

[WLG]

WIENER LINGUISTISCHE GAZETTE

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Special print from: *Wiener Linguistische Gazette* (WLG) 97 (2024):
421–433

Special Issue *Reden · Schreiben · Handeln. Festschrift für Helmut Gruber*
Ed. by Martin Reisigl, Jürgen Spitzmüller, Florian Grosser, Jonas
Hassemer, Carina Lozo und Vinicio Ntouvlis

University of Vienna · Department of Linguistics · 2024

Owner, editor and publisher:

University of Vienna, Department of Linguistics
Sensengasse 3a
1090 Vienna
Austria

Editors: Florian Grosser, Jonas Hassemer & Carina Lozo

Editorial board: Markus Pöchtrager & Stefan Schumacher

Contact: wlg@univie.ac.at

Homepage: <http://wlg.univie.ac.at>

ISSN: 2224-1876

NBN: [BL,078,1063](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:5:1-63864-p0078-1063-9)

The WLJG journal is published in loose sequence and in open access format.
All issues as of 72 (2005) are available online.



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Wiener Linguistische Gazette (WLG)
Department of Linguistics
University of Vienna
Issue 97 (2024): 421–433

Abstract

This paper explores the visual representation of the future, drawing on examples from architectural rendering, science fiction and climate change imagery. Using Kress's and Van Leeuwen's theory of visual modality, the paper describes how images of the future display an intense surface realism, yet contain incongruities and inconsistencies that induce a sense of unreality.

Keywords: visual communication, modality, realism, future

1

The English language has no future tense. To denote the future it uses modal auxiliaries, words that express degrees of uncertainty: "The future in English is not so much a category of time as a sphere of judgment about which English allows speakers to be more or less definite and

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certain” (Kress & Hodge 1979: 133). Modal expressions in turn almost always connote the future (Joos 1964: 129) – beliefs and intuitions, hopes and anxieties.

Like history, the future is written, and continuously rewritten, from the point of view of the present. Whorf has described how the Hopi express the future in terms of present practices that are “expected to carry forward, in both obvious and occult ways, into future events of interest” (1956: 148). For us, too, the future may be present in the present and the present in the future, for instance when referring to some kind of plan or arrangement, using the present tense to speak about the future (as in *The plane leaves at seven twenty*), but also when we project our hopes and fears into the future.

What about images? With images of the past, we are familiar. Old photographs show the symptoms of their ageing, now digitally simulated by internet applications such as Instagram to intentionally signify the past – through the discolorations that occur in both black and white photographs (sepia) and colour photographs, or through scratches and other kinds of negative damage (cf Spitzmüller’s concept of ‘historicity cue’, 2013: 258–264) But can images depict the future? And if so, does this involve modality? Can images convey the ‘not yet’, the hypothetical, the ‘maybe real’? Can they express our hopes and fears?

2

As Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) have argued, images may not have the equivalent of modal auxiliaries, but they can express degrees of reality, and they do so by varying the degrees to which specific means of visual expression are used: degrees of definition, ranging from the simplest line drawing to the finest rendition of detail; degrees to which the background is represented, ranging from plain backgrounds to maximally sharp, maximally defined backgrounds; degrees of colour saturation, ranging from the absence of saturation (black and white) to maximally intense colours; degrees of colour modulation, ranging from flat, unmodulated colour to the representation of all the nuances of a given coloured surface;

degrees of colour differentiation, ranging from monochrome to the widest possible variety of colours; degrees of depth articulation, ranging from the absence of depth representation to maximally deep perspective; degrees of tonal articulation, ranging from just two shades (for instance black and white or a light and a dark version of a particular colour) to maximal tonal gradation; and degrees of the rendition of light and shadow, ranging from the absence of shadow representation to maximum variation in the depth of shadows, with options like simple hatching in between.

Consider the images in newspapers. Political cartoons are traditionally in black and white (they may now be 'coloured in' with a limited number of subdued colours) and have reduced detail and minimal representation of depth, background, light fall and tonal gradation. This then contrasts with news photographs, which use colour, have higher definition, and show depth, the play of light and shade, and so on. Such differences express the validity of these image genres as 'representations' of the real. Political cartoons represent opinions, news photos are meant to represent facts, to provide reliable documentary information. To the degree that newspaper drawings increase their modality and news images reduce it, the boundary between what is presented as opinion and what as fact becomes blurred.

