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...
(How Do We Say Things Like This in Words?)

By

Claire Olivia Alfonso

An Undergraduate Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
English Honors-in-Discipline
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(How Do We Say Things Like This in Words)

INTRODUCTION & GUIDING QUESTIONS

When communicating, I almost always feel that what I want to express is inexpressible. I feel that the noises that come out of my mouth do not match up with or explain my thoughts or feelings— and, because of this, neither my inner world or what I want to express to people is ever communicated, seen, or heard. Only rare instances of serendipitous combinations of moments, people, feelings and/or perfect combinations of words make me feel satisfied in communication. These are the moments I existentially seek to immortalize and cherish. Most of the time, however, language falls short— the external reflection of my inner world can only be conveyed, uncorrupted, by anything other than standard language.

I envision a language of images, sounds, color, feelings, and non-identification. My thesis is a meditation on this, and on the many parts of existence that often feel incommunicable through words alone. In my argument I understand language as a medium, and communication as an art for which we choose the medium that best conveys what we need to express. For some, words are fickle, easily misunderstood, and often put us at a loss. Through an experimental audiovisual collage film, I grapple with the phenomena of the inexpressible, explore the theorized reasons for the inexpressibility through words, and test out alternative ways that we can communicate more effectively and truthfully— with an emphasis on image-language.

The film begins with a shot of fireworks on the beach accompanied by distant sounds of

the ocean and kids laughing ecstatically. The chirping voiceover translated in the captions reads out a desperate wish: “If everything were as true, as simple, as beautiful... If everything was a fire burst of colored light in the sky, above the sand, next to the ocean.” The video clip is true; the fireworks are occurring at the beach, and the sounds you hear are what occurred in that moment— a capture of genuine human excitement at the cathartic, happily catastrophic miracle that is fireworks. Fireworks bring awe and simultaneous peace— an effect that intensifies when they occur in a sentimental scenario such as on the beach, with family and happy kids, at sundown on a beautiful clear-skied evening. Moments like this inspire the existential sentiment: If only everything could bring this feeling of simultaneous awe and peace. This opening scene asks us: How do we memorialize moments like this and hold them as special? How do we communicate our love for certain aspects of life, their impact on us, and our desire for everything to be as special as these few things seem? This first sequence introduces the overall investigation of the film: *What am I existentially trying to communicate? Why am I trying to communicate this? and How should I go about communicating it?*

LANGUAGE (AND ITS FRAILTY)

Everyday conversation and expression most commonly takes the form of standard verbal and written language— words, sentences, and phrases. This is the most widely understood form of language, so we use these elements to tell others what is important to us. However, this form often does not translate these thoughts and feelings well enough. Because of its nature and the way it functions, standard language can easily be corrupted, misheard, and misunderstood. Our main communicative tool often seems, for many reasons, entirely inadequate for communicating things of any importance or emotional and personal significance.

There exists a historical and theoretical suspicion of language and many alternative

modes of communication that predate or have evolved and existed alongside standard language. In terms of philosophy and theory, the language/non-conveyability dilemma is most well-documented in works in phenomenology, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. In the 1967 foundational deconstructivist text *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida writes “It indicates, as if in spite of itself, that a historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon” (6). Even by 1967, standard language had not kept up with the overall communicative needs of the mid-late 20th century individual and culture, its inadequacy problematic— a fact natural to language that first and foremost must be mentioned, according to Derrida. The philosophizing on the structure and inadequacy of language from the 19th century through Derrida sought to build a theoretical framework that recounted how language operates through sign and signifier— and how this operation inevitably causes language to fail us at times. Many of these theories build from the foundation of syntax, noting that the correct interpretation of an instance of language must first begin with the signification of the speaker being the same for the person who is receiving the communication— over the boundaries of misspeaking, mishearing, accents, or language barriers. These philosophical schools explain to us the communicative inevitable: what we say can very easily be lost through the organization of words and phrases; and that language, by nature, is somewhat inadequate for communication.

At the root, the post-structuralist and deconstructionist dilemma with language is that it does not always replicate the thoughts of the mind. In his book, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism After Structuralism*, Jonathan Culler explains this:

The ideal would be to contemplate thought directly. Since this cannot be, language should be as transparent as possible. The threat of non-transparency is the danger that, instead of permitting direct contemplation of thought, linguistic signs might arrest the gaze and, by interposing their material form, affect or infect the thought. (Culler 91)

The complex nature of the immaterial— emotions and the inner world which we try to express— is, by default, indescribable using the material that we have at hand. At their core, words are signs by which our thoughts and desired expressions are communicated and often translated into something non-identical.

