

■ WINDOW DISPLAY AS COMMUNICATION

Isabel Guimaraes

*Design Department, FAUTL/Faculdade de Arquitectura Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, Lisbon, Portugal.
Email: guimaraes.isabel@gmail.com*

Lately there has been a recognition of window presentation value as a potential consumer's attraction strategy and the reinforcing of a brand image. In an over offer market where the consumer is becoming more demanding, appears a renewed interest on the behalf that not only the passerby feels allured by a lifestyle communication but also by creative presentations, being window presentation considered as a competitive factor. Still a subject of few researches, dependent on society's dynamics and its trends, along with the fact of comprehending a diversity of subjects, becomes a considerable complex theme. Therefore, we decided to approach it under what we consider one of its main views: as a communication act.

As final considerations we advocate an alteration of the window displayer status and required skills, an ecological attitude in window presentation as well as an investment on the development of exhibition gimmicks, as versatility and creativity enhancer.

Keywords: Window presentation, Window display, Communication, Visual merchandising, Design.

1. OBJECTIVES

With this study we intend to confirm if window presentation may be compared to a communication act, according to Roman Jakobson's graphic scheme, and through the collection of real examples in Paris, which, in Europe, is the city of window presentation by excellence. With that comparison we desire to attend an approach to the theme's interdisciplinarity and therefore be able to apply this new knowledge to the improvement and innovation of window display in general, considering the importance of this subject in our daily sceneries, which includes the behavior of the potential consumer.

Considering that window presentation is still a subject of few researches we also expect with this study to contribute to its affirmation and elucidate how it may be related to other subjects, as well as how qualified their practitioners should be.

This way we expect to contribute to a wider knowledge in this matter, therefore, to the society.

2. INTRODUCTION

Society is an organism in permanent evolution and mutation. An analysis and attentive look at it, from the ones who intervene in it, is fundamental, because the sceneries in which we move create circumstance (allow and restrain), they are the shelter of gestures and daily choices of the citizen. Due to the presence, interference and influence of visual merchandising in our everyday life, the lack of research on such subject as window presentation may be seen as negligence or absence of critical judgement by those who intervene in the society's public spaces.

“Cristallization of the spirit of the moment, brief and intangible, places where the epoch retains itself; the stores, form on the ground floor of our real estate a peculiar stratum of the city where our first impressions and contacts are born.” [1]

Shop windows are an aesthetic reference on the urban landscape. Spaces that are juxtaposed, offer us, simultaneously with the city's own reflex, a constant metamorphose of the city streets, by its successive glassy creations of diverse nature, whether elitist, popular, more or less typical. Images done and undone, illuminate the city at night reflecting lifestyles, expressing a season, being often the first impression when we arrive to a new city.

Window presentation which, at first sight, may be seen as minor and a very specific sector of commercial activity, till the mid 1990's

“was still a specific practice, limited to a small group of professionals (the window displayers), in general with no strategic content. Essentially it was asked to a shop window to be pretty and attractive. It was rare investing a large quantity of money in that activity, dedicate studies to it or appealing to professionals or artists of main importance.” [2]

In the last years, the brands with chain stores, of great proliferation, and which have been investing in window presentation, have had preference for specific areas in the cities — the main commercial and touristic streets — and, therefore, wherever we go, almost every time we find them together, on one hand, gaining strength for that union (by forming another commercial pole), and on the other, trying to highlight from each others through marketing strategies, which intend to be visually appealing and preferred.

The act of exhibiting a product emblazons it, and the way it is shown intends to be a way of communicating with the passerby, attracting his attention and inducing him to shopping, attaining so the window presentation's goal. That exhibition, when designed within that prepositions, has a narrative and dramaturgic sense, precisely by the communicative side which intends to enhance certain aspects or values of the exhibited product, of its brand and, consequently, of the one who becomes its consumer.

