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MAGNIFYING THE ORDINARY: GENRE MIXTURE AND HUMOUR IN THE TV SERIES CHUCK

Abstract

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Chuck is an American television series about a “normal” guy who works at the *Buy More*. His life changes dramatically when he becomes the most important person for the USA intelligence. This gives rise to a conflict between civilian and spy life.

The analysis involves a multimodal account (cf. Lorenzo-Dus 2009) of the aesthetics (Cardwell 2005) of the second season that illustrates how the series establishes a parallelism between Chuck’s life as a spy and that of his colleagues at the *Buy More*. By combining elements from different genres (Altman 1988) it portrays a rather “different from what may be the expected-representation” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001:10) of the routine at the workplace (Armstrong 2005), thus depicting a rare humorous magnification of the ordinary life of a group of ordinary citizens with an ordinary job (cf. Beeden and Bruin 2011).

Keywords: *multimodal analysis, genre, television series, humour.*

1. Introduction

Chuck is an action- television programme from the United States created by Josh Schwartz and Chris Fedak. Chuck is a “normal” guy who works at the *Buy More*, a consumer electronics retail store. His life changes dramatically when he becomes, after receiving an encoded email, the most important person for the USA intelligence- a fact that cannot be revealed to anyone, not even his closest friends and family. This gives rise to a conflict between civilian life and spy life.

The series defies audience expectations by establishing a parallelism between Chuck’s life as a spy and that of his colleagues at the *Buy More*, an electronic retail store whose logo reminds us of *Best Buy*. Every time Chuck, the unwilling secret CIA agent, embarks on a new mission with undercover agents Sarah and Casey, so do the employees at the *Buy More*. They become the protagonists of “adventures” that are humorously presented as true competitors to the no less extraordinary life of CIA spies. This parallelism leads the spectator to conjuncture that life at the *Buy More*

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has nothing to envy about the exciting life of a spy, thus contributing to magnifying the ordinary.

Although this is a constant throughout the whole series, it is in the second season in particular where this device is more present. The series resorts to intergeneric (Altman 1988) conventions in order to offer a rather "different from what may be the expected-representation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001:10) of the routine at the workplace, thus depicting a rare magnification of the ordinary life of a group of ordinary citizens with an ordinary job (cf. Beeden and Bruin 2011). This is intelligently used as a humorous device (cf. Attardo 2001) in the series.

The analysis involves a multimodal account (cf. Lorenzo-Dus 2009) of the aesthetics of the second season of the TV series *Chuck*, and of episode 203 and 205 in particular, since "a close analysis and critique of thematic, formal and stylistic qualities present in a particular televisual sequence" allows us "to explore some of the questions that arise from the peculiarities of a single work....[in order] to capture something of the individuality and distinctiveness of the programme, [and] evaluate its achievements..." (Cardwell 2005). The underlying intention is to provide evidence of the idea that language analysis of media texts should not neglect visual and sound factors. This is mainly because, as is the case with *Chuck*, TV texts intertwine them all and, on many occasions, the intended message cannot be fully understood without taking both into consideration.

2. An overview of the TV series *Chuck*

The TV series *Chuck* starts when its protagonist receives an encoded email from his old college friend Larkin, now working in the C.I.A. In opening it, the only remaining copy of the world's greatest spy secrets (i.e., *the Intersect*) is embedded into Chuck's brain. His life changes dramatically when he is given permanent protection and gets involved in the most outrageous spy missions.

As a whole, the formula of the series is organised around an initial disruption of the *normal* scenarios of Chuck's life (workplace and family), which enter into conflict with his life as a spy. Chuck's refusal to have a secret dangerous new lifestyle as a CIA spy and his wish to get his normal life back is the main theme throughout the series. As a source for humour, *Chuck* resorts to the duality workplace-spy life, often conflictive and difficult to deal with for most superheroes (e.g. *No ordinary family*, *True Lies*). In *Chuck*, unlike many other series, the workplace gains a stronger protagonism, first because the CIA base is established in its basement and secondly because the series establishes a very intelligent parallelism in its subplots, which portray the events at the *Buy More* as being as exciting and dangerous as those

experienced by the spies. In the first season the emphasis was on how his new life affected his relationship with his friends, family and work. In the second season, however, the workplace becomes an essential scenario for the development of the series. Season two is the focus of the present article.