But that is not the whole story. The value of the particular positions on the modality scales I have just described varies with context (cf. Kress and Van Leeuwen 2021). Modality does not always decrease as articulation is reduced, as in the case of the political cartoon. If that were the case, simple line drawings would always have low modality and be judged as 'not real'. But despite their reduced articulation, scientific line diagrams are clearly meant to be read as valid representations of reality, not as opinions or fictions. There is therefore no fixed correspondence between modality judgments and points on the scales of articulation described above. Instead, the truth value of a given configuration of modality cues depends on the definition of reality preferred in the given context.

In many contexts, naturalistic modality remains dominant. Its definition of reality is perceptual: the more an image of something resembles what we think we would see if we saw that something in reality, the

higher its modality, although naturalistic modality judgments are also influenced by dominant image technologies. When black and white was the norm, colour was treated as 'more than real', exceeding the 'standard average photography' of the time, and therefore used for relatively unrealistic movie genres such as musicals and Westerns (cf. *The Wizard of Oz*, which shifts to colour once Dorothy enters the 'Land of Oz'), while documentaries and serious contemporary dramas tended to be in black and white. Today, colour is the norm and black and white tends to be used to represent the past or to connote the artistic photograph, harking back to the mid-20th century masters of photography, as for instance in certain kinds of advertisements for luxury goods.

In abstract modality, common in scientific visuals and modern art, reality is equated with the deeper 'essence' of what is represented or the general pattern underlying superficially different specific instances. This is expressed by reduced articulation. Specifics of illumination, nuances of colour, the details that create individual difference are all irrelevant from the point of view of this kind of "inner reality" (Williams 1976: 260).

In technological modality the practical usefulness of the image prevails. The more an image can be used as a blueprint or aid for action, the higher its modality. Many maps are of this kind and so are patterns for dress making, architectural drawings and the assembly instructions of 'do it yourself' kits. The corresponding modality configurations will tend towards strongly decreased articulation. Perspective, for instance, will be reduced to zero as foreshortening would make it difficult to take accurate measurements from the image.

Finally, there is the possibility of sensory modality, which is based on the effect of pleasure or displeasure visuals can bring about, and which is realised by a degree of articulation that is amplified beyond the point of standard average naturalism, so that definition, colour depth, the play of light and shade, etc, become, from the point of view of naturalistic modality 'more than real'. Sensory modality is therefore used in contexts where pleasure matters, in food photography and perfume ads for instance, but also to induce the opposite of pleasure, for instance in

surrealistic dream landscapes or in horror films where the slimy scales of lizard-like monsters will be rendered in extra fine detail.

One further observation needs to be made here. In one and the same image, some things may be represented in greater detail than others to express their relative 'reality' value in the given context. Artists often use this. When El Greco painted commissioned portraits of well to do citizens, he took pains to render the texture of their dress and expensive fineries in great detail, for instance the fur wrap in his *Lady in a Fur Wrap* (1580). But in *St Francis of Assisi* (1600) he represented the Saint's dress in less detail, as St Francis had voluntarily renounced his worldly goods and the values that came with it. Only the rope he used for a belt, the symbol of his voluntary poverty, was presented in vivid detail. In the one case wealth was valued, in the other poverty. To give a contemporary example, Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 98–100) contrast modality in an American *Delta Force* computer war game set in the Middle East (Novalogic 2005) with the modality in *Special Force*, a computer war game designed by Hezbollah and also set in the Middle East (Hezbollah Internet Central Bureau 2001). The former renders the military technology in fine detail, while the background remains a relatively featureless, generic desert. The latter renders the weaponry in less detail but the environment, the villages where the skirmishes actually occurred, in much greater detail. The former stressed the value of military might, the latter that of historical accuracy.