The value of window presentation has been more often recognized by the major companies as an important marketing instrument, that is, as visual merchandising, which consists in promoting products through image and a strategic exhibition display. Thus seems to exist now a renewed interest in window display, as public space “entertainment” and as brand identification. Through window presentation the brands intend to attract the potential consumer (making him a real consumer) and consolidate the brand image.

The fact that we now live in an over offer market, with a more and more exigent consumer to whom the product's functionality is not enough as sales argument, makes that window presentation is also a competition factor, as we verify that the consumer feels seduced by lifestyle proposals communicated through presentations performed in a creative way.

3. BACKGROUND

According to Fiske (1982), in communication studies there are two main stream researches, one that sees communication as a “flux of information” and another that understands it as “production and exchange of meaning”. The first is the procedural school of communication and the other is the semiotics school [3].

Our approach to window presentation as communication has as reference Roman Jakobson's (1896–1982) theory, the russian linguist. According to Jakobson (1960), the components of any linguistic process can be arranged in a graphic scheme (Figure 1) of six inseparable poles [4]. This has been accepted later to any act of communication (verbal or not), including visual communication.

We find it possible to establish a parallelism between Jakobson's six poles in communication (and respective functions) and the six poles in window presentation (Figure 2), seeing it also as a communication act.

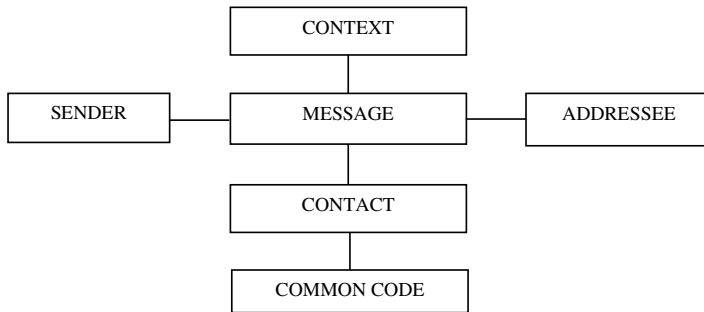


Figure 1. “The six poles in communication” in Jakobson, R. (1960).

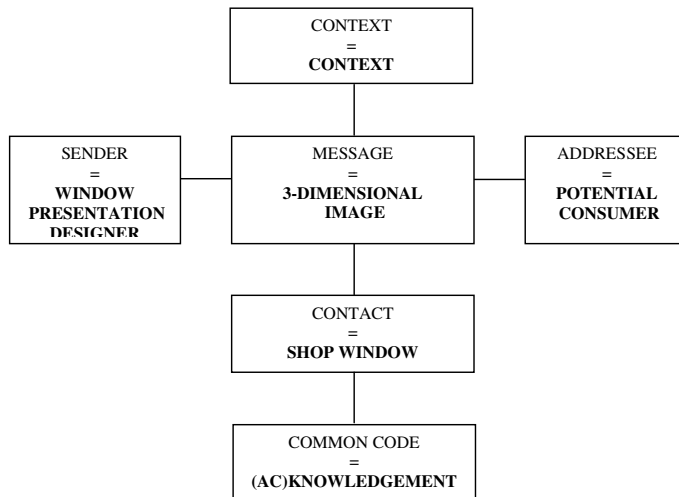


Figure 2. “The six poles in Window Presentation” (adapted from Figure 1: “The six poles in communication”, according to Jakobson [1960]) in Guimaraes, I. (2010).

4. A COMMUNICATION ACT

Is, then, window presentation comparable to a communication act? This is our question, although considering that window presentation is a subject that interacts with several other subjects in its concretization.

Approaching the window presentation subject through the metaphor that seems the main viewpoint — window presentation as communication — we will confirm that both subjects are comparable.

4.1. Sender/Window Presentation Designer

The window presentation designer [sender] has the *emotive* function in communication, which, as a result of its personal attitudes and choices, is subjective. The window presentation designer of a preeminent brand is a qualified professional with skills which differ widely from the traditional window displayer (who nowadays is the technician, not the creator). A decisive and creative part is trusted to the first, who is more and more determinant in the brand’s message communicating process, convincing the client and inducing him to consumption and satisfaction through the products exhibition. This professional must build a seducer and strong message, which contains a narrative that allows to each passerby a personal/individual reading in a way that a “contract” and an emotional bound take place between product/brand and consumer. Such product, with an individual and cultural meaning must,



Figure 3. *Sonia Rykiel*, Paris Photo by the author (Dec.'09).