LINGUISTIC GRAPPLING IN MY THESIS (LANGUAGES OF MY FILM)

In my film “...” I grapple with the language issue by using various methods of translating thought and inducing emotion. There are five communicative registers in the film, which work as different “languages.” There are the images (videos), the original ambient room-tone/noise accompanying most of the videos, the “voiceover”, the subtitles/captions, and the overlaid writing. The alternating use of different registers symbolizes a play with language, a testing of different methods of conveying thought/feeling, and a general questioning/interrogation of communicative methods and what effect they have on understanding.

These registers communicate in a different way in terms of their form and audio and/or visual properties. The video register works as the dominant register and primary image aspect of the film, in different types of clips. One aspect of the video register are the landscape shots and personally sentimental and emotional moments which resurface past fleeting and authentic moments in current, filmic, existential memorialization like Deleuzian crystal images— instances of non standard language where the signifier is the emotional function of the image sometimes as a memorialization of a moment past and the sign is the existential condition, rather than explanatory words (Deleuze 196). The other aspect of the video register are the pure color shots, glitchy and edited landscape shots that distort image readability and replace the received logical meaning with color sensation and abstract/creative association rather than the reading that comes from linguistic signs.

The voiceover is a fragmented sort of monologue of some of my most pertinent expressional desires and the inadequacy of only words to justifiably communicate those— an inadequacy that inspires the construction of an alternative language through the creation of the film. The voiceover originated as a recorded reading of the thoughts that appear in the captions at the bottom of the screen “translated” into something nonparallel to English— birdsong. Birdsong historically has had religious and divine connotations— known as “The Language of the Birds,” it is seen as the form of communication that is closest to “truth” or God:

The Language of the Birds is one of several names given to the secret hermetic language of esotericism. Since at least the Dark Ages an idea has existed that there once was a language, or a particular *word*, which perfectly expressed the nature of things. This language was called the Language of the Birds. (Henry 1)

Many whistled languages are often referred to as the languages of the birds such as Mazteco of Oaxaca, Mexico, Silbo of the Canary Islands, kuş dili in Kuşköy, Turkey, and sfyria in Antia, Greece. Language games, in some languages/cultures such as Oromo in Ethiopia and Kenya, are referred to as language of the birds (Kebbede & Unseth). Birdsong, whistled speak, the divine, and linguistic-grappling word-play all fall under the same theoretical understanding— they are communicative methods that deconstruct standard language and therefore have a different function in thought expression, allowing communication to be more open and expressive. By using the birdsong sampled and extracted from various public domain sounds uploaded to freesound.org, as the voiceover track, I am adding another layer of displaced meaning. I’m speaking to the mythological and linguistic legacies inspired by birds, raising the concept of many different historically and personally proposed methods of communication, and playing with the idea that there is any one divine, true, and flawless method of speech.

Alternative languages and alterations of language dominate the film, despite the caption translations of the birdsong being standard language, as in the use of words in a logical sequence. However, even these captions vary from the usual use of language in that they are all but are existential and questioning of/conceptually frustrated by the function, purpose, and inadequacy of the language they exist in. They do not answer themselves or work as one side of a conversation would. I am not trying to convey any functional meaning with standard language but rather using simple words and phrases to grapple with the inexpressibility dilemma outloud, raising the problems and questions in a language we all know but leaving the solutions, answers, and emotions to the images and sounds. Sonically, there are three moments of non-birdsong voiceover where my actual voice accompanies the subtitled text, breaking the wall between the viewer and personal human verbal communicative efforts. However, this utterance of words is still stopped from conveying any small amount of standard meaning through the use of low whispered volumes and speech reversals. The one moment in the film where I am speaking un-reversed language/words is the use of standard language in a conceptual form, unlike standard conversational or critical language.

There are vast differences between vocal and textual language in terms of how it comes across and is interpreted. Because I often feel such a profound disconnect between my thoughts/desired communications and language when using my voice, the direct and non-reversed spoken voice is only one segment of the film— I try to convey the bulk of the meaning through textual language instead. There is a personal battle and dysmorphia with my voice reading words, whereas typed text has the buffer of the machine and digital— typed text presents the literal words and letters first and foremost over the complications and biases of a voice, and written text operates similarly without the machine buffer, both forms of language are

visual. The typed subtitles and the handwritten text overlays are the place in the film where I convey the guiding existential questions behind my work, and where language and syntax struggles in the process of making itself understandable. I express these instances of questioning in either all capital letters in the captions or as sketch-like overlays on images multiple times in the moments of the film and my thought processes where a visual representation of direct thoughts is more crucial and meaningfully authentic. These overlays are textual, like type, but also expressionistic. They are direct thoughts without the bias and dysmorphia of voice but with a tinge of creativity and personalization, working in similar realms as many postmodern and deconstruction-inspired writers and artists. The absence of a legible voiceover lets written language and alternative methods reign supreme for my communicative needs and desires.

