

# The Dancing Cop: Semiotics and Innovation

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A short video shows Ramiro Hinojas, 55, at a busy crossroad of Manila, Philippines (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> He is a traffic control enforcer. He has attracted viral attention as “the dancing cop”. He directs the hectic traffic of Manila with the typical moves of Michael Jackson’s dancing. This video is perfect to introduce the semiotics of innovation. What happens here from the semiotic point of view? Hinojas conflates two systems of signs. On the one hand, the system of signs through which cops direct traffic, in the Philippines as well as in the rest of the world. Hjelmse’s glossematics would say that this system is composed of two planes, an expressive plane and a content plane. Both planes, in turn, are composed of three strata: matter, form, and substance.

The expressive matter of a standard cop traffic control sign system is the human body, mainly through its postures, gestures, and movements. Sometimes visual or acoustic prostheses are added to it, like a signaling disc or a whistle. The expressive form of this system is hybrid. Part of it is strictly codified through gestural codes taught and learned in police schools; part of it, instead, is spontaneous and essentially adheres to the gestural culture where the cop was raised and works. The function of this expressive form is to articulate the expressive matter, the body, in order to signify the content plane. This is also decomposable into a semantic matter, the multitude of pragmatic injunctions that a cop could communicate to a car driver or a pedestrian, and a semantic form, which selects some of these injunctions, for instance “move on”, “stop”, “slow down”, “speed up”, and associates them with the postures, gestures, and movements selected by the expressive form.

Ramiro Hinojas could have stuck to this sign system until his retirement, like most cops do in the Philippines and in the rest of the world. However, one day he decided to

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cross-fertilize the sign system of traffic control cop enforcement with that of dance, particularly the one invented by that mighty semiotic innovator called Michael Jackson.

These are the first two points to retain about the semiotics of innovation: first, innovation frequently stems from the conflation of two or more distinct systems of signs; second, innovation never originates from a vacuum; on the contrary, it always rests on some pre-existent semiotic materials. However, there is also a third point that Ramiro Hinojas's experience underlines: simply merging two systems of signs does not necessarily bring about innovation. The semiotic characteristics of the first and those of the second must somehow combine in order to produce a third system that derives from them but is at the same time new and harmonious. The purpose of innovation semiotics is to determine the rules, or at least the strategies, of this "somehow", as well as to pinpoint the hallmarks of both novelty and harmony.

In the case of Ramiro Hinojas, innovation comes about because the sign system of cop traffic control and that of dancing, especially Michael Jackson's, already share several features. First of all, some general ones: they both adopt the body as an expressive matter and articulate it through an expressive form that is based on rhythm, that is, on the regular repetition through time of certain postures, gestures, movements, often combined according to a certain gestural syntax; then, some specific features: conflating the sign system of cop traffic control and that of another dancing style, for instance tango, would have been more complicated. Michael Jackson's dancing language, instead, is perfect to be mimicked in traffic control: rapid and short movements arranged in a fluid array of springs and stops display the same kinetics of cops in busy traffic roads. This is the third point about innovation semiotics that this video suggests: innovation does not emanate from the conflation of two systems of signs whatsoever, but from the cross-fertilization of two systems of signs that already shared some structural characteristics, which were always there but which nobody could perceive before innovation took place. One of the purposes of innovation semiotics is to

detect innovation potential where nobody has still seen it, structural similarities between systems of signs that everybody else considers as irredeemably separate.

However, discerning and conflating the common expressive features of two distinct semiotic systems is not enough. Ramiro Hinojas's synthesis of cop traffic control and dance is innovative not only because it produces contamination of expressive patterns, but also and especially because it delivers a rearrangement of semantic configurations. The peculiarity of Ramiro Hinojas's traffic control style consists in the fact that the expressive form he adopts, Michael Jackson's dancing moves, has a communicative rationale that is completely different from the expressive form Hinojas is supposed to adopt, the gestural code of traffic cops. The former indeed does not bear any pragmatic value: MJ's dancing moves are not meant to exert any action vis-à-vis their receivers; they don't order anything; they are there to be watched and admired; their only purpose is to provoke aesthetical pleasure through the harmoniousness of their spatial and rhythmic patterns. The latter, on the opposite, does not bear any aesthetic value: a cop's traffic control moves are expected to exert precise actions, usually orders, vis-à-vis car drivers; they don't signify anything but that; they are not there to be observed and applauded at; their aesthetic form is not at stake.

However, when Ramiro Hinojas decides to direct the traffic of Manila with the dancing moves of Michael Jackson, not only two expressive codes, but also two communicative rationales merge: his postures, gestures, and movements are not simply speech acts anymore, but a performance that turns car drivers and pedestrians into spectators. The cultural consequences of this transformation are huge: the street turns into a stage, the arid functionality of a crossroad into a creativity arena, where passersby are suddenly snapped from the meaningless routine of their daily commute and reminded that human life is all about meaning, and that meaning is all about surprise. These are two further points one should keep in mind about innovation semiotics: first, true innovation is never only a matter of expression; true

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innovation reshapes the semantic form a society adopts, and the vaster and deeper the reshaping is, the more compelling innovation will be; second, innovation takes place only when semiotic habits are shaken and reconfigured, as Peirce would have said. There is no innovation in routines, and every innovation disrupts routines, engenders signs that force receivers to produce other signs to interpret them, and so on and so forth until innovation turns into a new socially established semiotic habit and, ultimately, into a new routine.

