*Dina I. Spicheva*

# Image Communication in Virtual Reality Culture

## Image: Russian-style

In the Russian language the term *image (»имидж«)* is close in meaning to the term *brand (»бренд«),* which has been pointed out by many Russian specialists (Gavra D., Chumikov A.) [Гавра 2009; Chumikov 2012]. It is commonly known that the English word *brand* originally denoted a mark on farm animals made with a piece of hot metal. In the course of time *brand* came to be understood as a kind of marker of consumer and producer exchange (in the same way as heraldic signs stood for high quality in the past). In the Russian language, the main difference between *brand (»бренд«)* and *image (»имидж«)* lies in the fact that *brand* has a money equivalent, whereas *image* has none. That is to say, *brand* is an economy-adapted version of *image*. It belongs to the area of legal relationships where we talk about property items, additional price or added value. *Image* includes *brand* as its sign component. And it is in this component that *image* is most susceptible to control and promotion. *Image* means how a *brand* is perceived now. In other words, *image* as well as *brand* is the representation of someone or something that is created in accordance with certain purposes using special technologies in the process of communication between the image-bearer and the target audience. This is what we shall call *image communication.*

It can be carried out on a computer screen, a mobile phone screen, a TV screen, a lightbox and via digital image media, including paper, glass, etc. *However, the main focus of interest for this article is interactive digital image communication in the internet.* It is created with the help of the cutting-edge information and communicational means: websites, social networking sites, weblogs, RSS technologies, wiki resources, audio and video podcasts, on-line videos, etc. Even the definition of key words for searching this or that type of information in the internet can be part of image communication. Its carriers in virtual reality are banners (traditional and rich media), floating banners, text blocks, advertising screens, Pop-up and Pop-under windows, promotion pages, links from the content and so on. Let us try to prove the dominant role of image communication in structuring the social space created by virtual reality culture.

## The specific nature of virtual reality

Taking into account the fact that there exist different types of virtual reality produced by different means (television, dreams, different arts and so on), in this article we shall talk primarily about electronic virtual reality created by multimedia technology. The specific nature of virtual reality is manifested through its characteristics such as being non-material, conditional, artificial and changeable. Having said that, virtual reality produces effects characteristic of the material world. A subject is relatively free to enter this reality and to leave it. In other words, this reality is ephemeral because it can always be disrupted and revived again. Electronic virtual reality has drastically changed the space-time continuum, which results in the emergence of a completely new type of culture: virtual reality culture.

Virtual reality culture is formed through the integration of written, oral and audiovisual communication into the interactive informational Network. As it is known, communication determines the creation of culture. Consequently, the potential interactivity of modern communication with its global scale irrevocably changes our culture. »All the manifestations of the culture [...] are combined in this digital Universe which merges the past, present and future manifestations of the communicative thought in a gigantic historical supertext. In doing this, they construct a new symbolic reality. They turn virtuality into our reality« (Castells M.) [Кастельс 2000:314].

Virtual reality culture is the culture of the modern network society that possesses informational and communicative »substance« and all the features of a *supercomplex self-organizing human sociocultural system* (Knjazeva, Kurdyumov; Prigozhin, Nikolis) [Князева, Курдюмов 1994; Пригожин, Николис 1979; Степин 1996]. Within this system, users' communities generate differently directed parallel and intersecting information flows and constantly produce an innumerable amount of new communications. Within the network any subject in any point of space can join the communication at any point of time. As a result, the communication becomes impersonal and social contacts become fleeting and transient (email service, internet forums, etc.) *Communicativity* is the major feature of virtual reality culture. Within the network, *communicativity* means the kaleidoscope of constantly alternating social states that can be controlled only with this or that degree of probability.

## »Playing in accordance with the rules«

Modern digital technologies and new media (with the visual capacities and visual opportunities that they offer, as well as their relative affordability and ubiquity) enhance the manipulative potential of image communica-

tion. Due to these technologies, image communication is expanding in the network at an unprecedented rate and becoming virtually omnipresent. The peculiarities of the manipulative aspect of virtual reality culture as a super-complex, self-organizing human sociocultural system are as follows: 1) the object of manipulation is a process (the communication itself) 2) the subject of communication is situated within the system. Direct compulsion-based manipulation of social states and processes is practically impossible in such a system. Hence the question: to what extent can a human, who is part of this system, influence it and control its dynamics? And if it is possible, then what means and technologies allow the human to control the system flexibly and thus to structure the fragmentary social space of virtual reality?

