

THE PLACE OF ICONICITY IN THE ANALYSIS OF A MEANING STRUGGLE

The analysis of the *blue headphones* case

Everyday experience is iconic, self, reason, morality and society are continuously defined in aesthetic, deeply experiential ways.

(Alexander, 2008a:18)

Nothing is true in itself – social processes create appearances of truth

(Alexander in Carballo, Cordero, Ossandón, 2008:528)

- Context

- The Ethnization of the civil sphere in Slovakia
- The negative perception of Roma minority

- Event

- Active shooter situation in residential part of the city
- 5 people “roma” family killed in the flat, 2 people killed in the street, 15 injured

- Representation

- Unexpected, uncomprehensible, threatening
- Wild east/ wild west, compared to US, Beirut, Sicilia...
- Victims were Roma explanation
- Critique from the NGO – displacement of roma explanation
- *Inadaptability* of the victims

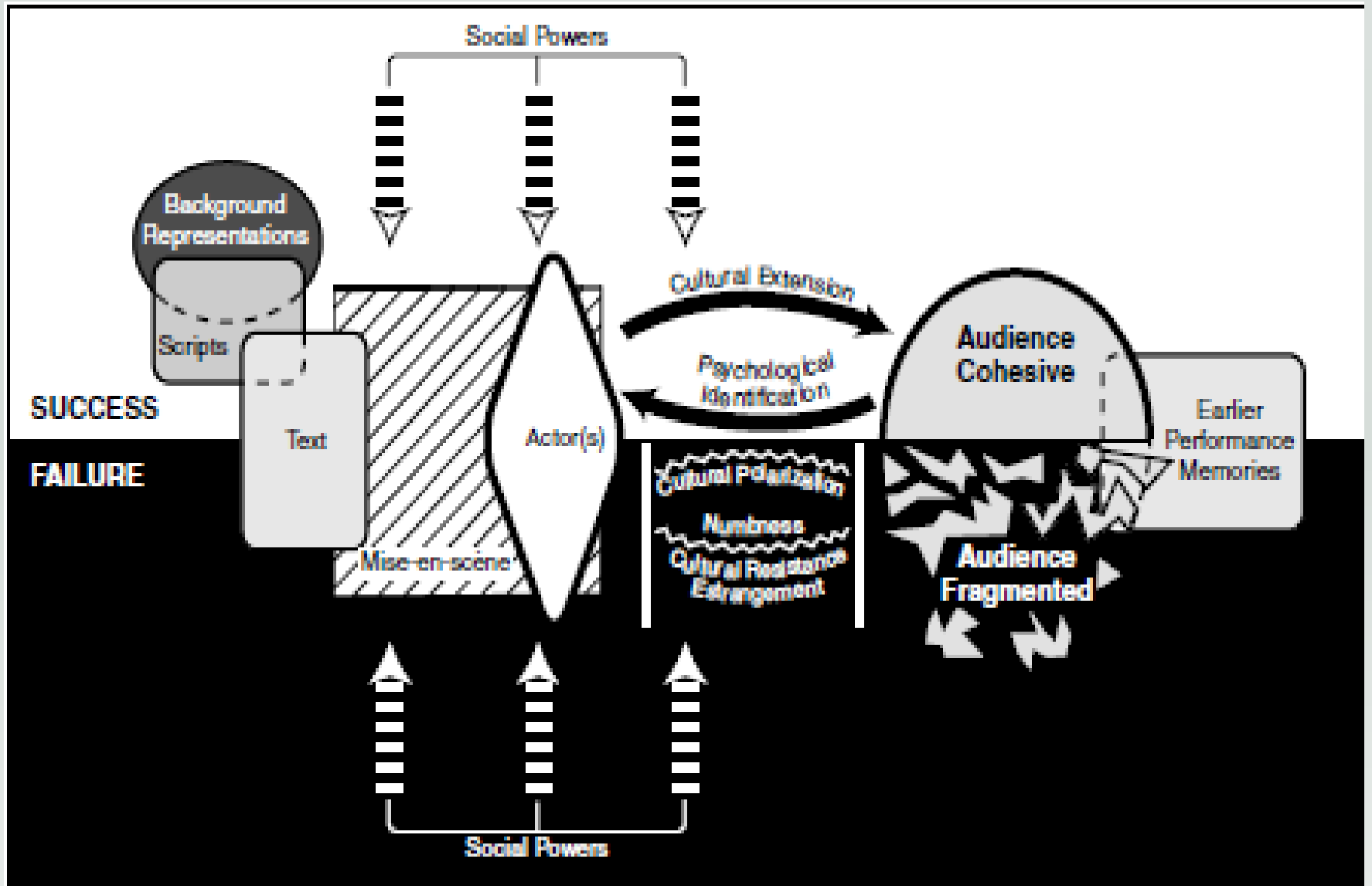
How do we analyse a meaning struggle?

