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## Multimodal Constructions of Work: A Social Semiotic Analysis of the Communist Press Images

### Keywords

visual communication, semiotic resources, work

### Słowa kluczowe

komunikacja wizualna, środki semiotyczne, praca

### Introduction

When surveying the front pages of *Trybuna Ludu*, a Polish newspaper and the official voice of the communist authorities, from the period spanning the era of communism through the political transformation of 1989, it becomes evident that certain themes were particularly prevalent. Among these was the theme of work, which received extensive media coverage, with news items being often accompanied by visuals. Considering the prevailing ideology of the time, the widespread dissemination of news and images on this theme is unsurprising.<sup>1</sup> The study that follows does not aim to answer why such images were prevalent. Rather, it examines them in terms of their content, focusing on the semiotic resources employed and the resulting representations, which served clear politically motivated goals.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example McNair's point on the principles of Soviet journalism, specifically that of 'narodnost' or 'linkage to the masses' and how it showed in so called 'economic news' or 'production propaganda'. Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 24–25.

As for its theoretical grounding, the study subscribes to views of language that foreground its social aspect or nature – those which focus on the link between the text and the social. Of relevance are, for example, the works of Bakhtin and Volosinov for whom language had its origins in social struggle, which made it not a neutral but highly evaluative and ideological resource.<sup>2</sup> Sociolinguists Gumperz and Labov also held views on the social aspect of language,<sup>3</sup> suggesting a link between the linguistic behaviour and the social environment of the speakers. Halliday's notion of choice, which rests on his view of language as a social semiotic (referring to "(...) the total meaning potential we have as members of a society"<sup>4</sup>), is particularly significant. Halliday conceives of grammar as a resource for meaning that is organized as systems of choices. The speaker then actively selects from the range of available options to realize the meaning in an actual communicational situation. Language, according to Halliday, is made to serve three metafunctions, each of which encompasses options from which the speaker selects simultaneously. The Hallidayan notion of language as a social semiotic, a system of meaning-making resources, directly relates to the analytical tools used in the present study and will be discussed in the section that follows. Critique is yet another approach to the questions regarding the social nature of language. Kress<sup>5</sup> traces it back to theoretical stances such as Halliday's, whereby the speaker chooses from the range of available options, which are appropriate to the circumstances at a particular moment. Assuming this, as Kress claims, we could examine the texts and uncover the choices that have been made (at least in principle) and discuss the reasoning behind them. Structures chosen at the level of text could then be extrapolated to the environments in which the choice was made. Thus, the text could, potentially, aid our understanding of the social semiotic and its critique. Finally, the school of social semiotics, influenced by the 'social turn' in the social sciences and the 'language turn' in linguistics<sup>6</sup>, is a direct source of influence for the present study. Shaped by Halliday's *Language as social semiotic* (1978),<sup>7</sup> social semiotics is "(...) a theory of sign-making which sees all acts of communication as social. In this theory, the sign-maker always has a social interest, or motivation, to communicate. It may be driven by the need to represent something in the world, whether this be an event, a belief, or the sign-maker himself."<sup>8</sup> Thus, the view of meaning as necessarily

<sup>2</sup> Janet Maybin, "Language, Struggle and Voice: The Bakhtin/Volosinov Writings," in: *Discourse Theory and Practice. A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage/The Open University, 2001), 64–71.

<sup>3</sup> Gunther Kress, "From Saussure to Critical Sociolinguistics: The Turn Towards a Social View of Language," in: *Discourse Theory and Practice. A Reader*, eds. Margaret Wetherell, Stephanie Taylor, Simeon J. Yates (London: Sage/The Open University, 2001), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Eija Ventola, "Orientation to Social Semiotics in Foreign Language Teaching," *Applied Linguistics* 5 (1984), 3: 275.

<sup>5</sup> Kress, "From Saussure," 34–35.

<sup>6</sup> Maybin, "Language," 64.

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 219.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Burn, David Parker, *Analysing Media Texts* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 5.

enmeshed within the social is emphasized as something which is practiced and actively enacted in society, while a semiotician's work involves looking at semiotic resources and studying their semiotic potential. The present study focuses on those semiotic resources. Specifically, it considers the images under analysis as signs and explores their meaning potential to better understand their role in constructing a given ideology.

