

HISTORY OF THE 25TH FRAME. THE SUBLIMINAL MESSAGE

Maria FLOREA¹

¹Lecturer, PhD, Apollonia University of Iași, Romania
Corresponding author: Maria Florea; e-mail maria.florea@tvr.ro

Abstract

The visual subliminal perceives 24 frames per second. In this sequence succession there can be inserted the 25th frame, in no relation with the visible message, yet perceived consciously by the human brain. The subliminal images are invisible at normal speed. The eye would not see them and the spectator would not question this image. Sigmund Freud has demonstrated that a word or an image can activate a juncture, a complex, a repudiated feeling. But even if images or usual words, which are part of the immediate reality, come up weird, forced in a context, there is a relation of retrospect to a domain, to a form or a structure in the subconscious, fixed through other anterior relations. In transmitting a message, what certainly exists is only the intention. On the way of transmitting, the message suffers various modifications, and if it reaches the subconscious zone, it can be no longer controlled and enters a medium with its own mechanisms of action.

Keywords: *communication, subliminal message, subconscious, frame, mass media.*

"The whole is more than the sum of the parts" pleads professor Beau Lotto from the University College of London, which considers that the audience sees 10% of an image with the eyes and the rest with the brain.

Max Sutherland and Alice K. Sylvester accredit the idea that this is "the biggest myth of all": the fact that publicity manipulates by using the subliminal stimulus. They consider that we only speak of a modern legend, which does not determine the increase of sales for a specific product. The phenomenon has taken in amplex in 1957, at the moment when, in a cinema in New Jersey, a marketing specialist, the American James Vicary, would have introduced in the film "Picnic" the slogans "Drink Coca Cola" and "Hungry? Eat Popcorn". These images and the respective writings repeated themselves each 5 seconds, without being perceived consciously by the audience, their length being under 50 millisecon, therefore under brain's capacity of reception.

Therefore, these images have been perceived only subconsciously. The experiment lasted for 6 weeks, 45,000 people having been exposed to this kind of impulses. Studies have shown that after this experiment the sales have increased with 57.5 % for popcorn and 18.1% for Coca Cola. The results were shocking, and the academic field was sceptic in what concerns their validity. Moreover, in 1984, James Vicary has admitted in Advertising Age Magazine that everything was a fake, an attempt to manipulate. Despite all these, the concept of "subliminal publicity" has resisted, being once again backed up, in the middle of the last century, by the book entitled "The Hidden Persuaders", written by Vance Packard, where Vicary's experiment is being presented as a form of clandestine manipulation.

The literature of the field demonstrates the existence of 15 classification criteria of publicity, which determine the apparition of 35 types of publicity, inclusively 15 subtypes. Among the used criteria, I would mention publicity orientation, objective, nature of the message or goods, the psychological processes involved (herein are identified the rational-, mechanical-, integrative-, suggestive- and emotional-type publicities). Furthermore, the geographical criteria, the expected effect, the communication channels, but also the level of perception, are taken into account. In this category we have a conscious level of perception and a subliminal one¹.

In 1978, Weiner has redone the test made by Vicary. He infiltrated the word *boeuf* (beef) in the journal of a film, and hoped that this would determine the increase in sales, according to the previous model. As a matter of fact, during the

break, the audience did not buy more beef sandwiches. This experiment has called once again in question the power of influencing consumer's behaviour, through a subliminal message.

Jean-Noel Kapferer demonstrates, on the basis of various experiments, that the subliminal threshold is variable, depending on stimulus, observer and context.

He has emphasised the fact that the force of the visual image has greater impact over the subconscious. The image does not demand a prompt decoding and it is immediately assimilated. Doina Ruști appreciates that, no matter if we talk about the image of a word or about a photo, the information infiltrates into a specific scheme which brings back sometimes in supraliminal various new meanings.

