



‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?’: a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the presentation of women in feminist artwork.

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Figure 1: ‘Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?’ artwork (tate.org.uk)

Introduction

In 1989, the feminist activist group Guerrilla Girls revealed that, whilst 85% of the nudes at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art were female, under 5% of the artists on display were women. A recount 23 years later discovered negligible difference and shockingly a 1% decrease in the number of female artists presented (Guerrilla Girls 2019). This is not unique to the Metropolitan Museum. A 2017 report on the representation of female artists in Britain asserted that, in London’s primary establishments, solo displays by female artists had decreased from 2016 to just 22% in 2017 (Steedman 2018:11). Meanwhile, article headlines such as, ‘In 2018 a woman is still more likely to feature in a gallery as a painted nude than as a painter’ (Judah 2018) reflect an ongoing battle. This is indicative of a broader culture influenced by a history of the “masterpiece” and the notion that ‘Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at’ (Berger 1972:47). This culture defines women by their body. In turn, this promotes self-objectification which can negatively impact health and political and social mobility (Piran and Teall 2012).

This study shall conduct a multimodal discourse analysis (MCDA) of a feminist artwork by a collective. Through a deconstruction of the representation of women in the text, the project shall analyse the artists' methods to dismantle the hegemonic portrayals of women as they attempt to tackle the gender bias.

Background

Given the current lack of sociolinguistic material or MCDA applied to artwork, this section shall begin by reaching outside of sociolinguistics, drawing upon anthropological, ethological and sociological studies as well as feminist art history and criticism. It will then look to feminist sociolinguistic studies, chiefly MCDA.

Art and society

Art is seen to be dialectical, both being shaped by and shaping society (Foster and Blau 1989). Thus, it has been long regarded as an insight into societies as well as an effective tool to both educate and incite action or change (343); now helped by the diverse contexts in which it appears, from home décor to museums to school curricula. Its strength lies in the aesthetic appreciation afforded to the medium, giving it the power to sustain contemplation and attention even when there is a lack of understanding of its intentions or the values it expresses (Dissanayake 1988:42). Where other discourse mediums – notably advertising – can be beholden to greater scepticism from the viewer, art can communicate ideologies and values under the guise of aesthetics. It can function either to uphold or to divert from the status quo (Dissanayake 1980:402).

Women, art and society

A history of art shows that presentations of women in artwork have frequented and thus served to naturalise the hegemonic view of women as passive, powerless objects of beauty and sexuality (Nochlin 1988). Nochlin observes in her study of art from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries that 'Art-making, the very creation of beauty itself, was equated with the representation of the female nude' (17). She noted several assumptions in the depictions of women: sexual availability; identity with nature; objects not creators of art; absurdity of engagement with work or politics (2). This disempowered view of women saw men dominating the visual space of artwork while women were often confined to the corners (4). Where women were presented as assertive, they were depicted as 'something other than women', 'like wild beasts' (7).

Nochlin (1988) notes some challenges to this. For instance, through the deconstructive methods of photocollage, Höch refuses women as sexual objects of the male gaze and presents this very concept as a mere 'social construction rather than a natural phenomenon' (29). However, as Kurczynski (2008) noted, it is still 'rare to see feminist concerns addressed overtly in art.' Chadwick (1990) summarises the female artist's dilemma in creating their own 'female visual language': the conflict between co-opting male discourse and evading it.

Women in advertising

Given the co-opting of advertising in the artwork to be analysed (see figure 1), a discussion of this mode of communication is appropriate. This allows us to enter the realm of sociolinguistics and obtain broader insight into the discourse surrounding women. Wilton (2015), in a MCDA of feminine beauty in magazine advertisements, observes no notable difference in the presentation of women between 1981 and 2013 (148). Where some ideologies can no longer be explicitly communicated, more subliminal methods are used (147). This is concerning, given Dyer's (2009 [1982]) assertion that advertising is gradually becoming more agentive 'in the manipulation of social values and attitudes' (1-2).

