

Roger Odin

# Religion and Communication Spaces

## A Semio-pragmatic Approach

### ABSTRACT

Following the reflection initiated in his book *The Spaces of Communication*, Roger Odin suggests a new distinction between physical communication spaces and mental communication spaces (spaces that we have inside us). The suggestion is exemplified by three film analyses dedicated to the relationships between religion and communication.

### KEYWORDS

semio-pragmatics, communication, spaces of communication, religion, cinema, advertising, commercials

### BIOGRAPHY

Roger Odin is professor emeritus of Communication at Paris 3 University (Sorbonne Nouvelle), where he was the head of the Film and Audiovisual Institute from 1983 until 2003. Theorist of the semio-pragmatic approach (*Cinéma et production de sens*, 1990; *De la fiction*, 2000; *Les espaces de communication*, 2011), he directed a research group examining film documentaries (*L'âge d'or du cinéma documentaire. Europe années 50*, 1997) and initiated research into home movies and amateur films (*Le film de famille*, 1995; *Le cinéma en amateur*, 1999). Today, he is interested in the mobile phone (*Il cinema nell'epoca del videofonino*, 2011; *Téléphone mobile et création, in collaboration with L. Allard et L. Creton*, 2014).

## COMMUNICATION SPACES

The notion of communication space, in the form I sought to develop in my previous book,<sup>1</sup> is intended to avoid the aporia related to the notion of context. I define a communication space as a construct designed to select, in a given context, a bundle of constraints that regulate construction of the actants, relations between actants, mode(s) of production of the meanings and affective elements employed, *on the axis*

1 Odin 2011.

of relevance chosen by the theorist. The last point is particularly important: by limiting the number of constraints selected, it is the choice of an axis of relevance that allows analysis (in a given context the number of constraints is such that it cannot be controlled).

Up till now the communication spaces I have constructed have been essentially spaces with a *physical* existence (family, archives, television, university, etc.), but to explain what is going on in various communication contexts, it seems necessary to add *mental* spaces<sup>2</sup>. According to René Loureau, “our ego is a bric-à-brac of institutions”;<sup>3</sup> one might also say that it is a bric-à-brac of *communication spaces*, some of which are institutions, others not. What I call “mental spaces” are the spaces we carry around with us.

A single example may illustrate this notion. We have in us what one might call a cinematic mental space, corresponding to the projection of a film in a cinema, on a big screen, in the course of a showing of fixed duration. The existence of this space explains the risk of our being frustrated by a film shown on television (or worse still on a mobile phone) and all the subterfuges deployed to remedy such frustration by the producers of programmes (for example, the introductory sequence imitating our entry into the cinema as in *LA DERNIÈRE SÉANCE*, a French TV show presented by Eddy Mitchell, with credits recalling the myth of movies, etc.). The same is true of similar tricks by viewers, setting up home cinemas in the hope of conjuring up (at least in part) the cinema communication space and making the associated psychological effort to build a “mental bubble” enabling them to cut themselves off from the outside environment and enter the film.<sup>4</sup>

I shall now look at three films that explicitly bring into play the religious communication space in terms of what they represent: a film promoting the Roman Catholic Church, *CATHOLICS COME HOME* (2008),<sup>5</sup> and two publicity films, one for Pepsi (*KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH*, 2002–2003),<sup>6</sup> the other for Coke Light (*HAVE A GREAT BREAK*, 2005).<sup>7</sup> For this analysis, I shall use as the axis of relevance the relations between religion and communication. For what purpose is religion brought into play? How (communication mode problem)? Which audience is being targeted? With what likelihood of success?

It should be borne in mind that the religious communication space may appear in physical form (churches, temples, synagogues, mosques, shrines and so on), bringing into play specific actors (popes, bishops, priests, rabbis, imams, monks), and in mental form. For all believers and non-believers (religion being a cultural phenomenon no

2 Odin 2015.

3 Loureau 1970, 48.

4 “The institution of this ‘bubble’ allows him to ideally replicate the spatial structure that characterises the movie theater, even in open and practicable environments”, Casetti/Sampietro, 2012, 22.

5 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lX7YXj7MltEProgram> [accessed 29 June 2015].

6 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nMYFboWPJk> [accessed 29 June 2015].