The visual subliminal perceives 24 frames per second. In this sequence succession, there can be inserted a 25th frame, with no connection with the visible message, yet perceived consciously by the human brain. The subliminal images are invisible at normal speed. The eye would not see them and the spectator would not question this image.

Such a study has been developed in 2014 with the pupils of the "Petru Rares" National College in Suceava, who were asked to realize a commercial for a drug. In order to increase progressively the frequency of frames, they have imagined a child running and becoming a teenager, then an adult (Fig. 1). Exactly at the moment when the rhythm of the frames was of 25 Hz per second, they have introduced on the screen a posting number type message. (Fig.2).



Fig. 1. Subliminal messages, aggressors and victims



Fig.2. Subliminal messages, aggressors and victims with a posting number type message

The commercial without the inserted message has been tested on a group of volunteers, and the one with the subliminal message on another group of pupils. During the view, experimental data prevailed, by means of a cerebral headpiece that recorded the alpha waves, responsible for the concentrating activity, and the beta waves, specific to the dreaming area. The pulse and concentration of oxygen in the blood have been written down and the expressions of every participant at the experiment have been recorded with a video-device.

The analyses performed demonstrated that only one child has managed to perceive the moment in which the subliminal message has been introduced.

Although specialized studies still argue that only one subliminal image cannot modify considerably the meaning of a message, the involuntary reception of some visual stimuli can change the back-up imaginative fond (p. 81). Especially in publicity, iconic experiences have been made by introducing some images to accentuate the suggestion already created by the context. For example, in relation with Marlboro cigars commercials (Fig.3), Flavio Mario de Alcantara Calazans assert that letters l and b, being bigger than the others, even than the capital letters, create a sexual suggestion and give the impression of a penis with black testicles. Another interpretation says that the two letters suggest number 11 which, in St. Augustins preachers, represent the blazon of sin, being considered a symbol of disorder and conflict. Last but not least, the white triangle above the

Marlboro writing is assimilated with a pyramid, a mason symbol.



Fig.3. Marlboro cigars commercials

Not few are the artistic films in which hidden, subliminal messages predominate. One of them is *Eyes Wide Shut*, directed by Stanley Kubrick, with Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman in leading roles (Fig. 4).



Fig.4. Artistic films with hidden subliminal messages

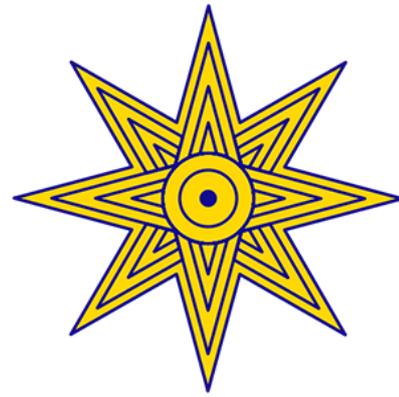


Fig. 5. Star of Ishtar

In one scene in the film, there is presented, in a secondary plan, a Christmas decoration (fig. 5), which is actually the Star of Ishtar, known as the goddess who gives birth to the world. On one hand, she is loving, but on the other hand, she is revengeful, egoistic and unfaithful.



Fig. 6. Magical circle of an invocation ritual



Fig. 7. Magical circle from an old sorcery and incantation manual

Another scene in the film presents the magical circle of an invocation ritual (Fig. 6). To the right we have the image of a magical circle from an old sorcery and incantation manual (Fig. 7).

To decode the image, a perception system anchored in the subconscious is being used. Considering that any context creates a waiting effect, we can deduce that there are three theories of reception²:

- a. In the first stage, a prototypical comparison takes place in receptors' mind; along with the perception, the already existing forms are being activated;
- b. In the second stage, a mechanism of formal analysis comes into action;
- c. In the third stage, the reception fragmented phenomenon is being produced.