Lirola and Chovanec (2012), in a MCDA of cosmetic surgery advertising, observe a reliance on both a sexualised and commodified construction of the female body (489). The "ideal" female body is displayed both 'for male voyeuristic enjoyment' and used as a vehicle to generate profit (503). This reflects the second-wave feminist stance on beauty standards as coercive and repressive (Lazar 2011:37). Meanwhile, Saz-Rubio (2018), in a MCDA of female identities in TV toiletries ads, observed appeals to sexual empowerment, echoing third-wave feminism in which sexuality equates to power (75). Either way, as Jeffries (2007) notes, presentations of women frequently foreground their 'body over [their] real lived experience' (194).

Whilst parallels can be drawn between art and advertising in their ideological make-up, only advertising has received a notable amount of sociolinguistic attention. Further, the focus of much of the literature discussed has been on a criticism of how women are portrayed with little attention afforded to methods contained in discourses seeking to alter these normative perceptions.

Method

This study will carry out a multimodal critical discourse analysis of the artwork 'Do women have to be naked to get Into the Met. Museum?' (1989) (see figure 1) by the feminist activist

artists, Guerrilla Girls. Though originally produced in 1989, it is an iconic work featured at the Tate which has been reproduced (including in translation) and re-appropriated as recently as 2018 (Guerrilla Girls 2019). It has been selected for this study given its explicit intention to expose a prevailing sex bias and problematic attitudes towards women in a world-renowned art institution. This shall allow the study to reasonably analyse the effects of the artwork directly alongside the study's focus. The group remains anonymous making it more plausible to observe the power of the art medium itself, detached from the influence of a famous, recognised individual. Further, Guerrilla Girls co-opts advertising and poster formats which makes their work appropriate to analyse within current frameworks provided for MCDA as minimal research has been given to discourse analysis of more conventional artwork.

The analysis will begin by examining the textual and visual content in isolation, as Machin and Mayr do in *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (2012). With its focus on the way in which 'semiotic choices [...] play a part in the communication of power relations' (10) through their presentations of identity, agency and responsibility, this work provides an appropriate framework. Attention is given to both the presence and suppression of features.

Significant to the discussion of agency, Machin and Mayr develop Halliday's (1994) idea of transitivity, specifically the different processes that can be associated with participants. The two process types applicable to this study are material and existential:

1. Material processes: describe something being done, usually concrete actions with material consequence.
2. Existential processes: express existence or occurrence, typically using the verb 'to be'.

Notably, 'there is a theoretical assumption [...] that levels of an actor's agency are directly correlated to material process types and that individuals or groups not involved in such processes are represented as being weak agents' (Machin and Mayr 2012:111).

Finally, given the attention afforded to the overall visual impression in art, it is appropriate to consider the composition of the different semiotic modes as a whole. Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) chapter on 'the meaning of composition' in *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* provides a suitable basis to analyse how different elements interact with and affect each other. They maintain that this is done through three systems:

1. Information value: elements are afforded particular informational values according to which 'zone' of the image they appear. For the purposes of this analysis, the left and right and top and bottom zones will be considered (177)
2. Saliency: each element is designed to draw the viewer's attention to varying extents through factors like size, contrast, focus and cultural value. This can 'set up particular hierarchies of the movement of the hypothetical reader within and across [...] elements' (204).
3. Framing: framing devices (those elements that divide or frame) or a lack of them, disconnect or connect parts of an image (177).

A potential drawback to this methodology is the niche, singular data set. Hence, this study does not seek to account for the methods of feminist art as a whole. Rather, this focused data set, with the qualitative approach of MCDA, will allow for a relatively comprehensive account of one approach to art as a feminist political tool. Of course, qualitative research is by nature interpretive (Creswell 2007) so, with this in mind, a conscious effort will be made to ground the analysis in established research and methods.