## Materials and methods

The following study examines a data set from one Polish newspaper, namely *Trybuna Ludu*, the official voice of the communist authorities, published from 1948 to 1990. The timeframe relevant to the study is that from 1944, marking the creation of the communist system in Poland, to 1989, which in turn marks the breakthrough period of the political transformation. Within the timeframe, five periods were selected, each representing a crucial moment in the Polish political history:<sup>9</sup> 1948–1955 (the building of the Stalinist model of socialism), 1956–1980, the 'Classical' period of the Polish People's Republic (PRL), 1980–1981 (period of 'diarchy' between the official authorities and Solidarity), 13 December 1981 – 21 July 1983 (Martial Law), and 1982–1989 (the erosion and final breakdown of the previous system). For each period, one representative year was chosen to exemplify it: 1950, 1960, 1980, 1982, and 1989. From each of these years, the first issue of each month was selected, yielding twelve issues per year. The resulting data set consisted of 60 issues, of which only the front pages were considered. These front pages were then scrutinized for images related to the theme of work, which in turn produced a data set of 34 images. The analysis and commentary that follow focus on the selected pictures, which exemplify certain trends identified during the study.

With respect to the analytical toolkit, the analysis is primarily based on Kress and van Leeuwen's<sup>10</sup> framework for visual meaning as discussed by Jewitt and Oyama<sup>11</sup> and supplemented with analytical categories drawn from the social semiotics of Roland Barthes<sup>12</sup> as well as those taken from van Leeuwen's<sup>13</sup> networks for analyzing social actors.

Kress and van Leeuwen's framework rests on the above mentioned Hallidayan notion of functions of language, which, as they demonstrate are also realized visually. The three

<sup>9</sup> The division into seven periods is based on Czubiński's historical analysis. See: Antoni Czubiński, *Historia Polski XX Wieku* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Gunther Kress, Theo Van Leeuwen, *Reading Images. The Grammar of Visual Design*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Carey Jewitt, Rumiko Oyama, "Visual Meaning: A Social Semiotic Approach," in: *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. Theo van Leeuwen, Carey Jewitt (London: Sage, 2001), 134–156.

<sup>12</sup> Theo Van Leeuwen, "Semiotics and Iconography," in: *Handbook of Visual Analysis*, eds. Theo Van Leeuwen, Carey Jewitt (London: Sage, 2001), 92–118.

<sup>13</sup> Theo Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice: New Tools for Critical Discourse Analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 136–148.

functions, or meanings, are ‘representational’, ‘interactive’, and ‘compositional’ meanings, each consisting of semiotic resources with a certain meaning potential.

Representational meaning concerns the ‘syntax’<sup>14</sup> of images, that is, the way the elements in the space are positioned and related to one another. The participants in an image can relate to each other either through ‘narrative’ or through ‘conceptual’ structures. The former express relationships of ‘doing’ or ‘happening’ and are characterized by the presence of a line or vector.<sup>15</sup> In the latter, the vector is absent; they represent the participants through more generalized qualities – “[t]hey do not represent them as doing something, but as being something, or meaning something, or belonging to some category, or having certain characteristics or components.”<sup>16</sup> Interactive meaning, in turn, concerns the relationship between the represented participants and the viewer. It is realized by three factors: ‘distance’, ‘contact’ and ‘point of view’.<sup>17</sup> ‘Distance’ refers to how much of the represented the viewer can see, or the ‘size of frame’. The main distinction is between a ‘close-up’, a ‘medium shot’, and a ‘long shot’, suggesting an intimate, social, and impersonal type of relationship respectively. As for ‘contact’, images can symbolically ‘demand’ or ask something of the viewer, or they can ‘offer’ information, whereby the viewer observes the represented disinterestedly. ‘Point of view’, on the other hand, concerns the use of ‘vertical’ and ‘horizontal’ angles. The former can either suggest a relationship of symbolic power over the viewer (‘low angle’), that of equality (‘eye-level’), or the power of the viewer (‘high angle’). The latter affords two effects, namely either engagement (‘frontality’) or detachment (‘profile’). ‘Modality’, another aspect of interactive meaning, concerns the reality value of the represented. The closer the image is to what one can see in reality, the higher its ‘naturalistic’ modality; the more it focuses on “how things are in general, or regularly, or according to some deeper, ‘hidden’ truth”, the higher its ‘scientific’ modality is.<sup>18</sup> Finally, compositional meaning involves three signifying systems.<sup>19</sup> ‘Information value’ results from the positioning of elements on the page, endowing them with different value, such as ‘Given/New’ (familiar, known, agreed on/not yet known, problematic, contestable), ‘Ideal/Real’ (idealized or generalized information/practical, specific, down to earth) or ‘Centre/Margin’ (central/marginal information). ‘Salience’ concerns the degree of importance assigned to the elements by means of colour, contrast, or size, for example. ‘Framing’ is the last signifying system which concerns the degree of (dis)connection between elements. The analysis, however, does not focus on this last aspect of compositional meaning.

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<sup>14</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 141.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>17</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 145–147.

<sup>18</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 151.

<sup>19</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 147–151.

