

# "Suddenly, Hope": Semiotic Analysis of a News Magazine Front Cover, *The Economist*

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In this work, we propose to analyse, from a semiotic point of view, the front cover of the news magazine, *The Economist*, released in November 2020, entitled "Suddenly, Hope". The basis of our analyses was the sign triadic conception inspired by Charles Peirce (1960), including Saussure's (1916/2006) demonstration, that each sign is linked to the signifier and signified structure and that these dimensions cannot be considered on their own. It is important to mention that the argument that was privileged was the notion that meaning is only produced in specific conditions of time, space and interlocution. Taking into consideration these conceptions, the colour portrayed in *The Economist* front cover was identified as the principal element of analysis. Goethe (1810/1840) presented colour as the main element of human perception, with the capacity to induce a significative effect in the message receptor soul, or the interpretant, to use Peirce's (1960) terminology in the conception of a sign. The image represented on the front cover of *The Economist* takes us to the actual social context, the pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The front cover of *The Economist* also compares to the liminality theory of Victor Turner (1969/1974). The crossing of the tunnel can be compared to a rite of passage so that society can become a better one.

**Keywords:** front cover, image, colour semiotics, sign theory, *The Economist*

## "De Repente, a Esperança": Análise Semiótica de uma Capa da Revista Noticiosa *The Economist*

Neste trabalho, propusemos-nos fazer a análise semiótica da capa da revista noticiosa *The Economist*, de novembro de 2020, intitulada "Suddenly, Hope" (De Repente, a Esperança). Sendo este o nosso objetivo, partimos da conceção triádica do signo, de inspiração peirceana (Peirce, 1960), assim como da demonstração, realizada por Saussure (1916/2006), de que cada signo está vinculado à estrutura que significante e significado compõem, pelo que estas dimensões não podem ser consideradas isoladamente. Mas o ponto de vista que privilegiámos é o de que a produção de sentido ocorre sempre em condições concretas de tempo, espaço e interlocução. Sendo este o ponto de partida para a análise, identificámos a cor da imagem retratada na capa do *The Economist* como o principal elemento de análise. Foi Goethe (1810/1840) quem apresentou a cor como o principal elemento da percepção humana, com capacidade para induzir um efeito significativo na alma do recetor da mensagem, ou seja, no interpretante, utilizando a terminologia da conceção triádica do signo, proposta por Peirce (1960). A análise da imagem presente na capa do *The Economist* remete para o contexto social atual de pandemia, causada pelo vírus SARS-CoV-2. A imagem da capa do *The Economist* conduz-nos, ainda, à teoria da liminaridade, de Victor Turner (1969/1974). Esta sugestão decorre da ideia formulada, no sentido de a sociedade atravessar o túnel, como quem empreende um rito de passagem para uma sociedade melhor.

**Palavras-chave:** capa de revista, imagem, semiótica da cor, teoria do signo, *The Economist*

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## Introduction

“Suddenly, Hope” (Figure 1) was the title of the front cover of the news magazine *The Economist*, published on November 12, 2020. This magazine was founded in September 1843 by the banker James Wilson, in a particularly controversial time, due to the discussion of the Corn Laws revocation (*From the Corn Laws to Your Mailbox*, 2007). The magazine was founded to support the abolition of the British Corn Laws, which were in force in 1815. As a result of this law, the price of the cereals was too high, due to the tariffs, among other restrictions, that this law imposed. The British Corn Laws benefit, from the economic and political point of view, the owners of large properties, preventing the growth of other economic sectors. The society that was mainly located in the urban areas were the main opponents to this law. From 1845 to 1852, there was a significant scarcity of food in Ireland, forcing the cabinet in charge, led by Sir Robert Peel, as the British prime minister, to take a stand and call the revocation of the law. Even though *The Economist* was founded with a purpose, it has evolved and become an important and prestigious international magazine, discussing several subjects, like a wide range of current affairs, politics, technology, foreign affairs, among others. The first editor-chief was James Wilson (1843-1857), the founder of the magazine. Zanny Minton Beddoes is the actual editor-chief. She was appointed to the job in 2015, being the first woman to take this position since the foundation of the magazine (*The Economist*, n.d.).



**Figure 1.** Front cover of the magazine *The Economist*, from November 12, 2020 Source. From “Suddenly, Hope”, *The Economist*, 2020. Copyright 2020 by *The Economist*. Reprinted with permission.