7 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6mygZNXUL8> [accessed 29 June 2015].

one can escape), the religious space is in us, a space made up of institutional organisations, rituals, beliefs (which one may not believe) and rules for behaviour (which one may not obey). We shall also see that we do not all have the same religious space and that it may consequently prove useful to our analysis to construct several religious spaces, depending on the religion under consideration and the cultural tradition of the place where communication is occurring.

## CATHOLICS COME HOME (2008)

The first film sets out to promote the Catholic faith. It is quite long for an advert (two minutes) and divided into two acts, underlined by the commentary and music, and by a break in the sequence of pictures. The discursive mode is clearly dominant, the film taking the form of an illustrated speech. The voice-over is omnipresent, almost pressing in its speedy delivery. It conveys the message the film aims to transport and makes for a consistent whole: without the commentary, we would not be able to connect up the images we are shown (which is not to say that the images are weak).

The first part of the commentary consists of short sentences, all starting with the personal pronoun “we”. The film is quite openly a statement by a community in whose name it speaks. This community is described as a universal family: “Our family is made up every race, we are young and old, rich and poor, men and women, sinners and saints.” The last two terms in this list have a special status: not only do they encompass all the individuals cited in the preceding list, but they also qualify them, dividing them into two categories, with the terms setting them apart as belonging to a religious community. What follows confirms this implicit assumption: it points out the fields in which the community intervenes, with God’s help, fields which, in themselves, do not belong in the religious space: public health, charity work, education, science. One is struck by the explicitly self-congratulatory tone of these statements, which underline the scale of their impact (“We are the largest organization on the planet bringing relief and comfort [...] We educate more children than any other scholarly or religious institution”) and the historically innovative character (“We founded the college system”) of this community in the world. The film emphasises then the community’s part in defending life (as this claim coincides with a picture of a pregnant woman, it may be seen as condemning abortion), marriage and the family. Then it moves on to sentences showing how the community is deeply rooted in the world, in history and religious tradition (in particular the holy scriptures, with the Bible and the Holy Spirit presented as having served as guides for the past 2,000 years). Only at the end of this sequence is the reference of the deictic made explicit: “We are the Catholic church.”

The second part follows directly the Catholic religious axis: it refers to sacraments, mass (celebrated for centuries, every hour and every day), Jesus Christ, Peter, the full lineage of popes who have assembled around them, in love and truth, Catholics and

the Catholic faith, which in this uncertain, changing world secures the presence of a powerful truth, permanent and consistent: God's love for his creation.

We shall now turn to the work on sound and image. What is striking is that, contrary to what one might expect, the pictures (apart from the ones concerning popes) have nothing to do with the documentary form. They are more like pictures from a fictional film. Images are suffused with a halo, which makes them slightly unrealistic at the same time as it gives them great emotional force; pictures are composed like paintings (framing, colour, depth of field), often leading to the construction of a micro-narrative that can be summed up in a single word: care, help, teach, or search. Furthermore, there are no sounds to tie the images to reality; on the contrary, music plays throughout, emphatically, even pompously, in some great affective surge that seeks to carry us away. The editing is consistent with this momentum: shots are short but the transitions between them extremely elaborate and smooth, creating the effect of two great flows corresponding to two sequences in the commentary and music. Moreover, none of these sequences is static. The result is a succession of travelling shots, which produces a stirring sense of movement.

I think it is now possible to make a suggestion regarding the target group of this video clip. This film is not out to convince atheists; there are too many religious presuppositions in its pitch. For the same reason, it does not seem to be targeting believers of other faiths; nothing in its discourse is addressed to them. On the contrary, the film conveys many signs of empathising with those already familiar with the Catholic faith: communication remains inside the Catholic religious (mental) space and the discursive mode combines with the private mode (references to shared history and memory).<sup>8</sup> The commentary indicates a target group: the film addresses those who have moved away from Catholicism (“If you’ve been away from the Catholic Church we invite you to take another look”) and who it would like to bring back into the flock (the last words are “Welcome home”). However, I would suggest that the target group is in fact even more specific: mainly (though not exclusively) those who have turned away to Evangelical churches.