When deemed appropriate, the analysis also points to some of the Barthesian terms as well as to concepts from van Leeuwen's networks for analysing social actors. For reasons of space, they cannot, however, be discussed here in detail and will be explained in the course of analysis. As indicated earlier, the images were initially surveyed for their specific contents and analysed according to various semiotic resources. Their meaning and the resulting representations were then interpreted against the relevant political background.

## Results and discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss the visuals on the theme of work as found on the selected newspaper front pages. The analysis involved examining the images in relation to the specific semiotic resources presented above, as well as commenting on other meaning-making aspects. The resulting representations of work were then contextualized within specific political circumstances. The discussion is organized around the selected periods to show if and how the representations of work changed.

In **1950** (the period of building of the Stalinist model of socialism), images present individuals;<sup>20</sup> even if other people appear working in the background they are often out of focus and difficult to identify. Their individuality is further emphasized by the fact that a name and a surname are mentioned in caption. Thus, when we look at Figure 1 below, we know specifically that it is Aleksandra Młodanowska, who operates a precision machine. In such images, a particular person is presented in the form of an 'offer', whereby the person shown is an actor (her eyeline creates a 'transactive reaction'), and the object of their gaze is usually the machine they are operating (or any other object they are working on). It may be argued that, in images of this kind, the eyeline creates an almost intimate relationship between the person and the object of their work. As for the way we, the viewers, are positioned in relation to the person inside the image, although there is no direct 'contact', the 'medium shot' suggests a social kind of relationship between us and the person presented. Figure 1 is also an example of the way in which state institutions or companies are perceived when it comes to a particular individual.

Figure 2 is in turn an example of a group representation.<sup>21</sup> The salient headline above the image says: 'We are fighting with pneumonia among children in the countryside'. Similar in its interactive ('medium' distance, 'offer' – type of 'contact') and representational ('narrative') dimensions, the image does not identify the working doctors by name but instead refers to them collectively as a 'team from the Health Centre in Mińsk Mazowiecki' who are vaccinating 'children in the village of Dobre'. With respect to 'point of view', both pictures (Figure 1 and 2) appear to establish a relationship of symbolic power on the part of

<sup>20</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 144.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.



Figure 1. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year III, no. 60 (432). Wednesday, 1 March 1950. Edition A. (“Women operate precision machinery”)

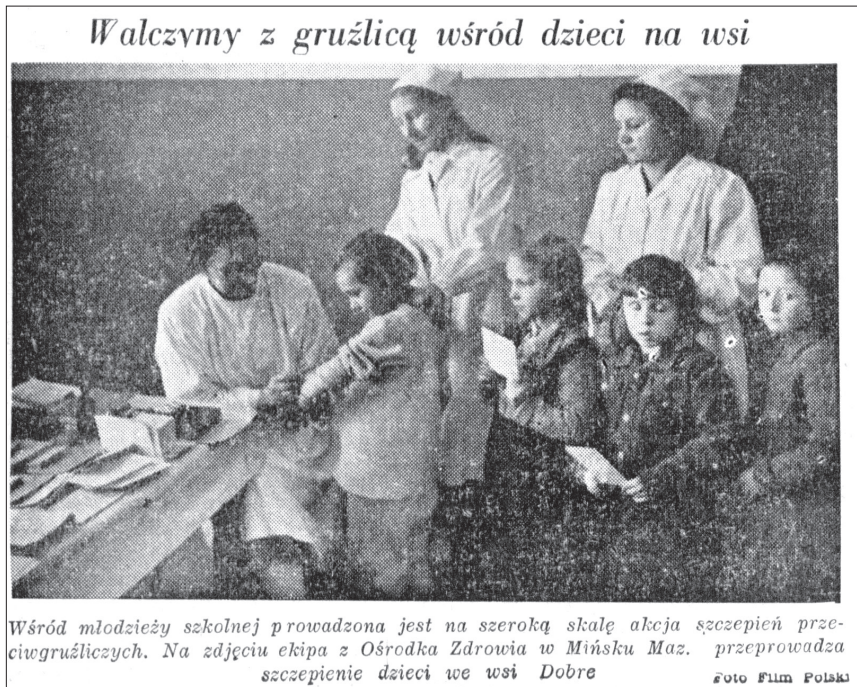


Figure 2. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year III, no. 32 (404). Wednesday, 1 February 1950. Edition A (“We are fighting with pneumonia among children in the countryside”)

the viewer, who is offered the represented participants for inspection, albeit in a detached ('profile') manner.

Figure 3 is also a group,<sup>22</sup> 'narrative' representation which differs, however, from the previous one as measured by distance. It is a 'long shot', distant depiction of farmers engaged in gathering the crop. The image is accompanied by a headline 'Harvest is coming to an end' and by a caption which, in contrast to the previous two images, keeps the farmers' identities anonymous by describing the scene in terms of the activity being performed rather than the specific individuals involved.