## Semiotic Analyses

The main goal of an image, engraving, painting, art, in general, is to convey a message to make a significant impact on the audience. Who can remain indifferent to Picasso’s paintings, like the *Maternity*, 1901 or *Guernica*, 1937? Independently, if one likes a certain image or painting, the images can produce feelings for those who see them. It can be happiness, sadness or any other kind (Gerger et al., 2014, p. 174; Hubbard, 2015, p. 93). This communication process implies the existence of an issuer (the cover author), the message (the meaning) and the receiver (who will see the cover), assuming that this process has a precise code in a specific context (Moura, 2011, p. 48).

The colours present on this cover were not chosen randomly. The colours were chosen to convey an unmistakable message. According to Goethe (1810/1840), colour is so important that in his book the *Zur Farbenlehre* (Colour Theory), Goethe presents it as the main element of human perception, giving it a physiological dimension. His book was originally published in 1810. Although, his theory gained higher recognition upon the publication of the English version by John Murray in 1840 (Goethe, 1810/1840).

The eye owes its existence to the light. From animal organs that are indifferent to the light; the light produces an organ that becomes similar to the light. Therefore, the eyes are formed in the light and to the light, in a way that the internal light meets the external light. (Goethe, 1810/1993, p. 72)

Goethe goes even further, as he mentions that colour can induce a definitive and significant effect on the soul of the message recipient (Goethe, 1810/1993, p. 175). He describes that people, in general, feel great pleasure with colour, reiterating that the eye needs the light as much as the light needs the eye (p. 175). In his book, Goethe (1810/1993) uses a unique image to reinforce his idea by recalling the rejuvenation sensation that one feels on a gloomy day when the sun illuminates an isolated part of the landscape, making the colours visible. Goethe (1810/1993) even mentions an amusing episode with a witty Frenchman. The witty Frenchman said that the conversational tone with the lady had changed, upon she changed the colour of her bedroom closet from blue to red<sup>1</sup> (p. 176), showing this way, unequivocally, the effect that colour has on a person's state of mind.

Considering the importance of the colour and its capacity to cause different sensations, as so eloquently written by Goethe, it is possible to analyze from a semiotic point of view, based on Saussure (1916/2006) and Charles Peirce (1960) concepts of image. But how? Through the application of Saussure concepts regarding language and the triadic conception of the sign by Charles Peirce.

Saussure (1916/2006) states that “language constitutes a system of pure values that determines nothing outside the momentary state of its terms ( ... ) when there is a relationship, which determines the place (position or space)” (p. 95). Saussure clearly demonstrates that each sign is linked to all other units. Therefore, it cannot be considered isolated.

It is possible, then, to consider a chromatic language, being composed by a system of simple units related among them. When these units are combined, they form more complex units, like colours or colour combinations, meaning what the system determines they mean (Pereira, 2011, p. 82). Applying the Saussure concept to the chromatic language, it is possible to consider colour as the combination of simple units characterized by the system to which it is linked (Saussure, 1916/2006, p. 95). The colour and their combination in the image under analysis have to be understood according to the role they play (Pereira, 2011, p. 83). Another important consideration is the triadic conception of the sign inspired by Peirce. This conception allows several analyses, as described by Santaella (2005):

in itself, in its internal properties, that is, in its power to signify; in its reference to what it indicates, refers to or represents and in the several effects it is able to induce in its receptors, that is, in the different interpretations that can induce in the potential users<sup>2</sup>. (p. 5)

It is not possible to perform an analysis based on the semiotic triadic conception of Peirce (1960) without referring to its elements.

A sign, or representamen, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates is called the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. (Peirce, 1960, para. 228)

It is important to mention that the elements of the Peirce semiotic — *representamen*, interpretant

and object — do not exist isolated, but only in relation to each other (Pereira, 2011, p. 84). According to the previous assumptions, it is possible to design a semiotic analysis model of the image on the front cover of *The Economist*, including the colour chosen by the author, as they can be considered signs.

The semiotic analysis of this image cannot be done without taking into consideration the social context. In fact, the production of meaning always takes place in a specific time, space and interlocution (Martins, 2002, 2017). In this particular analysis, the social context is the current pandemic situation.