3. Multimodal analysis and genre mixture

The framework for analysis emerges from the need to explain the function of certain unexpected activity types in the workplace (Levinson 1992) that move away from the kind of institutional exchanges (Drew and Heritage 1992) one may expect in a shop that sells electronic devices. The interpretation of the series draws upon the principles established by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) for multimodal analysis (Kress 2010) as well as on the theory of linguistic and film concepts of genre analysis both linguistically (Swales 1990) and in films and television (Altman 1988; Feuer 1992, Piazza *et al.* 2011) in combination with Yus' (2008) framework for the analysis of graphic novels. The humorous magnification of the ordinary in *Chuck* can only be accounted for if we interpret the signs (Altman 1988) or iconic referents as well as the verbal implicatures and explicatures (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Yus 2008) that derive from the compendium of the visual, audio, verbal, non-verbal, and symbolic information included in the text.

Altman (1988) points out that genres are usually defined in terms of either certain signs (taking the western as an example, the guns, horses, wagons, towns, landscapes, or even the western stars such as John Wayne or Clint Eastwood) or certain plots and themes (such as Wright's notions of the western's classic stories) (cf. Chandler 1997). Meaning, Altman (1988: 5) claims, "is contained in the generic patterns rather than in the individual text", thus intergeneric influences (Altman 1988) are essential when interpreting television texts. In turn, Yus (2008: 223-249) applies the principles of pragmatics and of relevance theory to the analysis of graphic novels and pays attention to the reader's inferential activity while reading graphic novels, with the intention of revealing "to what extent readers rely on inferential resources when attempting to transform the verbal-visual information coded on the pages of the graphic novel into cognitively relevant interpretations." Yus (2008) organises his analysis into five stages. Stage three and five are the ones applicable here. *Stage 3*: focusing on the panel (i) processing visual elements; (ii) processing visual and verbal sources of information; (iii) checking symbolic and visual information; (iv) distinguishing types of texts; (v) visual implicatures and explicatures; (vi) relevance driven-interpretations and *Stage 5*: processing the whole

story and building up background knowledge are the most useful for the present analysis of multimodal discourse.

This article focuses on the analysis of season two, with specific interest in episodes 203 and episode 205. I describe the compendium of semantic (Altman 1988) elements that combine with language, soundtrack and other non-linguistic elements such as appearance, ways of looking, body posture, gesture, the setting, lighting and the way the scene has been directed (Paltridge *et al.* 2011:252) that are used in the series to build an out-of-the-ordinary representation of the *Buy More*, an electronic retail store. It is in the representation of the workplace (Armstrong 2005) that the originality of the series resides. As argued by Pennock and del Saz (2006:13) "music and images and the sound of voices appeal to emotions on a subconscious level and create a state of mind which predisposes viewers" to interpret the information they are being presented with one way or another.

4. Episode 203. Chuck vs. the break-up

As is common in TV series, in *Chuck* each episode opens and closes the narrative plot structure; although the closure is really a semi-closure since the main plot lines are left open (e.g., the relationship between Chuck and Sarah). Consequently, a scene or an episode should never be interpreted as an independent text/discourse but as part of a whole. The formula for each episode includes a disruption of Chuck's life which entails a mission and a problematic situation at the *Buy More*. The spy story is an action-comedy series whose leading plot line is, apart from solving a mission for the CIA, the struggle that the characters Sarah, Casey and Chuck have between their spy-life and keeping it secret from the employees at the *Buy More* and from his family.