Note on Figure 3: *Sonia Rykiel's* Window Presentation Designer always makes a book selection which is presented as part of the window design, as a critical statement.

in some way, represent the store's content and the brand's identity and values, being synthetic and characterizing a lifestyle to which the consumer feels identified.

Therefore, in such brands, the window presentation designer is usually an arts professional (designer, architect, set designer, etc.) with considerable visual arts and semiotics knowledge.

4.2. Addressee/Consumer

The consumer [addressee] has the *conative* function in communication, which tries to involve him and make him adopt a certain behavior. He is seduced by stimulus, usually at sells point, through the perception process, being the lighting design often an attraction factor. The products exhibition and the way it is done, as well as the packaging and promotional materials in the store can be stimulus. Therefore, as many buying decisions aren't made until the consumer is at the store, the stimulus at the sells point are important as selling instruments, specially useful to promote the shopping impulse, by provoking in the consumer a rapid need to have the product. To stimulate consumption, sensory marketing is very used, it makes the consumer live the buying experience according to his own knowledge universe. Semiotics study is important to understand the consumer behavior because semiotics examines the correspondence between signs and symbols and its part in meaning



Figure 4. *Repetto* (shoe store), Paris Photo by the author (Dec.'09).

Note on Figure 4: All the lightness and elegance transmitted by this presentation and its lighting design evoke the identity of a ballet dancer as stimulus to the potential consumer, associating such characteristics to the product sold inside the store — shoes, and consequently to its consumer.



Figure 5, 6. *Louis Vuitton*, Paris, Champs Elysées Photos by the author (Dec.'09).

Note on Figures 5, 6: *Louis Vuitton*, a French brand, intentionally is located in one of the most visible corners of Champs Elysées (icon avenue of the city of Paris). It features among the other buildings through its architectural concept based on the brand's logo which often is also repeated and literally enlightened in its window's presentation, as seen here. So the identity of the brand is simultaneously reinforced through context, in an urban, architectural and window presentation scale.

attribution, that is, how to communicate with the consumer when creating relations between the products and the desired attributes, existing a correspondence between stimulus and meanings of signs. The consumer uses products (with learnt meanings) to express his social identity; the memory process has a fundamental role as it is through recognition that the potential consumer gives meanings to the signs being possibly induced by them to shopping. The potential consumer projects his emotions on the window, his identity and a new proposal on his lifestyle in terms of use. For this reason, consumption can be understood as identity creation.

4.3. Context/Context

Context [context] has the *referential* function in communication, it emphasizes the message content and, directing to the circumstance and surround aspects, it informs. The context, in means of location, brand and trends, works often as selling argument, as for its own informs about the brand, its kind of consumer and the moment trends. It influences the window presentation and the consumer. The window location, concerning to urban space, may assure it a better visibility and a predisposition of the potential consumer to pay attention to it. It may also work only as a way to sell the brand's concept, that is, as branding. Location, brand and trends are part of the research and analyses for intervention in window presentation. So, to work as selling arguments and attraction factors will have to correspond to the characteristics of a specific market sector, implicating an adjustment between what the consumer wants, his preferential locations and the sociodemographic characteristics, which determine habits and consumption preferences.

4.4. Contact/Shop Window

The shop window [contact] has the *phatic* function in communication, through which the channel is tested as a mean of attracting attention and keep communication. In the chain that starts in production and goes to consumption, the shop window works as an interface between brand and consumer, so it is determinant. Communicates better and draws attention when is a society reflex and if contains signs that correspond to what the passerby is looking for and to which he identifies himself. Therefore, the shop window must be conceived according to the target consumer, in a way to draw attention and attend its selling purpose. The glass materiality plays an important role through refraction and reflex, as while it works as a mirror it produces a psychological effect of identity and illusion when it allows the passerby to get identified and see himself simultaneously associated with the urban surround and the window universe, stimulating the acquisition desire.