Several features contribute to this assumption: the recurrent presence of pictures of regions where these churches have developed at the expense of the Catholic Church (Mexico, Brazil, more broadly South America, Africa, India); the metaphor of the family as an effective, reassuring community of mutual assistance (the image that Evangelical churches particularly like to project); the insistence on collective ritual (a basic element in the way Evangelical churches operate) and on ceremonial pomp and tradition, going so far as to make the Catholic Church look slightly dated (for example, in the sequence on communion, the priest gives the host to a worshipper, which is rarely the case nowadays as people generally take it themselves). It stops short of the formal features associated with Evangelical communication: the commentary plays

8 By private mode I mean the mode by which a group goes back over its past. Odin 2011, 89.

on affirmation, rather than employ a demonstrative, rational discourse, and the film works primarily through affective elements (music, visual dynamic).

In a way, the opening scene, with its Mexican dance sequence – quite astonishing for a film made to promote Catholicism – sums up the overarching communication strategy. It depicts the Catholic Church as a happy, joyous community of life in which people take pleasure in celebrating together, but in a rule-based framework; dance is a structured celebration (nothing disorderly), a celebration inviting participants to a communion of bodies in music (a way of bonding the community together), and we all know how important this is in Evangelical ritual.

To conclude, this film plays on exactly the same chords as communication by Evangelical churches, while at the same time underlining the superiority of the Catholic Church; unlike Evangelical churches, the Catholic Church is rooted in a long and prestigious history; it is an institution spanning 2000 years, rich and respected, well organised, its influence reaching all over the world. There is good reason to suppose that within this framework, the communication strategy deployed by the film stands a good chance of working.

The film I have just analysed mainly uses the discursive mode and fits wholly into the Catholic religious space, but the other two both draw on the storytelling mode (with a moral message)<sup>9</sup> and straddle two communication spaces: the story told brings into play the religious space (Buddhist in one case, Roman Catholic in the other), but the moral is altogether somewhere else, in the consumer space. Religion here is merely a vehicle for commercial discourse, urging the viewer to drink Coca Cola or Pepsi.

## KUNG FU PEPSI CRUSH (2002–2003)

The Pepsi film tells the story of a young boy who enters a Buddhist monastery as a novice. The camera focuses on a huge sign resembling a keyhole decorating the gateway of the monastery; the same sign crops up in all sorts of places, in particular on the monks' foreheads. For the first two-thirds of the film we are told nothing that might help us make sense of this sign; all we gather is that it must play an essential part because it recurs so persistently. At a narrative level, we see the boy's first steps in the community, which are difficult but lead to progress. He grows into a young man, successfully completing his initiation trials. The community hails his success and, at the invitation of the master, the monks all open cans of Pepsi in synch, raising them to their lips as one (it should be noted that the little noise as they lift the pull-tab is the only synchronous sound in the film). The initiate follows suit with a big smile to show how happy he is, but the community is expecting more; looking faintly angry, the monks are clearly waiting for something else on the part of the initiate. The latter is at a bit of a loss – much like the viewer, even if it is now abundantly clear that

9 Odin 2011, 61.

this is a Pepsi advert – unable to grasp what more the community wants of him. Then the camera pans from a close-up on the mark on the master’s forehead to the same sign on a banner behind him. The initiate suddenly realises that the sign corresponds exactly to the pull-tab on his Pepsi can; he shouts and head butts the can, flattening it. In doing so, the mark of the pull-tab sign is imprinted on his forehead, much to the satisfaction of his mentor and fellow monks, who rush in to congratulate him.

We may now summarise the communication strategy behind this film, which involves articulating two narrative figures. On the one hand, we have a carefully staged dramatic progression leading to the revelation of an enigma and an unexpected, spectacular, yet funny action in which the product is shown to be the operative factor for integration into the monastic community. On the other hand, there is the confusion between the religious space and the Pepsi space: the monastery is dedicated to Pepsi and to become a full member of the community, one must imprint the Pepsi mark on one’s body. The purpose of this assimilation process is, of course, to promote the product, but also to amuse us, to make us laugh. The combination of suspense and laughter acts as a go-between, bonding viewer and product. However, it seems fair to say that for this strategy to work, we must have no difficulty putting the religious space represented here at a certain distance.