To read a text, there is no need to identify each individual letter, but only a global approach, based itself on similitudes. There is a matrix on which images can be combined, even beyond the conscious threshold. However, these images are in uncontrolled proportion to other structures and associate themselves with meanings and experiences from the area of repudiated experiments. Even if inadvertent entry of an image in the subconscious is difficult to control, most often the type of matrixes, which have the approximate form to which they go to, can be anticipated.

Freud has demonstrated that a word or an image can activate a juncture, a complex, a repudiated feeling. But even if images or usual words, which are part of the immediate reality, come up weird, forced in a context, there is a relation of retrospect to a domain, to a form or a structure in the subconscious, fixed through other anterior relations.

Persuasive communication depends on several factors: the personal history of each individual, the differences in education, personality, behaviour etc., all these determining a different acceptance of a message. There are, however, psychological and moral conditions which can determine a standard behaviour.

Generally, the information absorbed subconsciously does not act immediately, and its possibilities to activate diverse domains are accidental, variable and multiple. To have a reaction desired by the manipulator, this

information must find a favourable field and even a predisposition.

If we can say that repetition creates a basic structure, the suggestion, on the other hand, is produced in varied areas, actions in time and subtly manipulates the conscience. Especially the artistic emotion has effects in the plan of defusing suggestion. Any piece of art firstly produces a basic message, but it also generates some series of subtle, imperceptible suggestions.

The manipulation experiences through language are themselves based on the capacity of suggestion of words, accrediting the idea that some persons have visual memory, while others excel in audio-reception.

In this process of producing and transmitting the subliminal publicity message there exists a series of causal factors with concerted action³:

1. In most countries, inclusively Romania, subliminal publicity is legally forbidden. This fact sustains the idea of the existence of this phenomenon, as you cannot forbid something which does not exist.
2. The myth of subliminal publicity agrees with the allmightiness of publicity.
3. Mass media has contributed to the creation and promotion of this myth.
4. From a scientific point of view, researches show that subliminal perception is an objective fact, even if sceptics sustain that such a demonstration cannot sustain the idea of manipulation through signals that are not conscious.
5. There are some contexts in which subliminal manipulation is accepted: we can be manipulated unconsciously when persons have a low degree of involvement in their attitudinal decision, inclusively in the consuming behaviour.

Max Suterland and Alice K. Sylvester consider that subliminal perception depends on the sensitivity level of each individual, a limit which varies not only from a person to another, but also from a concrete state in which the respective person experiences in that moment⁴.

"We are conscious of what captures our attention and we are not conscious of what does not capture our attention", pleads William James. It has been established that the perceptive level

depends on the tiredness degree, lack of sleep, alcohol or coffee-based drinks consumption, etc. In these conditions, there is no "final level", but it has been demonstrated that the level or threshold for words that denominate food is lower when we are hungry than after we have had eaten.

Another demonstrated fact is that, at conscious level, the message does not act according to the principle "all or nothing", but gradually.

Some theoreticians argue that instead of the "subliminal perception" concept, a more correct expression would be "superficial processing of information".

Specialists assert that not even in the case of subliminal publicity with sexual message would the intention of the audience (to buy that product or not) be influenced. However, this subliminal publicity is considered an affront to professional ethics and it is legally forbidden. Or, one cannot forbid something that does not exist. A dilemma out of which each one can benefit.

Sigmund Freud considers that, at the border between the conscious and the unconscious, the *lapse* feeling, namely the temporary oblivion through notional collapse, is being produced⁵. In this chaos of the thought, says Freud, words seem to think out of the box, and some can capture other words through sympathy. The threshold, known as *limen* or *liminis*, between the conscious and the unconscious, permits a relatively easy crossing from an area to another. Freud considers that the subconscious area is a labyrinth governed by mysterious rules, similar to those that act in an unknown universe. Upsetting, unaccepted messages, as well as accidentally forgotten experiences remain camouflaged in a zone situated under the limen of the conscious⁶. Freud considers that fade memories, the *deja vu* sensation, presumptions, anticipations or oneiric symbolism come all from the subconscious area of the human being. Practically, the subconscious is an inexhaustible deposit of symbolical combinations, an information bank about one's personal history. Fragmented oblivion and the lapse contain valuable data about the mechanisms which act at subliminal level.

