

Chapter 5

Communicative Content of Selected Visual Construction of Humour on Facebook: A Visual Social Semiotic Analysis

Ibrahim Esan Olaosun
Obafemi Awolowo University, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper socio-critically analyses some visual constructions of humour on Facebook. Based on 17 visual data, gathered through the method of extensive Internet Ethnography, the paper indicates that members of the Facebook networking site are informal misogynists, who through the methods of digital cloning, image cropping and digital impersonation, generate or appropriate visual materials and post such to generate social/communicational humour. Using insights from Visual Social Semiotics proposed by Hodge and Kress (1988) and Critical Social Semiotics espoused by Caldas-Couthard, Carmen Rosa and Van Leeuwen Theo (2003), analyses reveal that constructed visual humour incorporates and interrogates such social phenomena as religion, education, morals, love, health and politics. The paper concludes that Facebook is not just a site for meeting new faces and interacting with them but also a medium for obtaining information on these social phenomena and how they are represented in the minds of individuals.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the things that make human beings human and which reflect in their social lives is the use of language to provoke laughter and generate entertainment. Humour, an aspect of the aesthetic functions

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or uses of language, is a testimony to its (language) extensive nature. It is a discourse practice through which human beings soak up numerous absurdities of life. It can be regarded as a literary discourse because it uses language creatively and because it, like literature, performs entertainment, satirical and didactic functions.

Beyond its amusing content, a humorous discourse appeals to reason and understanding, sharpens the intellect and serves in constructing micro and macro ideologies. Because of its intellectual powers and other discourse significance, humour discourse has enjoyed tremendous attention of scholars in the fields of Literary Studies, Philosophy, Psychology, Anthropology and Linguistics. From the classical era of such scholars as Plato, Aristotle, Quintilian and Hobbes to the modern era witnessing such scholars as Critchley, Herbert Marcuse (a critical Philosopher) Erich Fromm (a psychologist), Daniel Wickberg, Michael Billig and Alison Ross, to mention but few, humour is a significant object of academic research. Several scholars (e.g. Morreall, 1983; Raskin, 1984; Mulkay, 1988; Provine, 2000) have published full length books on humour. Several journal articles (e.g. those of Suls, 1972, Storey, 2003; Tisljar & Berzcki, 2005) have also been written on the subject. These studies have generally dealt with the cognitive processes involved in the generation of humour and the social functions of the discourse.

Though rejectionists of humour have considered it as foul discourse, scholars, particularly from these fields have taken it as a serious discourse and have theorized superabundantly about it in respect of its nature, arts, origin, effects and functions. Several theories, the most popular of which include Superiority Theories, Incongruity Theories and Victorian Relief Theory (see (Michael Billig, 2005) have been developed to elucidate these ideas.

Changes in our social and cultural lives have brought about new forms of humour which relate to and illuminate contemporary social, economic and political matters as well as generate debates around these matters. Therefore, my concern in this paper is not to theorize humours but to contribute to debates on how humours are produced and made to function on the internet space. Essentially, this paper aims to connect visual humours on *Facebook* to the broad essence of humour, which according to Alison Ross (2005), include “surprise, innovation and rule-breaking”.

This paper is expected to open up debates on characteristics and functions of ‘computer mediated humour’, especially as it relates to or differs from scripted, broadcast and spoken humour on radio, television and in the literary medium. It will also point up the creative ingenuities of *facebook* community members, some of who could be as fun provoking as many recognized comedian writers and performers in the Nigeria entertainment industry.

CONTEXTUALIZATION

In this modern day of digital technology, nothing seems impossible to do, particularly on the internet space. One of the amazing possibilities that accompany this technology and which manifests in *Facebook* discourse, is ‘visual grafting’ or ‘personality cloning’ ; the concept which I am using to describe the situation in which new persons or objects are created through the process of hybridization, similar to that used in plant or crop sciences. For instance, the head of an individual can be placed on the body of another individual, resulting in the phenomenon of ‘digital impersonation’. An incidence of visual grafting that occurred in Nigeria recently involved a state governor who was framed as a porn artist engaging in an explicitly sexual action with a female porn actress. But for the efforts of individuals who traced the sources of the graft items, the publication would have marred the reputation of the governor.

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