Analysis

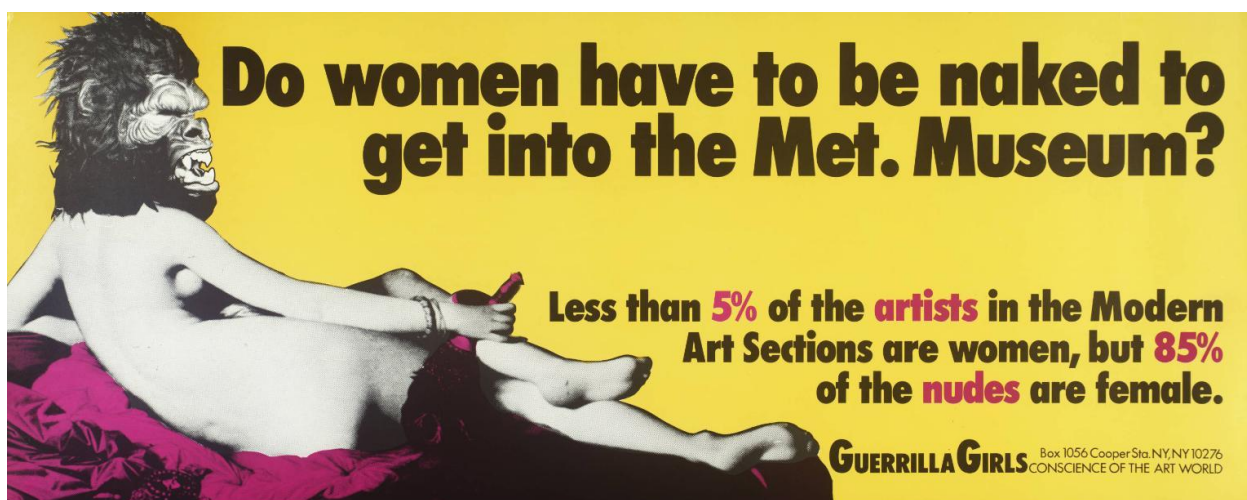


Figure 1: 'Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?' artwork (tate.org.uk)

This section shall 1) analyse the effects of the textual features, 2) analyse the effects of the visual features, and 3) analyse the effects of the overall composition.

Taking the starting point of language in isolation, perhaps the most striking lexical choice is the crude use of 'naked' in the opening question of the text. This word choice has connotations of vulnerability and exposure alongside potentially sexual implications. It is interesting therefore that it is presented in conjunction with the verb 'to be' and thus as a

state of being, inferring women must currently alter who they are in order to access the art world. Further, whilst 'to be naked' infers a material process – 'to get undressed' – it is grammatically presented as an existential process (Halliday 2004), removing any sense of the participants having agency in their own circumstances: they are passivated and merely defined by a bodily state. The use of the adjunct (Machin and Mayr 2012:113) 'have' emphasises this. It embeds an imperative within the question, inferring that an unidentified third-party dictate the way women must be. In not identifying this party, no responsibility is directed anywhere in particular but rather the issue of female representation in the art world is presented as a society-wide issue.

In a similar way, the absence of pronouns avoids manifesting a 'them' and 'us' divide (Machin and Mayr 2012:84). This can be applied to the structural opposition (39) between men and women. Whilst the opposition is implicit (we know men are the other side to the statistic), the lexical absence (38) of men in the written text allows their different circumstances to be implied without presenting them as a rival. Thus, the artwork seeks to incite a productive response over a defensive one: to present the issue as one to be dealt with as a collective. This is not to say that women aren't presented as a united voice in their own right: they are classified together as 'women'. Collectivisation (Machin and Mayr 2012:80) is often seen to de-humanise or homogenise people, however in this instance it is twofold. Whilst it indeed highlights the sweeping ideologies cast over women in the artworld, the cause driving the artwork also renders the collective reference a testament to the shared cause.

