Flavia Bleuel (M.A.)
Universität der Künste Berlin

Aesthetic Emotions and Media Pictures

Aesthetic Emotions and Media Pictures

Pictures are said to easily evoke emotions. Media pictures[1] are even used with the intension to elicit emotions. But, in communication science this process is rarely theoretically reflected or empirically tested as this topic is a rather new field of research (Kappas & Mueller, 2006). This is surprising if we consider living in a visual era in which we are overwhelmed by emotional visual communication. Hence, the central question of the paper is: Which emotions are induced by media pictures? Two aims are to be dealt with. First, emotion elicitation through media pictures is briefly theoretically reflected. Second, a pilot study for the development of a scale to measure these affective reactions is presented.

Utility emotions and aesthetic emotions

In everyday live most emotions are elicited by events or persons. But, as people use media emotions are also elicited by media offers. Scherer, Wallbott and Summerfield (1986) compared causes of emotional experience in eight European countries and found that about 20 percent of the emotional experience can be attributed to media content. It seems very likely that these experiences have increased when we consider that average media use in Europe has steadily risen in the last years (EIAA, 2008). A question to be discussed is: Can media pictures evoke the same emotions people have in everyday live?

Scherer (1998; 2004) points out that emotions elicited by media content differ from common or utilitarian emotions concerning appraisals, duration and intensity. Hence, it is suggested that affects produced by media pictures should be conceptualised as feelings that integrate cognitive and physiological effects. Therefore the componential approach to emotion serves as theoretical background. Utilitarian emotions have "major functions in the adaptation and adjustment of individuals to events that have important consequences for their well being by preparing action tendencies (fight, flight), recovery and reorientation (grief work), motivational enhancement (joy, pride), social obligations (reparation),etc" (Scherer, 2004, p. 241). According to emotion elicitation in visual communication to concentrate on just utilitarian or basic emotions like sadness or happiness would narrow the perspective. Scherer (1998) gives causes to think about a subclass of emotions that are influenced by the specific characteristics of media. When talking about the effects of media pictures one also has to take into account their design features. Current studies show the influence of press photo techniques like sophisticated photographic techniques, artistic quality or special composition on attention and preferences (Bleuel & Hautz, 2010; Roessler, Haschke, & Marquardt, in press). In line with this considerations the subclass of aesthetic emotions are explicitly considered in the following. Aesthetic emotions can be defined as "evaluations of auditory or visual stimuli in terms of intrinsic qualities of

---

[1] Media pictures can be defined as substantial reproductions which can induce mental images, are linked to a medium and address a mass audience for communicative reasons (Bleuel, 2009). This definition excludes all other forms of pictures like metaphors, dreams, reflection or paintings.

form or relationship of elements" (Scherer, 2004, p. 242). When perceiving media pictures people do not necessarily appraise the relevance of the pictures for their personal goals, social values or bodily needs. Hence, aesthetic emotions are not necessarily linked to goal relevance or coping potential (Scherer & Zentner, 2001; Scherer, 2004). Instead the appreciation of picture qualities is more important. Even though goal relevance or coping potential play no crucial role, this does not mean that there are no physiological or behavioural changes. But, these embodied changes are "rather diffusely reactive" and weaker and not comparable with proactive action tendencies (Scherer, 2004, p. 244). So, what does aesthetic emotions distinguishes from simple feelings of liking, preference or pleasure? Aesthetic emotions differ from preferences or pleasure by means of intensity of subjective feeling, potential embodied changes and they are based on comprehensive appraisals (Scherer, 2004). Silvia (2009) adds another appraisal and proposes that several aesthetic emotions like interest, surprise or confusion can be mapped on a two-dimensional appraisal space namely novelty/complexity and the ability to understand (comprehensive appraisal). Given that people are aware of their subjective feelings aesthetic emotions can be measured via self-report.

Scale development

As aforementioned a list of utilitarian or basic emotion terms is not sufficient for measuring the variety of aesthetic emotional reactions to media pictures. A dimensional approach would limit the description of aesthetic emotions on the two dimensions arousal and valence which results in a low degree of resolution and differentiation. Finally, an eclectic approach has the disadvantage that verbal labels for affective states are especially chosen for different study purposes and this makes the comparing of results difficult (Scherer, 2004). Therefore the development of a scale for aesthetic emotions on media pictures is based on the componential approach to emotion in order to explain underlying mechanisms of emotion elicitation. This includes the measurement of components like appraisals, physiological reaction, motor expression and subjective feeling. Self-report as an approved methodology is used as a first access to emotional experiences with media pictures.

In visual communication on has to differentiate between which emotions are expressed by the picture and which emotions are felt because of the picture. The scale is meant to measure felt aesthetic emotions. Besides, the scale is initially developed for one kind of media pictures namely photos. Content analyses of newspapers and online newspapers showed that photos are used more often than other picture techniques like illustration or graphics (cf. Bleuel & Hautz, 2009). The ability of the scale to discriminate different types of media pictures has to be validated in further studies.