In Episode 203, Larkin returns with news on Fulcrum. This organisation has stolen a chip that has data that could expose, among others, *Team Bartowski*. Bryce and Sarah must pose as a married couple to get the chip back. Chuck's jealousy causes some problems, but Sarah's decisions endanger the mission, and force Chuck to also take some decisions of his own. Meanwhile the *Buy More* crew must deal with bullies who "occupy" the staff room at the *Buy More* playing video games.

The episode starts in Bogota, Colombia 2005. Larkin and Sarah are kissing on the street with a Sergio Leone score playing in the background. They are discovered and have to run to escape. The subplot takes us to the *Buy More* in Los Angeles. The workers face an unusual situation whereby a group of bullies occupy their staff room and vandalise it shouting and eating while playing video games. Although mistaken (tacos and burritos are Mexican not Colombian food), the first parallelism that is

established between the two worlds comes from a comment from Morgan Grimes (Chuck's best friend and often used as a comic relief in the series).

Morgan: Look at them. With their colas and their tacos. They can't treat my store like a frat house.

This comment establishes the connection between South America, the spies and the *Buy More*. The language relates to South American culture: tacos and burritos are identified with South American food in the USA. Some comments made by the characters are as follows: "Casey: *You showed some cojones out there, Grimes. Maybe there's hope for you yet.*" Mitt: "*You making fun of me man cause I can't read Spanish, Grimmerz?*" Notice also how Morgan says "*my store*", ratifying for the audience the close relationship between the employees and their workplace. A more detailed analysis of episode 203. *Chuck vs. the break-up*, follows.

Situation 1. *Spy film*. Morgan tries to kick out the Mighty Jocks. While he backpeddles (spy-film music accompanying), his leg turns off the power supply. He is ransacked and threatened by Mitt. Morgan's behaviour mimics that of a spy in a dangerous situation.

Both the spies and the *Buy More* crew try to get rid of a group of people who are a menace to them (Fulcrum and the Mighty Jocks). Chuck feels threatened by Larkin (he is afraid he'll steal Sarah from him), and Morgan by Mitt. Both want to avoid direct confrontation with someone who is a threat and makes them feel insecure. Although they run in parallel, both stories converge at the end, confirming the similarity between both worlds. Morgan says to Chuck: "*Man, you ever have someone show up in your life and just make you feel so damn small?*"

Situation 2. *Western film*. Mitt challenges Morgan to a duel "*Alright tough guy. You and me. After work. I'm gonna be waiting for you. You're a dead man, Grimmerz*".

The clock strikes 8:00 (a parody of the famous scene in *High Noon*) while the music is similar to the score of "*For a few more dollars*" by Sergio Leone. Dramatically humorous dialogue sets the tone for the scene:

Lester: Shift's over. Nice knowing you.

Jeff: I'll look after Anna when you're gone.

Anna: I'd rather be drawn and quartered.

[Anna approaches. Jeff's bummed. He and Lester head off.]

Lester: It could be worse. She didn't say she'd rather be dead this time

Anna: (mischievous grin) You ready, Morgan? My roommate's out of town...

We have the place to ourselves.

[Anna starts to lead Morgan out of the store]

Jeff: (yells out loud) Deaaaaaaa mannnnn walking!

[*Morgan, scared, musters all the bravery he can as he heads towards the exit.*

Suddenly he stops]

Morgan: You know what? I just remembered I promised Big Mike I'd finish the inventory by tomorrow morning.

Anna: Morgan... you knew about this last week.

[*Beat. Morgan's bummed. Sex... or death. He chooses life.*]

Morgan: I'm sorry. If I don't do it, Big Mike'll kill me.

Anna: Fine. Your loss.

Morgan: Rain check?! Anna...

In this scene, the role of the music is essential to understand what is going on in Morgan's head, when he hears Lester shout "Deaaaaaaa mannnnn walking". While Morgan starts to walk towards the door and Sergio Leone's score continues playing. When Morgan tries to back off, he has a conversation with his girlfriend Anna, both adopting a tragic voice tone and attitude.

Anna: Morgan you can't let a boy like Mitt push you around, this isn't like high school.

