MAŁGORZATA SLAWEK-CZOCHRA
JOANNA SOSNOWSKA

PERSPECTIVE OF THE AUDIOVISUAL ARTS:
ON WAYS AND TOOLS OF STUDYING EMOTIONS
IN THE CURRENT VISUALS

Emotions in visual arts can be subject to analysis on the level of the creative act, the work itself, categories of technique and reception, as well as on the degree of division into form and content. Studies show a dichotomy between an intellectual (cognitive) sphere and an emotional (aesthetic) sphere, pointing to the role of recipients’ competence, allowing them to properly read the cultural and artistic code behind emotions presented in visual works.

1. EMOTIONS IN AUDIOVISUAL ARTS

1.1 RESEARCH MODELS AND LEVELS

Visual arts is a broad term which covers a few, often quite different, areas. Initially, op-art was supposed to affect the sight, not emotions. Its subject of analysis today is film/video, painting/drawing/graphics, photography, theatre/performance, architecture, sculpture. The character of the particular forms of...
visual arts can affect the reception of a given work. Studies on emotions in visual arts are often fragmentary and depart from clear-cut categories and typologies.

Just like in traditional arts, emotions in visual arts can be manifested at many levels:

- emotions are an element of a creative act; it is thanks to the author’s emotions that a creative act takes place;
- emotions are included in the work itself; they are a part of the material;
- emotions are evoked by the author; artists can affect the emotional states of the viewers of their works;
- emotions distort or intensify the reception of a visual work;
- emotions are an element of the critical reception of a work by experts, art critics;
- emotions define the motivation behind the lasting and durable nature of a work of art.

Researchers highlight the twofold nature of the aesthetic emotions affecting the viewer:¹

- emotions of A-type (artifact)—evoked by the original, special nature of the means of expression, unusual composition and organisation of a work of art—admiration, surprise, pleasure;
- emotions of R-type (represented world)—evoked by the presentation of the world in a work of art—reactions reflected in the faces of the characters portrayed in paintings, films, dramas, photographs, e.g. sadness, suffering, joy.

When it comes to evoking emotions in visual arts, the selection of the means of expression is important, such as content or the overarching idea behind the work. The studies on the creation and reception of art, in the context of emotions, point towards a dichotomy between the intellectual, cognitive sphere and the aesthetic, emotional sphere.² Other approaches focused on some areas, neglecting others, e.g. psycho-analytic theories (based on emotions, affects, desires) and cognitive science (based on experience, mind,

---

intellect),³ or even today’s neuro-aesthetic studies. It seems, however, that the necessary condition of a proper approach towards art is “transdisciplinary character, paradigmatic eclecticism, and methodological syncretism”.⁴ They do not offer methodological meta-language but rather openness and a wider scientific perspective together with novelty in results. Studying emotions in visual arts is possible through:

- sensory elements, affecting the sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste;
- intellectual elements: symbols, motifs, a general and synthetic view of the content.

A taxonomy of the reception of emotions encompasses three types of experience:⁵

- art as a medium of valuable and aesthetic beauty;
- art as a medium of higher values; the experience of the hidden, repressed emotions;
- art as a medium that promotes extra-aesthetic values; the experience of emotions is parallel to understanding a work of art.

Aleksandra Jasielska distinguishes the following models of emotions in the context of works of art:⁶

- representation in the model of basic emotions,
- representation in the appraisal model,
- representation in the model of psychological construction,
- representation of emotions in the social construction model.

Studies on the reception of emotions could be viewed from the perspective of personal or community experience, revealing an ambiguous nature of the interpretation of works of art and the way they are experienced. Emotional experience points towards one of the dimensions:

- individual (personal),
- collective (shared by a community, e.g. watching a movie, watching a performance).

The biggest challenge is to recognise emotions expressed in art and to categorise them. The study of how a work of art is received can concern the level of:⁷

⁴ Ibid., 166.
⁶ Ibid., 208–19.
– author’s intentions (the stage of creative work),
– author’s results (the finished work),
– the reception of the work (the way it is experienced by a viewer, reader, listener).

Emotions expressed through art are subject to certain categories of style, genre and type. They usher in an agreement between the author and the addressee of art, giving an impression of emotional pre-reception through the introduction of the imposed quantifiers.