The visuals, in many ways, defy the written text. Whilst the text talks of the objectification of women, the positioning of the viewer in relation to the visually represented participant does not entirely play into this. Objectification is encouraged by the somewhat side-on angle of the participant (an angle indicative of detachment) (Machin and Mayr 2012:98) and by the medium shot, which allows the figure to be viewed in its entirety from a relative distance, as if in a painting. However, the participant is also viewed from behind, encouraging the viewer to align with the participant's perspective (99). This conflation is perhaps intended to encourage the viewer to interrogate their response to the image. Undoubtedly, the image continues to challenge objectification when we consider transitivity (Halliday 2004). If we apply the passive existential process, 'to be naked', to the image of the figure, it falls short. The participant is carrying out material processes: 'wearing', 'holding', 'looking' and so on. They are activated. Certainly, the loaded and salient quirks associated with the figure – the mask, the phallic object of the fan, and the flood of pink - indicate a more agentive

presentation of women than the written text. There is a sense of reclaiming going on through these different connotators (Machin and Mayr 2012). The object of the gorilla mask takes the notion of women being akin with animals and nature ('as passive, as non-agent' (Plumwood 1993:4) but also irrational and potentially violent (Nochlin 1988)) and reclaims it with an animal connoting strength, dignity and, typically, masculinity. The juxtaposition of the teeth-baring gorilla head superimposed on the soft, sensualised female nude confronts the male gaze and disrupts the hegemonic feminine ideal. The gorilla becomes an empowering, assertive symbol, affording a sense that the participant has ownership over her actions and how they are perceived. Thus, the abstracted setting (Machin and Mayr 2012:53) of a bed, signified through the pink bed clothes, and the phallus the participant holds come to signify the participant reclaiming their sexuality, rather than it being framed as something merely for others to consume. The use of the colour pink is interesting here. Associated with the diverse feminine stereotypes of 'softness and delicacy'; 'vanity and artificiality'; 'independence and fun, sexuality and lust', the colour is seen to reinforce femininity as a constant influence on women's gendered lives (Koller 2008:396). However, the artwork disrupts this by using pink as an integrating device connecting the bed sheets and phallic object with the non-gendered noun of 'artists'. This visual 'rhyme' (Kress & Van Leeuwen 2006:204) undermines either the sexual connotations of the objects or the connotation of the colour pink being strictly confined to women, or indeed necessary to femininity.

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006), elements are bestowed with particular informational value according to the 'zone' they are placed in (177). This premise is often utilised in advertising. The left is associated with the Given (commonsensical and self-evident) whilst the right presents the New (problematic and contestable) (181). In the artwork, this is turned on its head. It is the current, factual situation in which women find themselves that is presented in the text as the 'problematic' New. Meanwhile, the alternative and confrontational presentation of a familiar and classical female nude is placed as the Given, implying that a more nuanced image of women should be the accepted norm. In this way, the semiotic modes of both image and text project the same message: to interrogate attitudes that have become assimilated deeply into our culture. A similar effect is produced through the vertical structuring of the text. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) maintain that 'the upper section tends to make some kind of emotive appeal and to show us "what might be"; the lower section tends to be more informative and practical, showing us "what is"' (186). The artwork adheres to this structure. Whilst the question in the upper zone contains the seemingly ludicrous suggestion that women might need to be naked to access a museum, the statistic below affirms that this is largely the case. Once again, the actual situation is painted as dubious.

The hierarchy of movement (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006:204) encouraged across the different elements of the artwork has a similar effect. Arguably, the most graphically salient element is the written question with its elevated placement, bold black font and high tonal contrast with the yellow background, but after that the figure likely draws the viewer's attention. Regarding salience, human figures hold cultural weight and elements also 'appear "heavier" the further they are moved towards the left' (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006:202). The line of the woman's body, curving down from left to right, then becomes a connective element between the bodies of text. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) maintain that 'the shape of the reading path itself conveys a significant cultural message' (205). Here, the viewer's gaze is manipulated in a way that enacts behaviour indicative of the male gaze. Thus, whilst the Given is not overtly presented as a traditional paradigm of the female ideal, it is rendered one in light of the "most plausible" reading path. The New can then be seen as a 'reproduction of the existing classifications of the culture'; of the paradigm (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006:198). However, whilst such syntagmatic relationships declare an established culture, they also point to a problem with the paradigm and prompt the viewer to question whether they are still prepared to entertain it (190).