PHILOSOPHIES & PRACTICES OF DECONSTRUCTION

In the realms of literature and visual art, language play exists formally and theoretically framed by its practitioners as stylistic decisions and/or entire movements. In avant-garde poetics and literature as well as contemporary visual art movements such as Fluxus, creators deconstruct language and manipulate it in a subversion of and contemplation on the possibility of higher meaning amidst the need for unbridled expression. Many of Gertrude Stein's avant-garde poems, such as "A Carafe, That is a Blind Glass", use words more as sounds or abstract signifiers than as arbiters of logical meaning. Stein does not give the content any context or purpose— the poems employ words and evoke sensation without any logical meaning. Another poet and artist, Madeline Gins, also chronicles words more as triggers of association and emotion than as signifiers of meaning. Many of her poems also fall in line with some concrete poetry traditions, words fill a page like a canvas and construct an image— a total deconstruction of language's intent. Culler, citing Derrida, argues that "The practitioner of deconstruction works within the

terms of the system but in order to breach it” (Culler 86). Deconstructionist practitioners use the linguistic medium in their questioning and challenging of language, stripping it bare in order to examine the function of words and raise the idea of an alternative language that might better serve the bigger purpose of contributing to the experience of a true shared reality? Shortly after the five-minute mark of the film, I speak to this deconstructive practice and philosophy, raising it as a possible solution to the dilemma of the unconveyable, and ask, “Is there a way to use language but avoid its confinement?”. After this question, starting at 5:35, the birdsong speech stops and is replaced with my voice reading a poem over a montage of videos of echinaceas, a rabbit in a field with fireflies, and the ocean shore at dusk. The poem uses language in a more experimental and abstract way. The verses are synesthetic more than explanatory: I evoke ideas of moments, time, color, infinity and thoughts of safety, sunset, and solitude. The poem is a collage of words and association triggers as the visual element at this moment is a collage of moments/visuals that together encapsulate these bigger ideas, feelings, and emotions. In these moments of normal use of spoken language, I grapple with how despite their habitual inadequacy, words can effectively, like images, convey the important essence of certain thoughts or at least raise the topic of their inadequacy when used in a deconstructed and more sonic and artistic form. In deconstructive conversational and artistic practices, words and sentences are not put together to convey thought in the logical fashion that is the considered foundation of a shared reality. Instead, the elements of language convey thought on the basis of emotion and mental association— the elements of language have a purpose and effect more akin to that of images. They come together in a fragmented yet sequential way, like videos and films in montage form. In this same fashion I establish a language that is a non-standard collection and organization of images, sounds, and sensations in my film in order to try to truthfully communicate feelings and

talk about bigger existential aspects.

IMAGE-LANGUAGE AS AUTHENTIC COMMUNICATION?

Abandoning their technical and precise desires, words can be used in a more emotive way. What happens when this expressional urge abandons words nearly altogether? Just before a diegetic audio montage sequence of rain on foliage begins, the film states: “I don’t have doubt when using the nonverbal.” Conceptually speaking, where the use of images with words and words in a deconstructed way still does not suffice, another register of communication in my film comes into play— images alone. The diegetic sound and images create an image-text-noise world that questions and challenges the flawed and sometimes inadequate standard use of language, and proposes an image-language to take its place, asking: *Is there such a thing as an image language, if not, is it possible?*

The contemporary pervasiveness of internet memes, emojis, and social media culture/communication, hint that symbolic, image-based signifiers are taking up more space in the collective consciousness and culture in general. The exponentially growing bank of emojis in our phone keyboards shows that we are entering (or have already entered) a more image-based phase of our language. If the way people communicate via words is taking on increasingly individual forms depending on subjective expressional need with increasing amounts of variations from the norm, then how close are we to a common trend of using alternative languages altogether, rather than just alternative syntaxes? Language has also undergone a sort of digital deconstruction— no longer is standard communication only words, it can also include messages and social media posts. Inside of this, language is constantly occurring in the forms of emojis, message reactions, likes/comments, photos, videos, etc. A conversation that entails only back and forth selfie sending is not out of the ordinary, and a conversation with emojis added in

with/instead of words is a pleasurable way of communicating for the average smartphone user. All over social media platforms, there are accounts on which people do not share snippets of their daily life with descriptive captions but on which people use the entire account as a sort of “vision-board”, purely posting photos or text posts of symbols/emojis, for the artistic effect, usually with no textual explanation whatsoever.