1.2 CURRENT TRENDS OF STUDYING EMOTIONS IN AUDIOVISUAL ARTS

Three areas of visual arts are subject to analysis:
– film/video: feature films, documentaries, videos, television materials, videos in social media;
– photographs/collage: photographs used in television materials, online portals, social media, audio and press websites;
– animation/graphics: animated and graphic materials, available on television, television websites, social media, audio and visual websites.

The study of emotions in visual arts can be viewed on three levels:
– emotional aims of the author of visual art,
– emotions inherent in a visual work of art,
– emotional reception of a visual work of art.

Studies on the emotional intentions of the artist and the emotions identified by the addressee require direct cooperation with authors and addressees. Contemporary visual media are the products of not a single author but teams of authors, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities. Studies of the reception of visual materials in the media would require collaboration of a research team and a long time, since the materials are produced through many channels, e.g., television, streaming platforms or the social media. William J. Thomas Mitchell claims that images are “a form of life driven by desires, needs, appetites, demands and yearnings”.

From this perspective, emotions inherent in the works created during the COVID-19 pandemic can be subject to analysis through basic elements of the structure and aesthetics of a visual work of art and its content.

Emotions such as happiness, fear, sadness, anger, wrath, boredom, guilt, solidarity, compassion, stagnation, care, hatred, humiliation, were consid-

---

ered within three aspects of visual arts related to the media. They link real reality (realistic, ready to be registered visually) with virtual reality (created, complementing or replacing the real reality). These two realities are present in the visual messages in the media. An extremely important element of the visual message is the way a work of art is created, relying both on the convention of documentary and artistic values.

2. TOOLS FOR RESEARCH OF EMOTIONS IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

The study of emotion in audiovisual material requires looking at the work in terms of artistic means, formal features, and content.

2.1 TOOLS FOR STUDYING EMOTIONS IN RELATION TO MEANS OF EXPRESSION

1. A tool to evoke emotions in visual arts is colour. Its symbolism, mixtures, linked with other features of a work of art can evoke certain emotional states. It offers an aesthetic, emotive function. By describing a colour, we touch upon its three basic features, which affect its perception: hue, saturation, and brightness. There are many classifications and models of colours as proposed by Helmholtz, Benson, Mayer, Lambert, Runge, Chevreul, A. Munsell, NSC, HBS. Colours perform a similar emotional, aesthetic, dramatic function both in visual and audio-based arts. It is a significant means of expression in film, photography and artistic television genres. It becomes not only the author’s interpretation of reality but a conscious element of evoking emotions. Among all the sensory stimuli, it is colour that affects our emotions most. Its influence is of an irrational nature, and sensitivity to colours is an individual, changeable and ephemeral thing. Colour can be an element of manipulation, often perceived subconsciously. It can be also interpreted contrary to the author’s intention. Therefore, the author should make a choice of colours on the basis of an abstract, mind-related

---


impression. An emotional character of colours used in film was studied by Patti Bellantoni.\textsuperscript{12}

2. The creation of a film’s emotional character is attained with adequate film-making language. Movement, dynamics, timing are all features of audiovisual works, which shape the addressee’s emotions. Framing, camera angle, perspective, depth of field and editing all produce and arouse certain emotions. The language of film making and its use have been studied before.\textsuperscript{13} What is of essence here are the grounds, e.g. foreground—the face (the character’s portrait), its emotions, and identification with emotions. Płażewski claims that close-ups are “emotionally the most important and most powerful means in the hand of a film maker”.\textsuperscript{14} It is also the use of light that can add an emotional and aesthetic value. An important element is the postproduction process, which can enhance the emotionality of the message, highlight the film’s synthesis, analogies, lead to the creation of an audiovisual work of art. The use of audiovisual counterpoints, acoustic effects, silence, music, or words can build an emotional message and lead to its polyphonic reception.