3

Modality analysis can be applied to images of the future, as has been done, for instance by Maagaard (2013). It can show how images of the future are made to look 'not yet real'. *Realfeel*, an Australian company based in Melbourne, produces architectural renderings, images of environments that do not yet exist, and may never exist. The company advertises these as highly realistic images of buildings and products which communicate "functional design intent" in a way that is "flattering and immediately accessible" to prospective investors or clients (www.realfeel.com.au [last

accessed: 27/08/2024)). One of the images on their website shows the interior of a yet to be built apartment. The room is bright, with sunlight pouring in through the large windows. The furniture is brand-new, spotless and maximally functional, with nothing out of place, a “machine to live in” as Le Corbusier (1986 [1927]: 5) famously put it. But there are also plants, a vase of tulips on the table, a glass bowl with apples on the kitchen bench in the foreground.

The image makes the future look attractive. It has high naturalistic, almost sensory modality, especially when enhanced by the glossy luminance of the computer screen. We see the weave of the carpet, the brush strokes on the abstract painting on the wall, the reflections of nearby objects on the glass table, and the play of light and shade, for instance the sharply delineated shadow of the plant on the pristine wall behind it. And yet the image conveys a sense of unreality.

Close inspection shows where this sense of ‘unreality’ might come from. The elongated shadow of the plant, for instance, suggests late afternoon. But the exterior, as seen through the window, would seem to indicate the middle of the day, and many of the other shadows are less sharply delineated, less elongated, and falling in a different direction. The bowl of apples in the foreground is too small, compared to the tap of the kitchen sink and the tulips on the dining table are perhaps too big in comparison to the bowls with which the table is laid, ready for a meal.

What is the function of such unrealities? In his book on early Netherlands painting, Panofsky (1971: 141) argued that artists often signpost symbolic meanings through touches of unreality, even in highly realistic styles. He called these ‘disguised symbols’. In *Madonna in a Church* (1438–1440), Jan van Eyck painted the architecture of the church and the way the light falls through its tall windows with great accuracy and in fine detail. But the Madonna is too large in relation to the building and the shadow she casts suggests that the light is coming from the North, which cannot be right, given that the chapels of Gothic churches were always built facing West rather than East. This, Panofsky suggests, was deliberate. Jan van Eyck was perfectly capable of painting her to scale, but he did not. Her size was therefore a disguised symbol. However realistic the painting looks, however finely rendered the details may be,

the painting is, in the end, not a picture of Madonna in the Church, but a picture that makes a theological point, a picture of Madonna *as* the Church as “an embodiment in human form of the same spiritual force or entity that is expressed, in architectural terms, in the basilica enshrining her” (Panofsky 1971: 143). And the sunlight, similarly, is “not the light of nature, but the Light Divine disguised as the light of day” (Panofsky 1971: 147).

In Realfeel’s image of the yet to be built living room, future living is likewise endowed with symbolic values. The apartment is depicted as a kind of heavenly mansion suffused with light, and just as not everything is realistic in Van Eyck’s painting, so here not everything is functional. The values of naturalistic perceptual modality mix with conceptual, symbolic values to create an idealized, almost paradisiacal vision of the future – too immaculate, too flawless to be true.

In another visualization, Realfeel presents a panoramic high angle of Sydney’s Oxford Street by night, looking towards the centre of the city, with the south end of Taylor Square in the foreground. Much of the image is photographic, but the foreground has been altered. There are trams which do not yet exist and the square is newly landscaped, with brightly lit water features on the left and a market with marquee style stalls on the right (there have been occasional markets in this square, but only in day time). The image was commissioned by Darlinghurst Business Partnership, a group of local businesses and community leaders who are promoting the redevelopment of the area, which is currently in decline.

It is, again, a high modality picture, which nevertheless also has a touch of unreality about it because of the many incongruities it contains. The tram, strangely empty, has a single current collector on its roof, but there are no overhead wires. The spots of light on its roof do not seem to come from any detectable streetlight and serve as luminary accents, enlivening the picture and making the tram look new and shiny. The tram enters from the right bottom of the image and rides on the right track of two tracks even though Australia has left hand driving, also for trams. The marquees on the right serve as light sources, casting an ethereal glow on the footpath. The people walking in the square, alone or

in couples, are symmetrically distributed and look rather homogeneous, all white, with, for the most part, dark hair.