Figure 3. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year III, no. 209 (581). Tuesday, 1 August 1950. Edition F (“Harvest is coming to an end”)

Figure 4 is an even more 'depersonalized' depiction of work, suggesting that the presentation of inanimate objects or structures can signify certain values or more general, abstract ideas. One could refer here to Barthesian semiotics and Barthes' concept of the layering of meaning,<sup>23</sup> wherein the first layer is denotation (i.e. “«what, or who, is being depicted here?»”), and the second layer is connotation (i.e. “«what ideas and values are

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Paladin, 1973) cited in: van Leeuwen, “Semiotics,” 94.



*Dzięki współzawodnictwu pracy budowa osiedli mieszkaniowych w Warszawie szybko postępuje naprzód. Na fotografii fragment mokotowskiego osiedla WSM*

Figure 4. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year III, no. 91 (463). Saturday, 1 April 1950. Editions A–B (“New houses for Warsaw”)

expressed through what is represented, and through the way in which it is represented?»<sup>24</sup>). In Figure 4, the photograph presents a construction site (denotation). The linguistic message in the caption fulfils a dual function. First, it acts as what Barthes terms an ‘anchorage’,<sup>25</sup> answering the question of what the image represents at the level of the literal message. From the caption we learn that the image depicts a part of the ‘Mokotów’ residential estate and that, thanks to the effort and competition between the various work teams, the building of new housing estates in Warsaw is progressing fast. Second, the linguistic message also guides the reader towards the correct connotation. In this case, the image appears to signify the collective effort involved in building new housing estates in Warsaw.

While in 1950 images of individuals and groups focused on the object of their work, by 1960 (the Classical period of the Polish People’s Republic) this had given way to more distanced depictions of groups of workers. Figure 5 exemplifies this new form of representation.

<sup>24</sup> Van Leeuwen, “Semiotics,” 94.

<sup>25</sup> Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 39.

This example indicates a peculiar relationship between the people involved, and the object or thing they are working on. The relationship is not only about active agents, the work they perform, and its goal: individuals constitute an integral part of the object, or we could perceive them as parts ‘belonging’ to the object or the whole, making it an example of conceptual structure, specifically ‘analytical’<sup>26</sup> one. In this way, an inanimate object becomes the main focus of the photograph.

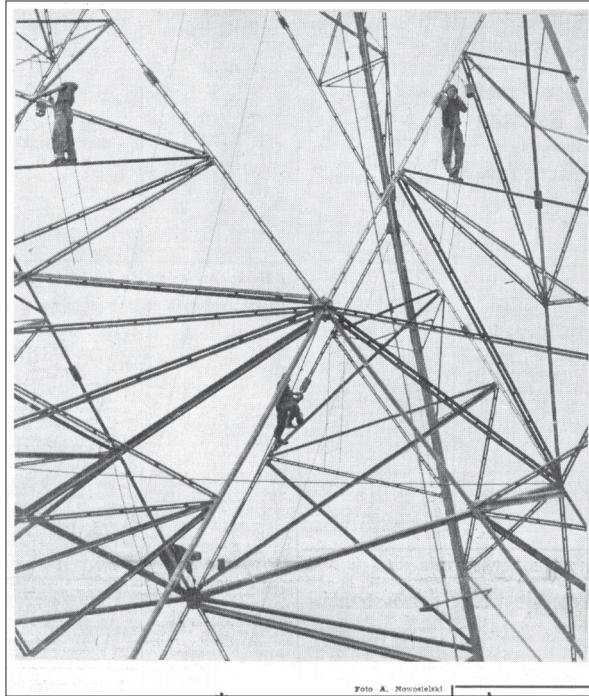


Figure 5. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XIII, no. 120 (4071). Sunday, 1 May 1960. Edition A

A photograph from 1 October (Figure 6) presents a group of smiling workers in a steel factory in Chungking, China. From the headline above, we know that the image refers to the eleventh anniversary of the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China. The individuals in the photo stand for a more general idea; in other words, it is these individuals who, in a sense, ‘stand for’ a broader concept. Regarding the image’s interactive meaning, the use of a ‘medium shot’, a vertical (‘eye-level’) angle, and a horizontal angle (mixture of ‘frontal’ and ‘profile’ depictions) suggests a relationship with the viewer characterized by equality, engagement, and social connection. In terms of the way these workers are depicted

<sup>26</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 144.