- Structures (Mental, cognitive aspects)
 - Structuralist theories treat meaning as text
- Agency (Active performativity)
 - pragmatist theories that treat meaning as emerging from contingencies of individual and collective actions practices
- Materiality (Icons)
 - Are the subject of this presentation

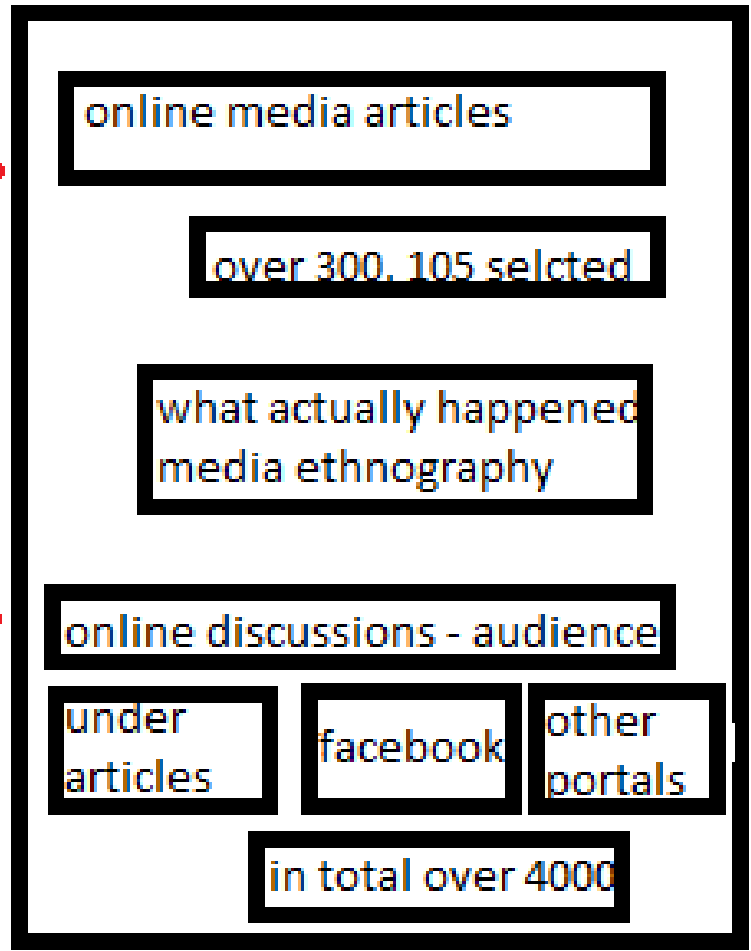
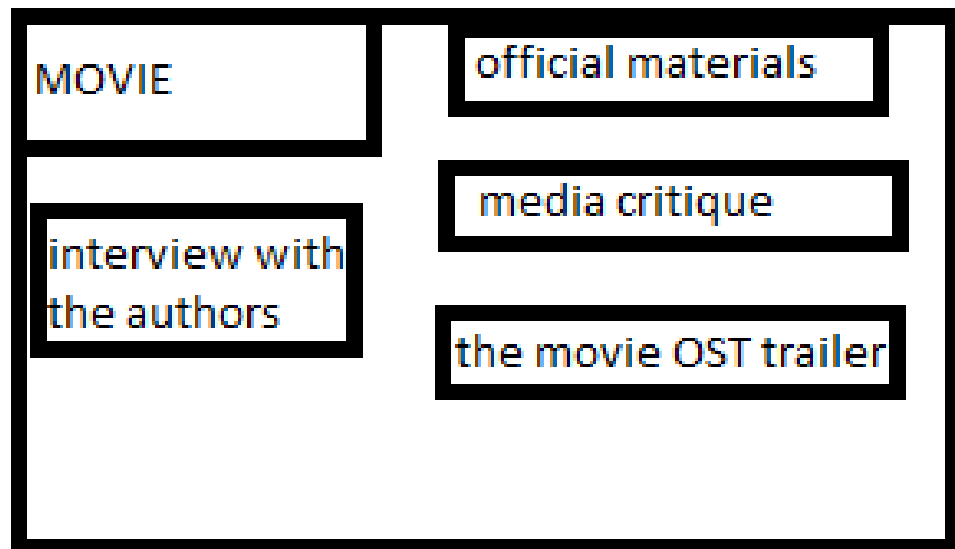
Theoretical background – cultural sociology