Freud pleads that not forgetting is an accidental action. Any forgotten word, unfinished

phrases, sudden oblivion of a very familiar name represents, in his opinion, camouflaging an upsetting intention that can be activated through suggestions or by simply updating a feeling of guilt (ib. p. 13-14). In his opinion, the lapse has been produced against the background of a repudiated feeling of guilt. In this way, the wish to eliminate a construct from the conscious zone determines a series of deviations, some of which about to be symbolically kept in the subconscious. An example in this respect would be the inducted dream. Freud pleads that noises or whispered words in the ear of the dreamer get to the subliminal zone in suggestive forms⁷.

In such cases, manipulation from the part of the press, politicians or advertising commercials may interfere.

Carl Gustav Jung defines the zone over the conscious limen, as *the unconscious*. Jung considers that there is a collective memory of meanings, structures and symbols with roots in the universal myths, to be manifested in nocturne dreams. In other words, there is information which comes from the personal experience and information that belongs to the general existence. This information finds itself partially in the unconscious area, being related with touching events of the human being.

The subconscious zone is populated, unwillingly, with various pieces of information. Under its influence, individuals can choose the path on which they will go. Information under the conscious limen does not act directly over the taken decisions, but it can create some blockages, can bring uncertainty in expressing a belief, can show up in dreams or can invade the mind of a sick person.

Studies about the subconscious or about how can the information be stored within this area influence our choices are few and not highly relevant. Specialists can, however, anticipate the reaction which comes from the subconscious based on events produced at the limit between the conscious and subconscious. The most important conclusion is that influencing a decision by the intervention of information deposited in the subconscious depends not only on the history of each individual in part, but also on the universe to which he reports.

Shannon and Weaver have elaborated a mathematic theory of communication according to which the message comes from a source transmitted by an emitter, through a channel, being received by a receptor. On its way, the message also receives other information from the so-called parasitic sources. In this way, in the communication process, the message modifies itself, often substantially, the process favouring the occurrence of some information on diverse bearings. The communication channel, the code through which the message is being transmitted, but also the possibilities of reception demonstrate the existence of a linguistic universe, which modifies itself permanently.

As known, a signifier contains more messages. Whichever the complexity of communication, the language includes the possibility of continual metamorphosis. As Umberto Eco pleads for, the complexity of the message is explained by the fact that it puts into circulation a cultural content, not a real object. The individual history and the one to which the respective character pertains influence any transmitted message through any type of channel. One should take into account that every époque has its own existential code, as well as any individual evolves based on some values to which he had access.

Doina Ruști, in the volume *The subliminal message in the actual communication*, considers that informational redundancy depends on several factors, an aspect which makes the problem unwatchable schematically. Kapferer pleads for the difficulties in communication occurring from the differences between the capacity of source and the capacity of channel⁸.

The sense of redundancy which accompanies transmission of a message gives birth to a infinite series of combinations which extend formally into the subconscious.

In transmitting a message, what certainly exists is only the intention. During its transmission, the message suffers various

modifications, and if it goes to the subconscious zone, it can be no longer controlled, entering a medium which has its own mechanisms.

Starting from the idea that the existing information about the message registered subliminally is the result of a small number of experiments, no clear-cut conclusion can be drawn as to the way in which it influences the conscious. The semiotic areas to which the messages transmitted to the subconscious go can be only approximately anticipated, sometimes partial reactions of the subject can be predicted but, until now, it could not be explained the whole journey of an information impregnated subliminally. One aspect is however demonstrated: the subconscious zone is active, as proved by dreams, psychical diseases or art. One should not forget that repetition and the power of suggestion are two methods of immersing inside the conscious.

Endnotes

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