3. An important part of an emotion-laden meaning is its genre, pointing towards the author’s main message.\textsuperscript{15} A message that is organised appropriately in terms of its structure and content has some audio-visual frame, which affects its interpretation.\textsuperscript{16}

2.2 AESTHETIC TOOLS FOR STUDYING EMOTIONS IN AUDIOVISUAL ART

Aesthetic research tools can focus on the formal elements of a work of art (e.g. stylistic, formal features):  
1. Colours. The use of certain colours, dominant colours serves to evoke certain emotions. A visual work gives an opportunity for colour-related emotional naturalness, its style and deformation.\textsuperscript{17} It can be assumed that positive emotions, such as happiness or joy, are associated with the yellow col-

\textsuperscript{12} Patti BELLANTONI, Jeśli to fiolet, ktoś umrze. Teoria koloru w filmie (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Wojciech Marzec, 2010).
\textsuperscript{13} Jerzy PŁAŻEWSKI, Język filmu (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 2009); Daniel ARIJON, Gramatyka języka filmowego (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Wojciech Marzec, 2008).
\textsuperscript{14} PŁAŻEWSKI, Język filmu, 47.
\textsuperscript{15} Maria WOJTAK, Gatunki dziennikarskie (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 2005).
\textsuperscript{17} PŁAŻEWSKI, Język filmu, 415–26.
our (the colour of energy, joy, obsession), anger or hatred is associated with red (strength, provocation, aggression), sadness is associated with blue (melancholy, reflection, powerlessness), purple is associated with change, passing, death. Fear, anxiety or terror can be associated with green, the colour of poison, disease, but also purple (non-physical colour), being present in the extra-sensory, mystic, paranormal dimension; it is related to rituals, magic, spirituality. Additionally, shades of colours, as well as the black and white colours, can be interpreted in various ways, depending on the interpretation of a visual work itself, e.g. shaped by culture. The emotional character of a visual work of art is connected also with colour saturation and its use in the work, e.g. a video or animation. Emotions can be also read through a characteristic colourfull leitmotif in a linear visual work. Visual message becomes an emotional sign, a symbol, through the use of or elimination of colour. A black-and-white photograph can intensify its emotional message, i.e. the emotion of sadness, fear, pity, boredom. Colours can point towards emotions such as fear, sadness, anger, happiness, boredom, guilt, solidarity, compassion, hope, stagnation, care, hatred, humiliation, and determine the attitude towards them.

2. Light. The use of light and lighting (realistic or artistic) or the colour of lights are an important element of evoking emotions through a work of art. Anger, often identified with evil, wrath, may be exposed through contour lighting, which cuts off the object (character) from its background and simultaneously adds dark tones and deep shadows. A similar use of lighting can evoke fear. Its production relies on the avoidance of light and its gradual appearance. Sadness related to death may be symbolised through the use of overexposure to light or light lines. Happiness (joy, enthusiasm) is built through high lights, bright tones, low shadowing, classic direction of the primary and secondary lighting. The emotions of happiness, joy, carelessness are built through dynamic lights in the form of dancing skylights or sun rays. The realistic use of lights is connected with day and night lighting and the proper adjustment of colours (whether black and white or multicolour). Contour light, especially side light, reveals the nature and emotions of a character. It creates a real, tangible, emotional image.

18 Ibid.
20 Płażeński, Język filmu.
3. Compositional structure. It is framing, spatial organisation of images. It can underscore the emotions expressed through art.22 A similar effect is achieved by decomposing elements or eliminating them (dummies without limbs, crumbling, dilapidated buildings, no visible horizon.23 Emotions such as anger and happiness and hope require a stimulus that would help to identify them. On the other hand, sadness is mostly evoked by the character being isolated or through barren landscape. A feeling of guilt can be evoked by both means. Fear and anger can be aroused by other measures, limiting the field of vision, geometrization of images, blurring the perspective through specific framing and oblique lines.24 Sadness and joy are evoked by soft lines and their blurring. Emotions can be also evoked by a specific juxtaposition of images, change of frames, both significant in the process of film editing.25

4. Stylistic elements. They play an important role in the emotional message of a visual work. They are meaningful, they order and condense emotions. It is difficult to establish one-to-one correspondences between stylistic figures and emotions. Their interpretation can be gradual and metaphor-based. Anger, wrath, or hatred can be interpreted on the basis of an excessive repetition of elements or their rhythmic nature (refrain). A visual work of art can also employ multimodal metaphors, e.g. auditory-visual ones. An implicit role is played by grotesque, which can trigger a smile or a feeling of fear.26 Each of the emotions has its own repertoire of symbols (visual symbols), the use of which refers to a specific emotion, whether in film or literature, e.g. mythology or the Bible (black ravens—fear).27 Signs and symbols do not necessarily have to be a visual symbol of an emotion to evoke it. What is interesting, a single use of a symbol can evoke emotions different from those evoked by the repeating symbol, and its function can change.

from informative to cautionary, where fear becomes the primary emotion.\textsuperscript{28} The COVID-19 pandemic fostered the creation of new symbols or attributed well-known symbols with new meaning, it triggered new emotions. The use of auditory-visual harmony and dissonance can also intensify the expressed emotions.