# XI rocznica proklamowania Chińskiej Republiki Ludowej



W stalowni w Czungking

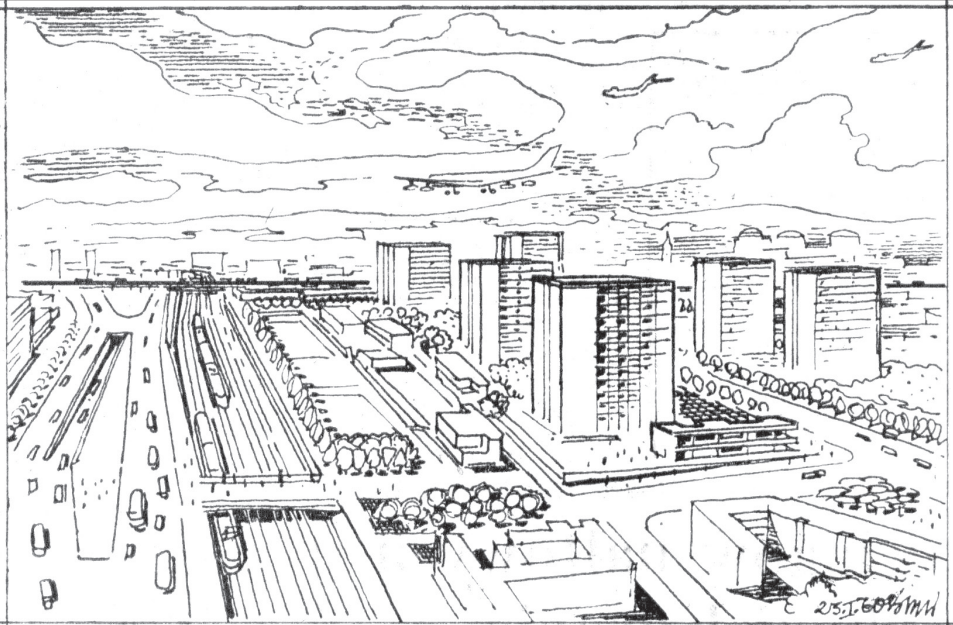
Fot. CAF

Figure 6. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XIII, no. 273 (4224). Saturday, 1 October 1960. Edition A (“The eleventh anniversary of the proclamation of the People’s Republic of China” / “In a steel factory in Czungking”)

(the ‘representational’ meaning), the photograph presents a relatively individualized image of the workers, who, despite the work overalls emphasising their group membership, are distinguished through distinct facial features.<sup>27</sup>

Figure 7, in turn, is similar to depictions in previous periods, albeit characterized by a radically different modality. The picture presents the result of work yet to be completed: an abstract drawing depicting a building and construction design, part of the larger project of developing what the accompanying article calls the capital’s ‘wild west’, namely the areas west of the Palace of Culture and Science. The use of ‘scientific modality’ contributes to conveying an abstracted idea of development and progress.

<sup>27</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 143–144.



Projekt osiedla „Srebrnego” w Warszawie. Autorzy: prof. J. Bogusławski i arch. B. Gniewiewski. Osiedle obejmuje teren pomiędzy wykopem linii kolejowej, ul. Towarową, Srebrną, KRN i Żelazną. Na rysunku widzimy fragment zachodni. Widoczny na rysunku wiadukt to projektowany w dalekiej przyszłości wyjazd z przedłużonej ul. Miedzianej. Tuż nad samym wykopem linii kolejowej — boiska szkolne. Nad nimi szkoły. Odizolowane od linii kolejowej boiskami szkolnymi i szkołami — wysokie, 12-kondygnacyjne punktowce mieszkalne. Wokół nich pawilony handlowe.

Osiedle obliczone na 2.300 mieszkańców. Rozpoczęcie budowy przewiduje się w roku przyszłym.

Rys. K. Marczewski

**Rozbudowa portu w Malborku ■ Szczecińskie Centrum Młodzieży Szkolnej ■ Gaz dla Nowej Soli ■ ZPB im. Harnama ■ 113 mln zł na budowę w Krakowskim**

**Korespondenci „Trybuna Ludu”**

**GDANSK.** Port rzeczny na Nogacie w Malborku ma perspektywę szybkiej aktywizacji jako baza eksportowa warzyw, zwłaszcza cebuli.

**ZIELONA GÓRA.** Jedną z ważniejszych pozycji w ogólnowojevodzkim programie rozbudowy urządzeń komunalnych będzie oddanie

Figure 7. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XIII, no. 32 (3983).

Monday, 1 February 1960. Edition A

In 1980 (the Period of Diarchy: official authorities vs. Solidarity movement), depictions of people at work changed and became more similar to those found in 1950. The images show individuals engaged in various tasks. There is, however, a slight difference between the 1950 and 1980 images: the latter are more ‘frontal’ depictions, though not necessarily involving direct eye contact. They are also less distanced and feature a greater degree of background articulation, allowing the viewers to observe others working in the background, while the focus remains on a particular worker. As illustrated by Figure 8, this worker is identified by name and surname – ‘seamstress Ewa Jaracka’. At the same time, her work



Figure 8. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XXXII, no. 27 (11035).  
Friday, 1 February 1980 (“Seamstress Ewa Jaracka”)

uniform adds the ‘generic’<sup>28</sup> quality to the depiction, emphasizing that she is one of the many employees at the textile plant.