Is a set of theoretical frameworks that allow to study meaning in a specific way, so that it can be seen as:

- Dynamic
- Captured in transformation
- Understood in context
- Connected to the activity of the social actors
- Reflected in terms of social power relations
- Understood in terms of enhancing social cohesion and creating the basis of collectivities.



(Alexander, Giesen, Mast, 2006)



Social representations and icons?

- **Mental structures**, meaning and narratives

versus

- Iconic elements, visual, material and **tangible aspects**

How do they relate to each other?

Recent move away from the focus upon intangible meanings towards focusing upon materiality

“**Meaning** is made **iconically visible**, in other words by the beautiful, sublime, ugly or simply by the mundane **materiality of everyday life.**” (Alexander, 2008a:Abstract).

Surface versus Depth

- In accord with Durkheim (Alexander, 2008a:15), Alexander acknowledges the **importance of material objects**, in terms of “**tangible form**” but in which “**the intangible substance is represented**”.
- Study the **material aspects** but as filled with **meaning** (narratives).
- “**interplay between the surface and the depth**” (Alexander, 2010:324)
- One of the basic intellectual sources of cultural sociology is Saussure’s semiotics and the distinction between signifier and signified.



Aesthetic – cum - Moral

- Similar to the world of meaning and semiotics Alexander (2010:325) suggests to understand “**aesthetic surface as the visible signifier** and the **moral depth as the invisible signified**”
- “art carries a **moral message**”
- “**implicit personality theory**” This represents the tendency of people to ascribe personality traits to others according to their apparent visible characteristics. (Eagly et al. , 1991)
- “materiality is critical to establish types”. (Alexander, 2008b:7)
- We could say, that the iconic character of the objects points towards evaluation of the moral or immoral character representation of social groups, ascribed to them according to their aesthetic quality.
- In other words, we “**know how... an honest man looks like**”. Alexander (2008b:11),





Interplay between icons and meaning

- **IMMERSION** into the **ICONS** - Identification
- **Subjectification** = project myself on something
 - one might internalize this object, making it dissolve in self-subjectivity. It is a process of identification, during which, as Alexander (2008b:7) puts it, “one no longer sees the object but oneself, ones projections, one’s own convictions and beliefs.”
 - Projecting my qualities and characteristics on the perpetrator = he was one of us, he was good, decent, ordinary HE WAS LIKE US, ONE OF US
- **Materialization** = becoming something...
 - “subject falls into an object and loses oneself” (ibid:7). It is here that the members of the collectivity identify with the typified representations and fuse with them, not only by recognizing them as “ours” but becoming them
 - Becoming the perpetrator... identification... WE ARE THE SAME WE ARE HIM

Subjectification



Materialisation



Social performance (how icons “move us”)

- No longer only in mind, something thought of, but something **experienced**, something **felt** in the heart and the body.
- Alexander (2006) suggests that meanings, the structures, have to “**walk and talk**”. They are supposed to “**move in front of our eyes**” (Eyerman, 2004:4) At the same time, the “**audiences are *moved to participate***” (ibid:4) “
- The term movement here has particularly to do with emotions, but can also refer to or lead to physical actions. Just to remind that the word emotion etymologically comes from the word *emovare* – to move.





Conclusions – what to take out of it

- **Objects matter**, they draw our attention not only to the structures and the action, but also to the **materiality of the everyday life**.
- Daniel Miller (in Leitch, 2010:68) claims that “**objects** are not passive entities in the production, exchange, usage and meaning. They are **active in constituting social worlds**”.
- **surface versus depth dichotomy** – difference and interplay between what you see and touch and what it means - adding another analytical layer
- process of **generating social solidarity** - By the aid of immediate “**embodied and experienced**” knowledge, we can tell how “**good**” and “**bad**” people “**look like**”

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