Parts of our communicative evolution are not moving exponentially and robotically forward– it seems that sounds and images (similarly to ancient whistled languages and hieroglyphics) are something that we as a species are drifting back towards in order to convey what we need to or resist the expectation to convey, while working in the channels of highly modern and advanced technology. In the realm of social media and digital communication, this creative internet presence is a sort of image-language.

FILM SPEAKING IMAGE-LANGUAGE

The image holds power and transmits meaning at a frequency different from that of standard language, but the employment of images in an organized way is nevertheless a communicative method of translating the world of the immaterial into the field of the material world. Filmmaker and theorist Sergei Eisenstein, in his essay on cinematic principle and the ideogram, writes that hieroglyphics are “a cross between the figurative mode and the denotative purpose,” noting that language should and has not primarily or solely served a denotative purpose, that the “figurative mode” is not something nonsensical or that should be overlooked (“Beyond the Shot”, 18). Images develop meaning because they can evoke associations and visceral sensations– triggering the most natural and stimulating brain responses, and therefore can be argued to be more “true” or at least have more significant power than words. Especially regarding hieroglyphics, images more directly portray the reality (and therefore meaning) of

aspects of life because they convey rather than signify. Film language is based on images while also formally deconstructing the rules of standard written and verbal language. Eisenstein describes the function of hieroglyphics as a unique combination of symbol signifiers that together “achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented” (Eisenstein 16). In conversation with film, Eisenstein points out that this combination has the same function as montage film: “But– this is montage!! Yes. It is precisely what we do in cinema, juxtaposing representational shots that have, as far as possible, the same meaning, that are neutral in terms of their meaning, in meaningful contexts and series” (16). Film works similarly to language in the way that independent signifiers take on meaning when paired with others.

In photography and cinema, theorists identify the concept of signification regarding the technological function of the camera. Theorists such as Roland Barthes and Maya Deren note that because of the camera’s direct capturing of the world, film is uniquely truthful and capable of expressing something more closely resembling authentic thought than other communicative mediums. Roland Barthes, in his key semiotic text *Image, Music, Text* writes that the photographic image is “a message without a code” and “continuous message” (17). But this statement needs more delineation on where “image” begins and ends, what an image consists of, and what is being expressed. An image does not have to be a snapshot or direct mirroring of the objective reality and landscape we experience. An image, in the conversation of image-language, is something of graphic and sensory substance such as colors, patterns, sounds, textures, or even words independent of logical sentences. Image-language employs one of these elements or a mixture of them to evoke visceral/emotional identifications and associations, communicating on the level of pure thought rather than systematic logic. Film as an art and communicative medium

is an image-based language, the creators of films choose images as the signifiers because of the unique effect they possess.

My film, straying from any semblance of narrative or plot, is entirely audiovisual montage and communicates via the image-language. Montage, as noted by Eisenstein, is the pairing of images together in a structure to communicate certain effects and thoughts— much like hieroglyphics. Images are symbols and signifiers that create larger connotations and feelings when put in certain configurations. Regarding this aspect of montage alone with its reliance on rhythm to give the film different overall feels and energy, montage works in the same function as language as we know it. The numerous different shots of rain on foliage consecutively rather than just one emphasizes the weight of the symbol, and the rain/moments with the rain are allowed time to speak. The echinacea shots are repeated in varying colors, signifying the various emotions and mental connotations of that moment, that shot, that image— further accentuated by the emotions of the accompanying poem voiceover. The images function as signifiers: put together, they convey greater ideas with aesthetic and emotional impact as well. For this reason, the image-language is the root of my audio-visual project.

IMAGES, FORM, AFFECT, AND EMOTIONS

This multi-sensory, multi-layered level of communication is what thinkers in the field of affect theory seek to legitimize. Affect theory is the existential space for that which somewhat escapes conceptualization, like language and emotion— aspects of the experience that the conscious mind always has tension with. According to Martha Figlerowicz, affect theories are:

Celebrations of Proustian moments when the self and the sensory world, or the conscious and the unconscious self, or the self and another person, fall in step with each other in a way that seems momentarily to make a sliver of experience more vivid and more richly

patterned than willful analysis could ever have made it seem. (Figlerowicz 4)