Figure 9, a ‘figure-ground’ image, is the first and only fully coloured image in the data set under analysis. The image featured on 1 May is a more abstract (‘low modality’) depiction alluding to the International Workers’ Day. The way both the verbal and visual messages combine in this single image is important. The image of a white dove signifies peace and is connected with the colour red, which is partly a banner and partly the background, used in politics to connote left-wing ideologies.<sup>29</sup> Both white and red carry associative value.<sup>30</sup> The dove and the colour red are also connected to the verbal message: ‘Future belongs

<sup>28</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 143.

<sup>29</sup> See for example David Machin, *Introduction to Multimodal Analysis* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2007), 89.

<sup>30</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1977 [1914]) cited in: Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar of Colour,” *Visual Communication* 1 (2002), 3: 355.

to the forces of peace and socialism'. It may also be said that the combination of colours plays an important role. Tattersall<sup>31</sup> and Frost,<sup>32</sup> for example, point out that both the colour of a headline and the background on which it is placed may increase impact and serve as a useful technique for emphasis. The combination of colours in Figure 9 clearly emphasises the message the image conveys and has the effect of elevating it above the rest of the page. The ideational function of the image communicates left-wing ideology, while its interpersonal function draws our attention to the image – the effect is realized multimodally.



Figure 9. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XXXII, no. 103 (11111). Thursday, 1 May 1980

Finally, Figure 10, also featured on 1 May is a medium shot of workers, most of whom are looking to the side ('offer') at Edward Gierek, First Secretary of the Communist Party, as he visits the mechanical plant. The workers' gaze, as well as his more frontal depiction, makes the politician the more 'salient'<sup>33</sup> character, who is also the only one identified in the caption: "Edward Gierek among the staff of the Warsaw Plant named after M. Nowotko."

<sup>31</sup> Mark Tattersall, "Page Layout and Design," in: *Pulling Newspapers Apart. Analysing Print Journalism*, ed. Bob Franklin (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 208.

<sup>32</sup> Chris Frost, *Designing for Newspapers and Magazines* (London: Routledge, 2003), 70.

<sup>33</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, "Visual Meaning," 150–151.

Both the visual and verbal elements, therefore, juxtapose the ‘group’ with the ‘individual’,<sup>34</sup> making the latter literally stand out from the crowd.



Figure 10. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XXXII, no. 103 (11111). Thursday, 1 May 1980 (“Edward Gierek among the staff of the Warsaw Plant named after M. Nowotko”)

There are two photos in 1982 (Martial Law) which are worth mentioning, particularly in the light of the political situation at the time. The first (Figure 11), dated 2–3 January (approximately three weeks after Martial Law was introduced), presents a group of miners as they are changing shifts. Those going down into the mine are shown from the front, with some directly confronting the viewer. The caption further informs the reader about the amount of coal mined after the situation in the mine normalised. Regarding the viewer’s positioning, although there is no direct ‘face to face’ contact, we can still observe the miners’ facial expressions, encouraging us to relate to them as individuals rather than as an anonymous group.

<sup>34</sup> Van Leeuwen, *Discourse and Practice*, 144.