Overall the image tries to project the Committee's bright vision of night life in the city – a far cry from Taylor Square as it currently is, as described, for instance in a Lonely Planet guide book (<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/australia/sydney/taylor-square/> [last accessed: 27/08/2024])

You know it's been a rough night if you wake up in Taylor Square – a vaguely diffuse paved area straddling the gay hub of Oxford Street. The stern Greek Revival Darlinghurst Courthouse (1842) watches the goings-on, no doubt disapprovingly.

Architectural images of this kind border on the sensory, allowing the future to not only be observed but also felt “so that it is as if you are actually standing there in person”, as the Realfeel website has it (<https://realfeel.com.au> [last accessed: 27/08/2024]). Yet they also exude a strange emptiness, a lack of signs that the world it depicts is actually lived in, so that the future remains remote, something we can look at, but not enter. Small anomalies, which viewers may not even be consciously aware of, may then hint at the values behind the vision of the future which the image projects.

4

Like 3D architectural visualizations of apartments in future apartment blocks, many science fiction space crafts and space stations also look like heavenly mansions. The interiors of Star Trek's *Starship Enterprise*, for instance, are bright, spacious and empty. The large control room is functionally furnished with aeroplane chairs in cream leather, aerodynamically shaped desks with a touch of mahogany to provide a sense of luxury, and computer screens discretely tucked away in niches, much as in the first-class compartments of many airlines. Luminous surfaces, reflections on the shiny floor and the play of light and shade create high, near sensory modality. But these interiors also draw on a symbolism that has deep historical roots. The central control room is a dome, and the

corridors are curved. Hughes (1968: 14) has likened the ‘flying saucer’ structure of such spaceships to the ‘mandorla’, the cloud on which God resides in late Medieval paintings:

What is a flying saucer but a kind of horizontal mandorla, round in plan, but elliptical when seen edge-on, in which incomprehensibly powerful and technologically advanced beings descend from outer space – and take off from earth.

But the future may bring heaven as well as hell. The corridors of the spaceship in Ridley Scott’s *Alien: Covenant* (2013) are dark and full of gloomy greys and rusty reds. Here, too, texture is rendered in detail and gleams of light draw attention to the pipelines, the cables, the valve hand wheels, the instrument panels. But these textures are repellent rather than attractive and bathed in eery greenish light. When spaceships get damaged, order has descended into chaos, with twisted wires hanging from the ceiling and debris piled up on the floor as in Tarkovsky’s *Solaris* (1972) which was perhaps the first film to depict this kind of decay, and make *earth*, rather than Heaven, look like a paradise, in scenes accompanied by J. S. Bach’s organ music.

The same contrast can be seen in the characters that inhabit these spaces. There is, on the one hand, the brightly lit world of tightly knit teams with a collective identity, yet also with humanizing individual differences, as expressed by their dress – clean, functional, uniform-like versions of the fashions of the day. The *Star Trek* cast, for example, wore mustard yellow, pale blue or red pullovers and tunics with black collars; the astronauts of *Forbidden Planet* (1956) steely grey jumpsuit uniforms with elaborate shoulder pieces. But there are also characters who draw on an iconography that goes back to the 10th century, when the devil, as depicted in Western art, began to acquire a bestial appearance (cf. Pastoureau 2013) – hairy, often with a snout or muzzle, horns or pointed ears and cloven hoofs, and accompanied by demonic creatures with human as well as animal features, paws ending in eagle talons, and cruel teeth. The images of hell created by 16th century artists such as Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel are full of characters of this kind. Contemporary images of the future draw on this, using a time-honoured

set of signifiers of doom and evil in ever new combinations. Human figures acquire horns or pointed ears, snouts, deformed or trunk-like noses with exaggerated nostrils, sharp teeth, claw-like hands with sharp nails, and extreme hirsuteness. Animals with lizard-like scales or insect-like breastplates walk upright and speak like humans. Again, the depiction of these characters uses sensory modality, enhancing the bristled hair, the slimy or scaly skin, the rawness of scars and disfigurements, so instilling fear of the future, just as did the painted hell and brimstone sermons of the past.