Under Figlerowicz's understanding, moments of affect are the personally and existentially profound. The fleeting, escapable, sublime, emotional, and unexplainable. The religious, the spiritual, the exciting, the synesthetic. Affect moments include the Sartrean nausea, the overwhelmingness of consciousness and the need to speak on it by using synesthetic language, sights, sounds, sensations, colors, and image associations. Affect theory acknowledges that words escape us and we are sometimes unable to formulate anything clearly—yet in these spaces of affect, everything is clear and peaceful without ample formulation or explanation why. This concept inspires the existential question: *When these moments and sensations are what resonates with us the most—should they not be our primary expression and focus of existential research?*

Affect theories/moments are “grounded in movements or flashes of mental or somatic activity rather than casual narratives of their origins and end points” (4). Affective understanding of moments urges us to identify, look at, and honor cerebral patterns, moments, and feelings. This theoretical framework inspires one to take life for what it is, bask in the confusing and non-conveyable nature of it, and see this fact and perspective itself as the theory rather than one for which we endlessly try to put words to something beyond words. Under this thought, what is important are these naturally-occurring deconstructive sensations, parts of the human experience that are represented not through “willful analysis,” but in their very existence, and in deconstructive representations that mirror, in affect, the fragmentation of the mind, emotions, and human experience.

In my film, I put the concepts of image-language and affect theory in conversation with each other. By the reasoning of emotion and affect being the predominant driving force behind expression and the reasoning of images being the most emotionally rich signifier, communication

of complex concepts should be imbued with more image-language and less traditional language. For many, these “somatic flash” elements of consciousness hold much more weight and sensuality than that of syntactically organized thoughts that help us play into a certain reality. For many, the existential inhabits too much space in the consciousness for empty signifiers to be given much meaning. The existential is by default unconveyable, which speaks to the fragility of understanding and of everything that is. This is the ultimate non-conveyable, and what I try to speak to in my film.

MAKING PEACE WITH THE LOST & THE UNCONVEYABLE

The entire videographic element of the film is low-definition videos shot with a broken iPhone 8 camera, montaged together with meditative breaks of black screen. These are videos I've taken over the past year and a half in a sort of diaristic capturing and honoring of moments in which I felt emotionally complete or aesthetically impassioned, like being in the midst of the Proustian moments that Figlerowicz identifies (4). The use of the broken camera results in grainy and lower-than-average contrast videos— the videos preserve the idea and colors and objects of the moment but not in perfect clarity. The exact details are not conveyed, only the essence— a situation similar to language, memory, life and the flaws with each. The video blur is symbolic of the gap between perception and communication. There are segments where the visual meaning is even more deconstructed, when these low-definition videos are edited and pixelated heavily through a variety of Adobe Premiere color and grain effects used abstractly. In both instances, where words are sometimes inadequate to convey the essence and feeling of a thought or experience, these shots do not have the faculties to convey anything other than the general essence and feeling, and extra colors/visual qualities are synesthetic stand-ins for perfect clarity. We do not need the high definition zoom capture of the water, the grains of sand, or the

raindrops– the exact details are not needed to grasp the feeling and essence of the moment. There is always going to be a gap between desired communication and perceived communication, by asserting that firsthand, we open the window to discuss this uncomfortable and ever-present dilemma, along with many others. Because of this, this low-definition and synesthetic image register is the primary language register of “...”.

After the six-minute mark in the film, an indecipherably grainy video with what appears to be a blinking light fills the screen. Over it is the caption, “I WANT US ALL TO BE ABLE TO SAY WHAT WE MEAN AND BE HEARD, But some things feel so un conveyable.” Like the meaning of one thought/sentence can be lost with the excessive corruption of the language medium– and like the subject of this video is unidentifiable– the essence of an image-language utterance can be lost too. After that, what is left? If all our thoughts and feelings are skewed or misrepresented in words, we have much to lose. After corruption and blur of an image, what remains is more abstract, yet not made equally untrue. In this circumstance, images reign supreme in terms of not fully betraying us, but still, there is something lost and something that can never assuredly exist outside of the individual heart and mind. Everywhere there is a gap, a loss, a death that forces us to make peace with true death, the actual end of life.

There is always something in between, something unsaid, something lost in translation, something confused, something blurry, something inexpressible. The inevitable battle with language comes from the inevitable desire to express, to share, and be understood. More so than the deliberation on the failures of syntax, what matters is a human agreement to receive communication with an openness about the medium it reaches you in, whether it be words or images or a careful fusion of the two. The boundless urge to share and connect is greater than the bounds of the materials we use to do such. What we aim for is the finding of, or at least the

continual searching for, our individual mediums that best allow the inner world to translate effectively to the outer one. And where this is impossible, we seek what honors the meditation on this existential fact and that which brings peace in spite of it...

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