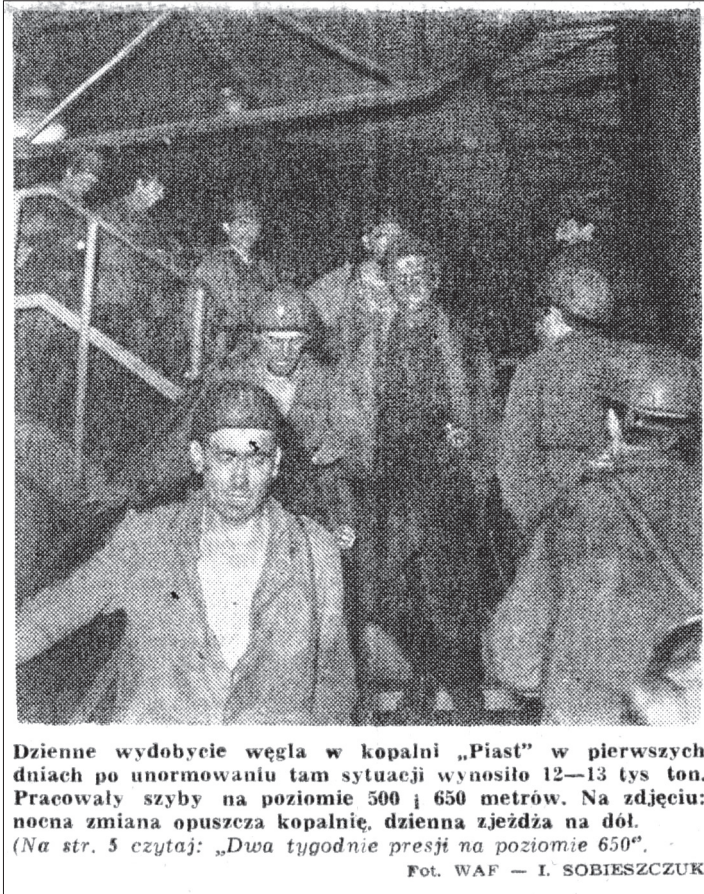


Figure 11. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XXXIV, no. 1 (11625).  
 Saturday–Sunday, 2–3 January 1982 (“Night shift is leaving the mine, day shift is going down”)

The latter (Figure 12) presents soldiers of the Pomeranian military base gathering potatoes on a state farm. The positioning of this photo on the page as ‘G/R’ (Given/Real, namely self-evident or down-to-earth information),<sup>35</sup> combined with the content of the image, allows for the establishment of a specific perception of the military personnel involved in community work. Additionally, the more distant and ‘profile’ depiction encourages the viewer to perceive the soldiers as a homogenous group. The use of these two ‘long/medium’ shot photographs can be linked to the prevailing political circumstances and is particularly suggestive, considering that these groups had previously – and were about to again – find themselves on opposite sides during the anti-government demonstrations that swept the country in the preceding and following years.

<sup>35</sup> Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 148.

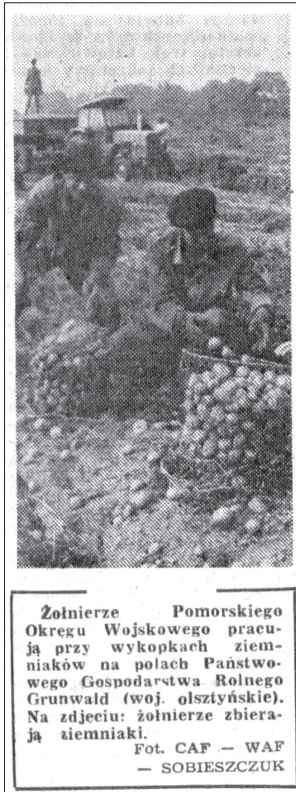


Figure 12. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XXXV, no. 233 (11857). Friday, 1 October 1982 (“Soldiers picking potatoes”)

In 1989 (Erosion of the previous system and its final breakdown), group, more distant (‘medium’ and ‘long shots’) and mostly ‘narrative’ depictions were prevalent, although their undertone or connotation appears to differ from that of the previous years under analysis. Figure 13 is an engraving from a 19th-century issue of *The New Worker* magazine, featuring a May Day march accompanied by a caption commenting on the history of the International Workers’ Day. The caption indicates that, although the character of the celebration and the protesters’ slogans kept changing throughout the years, the tradition of the celebration remained the same – the tradition of the international solidarity of the working class. The same issue features an image of the residents of Stawiguda village (Figure 14) engaged in the community service to help develop the surroundings of a newly built kindergarten. The 1 December issue (Figure 15) on the other hand, features a photograph of a building site and a group of ordinary people observing it. According to the article, the site is just one of many examples where housing construction was delayed due to the lack of finance and construction materials. The image, one could say, stands in stark contrast to the depictions of prosperity and development featured by the same newspaper in the earlier years.



Figure 13. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XLI, no. 101 (13868).  
 Saturday–Monday, 29 April–1 May 1989. Edition 1 (“An engraving from ‘The New Worker’ from 1892”)



Figure 14. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XLI, no. 101 (13868).  
 Saturday–Monday, 29 April–1 May 1989. Edition 1 (“Social service”)



Figure 15. *Trybuna Ludu* (Warsaw). Year XLI, no. 279 (14046).  
1 December 1989. Edition 1 (“Everything is normal, meaning a flop again”)