We assume that image communication in the network society culture can structure and program various states of social space forcing all its members into »playing in accordance with the rules«. In other words, image communication is *strategic* (»strategic action« after J. Habermas) and is fundamentally different from *natural* communication [Habermas 1996]. Both types of communication imply the social interaction between people. However, *natural* communication is oriented towards mutual understanding, achieving consensus and settling the differences, whereas strategic image communication pursues an explicit aim. The proof of its efficiency lies in the fact that the target audience can carry out an action programmed by image communication, arrive at a certain decision, and make a choice.

Taking into account J. Habermas' assumption that strategic action can be open as well as manipulative we can argue that image communication is always manipulative to a certain extent. It implies the latent manipulation of the consciousness and the subconscious of a target audience. Consequently, the age of virtual reality is characterized by the transition from formal to informal mechanisms of controlling social relationships. These mechanisms influence the opinion and the behavior of the target audience in an unprecedented manner.

## Image communication and symbolic capital

What kinds of resources of image communication in the network provides it with such manipulative capacities? As a matter of fact, image communication helps its participants gain additional values such as public recognition, prestige, wealth, power, fame, etc. In other words, image communication is aimed at achieving certain preferences; it allows a subject to expand the so-called »symbolic capital« that he or she possesses. P. Bourdieu defined the symbolic capital as the credibility that the possessor of the capital has among the audience [Бурдье 2001]. After P. Bourdieu, the demonstration of the symbolic capital is an effective mechanism of amassing other types of capital, including financial capital. In fact, nowadays the spending

on image campaigns in business, political or any other social sphere sometimes exceeds the spending on the actual production and social schemes, since key to a subject's influence on the public opinion and development is not exactly a material, administrative or any other resource that he or she possesses but rather the public credibility resource which is accumulated and turned into symbolic capital. Due to the fact that symbolic capital is a capital not recognized *per se* (ostensibly having no economic value nor offering any other benefit), it is more often than not the case that the actions that the initiator of strategic image communication »coerces« the audience into are perceived by this audience as natural and not complying with its beliefs and intentions.

## The »architector« of virtual reality

This result caused by image communication suggests a hypothesis that image communication is one of the most important *order parameters* and *attractors* that structure the supercomplex self-organizing human sociocultural system of virtual reality culture.

»Order parameters maintain the dynamic balance of the system. They manipulate chaotic conditions and thus promote the achievement of »balance measure« and »chaos measure«, i. e. through manipulation they »conquer« individual structures and affect their behavior. That is why they are manipulative parameters« (Astafieva O.) [Астафьева 2013]. **The order pa**rameters of society as a social system include language, government, culture, laws, rituals, fashion, scientific paradigms, ethics, corporate culture, as well as a company's individual dress code, etc. As opposed to order parameters, attractors are ideal ultimate states that the system is aimed at in its development. Order parameters refer to the process of self-organization; they are connected with »the simplification of reality« and the reduction of the system. Attractors initiate the processes of self-development; they belong to the supra-system factors and are determined from the outside. When they are accepted by the system, they become order parameters. Besides, an attractor is formed only when order parameters are taken into account. Consequently, sociocultural processes of self-organization could be affected to this or that degree by these parameters.

So, an order parameter is a given whereas an attractor is a prospect. Order parameters and attractors are capable of directing the network society towards new goals preventing it from sliding into uncontrollable chaos. What is this assumption based on? History holds examples of using the manipulating potential of image communication carried out through various arts including architecture; in these examples image communication manifested itself as an attractor or an order parameter.[1]

**1** For example, the Crystal Palace (designed in 1851 by Sir Joseph Paxton for the Great Exhibition in London) gave rise to The Internationale, the international working-class anthem. According to various historical evidence, the open innovational space of the Crystal Palace, which is the pilgrimage destination for working delegations from different countries coming to get acquainted with the cutting-edge technologies, was one of the factors that produced the idea of The Internationale: »Workers of the world, unite!«, literally »Proletarians of all countries, unite!« This idea rendered meaningful the sporadic and hectic working-class movements in Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, united the participants of those movements by the common desire to »execute the global revolution« and became the hallmark of the revolution in Russia – the revolution which changed the course of Russian history for seventy years.