On a first look at the front cover (Figure 1), it is possible to see a tunnel. But, it is not any tunnel. The arches that form the tunnel have protuberances, representing the SARS-CoV-2 spikes. This element cannot be considered only as a morphologic characteristic of the viral particle. This characteristic does identify not only the SARS-CoV-2, but also the importance of the spikes in the infection. The SARS-CoV-2 virus has several S-glycosylated proteins at its surface. These proteins are responsible for the anchorage to the ACE2 (angiotensin-converting enzyme 2) receptor present on the human cells, mediating the virus particle entrance into the cells (Huang et al., 2020, pp. 1141-1142; Letko et al., 2020, p. 562). This foreshadows that it was the SARS-CoV-2 virus that originated the formation of the tunnel, forcing, in some way, society to walk through it.

The black colour at the beginning of the tunnel is responsible for the darkness observed. From a physical point of view, black is not an actual colour but the result of visible light spectre absorption. This characteristic can lead us to another interpretation. The pandemic situation is so complex that all the surrounding energy is absorbed until nothing is left. The black is achromatic, an absence of light (Farina et al., 2006, p. 98). This absence of light, the darkness, transmit a dark feeling, sad and depressive, conveying an idea of death and destruction (Farina et al., 2006, p. 98). Precisely how the current situation can be characterized, a situation of chaos and death.

When walking through this tunnel, the colour black is gradually replaced by shades of grey, until the white, that is, until the clarity. The white colour appears as the antithesis of the black. From a physics point of view, the white is the reflection of all colours, which is associated with purity, to life and divinity (Farina et al., 2006, p. 97). This dichotomy can also be related to religion (Judeo-Christian), in which the white represents light (the paradise) and black represents darkness (the hell).

The tunnel demonstrates the path that society must roam to reach the light. The closer it gets to the light, the lesser the darkness. The colour grey is also neutral and is obtained by the mixture of white and black. In that sense, when approaching the light, the darkness gets further away, so the path becomes clearer. The origin of the word "cinza" (grey) comes from the Latin *cinicia* or *gris* from the Germanic, symbolizing the intermediate position between light and shadow (Farina et al., 2006, p. 98). When walking through the tunnel towards the light, the protrusions observed in the first arch of the tunnel disappear, giving the indication that the "wrongdoer", the virus, is disappearing.

At the end of the tunnel, a new element, a syringe. This syringe represents the so wanted vaccine against the virus SARS-CoV-2. This element is the only one that contains a true colour, red. Red is the first of all colours. It represents energy, blood, urges a feeling of heat and draws attention (Farina et al., 2006, p. 99). When looking at the syringe, it is inevitable not to look to the red element. In the Christian culture, the red gives life, purifies and sanctifies. It is the Saviour's red, the blood he shed on the cross for the salvation of humankind. It is the sign of strength and the redemption energy (Farina et al., 2006, p. 99).

Looking at this image, it is still possible to draw a parallel with Victor Turner's theory of liminality (Turner, 1969/1974), which analyses the passage rite from a pre-societal to a societal situation. Victor Turner (1969/1974) conceives liminality as the passage between the cultural state,

cognitively defined and logically articulated, and the limbo, which is the absence of “status” (p. 120). The “liminal” entities (society or people in the passage) are not in one or another place (Turner, 1969/1974, p. 117). They are in the intermediate state. In this context, as society faces a sudden event, like the current plague (SARS-CoV-2), the social distinctions and standard hierarchy are gone, in a way, thrown into limbo. All the society is subjected to the same situation. They are at the threshold of something, between the sickness and the cure. The tunnel represents the darkness, symbolizes the disease, while the vaccine represents the light, the cure. The crossing of the tunnel can be considered limbo. This ritual phase, in which society is currently at, for an indeterminate period, symbolizes the transition upon the social “death”, in that all can be affected by the virus. Society will leave limbo when it reaches the light. This passage is the rebirth of society.

Are we facing the necessary ritual to allow society the advent of a new world, with new social hierarchies, with greater equality? Doubtfully...

The front cover of the magazine *The Economist* also leads us to the narrative of *Genesis* and the *Apocalypse*. In the western religious tradition (Judeo-Christian), the event is enlightened by the salvation idea, a particular understanding of the historical period, which “is ruled by the eschatological principle” (Martins, 2011, p. 43). Therefore, the event is a singular fact and autonomous source of meaning and intelligibility. It is the bearer of a “hermeneutic power”, a “power of revelation” (Martins, 2011, p. 51). Taking into consideration this point of view, it is also possible to compare this moment with the apocalypse, the destruction, with the society being pushed through to a tunnel, to a new beginning, the genesis.