There is something else Ramiro Hinojas's performance can teach. First of all, that there is no innovation that does not entail a certain amount of risk; second, that the greater the innovation, the bigger the risk; third, that the first risk every true innovation runs, is that of not being recognized as such. What is the risk involved in directing traffic with MJ's moves? By opening up a new arena of meaning in the scenario of everyday meaningless routines, the conflation of pragmatic and aesthetic communication runs the risk of determining the failure of both: pedestrians and drivers will not pay attention to the cop's gestural orders and will get distracted by his show, to the detriment of traffic fluidity. Simultaneously, their being caught in traffic, and not sitting in a theatre, will prevent them from fully enjoying the aesthetics of the performance, also because they receive it without any soundtrack. By merging two cultural dimensions, innovation therefore is always at peril of dissatisfying the requirements of both.

However, semiotics should emphasize that innovation exactly consists in such risk: every innovation that matters imposes a reconsideration not only of the systems of signs involved in its expressive rearrangement, but also of the cultural configurations that they convey. Ramiro Hinojas's innovative performance, for instance, should encourage observers to reconsider the whole lifestyle in which metropolitan citizens are caught: a rat race where any meaningful contemplation immediately becomes a hindrance to the meaningless motion of the city; the magic transformation of the cop's gestural orders into MJ's dancing moves should also hint at the nightmarish work conditions of traffic control enforcers in a metropolis like

Manila: hours and hours surrounded by dangerous cars, noise, pollution; hours and hours performing the same gestures in the attempt at putting order into chaos. In this frame, the metamorphosis of traffic control into dance should be received like an epiphany of meaning into the meaninglessness of contemporary urban life.

Nevertheless, another important semiotic point about innovation is that, like any other communicative artifact, innovation too entails simultaneously an *intentio auctoris*, an *intentio lectoris*, and an *intentio operis*. On the one hand, there are the intentions of the innovator. From interviews with Ramiro Hinojas, it is known that his purpose was not to make an existential statement about the alienation of urban life. More pragmatically, he was a 55 year- old man previously fired by a company, a man whose only goal was to have his temporary contract as traffic control enforcer be converted into a permanent one. His motivations were therefore similar to those of every innovator: to be noticed, to emerge from the background, to produce difference and therefore meaning; to turn such meaningful difference into socio-economic benefit. Yet, besides this *intentio auctoris* there is the *intentio lectoris* of innovation, what receivers of an innovative communicative artifact actually make out of it. Here reactions may vary: Ramiro Hinojas's performance will entertain some, annoy others, and introduce a few to a whole new reconsideration of their daily existence in the urban environment. Finally, there is the *intentio operis* of innovation, that is, innovation as it emerges from the way it plays with the structures and codes of a society and its culture. The disciplinary aim of semiotics is to understand the *intentio operis* of innovation, but also to comprehend why innovation can succeed or fail depending on the way its inner structure is communicated and received.

Finally, a last point about innovation and the semiotic approach to it: *Youtube* is now replete with short videos showing dancing cops in different cities of the Philippines or even in other countries. Some of them don Santa Claus clothes on Christmas time, some others dance with alternatives moves. The point is that innovation never freezes in time. On the contrary, as soon as it turns successful, it is immediately imitated, sometimes with little

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variations that nevertheless never feature the same innovative potential of the first performance. The first cop who directed traffic while dancing was a genius, the second one was just an epigone. This is true about every innovation: copied, imitated, taken as a model, an innovative communicative artifact or act is doomed to be reabsorbed by a society and its culture, turned into one of the routines it was supposed to react to.

To sum up, these are the points on innovation semiotics that the performance of Ramiro Hinojas exemplifies:

1. Innovation never stands on a vacuum; it springs from preexistent semiotic materials;
2. Innovation comes about from the conflation of two or more semiotic systems;
3. Innovation detects deep structural similarities among these systems, similarities that were unseen before innovation took place;
4. Innovation always compels the reconfiguration of a society's culture;
5. Innovation imposes the disruption of semiotic habits;
6. Innovation is always risky; the first risk of innovation is not to be recognized as such;
7. Innovation is a communicative act whose success depends on the encounter between an *intentio auctoris* and an *intentio lectoris* through an *intentio operis*;
8. Successful innovation entails contagion and imitation, and imitation sinks innovation into platitude
9. Semiotics is the right discipline to study, recognize, and device innovation processes;
10. We are working on it



Fig. 1

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<sup>i</sup> The video can be retrieved at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9PfKsF0B7Uc> (last access June 2, 2012).