Morgan: (with western music in the background) No. This is worse. This is *Buy More* (Lester and Jester with tragic expressions assent).

Anna is portrayed as decisive, direct and very explicit with regard to her sexual intentions (García-Gómez 2011) towards Morgan. She is not afraid to talk about it in front of the others. At the end of the episode Morgan faces Mitt (in the background you hear duel western music) and they go downstairs for a "cage match tournament" (a reference to 1985 *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* 1985). Humorously, it is Anna who ends up fighting Mitt, thus proving that she is the strong one in the couple. This also establishes a parallelism between Chuck and Sarah (the CIA agent who protects Chuck).

These scenes and situations which intertwine generic conventions from other genres (spy films, western films, and cage tournaments in films) are supported by the language and attitude of the workers at the *Buy More*. They comically exaggerate their reaction during the events they get involved in by behaving as if they were facing a life or death situation. The emotions the characters go through also support this parallelism: for example, love (both Morgan and Chuck are in love with girls who, at least apparently, are stronger than them), danger (they both have to fight a man to gain their girls' respect: Chuck needs to get rid of Larking; Morgan needs to get rid of Mitt to have Anna's respect), the menace lurking over their life-style (the

sport bullies are disrupting order and well-being at the Buy More; Fulcrum threatens to destroy the world). All of this implicitly signals the similarity between two worlds that are rather distant in real life, thus contributing to the magnification of the ordinary.

Other unusual situations for a retail store include: battle strategy and tactics (the vocabulary, setting and structure of episode 2x01). Scenes that emulate advertising aimed at women (Sarah enters the *Buy More* with the camera in slow motion, her hair blowing, blurred texture, a romantic image similar to that used in products for women). A bachelor's party (2x18). A robbery with hostages that emulates films which include similar situations (2x11). A TV game show with the "the Wheel of Fortune" in order to choose the employee of the month (2x09).

Episode 2x21 emulates a military inspection by using "a configuration of meanings that are typically associated with a particular situational configuration of field, mode, and tenor...[which must] include the expressions, the lexicogrammatical and phonological features, that typically accompany or realise these meanings" (Halliday 1985:39).

The vocabulary used in this situation is typical of certain intimidating military inspections: *to tighten your-slack asses up, to meet you all in the flesh, looking forward to spending more time in here in the Buy More trenches, getting to know the rank and the file*. The non-verbal language reflects military inspection positions such as standing in a file, in silence, heels together and in line, body erect, arms hanging down straight from the shoulders and, the direction of some of the worker's eyes which reflect the common practice of "unauthorised observation or challenge to the supervisor". However, humour is built by Anna for example, who stands poker-faced, with her arms crossed and a defiant-fed-up expressions.

Special attention should be given to episode 2x05. *Chuck vs. Tom Sawyer*, since it is representative of the union between the two worlds: The *Buy More* and its crew are the real world heroes in this episode, since in the end the Chuck who saves the world is not Chuck-spy, but Chuck-crew-member-of-the-Buy-More. In this episode, "Sarah, Casey, and Chuck are shocked when they discover that the fate of the world and the prevention of World War III rest in Jeff's hands and his ability to play the video game Missile Command, of which Jeff is the reigning World Champion. The designer of Missile Command is found to have also forayed into the command of actual missiles, and he had hid the launch codes to actual missiles within the video game. Chuck convinces Jeff to play an exhibition of Missile Command at the Buy More; however, when Jeff collapses under the pressure, Chuck is forced to play instead." (Wikipedia 2012).

Additionally, visual information contributes to build an identity of the *Buy More* and its members (cf. Armstrong 2005) as a "Nerd Herd". The group Chuck and his

friends are part of come from different minorities and are stereotyped (Armstrong 2005) in the series. The choice of a politically correct number of races is implicitly transmitting the idea that the *Buy More* is available to anyone. Among the major characters: Big Mike, the manager is Black; Morgan Grimes, Spanish-American; Jester, white American but with a father that is part Indian; Lester Patel comes from Indian descent and he is Jewish; and, Anna is Taiwanese. Anna's appearance is always commented upon by her colleagues, in particular with regard to her extremely short skirts and heavy make-up. The stereotypes are humorously reinforced in season two which also includes a parody of a police interrogation in which implicatures and explicatures are combined for humorous purpose. The dialogues reproduced below are examples of it.