Figure 7. *Chanel*, Paris, Place de La Concorde Photo by the author (Dec.'09).

Note on Figure 7: The jewelry store dedicates only a small part of the window to the exhibition of the product, reflecting in the most part of it all the magnificence of the urban and architectonical surrounding together with the image of the potential consumer as a mirror so that he can see himself simultaneously associated with that universe and desire it.



Figure 8. *Galeries Lafayette*, Paris Photo by the author (Dec.'08).

Note on Figure 8: As children are the main target at *Galeries Lafayette's* Christmas Windows, besides the surprise and pleasure provoked on them by the theme's presentation also the seduction is usually achieved with manipulating plastic, iconic and linguistic signs.

4.5. Message/Three-dimensional image

The three-dimensional image [message] of the shop window has the *poetic* function, which, controlled in its physical and perceptible side, intends to provoke surprise and pleasure, besides trying to be innovative. The image is the result of the selection and combination of its parts — support and information — through plastic, iconic and, eventually, linguistic signs. It is a manipulating promise, being its implicit purpose lead to shopping. The image works as attraction element because it promises something, appealing whether to identification or to desire. What will make it more efficient will be the ability to understand how target consumers function, adjusting its conception to their characteristics.



Figure 9. *Moschino*, Paris Photo by the author (Dec.'07).

Note on Figure 9: This window presentation is directed to a certain target, assumed to know the fairy tale entitled “The gingerbread man”, the anthropomorphic hero, a cookie that can run away from every persuer but here seems to have completely lost that ability by being enchanted over the “Moschino woman” and so dancing according to her rules.

4.6. Common Code/(ac)knowledgement

The (ac)knowledgement [common code] has the *metalingual* function, which is verified when in message’s conception and interpretation the applied codes are understood. To occur communication there must be sharing of the implicit knowledge, and, depending on who we want to communicate with, we need to understand his social and cultural cognitive universe to influence the person’s perception and interpretation. There must be understanding of the behavior, the thinking and feeling of the consumer. It depends, then, of the cognitive universe of each sender and addressee, that is, of the knowledge and the communication code sharing, in a way that an acknowledgement of the addressee takes place and the intended message is directed in an efficient way. The identification of a common language is fundamental and easier if it is close to reality and daylife of the target consumer, his needs, desires and behavior or, then, if it is weird, which can also be a way of provocation.

5. CONCLUSIONS

According to the confirmed possible comparison of our study between a communication act (Roman Jakobson’s graphic scheme) and window presentation, we propose a graphic adaptation (Figure 3) which translates the verification of the interrelationship and influence of the six elements and functions that integrate window presentation when it attends the goal of attracting the potential consumer, that is, when it reaches the (ac) knowledgement by functioning as a system [5].

If not understood in its amplitude, the shop window and its display will be undervalued and may be considered as a neglected space of the store. The acquisition of status through image is not a new strategy; though it has a huge potential if it is consciously managed. We should then question who are the qualified professionals for the task, considering that they may privilege us with an improved image in our daily urban sceneries, besides influencing our behavior.

Considering the aesthetics importance of shop windows in urban landscape, as well as its condition of behavioral circumstance creators, it will be an undeniable benefit, whether to the professionals (window presentation designers) or to the potential consumer (not to be so vulnerable to its effects) to understand the logic of an effective window presentation.

About new ways to face window display, we suggest as one of the possibilities, a disciplinary intersection, being the shop window a space where an artist from plastic, performative or visual arts, may exhibit his work, crossing such display with visual merchandising strategies.