5. Aesthetic values. Mieczysław Wallis makes a distinction between soft and sharp aesthetic values. The soft ones are beauty, attractiveness, evoking pleasant feelings. The sharp ones are tragedy, grotesque, being characteristic, expressive ugliness but also loftiness.\textsuperscript{29} Joy, hope, happiness can be evoked by the beauty of landscape. Fear, anger, sadness, terror, grief appear in the context of ugliness, decay in the form of emotions being directed at an object, subject or a state.

6. Presentation of characters. Reality or fiction-based characters are carriers of emotions. Similarly to other formal elements of a visual work of art, the character-related emotional message may be interpreted subjectively. There are certain visual elements, e.g. crying, which can be associated with joy, sadness, anger. Anger (aggression, fury, irritation) can be expressed through facial expressions, clenched fists, dilated pupils, shouting, crying. Sadness, guilt, humiliation is evoked by crying, dropped gaze, thoughtfulness, stillness.

7. Sound. Music, murmur, silence, verbal elements are specific for art based on moving pictures. Verbal narration is a clear emotional element subject to interpretation. When combined with pictures, visual elements, it can trigger ironic and comic elements, changing the intention behind the work. Music is the most emotion-laden element of a visual work of art. It can be an illustration of emotions, it can complement them, create a third dimension, or be their contrast\textsuperscript{30} in the form of background music.\textsuperscript{31} Sadness can be evoked by a music theme, song chorus, musical instrument. Fear, anxiety, uncertainty, anger are evoked by specific themes, just like happiness is. It is claimed that particular sounds, instruments can evoke certain emotions and create a proper mood, atmosphere.\textsuperscript{32}


\textsuperscript{29} Mieczysław Wallis, “Wartości estetyczne łagodne i ostre,” in Wybór pism estetycznych, ed. Teresa Pękała (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 197–213.

\textsuperscript{30} Cf. Janusz Płisiecki, Film i sztuki tradycyjne (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1999).


\textsuperscript{32} Zofia Lissa, Estetyka muzyki filmowej (Kraków: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Muzyczne, 1964).
2.3 CONTENT TOOLS FOR EXAMINING EMOTIONS IN AUDIOVISUAL ARTS

The most important content tools are:

1. Title. It can reveal the character of the work. The title should be attractive, not only in terms of included information but also emotions, the foundations of contemporary culture. During the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, many works incorporate “COVID-19” into their titles in order to draw attention and provoke a whole range of emotions, creating dyads of emotions based on similarities or differences.

2. Topic. Theoretically, it evokes the expected emotions in the quickest way by referring to them directly. The topic of a visual work of art can be interpreted separately, as the specificity of photography, recordings, graphics, or a component of the main message. Such an approach relates COVID-19 directly to being lonely in isolation understood literally or in its social sense.

3. Motif:
   - visual: static motifs which present the three-dimensional world, and dynamic motifs which evolve in the course of time.\(^{33}\) They can be of a given concrete character, e.g. sadness is evoked by a black-and-white photography, rain, mist, or of a dynamic character, e.g. happiness can be evoked both by rain and the sun. Visual motifs alluding to the SARS-Cov-2 pandemic may reach for well-known artistic topic, deeply rooted in mythology, religion, pop culture, etc.
   - musical: soundtracks rely on musical motifs, which can be described as performing the following functions: to remind, to repeat, to describe, to comment upon. All of them can help to create the emotional atmosphere of a work of art.

Motifs can assume the function of symbols and visual signs.\(^{34}\) Their interpretation is possible through references to academic literature, e.g. semiotic analyses.\(^{35}\)

---

\(^{33}\) Janusz Plisiecki, *Film i sztuki tradycyjne* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo UMCS, 1999).