The vaccine is seen as salvation, comparable to the arrival to paradise. The syringe is the only element with a true colour, the red, which is indissociable of an energetic feeling, the redemption and from the bloodshed by the Saviour (Farina et al., 2006, p. 99), for the benefit of society. The vaccine is society's hope. If society can cross the sombre tunnel, it will leave limbo, reaching the light, paradise.

While focusing on the image in study, we cannot stop thinking of another message this image conveys. The image can be seen as a black and white dichotomy, with only a small note of colour, red, meaning hope, but we can also consider other feelings, like fear. Will we be able to reach paradise? What if society remains stuck in limbo?

All of these sensations are possible because “colour is touch, the eye, the hammer that makes the soul vibrate, the thousand-stringed instrument” (Farina et al., 2006, p. 13; Kandinsky, 1969). The colour has several dimensions, in the sense that it is seen, causes an impression into the retina, that is, optical-sensitive, it is felt, it provokes a psychic-expressive emotion, and it is constructed symbolically, that is, in cultural terms. Colour has its own meaning, a value as a symbol. It is a language that communicates an idea (Farina et al., 2006, pp. 8, 13).

The image may transmit a message, which means the image's title is unnecessary, as all the image elements transmit the path to hope.

Roland Barthes (1964) may disagree with the idea that the title of the image became unnecessary. In the “*Rhétorique de L'Image*” (Image Rhetoric), Roland Barthes defends the union of both the word and the image. Even more, Barthes proposes submitting the image to the *logos*, being preposterous to present an image without words. Although Barthes (1964) mentions that it is possible to find images without words, but only when with this absence it is purposed to give an enigmatic purport to the image (p. 43). Even further, Barthes (1964) refers that:

the image immediately delivers the first message, the substance of which is linguistic; the supports are the legend, which is marginal, and the labels, which are inserted naturally into the scene, as in conformity; the code in which this message is taken is none other than the French language; to be deciphered, this message requires no other knowledge than the

knowledge of the writing of French. (p. 41)

The superimposition of the image to the word is relatively recent. In this regard, Martins (2011) refers to the following:

the shift from word to image began over a century ago. Since the invention of photography in the mid-nineteenth century, to the cybernetic networks and virtual environments, through the image of cinema and television, the image has not stopped following the path of separation from the word, becoming autotelic. (p. 72)

The perception of the threat, which the image poses to the western *logos*, has thousands of years. Martins (2011) recalls, in that sense, the Old Testament, in particular the Exodus (20:4), which forbids the images of God: “you shall not make any idol, nor anything that has the form of what lives in the heights of heaven, on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20: 4, as cited in Martins, 2011, p. 71).

Christian theology goes even further by demonizing the image by designating it as a *daimon*. *Daimon* means “genius” in the Greek etymology, that is, the devil, who tries to seduce and fall into temptation. In turn, *dia-bolé* is a separate image, which is opposed to *sun-bolé*, an image that brings together (Martins, 2011, p. 71). But, in the technological age that characterizes our time, the separation of *logos* and image is a reality. In fact, Neiva (1993, p. 11) states that only what is translated into images is real.

Then, analyzing the cover of *The Economist*, following Neiva (1993) concept, which demonstrates the importance of the image, there is no reality without it. Observing it at the light of Peirce's triadic division, “anything which determines something else (its interpretant) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its object) in the same way, the interpretant becoming, in turn, a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*” (Peirce, 1960, p. 2303). And according to Farias and Queiroz (2017), any action of the sign (semiosis) is constituted by the irreducible relationship of the *representamen*, object and interpretant (p. 23), is, therefore, possible to look to colour as a sign that is not subject only to their internal properties but as a reference to what it indicates and the effects that elicit in the target audience (Santaella, 2005, p. 5).