A sense of rebelling against the existing norm for women also plays out in the division of the frame (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006:203). The weak framing of the two key elements allows for an opposing but interactional relationship between them. The text occupies the majority of the space and is structured around and over the woman in a way that appears to hem her into the bottom left corner, implying that she is restricted by the circumstances foregrounded in the written text. However, the diagonal vector loosely dissecting the frame also means that the participant encroaches on the space of the written text both on the vertical and horizontal axis, almost as much as it invades hers. The space the participant occupies allows ample space for the question but restricts the space afforded to the statistic. This foregrounds a desire both to confront society and to quash women's current circumstances. Indeed, the transactional reaction (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006:74) between the figure's assertive, snarling gorilla head and the phenomenon of the written question imply the participant is invested in confronting the viewer. You almost expect a dialogue bubble to appear around the title question.

Conclusion

Whilst the artwork's explicit message, targeted at a prominent establishment, strips it somewhat of its aesthetic guise (Dissanayake 1988:42), the more subliminal methods

(Wilton 2015) allow it to perform a broader deconstruction of normative femininity. By altering a hegemonic portrayal of a female nude rather than omitting it entirely from the discourse, the Guerrilla Girl artwork is able to depict the current reality for women as well as deconstructing it. In this way, it fulfils the capacity of artwork to educate as well as promote change (Dissanayake 1988:343). By enacting a process of change on an established cultural image, the artwork diverts it from the status quo (402). Like Höch's photcollages, it presents the feminine ideal and the male gaze as a social construct rather than an essential truth (Nochlin 1988:29).

By disrupting the viewer's expectation, the artwork encourages them to interrogate what they see. This is achieved most obviously through the superimposed gorilla head and the pink-highlighted phallus. These objects acknowledge but also confront the assumptions that women are significantly defined by their sexuality (Nochlin 1988; Lirola and Chovanec 2012) and kinship with nature and 'wild beasts' (Nochlin 1988:7) by reclaiming the imagery as part of an openly feminist discourse. By associating these connotators directly with the participant, it affords the participant an agentive role in the feminist discourse and disrupts the notions that women should be mere objects of art and should not be seen to engage with politics (Nochlin 1988). However, the confinement of the female nude to the corner of the visual frame, as is typical of the disempowered artistic depictions of women (Nochlin 1988) is a visual reminder of the constraints of the situation communicated in the statistic.

There are semiotic contradictions present throughout the discourse by which the female participant(s) of the text and the visuals is/are: passivated but also activated; homogenised but also united; objectified but also aligned with; confined but also assertive. This method of contradiction undermines typical structures of feminist discourse, constructing a more nuanced comment on a culture towards women. The contradictions allow the text to acknowledge the anxiety of second-wave feminism that the feminine ideal is oppressive and coercive (Lazar 2011:37), whilst at the same time promoting the third-wave feminist attitude of empowerment (Saz-Rubio 2018). It is in appealing to both of these stances that the artwork creates its own 'female visual language' (Chadwick 1990). Rather than merely co-opting male discourse or evading it (Chadwick 1990), Guerrilla Girls have openly adapted historically "male" ideas of femininity, denaturalising a hegemonic portrayal of women and the female body and thus undermining some of the conceptions that have bolstered the gender bias in the artworld.

Future research could analyse methods used by other feminist artists to deconstruct prevailing norms, or indeed the construction of female identity in contemporary artwork that

doesn't overtly seek to criticise. Stepping sideways, studies could analyse children's artwork to see how the prevailing cultures impact on their perception of female identity.

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