We may assume that an audience that does not belong to the Buddhist religious space has no problem with this. What the film shows us does not bring into play the religious space of each viewer; it is merely something exotic. Furthermore, the film, although it represents a religious space, communicates in a cinematic rather than a religious space. The way in which the temple is described, both in what we are shown – the practice of martial arts, the shaving of the young initiate’s head, the acrobatic Kung Fu exercises, the trial of breaking bricks – and the manner of showing it – not only the composition, but also the soundtrack with its shouts – reminds us of all the stereotypes that Kung Fu movies have presented on this topic. Lastly, the trick with the pull-tab on the Pepsi can is clearly tongue-in-cheek. Despite this distance we may ask whether the film might not shock someone with genuine Buddhist convictions, in which case its communication strategy would be at odds with the viewer’s religious mental space.

## HAVE A GREAT BREAK (2005)

This question seems even more crucial when assessing the impact, for communication purposes, of the Coke Light film.

The film starts like a love affair, with a young woman walking her dog on the beach who is thunderstruck on seeing a handsome male emerge from the waves. It then cuts back and forth between the young man and his admirer, who watches him while drinking Coke. This sequence plays (perhaps rather heavily) on the young woman’s hungry, lascivious looks, with close-ups of both bodies (mouth, breasts, back), and

certain movements (the man pulls up his shorts, does up his belt, the woman begins to expose a breast, raises her skirt) leaving the viewer in no doubt about the powerful sexual charge conveyed by this exchange. As someone pointed out during an oral presentation of the present analysis, the early part of the film is reminiscent of a James Bond movie. The content of the scene and the way it is filmed (the setting, the lighting which sets off the bodies, the view of the sea looking into the sun and dynamic cutting back and forth between close-ups) both contribute to impressing on us a reference to the cinematic space.

All this changes when the young woman and the viewer discover that the handsome young man is a priest. From then on, the Catholic religious space is explicitly brought into play. We see the man putting on his clerical collar and the crestfallen look of the woman. What follows confirms that the action has moved into this space: the priest approaches the young woman, brushes his hand over the Coke can as if it were holy oil and anoints her forehead, making the sign of the cross. Then he walks off and we see the young woman, her face transfigured with joy. The slogan appears: "Coke Light: have a great break." The moral of this short fable can be summarised in two points: drinking Coke Light is better than sex; Coke is a sacrament that makes you calm and really happy.

A viewer belonging to the Catholic religious space will probably see this film as quite simply scandalous.<sup>10</sup> It steals a sacred gesture for the purposes of an advertising campaign. It takes this process much further than the previous film, which set the Buddhist religious space at a distance, treating it as a cinematic space. But in the second film, this is not the case: the religious gesture is made by a man who is no longer the good-looking Bond-style male who walked out of the sea, but a priest, who demonstrates his status with his clerical collar and the gestures he makes. We are clearly no longer in the same communication space.

Would the film work outside the Catholic space? We should start by pointing out that for a viewer to get the point he or she needs to be able to recognise a priest by his garb (which is probably not a major problem even for someone far removed from the Catholic space) and to be familiar with the ritual of anointing, which is perhaps more problematic. Any viewer would nevertheless grasp that this is a reference to the religious space. Someone belonging to a religious space other than Catholicism would most likely be deeply shocked as well by a religious gesture being hijacked for commercial ends.

How then would convinced atheists react? They might enter into the communication game started by the film, but this is by no means certain. There is nothing critical about the way in which the film takes religion onboard. Quite the contrary. The narrative uses it to talk up the merits of Coke Light. So rejection of this implicit apologia

10 In Belgium, a consumer group lodged a complaint about this film with the Jury d'Ethique Publicitaire in February 2005, but the case was dismissed.



of religion may combine with rejection of the commercial communication space to which the film alludes.

In short, it seems to me that the communication strategy of this film stands little chance of achieving its aims.

## CONCLUSION

As you can see, analysing a film from the point of view of communication requires us to take into account the mental communication spaces at work in the context in which communication plays out. So it is up to the analyst to construct them, on the basis both of the clues the film provides as to the space in which it is supposed to operate, and of what can be known about the spaces in which it will have to circulate. It is then possible to form hypotheses, which will need to be confirmed (or invalidated) by field studies.

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