socio-cultural and physical parameters which tie empirical psychology to situativity. From this perspective, hands-on experience is irreplaceable and inseparable from meaning conception and creation. Perception is bound by experience and physical encounters *in situ* are inseparable from context. Therefore, giving meaning to a place and shaping a consciousness about it requires experiencing and learning it physically and mentally more or less like Robert does.

Multimodal storytelling

Language teams with stories in embryo form. It serves as the motorboat for the telltale signs to travel inside the neurons and create vivid images and sensations. 'Just like emotions, language is key to the acquisition and manipulation of social information' (Christakis, Fowler 2010: 249). 'Levi-Strauss said that individuals have an innate biological capacity, what he called a 'bio-grammar,' which they use to 'decode' or interpret codes of cultural information' (Baldwin et al, 2004: 33). This 'bio-grammar' describes linguistic processes and mental interpretations based on physiological and cognitive procedures. The connoted, denoted or symbolic messages appear in interplay in storytelling and posit that language is much more than a means to an end. Sociolinguists believe that language is 'culturally specific [...] grounded in social and cultural experience' and that it represents 'the significant features of social and cultural experience that are regularly and routinely communicated' (Baldwin et al, 2004: 49). 'Semiologists have argued that all cultural products should be seen as texts, [...], consisted of signs whether visual, aural or even tactile which can be 'read' or interpreted' (Baldwin et al, 2004: 32). This leads us to the fundamental principle of multimodal storytelling, representation; language presenting and representing events, characters and behaviours. 'Meanings are produced in the interactions between text and audience' (Fiske 1990: 164). Language and images have a never-ending fling where brain chemistry complicates things from day to dawn.

By the 'language of images,' then, we mean three sorts of things: 1, language about images, the words we use to talk about pictures, [...] 2, images regarded as a language, the semantic, syntactic, communicative power of images to encode messages, tell stories, express ideas and emotions, raise

questions, and 'speak' to us, 3, verbal language as a system informed by images, literally in the graphic character of writing systems or 'visible language,' figuratively in the penetration of verbal languages and meta-languages by concerns for patterning, presentation, and representation. (Mitchell 1974)

Language is not only an instrument of expression but also an instrument of action. Words have meanings that people attempt to simplify, decode and respond to but they are meaningful actions themselves since they are said to compliment an activity or a feeling that portrays an activity.

Additionally, non-verbal communication is carried on through presentational codes such as gestures, eye movements, or qualities of voice. 'Argyle (1972) listed ten presentational codes: bodily contact, proximity, orientation, appearance, head nods, facial expression, gestures, posture, eye movement and eye contact, and non-verbal aspects of speech' (Fiske 1990: 68-69). In multimodal storytelling, all the above codes appear in action. The non-verbal language with the facial expressions and the body postures sketches out the emotional and psychological profile of the characters engaged. As Allan Pease states about body language that 'every gesture is like a special word and a word on its own can have many different meanings; only when you put it in a sentence with other words you can fully comprehend its meaning'⁴. Expressions, gestures, looks and pauses communicate what words fail. Rudolf Arnheim claims that 'certain facial expressions become understandable only because they are part of a situation, because the dialogue and the other conventions reveal what the human being is feeling'⁵. This is evident in the film more than once. Nonetheless, 'Kress and van Leeuwen (2006: 66) argue that although semiotic modes are grounded in physiological experience, they are not naturalistically equated to sensory modes' (Page 2010: 7); which make us question the link between language and emotions, between experience and articulation in the narrative of the film.

Dialogue is one of the mainstream conventions elaborated to express ideas, thoughts and feelings of the characters. Dialogue can reveal more about the psyche of a character than descriptive narrative in terms of the rhythm and

4 «Κάθε χειρονομία είναι σαν μια ξεχωριστή λέξη και μια λέξη μπορεί από μόνη της να έχει πολλές διαφορετικές σημασίες; μόνο όταν την βάλεις μέσα σε μια πρόταση μαζί με άλλες λέξεις μπορείς να καταλάβεις πλήρως το νόημά της» (Allan Pease 19).