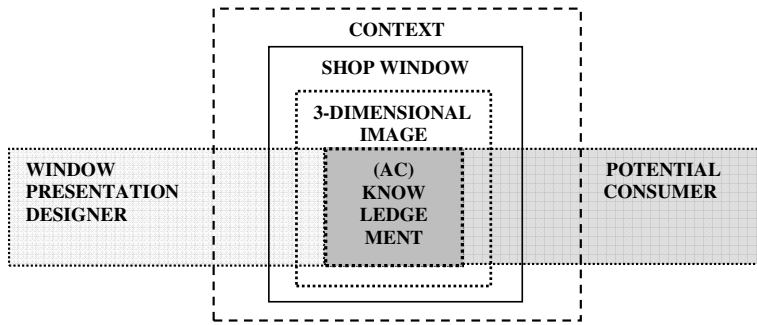


Figure 10. “The interrelationship and dynamic of the six poles in window presentation” (readapted from Figure 1 and Figure 2).

The inventiveness of ideas and materials, in an ecological attitude, as a sense of reuse and sustainability, should also be considered in window presentation, attending to the probable future restrained production and consumption.

Foreseeing the possibility of window presentation’s assertion through a “revolution” relating to the treatment of the shop window space, we advocate the development of gimmicks as infrastructural in it. These should include several possibilities for lighting design and allow the ability of mutating that space, enhancing its creativity and expressiveness, so emphasizing the window display as urban scenery.

In sum, we appeal to a closest attention at “window presentation” subject and to its practitioner’s skills, due to its interdisciplinarity and complexity, as well as relevance, whether for being part of our everyday sceneries or for the pertinent position in the production/consumption chain, an interface that tries to induce the passerby to become a consumer.

6. PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE

As a result of this study’s final conclusions, having now a closer comprehension of the principles of an effective window presentation, we are to start a new research, having Oporto’s (Portugal) downtown as a case study. Considering window presentation’s dynamics as a communication act and an interactive system, using the methodology of *Design Thinking*, we intend to verify if by applying the same principles to the so called traditional commerce (whose budget is much more restrained than one from a major brand) we can also attend the goal of inducing the potential consumer turning him to a real one, and with that contribute to the revitalization of Oporto’s downtown’s traditional commerce.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is based on the author’s Master dissertation *Window presentation: set design and communication? An approach to the theme’s interdisciplinarity*, supervised by

João Paulo Martins, Architect, PhD in Design, Professor at FAUTL (Faculdade de Arquitectura da Universidade Técnica de Lisboa), whom is gratefully acknowledge.

João Mendes Ribeiro, Architect, specialist in Set Design, also had a determinant and inspiring participation as interviewed on the author’s Master dissertation, for which is to be acknowledge.

Katja Tschimmel, Designer, PhD in Design, is supervisor on the author’s Doctoral Dissertation, and friendly counseled on this paper writing.

Sylvia Demetresco, Window presentation consultant, PhD in Communication and Semiotics, a reference on the theme “Window Presentation”, generously contributed as interviewed on the same Master dissertation and is now one of the supervisors of the author’s Doctoral Dissertation, which

results from the first and concerns to the improvement on traditional commerce's window presentation in Oporto's downtown.

Design Department/FAUTL, for the support and finalization of the Master Dissertation as well as the encouragement to proceed with the Doctoral dissertation.

REFERENCES & ESSENTIAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Fauconnet, F., Fitoussi, B. and Leopold, K., "Vitrines d'architectures: les boutiques à Paris", Editions du Pavillon de Arsenal, 1997, p. 10.
2. Demetresco, S., "Vitrinas em Diálogos urbanos", Editora Anhembi Morumbi, 2005, p. 15.
3. Fiske, J., "Introduction to Communication Studies", Methuen, 1982, pp. 42–43.
4. Jakobson, R., "Linguística e Poética" in "Linguística e Comunicação", Editora Cultrix, 1960, p. 123.
5. Guimaraes, I., "Design de montras: cenografia e comunicação? Uma aproximação à interdisciplinaridade do tema" ("Window presentation: set design and communication? An approach to the theme's interdisciplinarity"), Master Dissertation, Design Department, FAUTL/Faculdade de Arquitectura Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, 2010, pp. 70, 184.