## Discussion and conclusion

Having examined the types of depictions contained in the data set of 34 images across the selected years, it is evident that the representations not only reflect the relationship between a person and the object of their work but also convey a particular worldview, shaped and reinforced by the political circumstances of the time. In 1950, medium shots (‘distance’) of individuals focused on the object of their work (‘offer’ type of ‘contact’) were prevalent. At a time, when the system was being established, such images could exemplify the effort invested in individual work and, by extension, indicate the collective effort contributing to the development of the country and the establishment of a new political system. The more depersonalised depictions – such as a group of doctors, farmers, or a construction site in Warsaw – appear to signify not only the effort invested in the respective tasks, but also the more general effort involved in (re)building the country and forging a new political

system. By **1960**, depictions were characterised by more distanced group representations, some showing people and the objects of their work through analytical structures (a ‘part vs. whole’ relationship). This could signify the involvement of an individual in their work while simultaneously indicating a greater sense of order, in which an individual’s place in the world is defined by their labor. One might also extend the comparison to suggest that this is how the state envisaged the individual’s role and position within society, now that the system had been consolidated. The 1960 depictions all seem to represent more general ideas, whether concerning an individual and their work just described, shared ideological beliefs between the allies, or the notions of development and progress. In terms of the relationship between the viewer and the depicted participants, the representations from **1980** resemble those from 1950 but are more ‘frontal’ – signifying engagement – and less distanced, with more detailed backgrounds. All these features contribute to a greater degree of ‘modality’, making the images appear more realistic and engaging for the viewer than those from earlier years. One could conclude that the images had become more ‘open’ or transparent. The tendency, with respect to depiction of people at work, may be related to the political climate of the time, when the authorities’ reputation and influence were vulnerable. Such images, especially those showing politicians among ordinary workers, could help the state appear approachable in the public eye. In **1982**, the mere juxtaposition of the two shots – miners and soldiers at work – effectively captured the political situation of the period. The newspaper’s choice to depict the miners in a way that emphasizes their individuality while portraying the soldiers in a more anonymous manner, further highlights the contrast between the two groups, which found themselves on opposite sides of the contemporary conflict. By **1989**, the visual representation of the theme of work shifts again, with depictions becoming more distant and presenting groups of ordinary people primarily through ‘narrative’ structures. The difference, however, is most evident at the level of connotation. Historical images of people marching in the May 1 parade, engaging in community work, or observing a failed construction project evoke a distinctly different set of sentiments. The shift in focus may reflect once more the political processes under way, as the status quo – actively endorsed by the newspaper – was on the verge of collapse.

As is evident from the analysis above, approaching the visual data from a social semiotic perspective contributes to eliciting the meaning-making structures which might otherwise remain obscure. In this respect, a social semiotic approach to visual communication serves as a valuable interpretative tool. The symbolic relations produced by the use of specific semiotic resources are not obviously real, nor are the interpretations based on these resources. Still, they are ‘windows on the world’<sup>36</sup>, albeit subjective windows reflecting histories and politics, and as such, they aid our understanding of the social semiotic and its critique.

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<sup>36</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953) cited in: Jewitt and Oyama, “Visual Meaning,” 136.

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## Multimodal Constructions of Work: A Social Semiotic Analysis of the Communist Press Images

### Summary

The article analyses images depicting the theme of work, published on the front pages of *Trybuna Ludu*, a Polish newspaper and the official mouthpiece of the Polish communist authorities. The set of 34 images (drawn from selected years of the 1944–1989 period) was examined using a social semiotic toolkit, as discussed by Kress and van Leeuwen, who argued for the importance of visual images, which, just like the verbal, possess their own form of visual grammar. Following the principles of this 'grammar', the images were analysed in terms of semiotic resources employed and their potential meaning. The representations of work under analysis were then situated in the context of the political circumstances of the time. The study contributes to the field of research on visual communication.

## Multimodalne konstruowanie przedstawień pracy. Socjosemiotyczna analiza obrazów w prasie komunistycznej

### Streszczenie

Artykuł analizuje obrazy przedstawiające motyw pracy, zamieszczone na pierwszych stronach *Trybuny Ludu*, polskiego dziennika, oficjalnego organu władz komunistycznych. Zestaw 34 obrazów (pochodzących z wybranych lat okresu 1944–1989) został przebadany przy użyciu narzędzi zaczerpniętych z semiotyki społecznej, omówionych przez Kressa i van Leeuwena, którzy wskazywali na znaczenie wizualnych form komunikacji posiadających – podobnie jak język werbalny – własną gramatykę. Zgodnie z zasadami tej gramatyki, obrazy przeanalizowano pod kątem zastosowanych środków semiotycznych oraz ich potencjału znaczeniowego. Reprezentacje pracy poddane analizie zostały następnie osadzone w kontekście ówczesnych uwarunkowań politycznych. Artykuł wpisuje się w nurt badań nad przekazem wizualnym.

### Cytowanie

Łazuka-Banach, Anna. „Multimodal Constructions of Work: A Social Semiotic Analysis of the Communist Press Images”. *Studia Językoznawcze. Synchroniczne i diachroniczne aspekty badań polszczyzny* 24 (2025): 167–188. DOI: 10.18276/sj.2025.24-11.