5 «Αρκετές από τις εκφράσεις του προσώπου είναι καταληπτές μόνο επειδή αποτελούν μέρος μιας κατάστασης, επειδή ο διάλογος και οι άλλες συμβάσεις αποκαλύπτουν τι αισθάνεται ο άνθρωπος» (Rudolf Arnheim 147).

the flow of energy that is generated. Dialogue is the instrument that equips the characters with the power to share with one another what they think and feel, to communicate messages, to agree or disagree and even to mislead concealing their real feelings and intentions. Therefore, verbal expression is highly important in the interpretation of a character's mindset. The words, which are put into the mouth of a character by the scriptwriter, apart from mirroring a truthful state, can cough up implied truths as well. These messages are encoded in images that language shapes and triggers in the minds of the spectators. In order to decode them, it is of great importance to consider 'the ways imagery interprets us, in the sense that our attempts to understand the world and our own creations are organized by tacit images, subliminal structures by which we represent to ourselves the orders of time, space, and language' (Mitchell 1974: 2-3). As Sturken and Cartwright argue:

This process of interpretation is derived from semiotics. Every time we interpret an image around us (to understand what it signifies) whether consciously or not, we are using the tools of semiotics to understand its signification, or meaning. (Sturken, Cartwright, 2001: 28)

However, what is highlighted is the synergy of visual stimuli and connotative meanings⁶ under stereotypical contexts and ideological constructions. Reading and decoding images is a process anything but mundane. There are specific ways that meanings are communicated to the receiver whether the means is a literary text or a visual text.

The linguistic imagery featured in the film is not of grammatical or syntactical value but of pictorial quality. The simplicity of the vernacular prevails projecting the negation of over-sentimentalism. For instance, in the scene where Robert tries to explain to Olga the real reason of his visiting Belgrade and to provide her with the justification why her son in New York is in jail, the language employed is not sophisticated; it does not have to be decorated at all. Language is simple because the messages are simple. The readings of the main characters' body language and silences wish to exemplify the mannerism of their urbanized settled or unsettled souls. For example, there are two scenes where this is eminent. First, where Robert first meets Olga and she wants to act polite to the man that she will offer her home's hospitality to. She

6 'Connotative meanings rely on the cultural and historical context of the image and its viewers' lived, felt knowledge of those circumstances. Connotation thus brings to an object or image the wider realm of ideology, cultural meaning, and value systems of a society' (Sturken and Cartwright 352).

acts, moves and speaks in a way that definitely landmarks her uncomfortable position of first acquaintance but he is less mobile, less talkative and very rigid which shows more than her mannerism; it shows discomfort, non-justifying distress and most importantly indifference to what is happening. And second, in the scene in the restaurant where Robert and Olga have dinner, their body language, eye contact and tone of voice depict and underscore the established intimacy, communication and romanticism. The bodies radiate the breaking of barriers and the dance becomes the horizontal manifestation of their vertical desire. There is this subtle tendency to let arbitrarily enough the urban environment to be endowed with meaning; a meaning that seeks to create a discreet clash between the cinematic world and the real world but mainly targeting the simple fact that the emotions created, deduct to a consciousness of belonging.

Epilogue

To put it all in a nutshell, *Here and There* is a wittily written and humorously directed film about mobility, homeland and intimacy in an urban environment. Since ‘the invented images [...] have powerful meanings and certainty’ (Fuery 2004: 85), it can be argued that their value cannot be elicited only from their form and content, that slightly differ when dealing with different types of texts, but from the impact on the emotional and mental state of the recipient as well. The film conveys to the audience not only visual stimuli but sensory as well and the instruments do not relate to the visibly comprehensive ones but also to the invisibly appreciable ones. The latter are the most valuable for they communicate poignant truths, important feelings and culturally and artistically treasuring readings of human behaviour, human contact and human position within urban space. How people come closer to one another and closer to the city they live in, and how that is portrayed in a piece of cinematic art, is an issue of great significance when conversing about societal relationships in a transitory urbanism.

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