



# LUND UNIVERSITY

## **Polysemiotic Communication vs. Multimodality**

**a conceptual and terminological distinction applied in street art**

Stampoulidis, Georgios

*Published in:*

Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal

*DOI:*

[10.25765/sauc.v5i2.156](https://doi.org/10.25765/sauc.v5i2.156)

2019

*Document Version:*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Stampoulidis, G. (2019). Polysemiotic Communication vs. Multimodality: a conceptual and terminological distinction applied in street art. *Street Art & Urban Creativity Scientific Journal*, 5(2), 26-31. <https://doi.org/10.25765/sauc.v5i2.156>

*Total number of authors:*

1

*Creative Commons License:*

CC BY

### **General rights**

Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

---

## **Polysemiotic Communication vs. Multimodality: a conceptual and terminological distinction applied in street art**

**Georgios Stampoulidis**

Lund University (Sweden)

Email: [georgios.stampoulidis@semiotik.lu.se](mailto:georgios.stampoulidis@semiotik.lu.se)

Multimodality is in fact a polysemous word, which is tightly related to the notions of modality, and (semiotic) mode and is used in conceptually different ways across different disciplines (for a review see Adami, 2016; Devylder, 2019; Green, 2014).

As cognitive semiotics (Zlatev et al., 2016) aims to integrate concepts and methods from semiotics, cognitive science and cognitive linguistics, we endeavor to offer a coherent terminology, in line with the proposals of Green (2014), Stampoulidis et al. (2019) and Zlatev (2019), which distinguishes the notions of perceptual (sensory) modalities (sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste) and semiotic systems (language, depiction and gesture).

For example, using this polysemiotic/multimodal distinction would allow us to describe the work of street art displayed in Figure 1 consisting of verbal text (language) and pictorial elements (depiction) as clearly a form of polysemiotic communication, instantiated in the particular socio-cultural medium of street art, whereas the street artwork displayed in Figure 2 might be considered as an example of unisemiotic communication (only the semiotic system of depiction is present). Nevertheless, both artworks may be considered monomodal since at least one perceptual modality is involved: sight. On the other hand, artworks such as these displayed in Figure 3 and Figure 4 can be both polysemiotic and unisemiotic, respectively, and (potentially) multimodal (if) they trigger multiple senses in the viewer, such as sight and touch, for example. It is important to note that the terminological distinction and conceptual dichotomy between the semiotic systems of language and depiction are not always clear-cut, especially in the case of street art (and graffiti), as has been argued in a certain literature (Bal, 1991; Neef, 2007). Therefore, we would like to stress that street art is typically a form of polysemiotic communication, and thus, we restrict the term unisemiotic either to the case of primarily depiction-dominant or primarily language-dominant graphic representations.



Figure 1. A polysemiotic monomodal street artwork since it triggers (arguably) the sense of sight in the viewer, but includes multiple semiotic systems. Creator: Barba Dee. Photography Georgios Stampoulidis © in August 2018, Athens, Greece.



Figure 2. A unisemiotic monomodal street artwork since it triggers (arguably) the sense of sight in the viewer, but includes only the semiotic system of depiction. Creator: Bleeps.gr. Photography Bleeps.gr © in February 2019, Athens, Greece.



Figure 3. A polysemiotic and (potentially) multimodal street artwork since it may trigger multiple senses in the viewer, such as sight and touch. Stop Homo-Trans-Phobia. Creator: an anonymous queer group. Photography Ilaria Hoppe © in September 2010, Berlin (Kreuzberg), Germany.



Figure 4. A unisemiotic and (potentially) multimodal street artwork since it may trigger multiple senses in the viewer, such as sight, touch, and smell. Creator: FL1P. Photography Georgios Stampoulidis © in August 2018, Athens, Greece.

In our study on street art, marking this polysemiotic/multimodal distinction – terminological and conceptual – would help us toward a synthetic analysis of the interaction between language and depiction, and that of language, depiction, vision, and (potentially) smelling, touching or even hearing, into a whole communicative situation.

## References

Adami, E. 2016. Multimodality. In O. Garcia, N. Flores & M. Spotti (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Language and Society*, 451–472. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bal, M. 1991. *Reading 'Rembrandt': Beyond the Word-Image Opposition*. Cambridge and New York.

Devyllder, S. 2019. Review of B. Dancygier (eds.). 2017. *The Cambridge Handbook of Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Green, J. 2014. Drawn from the ground: Sound, sign and inscription in Central Australian sand stories (Vol. 13): Cambridge University Press.

Neef, S. 2007. Killing Kool: The Graffiti Museum. *Art History* 30. 418–431.

Stampoulidis, G., Bolognesi, M. and Zlatev, J. 2019. A cognitive semiotic exploration of metaphors in Greek street art. *Cognitive Semiotics* 12(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogsem-2019-2008>

Zlatev, J. 2019. Mimesis theory, learning, and polysemiotic communication. In M. A. Peters (eds.), *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory*, 1–6. Singapore: Springer Science and Business Media. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_672-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_672-1)

Zlatev, J., G. Sonesson & P. Konderak. (Eds.). 2016. Introduction: Cognitive semiotics comes of age. In G. Sonesson, P. Konderak & J. Zlatev (eds.), *Meaning, Mind and Communication: Explorations in Cognitive Semiotics*, 9–28. Peter Lang Publishing Group.