Image communication structures the chaotic environment of virtual reality in the same way as architecture forms the off-line environment of everyday life. In the virtual reality environment there are no distinct boundaries between various objects; here »anything can be anything«. As M. Castells has pointed out, nowadays the reality of people's existence is totally immersed in the setting of virtual images and the world of created beliefs. Under those conditions, depending on the senders' interests and recipients« preferences [...] we construct the categories and produce images which form the behavior, launch political processes, bring about dreams and beget nightmares« [Кастельс 2000:450]. The plurality and transience of those images arouse a sense of chaotic state of virtual social reality in contemporaries' mind.

## »Choice sans choice«

The very structure of virtual reality is »chaotic« since it is represented by a multitude of hyperlinks following which the user can endlessly transfer himself to ever new informational environments either distorting or changing the meaning of this or that message (or creating it from scratch for himself every time). The information contained in the hyperlink in one window pops up as a separate window which is still connected to the previous window and at the same time offers to enter a new environment following yet another hyperlink. All this is governed by one and the same idea and turns around one and the same context because it is programed by image communication.

Image communication, logically structured according to the principle »stimulus – reaction«, proves to be inefficient in the network. It conforms to the rules of the modernistic text design, i. e. it defies the logic of coherent narrative turning the parts of image message into closed self-sufficient formations, pictures that get attached to one another resembling a collage. At the first sight, the presence of hyperlinks offers a subject the freedom to pick and choose information. On the other hand, however, with every new »window« the subject gets more and more immersed in the internet space and becomes increasingly dependent on it. The attractive image message, purposefully designed as multiple (multi-level) hyperlinks, leads to »choice sans choice«.

## »Following the fixed route«

Having said that, the importance of the visual aspect of image communication cannot be overestimated, since it is this aspect that primarily affects the consciousness and the subconscious of a target audience through activating its aesthetic needs and value (or cultural) purposes. As a matter of fact, it is impossible to logically comprehend the ever-increasing amount

information in the global information space and to define its essence. In this respect, the initiators of information and communication use different means to single it out and to make it visible and exciting; in doing so, they do not exactly take into consideration the target audience's consciousness, but rather try to appeal to its subconscious emotional and image impression. Moreover, it is due to the visual nature of image communication that this communication has the dominant function as an order parameter and attractor in structuring the social space of virtual reality culture.

Visual communication prompts the target audience to start interaction »not through buying material goods but by means of informational devices and the circulation of signs and messages« using design. (Baudrillard J.) [Бодрийяр 2003:226–227]. According to Jean Baudrillard, everything in modern society is design-oriented: the body, human, political and social relationships, needs, aspirations, etc. This is particularly true for internet space, which is created by designers. As an attractor and order parameter, image communication focuses target audiences' attention and makes it follow »the fixed route«. At the end of the day, attention is what the initiator of image commutation seeks. Digital visual image communication created by means of design does not merely attract one's attention, it also seizes and captivates one's imagination and becomes engraved on one's memory.[2]

In this connection, this communication is based, in some cases, on the existing aesthetic needs of the target audience and functions as an order parameter. In other cases, it influences the formation of new aesthetic preferences and functions as an attractor. It is safe to say that in the virtual reality environment image communication substitutes through its design the traditional aesthetics which in real life is primarily created by architecture.

Furthermore, in virtual reality culture »ethics is increasingly becoming the question of aesthetics« (Bard A., Soderqvist J.) [Бард, Зодерквист 2004:56]. **What with the absence of stable aesthetical and ethical guidelines, we have today »the multifaceted man«** who fulfills with the help of image communication the urgent need to constantly change his identity depending on the context and situation. The dependence of the internet age contemporary on the opinion of those around him or her was pointed out by A. Bard and J. Soderqvist. Their prediction is that »cheap« style will soon become synonymous to social suicide« [ibid.]. A person who does not support the needs of those around him or her is expelled from a virtual community by a single mouse click, which increases the importance of image communication in virtual reality culture.