One further example. In the 1960s version of *The Time Machine*, Rod Taylor, as the Time Traveller, arrives in the year 802701 at the dome where the Eloi live. The building, bright and spacious, looks like a flying saucer. But, like the space station in *Solaris*, it has fallen into decay and lost its heavenly gloss. Like the cast of *Star Trek*, the Eloi wear light-coloured and more or less uniform costumes – dresses for the girls, tunics for the boys (the Eloi seem to have acquired eternal youth) and live a collective life. But luscious and abundant as the fruit on their dining tables may be, there is no sense of bliss in this heaven – the Eloi are listless and indifferent.

The Morlocks, by contrast, live in darkness and fear the light. They have large noses and mouths, sharp teeth and claw-like hands, and their skin has a greenish cast – green, as Pastoureau has shown (2013: 99), has long been the colour of dragons and serpents, signifying their evil and dangerous nature. It was also the colour of ghosts before ghosts turned white and often combined with viscous and pustular skins.

In the film Rod Taylor only just escapes the Morlocks with his time machine. The dark forces seem to have gained the upper hand here, as in many other 20th century visions of the future. A utopian future, a world of plenty, of heavenly bliss and of eternal youth appears to have been achieved, but it has not yielded what it promised and turned out to be empty and lifeless, so opening the door for a return of the forces of darkness.

5

Today, many images of the future project the catastrophic results of climate change. Greenpeace, for instance, has intentionally created and distributed many images of this kind (cf Doyle 2014). These images are not computer-generated or staged for science fiction movies or television series. They record places and events that exist today, but they make them stand for apocalyptic visions of the future that go back to the Book of Revelations, which described a future where “a third of the earth was burned up, and a third of the trees were burned up and all green grass was burned up” (Revelations 8:7) and where “the sun and the air were darkened with smoke” (Revelations 9:2). As Schneider and Nocke (2014a: 17) have commented, in what they call “the image politics of climate change”, “old religious images like Judgment Day or biblical plagues become linked with images of a threatening climate catastrophe”.

Looking for ‘climate change’ images on Getty Images produces more than 6000 images, but they are all variations on a limited set of themes, and they all see signs of the future in the present. Apart from the now iconic polar bear stranded on an ice floe, there are images of dry, cracked earth on which nothing grows, with or without animal skulls or a single dead tree; of bushfires with orange skies dimming the light of the sun, or of their ash-grey aftermath; of steam arising from the factory chimneys of the cooling towers of coal-fired power plants, often with a background of menacing black storm clouds; of shattered ice floes in Arctic or Antarctic seas; and of muddy water flooding the streets of towns and villages.

Although these images record real bushfires, floods, and so on, they have the same sensory modality as the dystopian science fiction images discussed earlier. They must make tangible the heat of the fire, the dryness of the cracked earth, the suffocating effect of inhaling smoke. But they also draw on symbols. An iconic (and less documentary) image, published by *Der Spiegel* in 1986, shows the Cathedral of Cologne as the only building still sticking out of an endless expanse of water (Gritman, 2014: 128). A Greenpeace poster described by Doyle (2014: 233) not only uses a limited colour scheme of red, yellow and black, it also represents what at first looks like a sunset – but this sun, dimmed by the red sky,

has the shape of a nuclear mushroom cloud, and its reflection on the ripples of the black sea forms the phrase 'climate time bomb'.

As Grittman suggests (2014: 131), these images depict risk, and risk always anticipates possible futures. She quotes Beck to underline this point (2009: 3):

Risk leads a dubious, insidious, would-be, fictitious, allusive existence: it is existent *and* non-existent, present *and* absent, doubtful *and* real.

Something similar could be said of all images of the future. What they show does not yet exist, yet it has a strong sensory presence. They display an intense surface realism, yet they contain incongruities and inconsistencies that induce a sense of unreality. In all this, the future, as it has been imagined, and continues to be imagined, in Western images, remains a projection of the present, reflecting all its contradictions, all its risks and uncertainties, all its hopes and fears.

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