Milbarg: We'll just start out simple. Why do you belong at the Buy More?

Jeff: I satisfy a quota. My dad's part Indian. The cool kind of Indian though, not like Lester.

Morgan: Why do I belong at the Buy More? You know, I'm going to have to think about that. I'm going to go grab a soda. And... You want one? 'Cause it's my treat. I'll gr- I'll grab you one. And I'll be back in a jiff.

Milbarg: (writes down on the report) "Untrainable"

Anna: I speak more than one language, binary code. Zero, zero, zero, one, er... zero.

Milbarg: (writes down on the report) "Prostitute?"

[Episode 205.Chuck vs. Tom Sawyer]

In sum, the inclusion of multimodal generic conventions (implicit or explicit) from other genres in the series leads to relevance driven interpretations (Yus 2008) whose function is to bring together both worlds, the spy world and life at the *Buy More*, helping give coherence within each episode and the whole series. The semantic elements (Altman 1988) from other genres make it possible for the employees at the *Buy More* to go through a lot of extraordinary situations, through terrible "ordeals" that would not be by any means reproduced in similar stores. Accordingly, resorting to genre mixture is essential to make the workplace appear as essential and unique for most of the characters. It becomes the place that gives sense to their life at the same time as it turns the *Buy More* into a competitor of any of the adventures that Chuck has in his secret double life as a spy

The examples explained confirm the need to carry out a multimodal analysis whenever texts from TV series are analysed and whenever we feel that a multimodal

account of the features in the scene is necessary to fully understand the meaning of it.

Clearly, a multimodal analysis certainly requires a greater degree of organisation on the part of the author (cf., especially if the results have to be transmitted on a one dimension medium as is the case with most research papers) due to restrictions of space and mode of communication (no videos or audio). The author is forced to limit the amount of information and make choices regarding what to show that would make her presentation relevant.

5. Conclusions

The multimodal analysis of season two of the American TV series *Chuck*, with particular interest in episodes 203 and 205, has paid attention to the generic mixture the series resorts to in order to build a representation of the *Buy More*, an electronic retail store, as an exciting and dangerous setting. It is in this representation of the workplace where the originality of the series resides.

The mixture of genres emulated in different events that take place at the *Buy More*, whether implicit or explicit, provoke in the audience the enacting of certain schemata that are then contrasted with reality or even with representations of the same context in other TV programmes. The incongruity of the situations, totally unthought-of in an insignificant electronic retail store, contributes to identify the workplace with spy life, thus humorously magnifying it for the purpose of making the audience laugh. Instead of a boring retail store, the representation of the *Buy More* becomes the iconic sign of the out-of-the-ordinary in which employees go through exciting and nerve-racking situations that require their expertise in order to save it.

Nonetheless, as Yus (2008:223) rightly points out, "perception is not as automatic as it seems to be, but is always mediated by the person's background knowledge, expectations and assumptions about the world" (actual or possible) and that "whatever the visual input, inferential hypotheses have to be made in order to match iconic information and their referents." As such, the final interpretation or vision of the *Buy More* as an extraordinary place and competitor of spy life depends on the inference that each spectator makes of the discourse in *Chuck*, the former being understood as "the cognitive resource that human beings use to fill the gap between what is coded and what is interpreted" (Yus 2008:223).

Ultimately, the results of the analysis here depicted indicate that the concept of inference should be analysed one giant step away from the utterance and paragraph level and be interpreted as a compilation of messages that the spectator receives through the different episodes that make up any TV series. Undoubtedly, when

interpreting the discourse in Chuck, the audience will always resort to the textworld (Attardo 2001) of the series and to their social reality.

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