In order to be successful and in demand on the network, one has to plan his or her own image communication to function as an order parameter that helps other participants of the communication to define roles, to outline ethical and aesthetical norms of interaction and to achieve a result. In

**2** For example, one of the popular images of modern superheroes is the long black leather coat, the sunglasses, and the piercing eyes of the main character of The Matrix (directed by A. Wachowski). Today this image is often made use of in advertising and PR campaigns. The British advertising agency DDB London has created a Matrix-style VW Golf clip that features the chief designer of the car manufacturer fighting against a dozen of his own clones. The fight with oneself and the slogan »Sometimes the only one you have to beat is yourself« symbolizes the pursuit of perfection. Using the theme and the sightline of the film, image communication offers the target audience the guideline for interpreting the image message.

virtual reality culture, these norms change rather quickly, which constantly raises the demand for new image communication that initiates the establishing of new norms. In this case, image communication functions as an attractor in the eternal process of producing ethical and aesthetical preferences. Thus, image communication both reflects and creates the ethics aesthetics of virtual reality culture that determines the consciousness and the behavior of the members of network society towards these objects and phenomena of the environment.

## »Access code«

In this respect, one can assume that digital visual image communication structures the virtual reality space not only through fulfilling the aesthetic needs of the target audience but also by affecting its ethical norms, which are the external manifestations of value purposes. The fact that virtual reality culture lacks common aesthetic traditions, ethical norms, and value orientation does not diminish its manipulative potential, because this culture is not based only on these traditions, norms and orientations. but, first and foremost, on a certain universal cultural code. C. Rapaille defined the cultural code as an unconscious meaning of this or that thing or phenomenon, whether it is a car, food, relationship or even a country in the context of culture in which we are brought up. He wrote that image communication was an access code to the perceiving subject's unconscious. C. Rapaille likens the code to a combination lock, the opening of which can give us an answer as to why we act in this or that way [Рапай 2008].

Taking into account the fact that »axiological« (value-related) and word-view (ideological) interpretation of reality is the core of the information society that uses advertising, the internet, public relations, etc., widely (Lukina N.) [Лукина 2012], it is safe to assume that image communication plays a part in creating a new system of values. It is integrated into the system of human attitudes towards the world, with image being a sign-and-symbolic device of interpreting social reality. An image message, which can achieve the value foundations of the target audience's world view, structures its consciousness and the subconscious because it acquires the same status as global values, national traditions, etc.

For example, image communications based on the well-known film *Avatar* (by J. Cameron) became truly transnational. In particular, A. Borisov, Minister of Culture of the Sakha (Yakutia) Republic, said that the film was based on *Olonkho,* a piece of Yakut epic literature. Such a statement could be made by the representatives of other nations because many cultures feature variations of the subject of the three worlds (High, Middle and Low) that symbolize the crown, trunk and roots of a tree. This example is a vivid demonstration of how dramatic the influence of digital visual communication can be once this communication has found a certain universal cultural

access code to the subconscious and to the collective unconscious of the representatives of different cultures.

## Image communication as an »attractor« and »order parameter«

The orientation of a universal cultural code allows image communication to function either as an order parameter or as an attractor depending on a particular situation. As an *order parameter*, image communication (by means of a cultural code) limits the excess informativity of a semantic field and allows the interpretion of an image message in accordance with its author's purpose. As an attractor, image communication employs another property of the universal cultural code, which is to unfold the generalized concentrated meaning (information) of this code into the corresponding (relevant) text or into a wider context. Thus, »digital« image communication, being a stable attractor and an order parameter, creates around itself a network community and its virtual culture. This communication »launches« processes of social self-organization and self-development by means of manipulating the »network« opinion and its symbolic capital.

## Biographical Notes

Post-graduate student of the Department of Social Communications at Tomsk State University; Deputy Director of the Career Planning Center; Chairman of the Additional Education Commission of the Department for Education of Tomsk Administration; Coordinator of Innovation Resource and Implementation Centre of Tomsk Oblast. Finalist Certificate of the International Competition for Developing the Concept of Skolkovo School (Moscow 2012). Author of 30 scientific publications and tutorials on image philosophy and psychology on the subjects of professional talent and career planning.

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## Recommended Quotation