CONCLUSIONS

Defining visual arts/audiovisual arts is a challenge since it embraces various disciplines. It has an effect on the studies of visual arts, introducing interdisciplinary research tools and theories (transdisciplinary approach, paradigmatic eclecticism, methodological syncretism). Studies on creation and reception of artistic works in the context of emotions point towards a dichotomy between the intellectual, cognitive and emotional, aesthetic sphere. Other approaches highlighted one sphere at the cost of the other. Therefore, a proper way seems to study emotions in accordance with “interdisciplinary, paradigmatic eclecticism and methodological syncretism.” Such an approach can be adopted in studies of emotions inherent in visual arts, offering its own metalanguage, but also openness and a broader academic perspective and originality. What is more, the aim of communication through visual arts is having an effect on knowledge, approaches, emotions in the addressee, motivated by the needs of one side of the process, or two sides. Studying emotions inherent in visual works should provide knowledge on emotions from the perspective of the author and the addressee of the work. This should also be an area of interest for further studies.

The abovementioned descriptions could be updated by detailed descriptions coming from the areas of film/video, photography/collage, animation/graphics.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


37 Ibid., 162.


SILVER, Alain, and James URSINI. The Vampire Film: From Nosferatu to True Blood. Milwaukee: Hal Leonard Corporation, 2011.


Perspective of the Audiovisual Arts: On Ways and Tools of Studying Emotions in the Current Visuals

Summary

Emotions in visual arts can be subject to an analysis on the level of the act of creation, the work itself, categories of technique and reception, as well as on the degree of division into form and content. Studies show a dichotomy between an intellectual (cognitive) sphere and an emotional (aesthetic) sphere, pointing to the role of recipients’ competence, allowing them to properly read the cultural and artistic code behind emotions presented in visual works.

The article is a theoretical review of methods, trends and tools for researching emotions in audiovisual arts. It presents ways of studying emotions in visual arts: film/video, photography/graphics, all available through the media. They should be discussed on three levels: emotional objectives of the sender, emotions inherent in the artistic work, and emotional reception. Works of visual arts combine virtual and actual realities, hence the way a visual work is created is important. Therefore, the article also presents tools for the study of emotions in audiovisual art on three levels: a) in relation to means of expression, b) aesthetic, and c) presenting content. The summary clearly shows the transdisciplinary nature and methodological syncretism of research on emotions in audiovisual art.

Keywords: emotions; work of art; audiovisuality; visual communication.

Perspektywa Sztuk Audyowizualnych: O Sposobach i Narzędziach Badania Emocji W Aktualnych Wizualizacjach

Streszczenie

Emocje w sztukach wizualnych mogą być przedmiotem analizy na poziomie aktu twórczego, samego dzieła, kategorii techniki i odbioru, a także stopnia podziału na formę i treść. Badania ukazują dychotomię pomiędzy sferą intelektualną (poznawczą) a emocjonalną (estetyczną).
wskazując na rolę kompetencji odbiorców, pozwalających na właściwe odczytanie kulturowego i artystycznego kodu emocji prezentowanych w dziełach wizualnych.

Artykuł jest teoretycznym przeglądem metod, trendów i narzędzi badania emocji w sztukach audiowizualnych. Przedstawia sposoby badania emocji w sztukach wizualnych: film/video, fotografia/grafika, wszystkie dostępne za pośrednictwem mediów. Należy je omawiać na trzech płaszczyznach: emocjonalnych celów nadawcy, emocji towarzyszących twórczości artystycznej oraz odbioru emocjonalnego. Dziesiąt wizualnych łączą rzeczywistość wirtualną i rzeczywistą, stąd ważny jest sposób tworzenia dzieła wizualnego. W związku z tym w artykule przedstawiono również narzędzia do badania emocji w sztuce audiowizualnej na trzech poziomach: a) w odniesieniu do środków wyrazu, b) estetycznego, c) prezentowania treści. W podsumowaniu wyraźnie widać transdyscyplinarny charakter i metodologiczny synkretyzm badań nad emocjami w sztuce audiowizualnej.

Słowa kluczowe: emocje; dzieło sztuki; audiowizualność; komunikacja wizualna.