The effect that a particular image or colour induces in a person is not, or it does not have to be equal to the same feeling it causes in another person. As stated previously, colour has a triple action on the receiver: impresses, expresses, and builds. And how? Colour is seen, that is, it causes a retinal impression; it is felt, that is, it provokes an emotion; it is constructive, meaning that it builds its own language that communicates an idea (Farina et al., 2006, p. 13). Farina et al. (2006) go even further:

the psychological factor dominates the eurythmy of the world pulse, of active and passive experiences in the daily march of the human existence, colour, a product of our visual sensation, has become, through the multiple aspects of its application a plastic reality... (p. 14)

This means that it is not possible to analyze an image, a painting, a colour, or even art purely by looking at the physics behind it. Art, in general, should be conceived, taking into consideration the sensitivity of the different receptors of the message. As Carla Fazenda (2001) mentions in her dissertation:

who said that colours are just electromagnetic radiations, that produce physicochemical impressions at the bottom of the eyeball? Is not possible to clearly see with the heart?

Colour is not an impression. Colour, if it knows is colour. Colour is the heart. Colouring. It is not in things. It is in the way of seeing them, in the way of standing in front of them. It is in the act of seeing, in the act of standing in front of it, admiring them. It is the way of colouring things, to perform magic with them, in the blink of an eye. (p. 9)

The front cover of the magazine *The Economist* was designed with a particular goal, to leave a mark in the soul of the message receptor, taking into consideration the social context that we are leaving and the psychological factor of each person. In other words, the way a person will look at this image will depend on the experience throughout the pandemic. They may look with their heart or their reason.

## Conclusion

The image on the front cover of the news magazine *The Economist* was, for sure, prepared with the intention to convey a strong message, with the ability to brand the receptor's soul. When looking for the first time at this image, it is possible to visualize the society walking through a dark tunnel towards the light. The dominant colour of the tunnel represented in the image under analysis is black, being this colour, from the physics point of view, the absorption of all visible light spectra. The black colour is gradually replaced by different degrees of grey until the opposite of the black colour, the white. The colour white, in turn, is the irradiation of visible spectra. This dichotomy led us to compare the tunnel with crossing a desert onto an oasis, going from hell to paradise, from chaos to salvation. This dichotomy takes us even further to the idea of the apocalypse and genesis. The black colour represents the apocalypse (hell), while the white symbolizes the genesis (paradise).

As Martins (2002, 2017) mentioned, the production of meaning is intimately connected to the context, that is, in specific conditions of time and interlocution. In this analysis, the social context is the pandemic state we live in, the uncertainty of what society will find at the end of the tunnel, leaving society in limbo, as Victor Turner (1969/1974) refers in his liminality theory.

This image has many elements that allow us to reflect, elicit distinct feelings, from anguish, depression, claustrophobia (the black colour) to joy, happiness, and freedom (the white colour). It is important to mention that the syringe is seen as salvation, reinforcing this meaning by the red colour. In the Christian culture, the red represents the blood that gives life. This image uses chromatic language to induce several feelings and transmit its message and the biological characteristics of the virus SARS-COV-2, like the spikes. These spikes can mediate the virus entrance into the human cells, making the image's message even more assertive. This virus is responsible for the darkness in which society finds itself.

Meanwhile, the crossing of the tunnel takes the interpretant to pose more questions. In the classical semiotic terms of Charles Peirce (1960) and its tripartite division of the sign, in *representment*, object and interpretant, the interpretant is the one who receives the message. Among the several interrogations that one can stance is the following: will society reach salvation, meaning the vaccine? A second question that one can pose is: is the human community at the beginning of a new era, an era with greater social justice?

It is important to mention that it is only possible to go onboard the journey proposed by the image due to the chromatic language and the bond that all the units form among them composing the language, accordingly to Saussure (1916/2006) assumptions. Naturally, it is not possible to forget that the production of meaning is only possible in specific conditions of time, space, and interlocution. It is noteworthy that this analysis cannot be dissociated from the social context that society is going through, the pandemic.



However, independently of how careful and meticulous the image observation is, the impact that causes differs from person to person. The message is constructed based on the interpreter's experience, his psychological state and his surrounding world. Even the more sceptics cannot consider colour only in the light of physics, as light absorption and reflection. Undoubtedly, it is necessary to consider the effect it can elicit in the interpretant. As Carla Fazenda (2001) says: "colour is heart" (p. 9).

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## Notes

1. Goethe takes up here the well-known passage from De Chamfort (1824): "from the moment the Lady... changed the furniture in her office to crimson, which was blue, he was willing to change the tone of his conversation" (p. 41).
2. Regarding the triadic tradition of language, read Martins (2017, pp. 21-26).

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