An explorative pilot study was conducted as a first step in the scale construction process. 59 students (25 men and 34 women, average age 22 years) in their first semester in strategic communication and planning were asked with open questions which affect labels they would use in order to describe their feelings concerning aesthetic and unaesthetic media pictures. As Silvia (2009) points out, there is still a need for explaining and assessing negative affects to visual stimuli. That is why I asked also for negative emotional experiences. This resulted in a pool of 180 terms that describe many different types of affective reactions. Besides the respondents were asked which picture subject

(e.g. landscape, people, objects) and picture technique (e.g. photo, illustration, graphic) they prefer to look at. The idea behind this is that preferences for picture subject or technique may influence the evoked aesthetic emotions.

Why do I use the componential approach in order to search for underlying mechanisms when just one component (subjective feeling) is included in the study? The empirical findings of Scherer (2004) and Zentner et al. (2008) show that many of their affect labels indicate that the recipients reflected changes in the different emotion components of a sequential emotional process. This is also the case for this explorative study on emotional reaction to media pictures. The verbal labels reflected changes in the cognitive (dreamy, nostalgic), physiological (tense, calm), or motivational (motivated) component. Besides, it can be distinguished between terms that refer to the picture itself and terms that refer to the producer of the picture.

The next step in the scale development process is to compare the terms with existing scales like the Modified Differential Affect Scale (MDAS) which has a focus on positive and negative emotions elicited during media use and the Geneva Emotional Music Scale (GEMS) which measures aesthetic emotions elicited by music. Furthermore the Geneva Emotion Wheel (GEW) is used because it contains 22 emotion families and their corresponding appraisals. This may help to classify the aesthetic emotion terms accordant to their underlying appraisals. Additionally other emotion descriptors derive from literature e.g. recent developments in aesthetic psychology like a model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgements (Leder et al., 2004) or an instrument for aesthetic perception assessment by Rowold (2008) that is limited to visual art. They seem to be fruitful for the explanation and measurement of affective visual communication. Currently a pool of aesthetic emotion terms is prepared. In a further study these terms are evaluated concerning their frequency of occurrence in the reception of media pictures. This study aims to reduce the eligible terms to a smaller number that can be subsumed under different factors.

References

Bleuel, F. (2009). Emotionale Visiotype. Eine Analyse von Wirkpotenzialen [Emotional visiotypes. An analysis of effect potentials]. In T. Petersen, & C. Schwender (Hrsg.), *Visuelle Stereotype*. Köln: Halem.

Bleuel, F., & Hautz, P. (submitted). How do photos affect the popularity of news articles? A content analysis of German news websites.

EIAA (Europa Interactive Advertising Association) (2008). Media Scope Europe 2003-2008. Retrieved March 1, 2010, from http://www.eiaa.net/Ftp/Conferences/EIAA_Mediascope_deutsch_final.pdf

Izard, C. E. (1994). *Die Emotionen des Menschen: Eine Einführung in die Grundlagen der Emotionspsychologie* (2.Auflage) [Emotions of humans: An introduction into emotion psychology]. Weinheim: Psychologie Verlags Union.

Kappas, A., & Mueller, M. G. (2006). Bild und Emotion – ein neues Forschungsfeld. Theoretische Ansätze aus Emotionspsychologie, Bildwissenschaft und visueller Kommunikationsforschung [Picture and emotion – a new research field. Theoretical approaches from emotion psychology, picture science and visual communication research] *Publizistik, 51* (1), 3-23.

Leder, H., Belke, B. Oeberst, A., & Augustin, D. (2004). A model of aesthetic appreciation and aesthetic judgements. *British Journal of Psychology*, 95(4), 495-508.

Renaud, D. & Unz, D. (2006). Die M-DAS – eine modifizierte Version der Differentiellen Affekt Skala zur Erfassung von Emotionen bei der Mediennutzung [The M-DAS – a modified version of the differential affect scale for the assessment of emotions during media use]. *Zeitschrift für Medienpsychologie, 18(2)*, 70-75.

Roessler, P., Haschke, J., & Marquardt, F. (in press). Zur Selektion und Wirkung von Pressefotos. Eine rezipientenorientierte Untersuchung auf der Basis von Fotonachrichtenfaktoren [On the selection and effects of press photos. A recipient oriented study on the basis of photo news factors].

Rowold, J. (2008). Instrument development for esthetic perception assessment. *Journal of Media Psychology, 20(1),* 35-40.

Scherer, K.R. (1998). Emotionsprozesse im Medienkontext: Forschungsillustrationen und Zukunftsperspektiven [Emotion processes in media context: research illustrations and future perspectives. *Medienpsychologie, 10* (4), 276-293.

Scherer, K.R. (2004). Which emotions can be induced by music? What are the underlying mechanisms? How can we measure them? *Journal of New Music Research, 33(3),* 239-251.

Scherer, K.R., & Zentner, M.R. (2001). Emotional effects of music: Production rules. In P.N. Juslin, & J.A. Sloboda (Eds.), *Music and emotion: theory and research* (pp. 361-392). Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

Scherer, K.R., Wallbott, H.G., & Summerfield, A.B. (1986). *Experiencing emotion: A cross-cultural study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Silvia, P.J. (2009). Looking past pleasure: anger, confusion, disgust, pride, surprise, and other unusual aesthetic emotions. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 3(1),* 48-51.

Zentner, M., Grandjean, D., & Scherer, K. R. (2008), Emotions evoked by the sound of music: characterization, classification, and measurement. *Emotion, 8* (4), 494-521.