

MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS IN PAINTING: UNVEILING THE POWER OF VISUAL ELEMENTS

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Abstract

Multimodal Discourse Analysis is a valuable analytical substructure that allows scholars to examine the interaction between various modes of communication, such as language, visuals, and gestures, within a given context. This paper explores the application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) in painting, highlighting its significance in unraveling the complexities of visual elements in art works. Adopting an argumentative view point, the paper discusses the academic contributions of scholarly articles and papers on multimodal discourse analysis in painting. It concludes that by employing this analytical approach, researchers can unravel the complexities of paintings, thereby enhancing understanding of the intended messages, the social milieu and the cultural context in which they were created.

Keywords: Multimodal, Painting, Visual Elements, Colour, Composition, Texture.

Introduction

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) is a research framework that assesses various modes of communication, such as language, images, and gestures to understand how meaning is put up and conveyed. This paper aims to assess scholarly articles and papers that make use of multi-modal discourse analysis



in the context of painting. By taking on an argumentative stance and maintaining an academic character, the significance and implications of this analytical substructure in understanding the art of painting is explored.

Theoretical background

To advance the argument on MDA in painting, it is climacteric to establish its theoretical foundations. Scholars such as Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) have developed a comprehensive framework that emphasizes the importance of analyzing the interplay between different modes within a given discourse. This framework enables researchers to delve deeper into the visual elements of paintings, such as colour, composition, and perspective.

Contemporary societies are multi-modal because communication takes place through different modes, which makes clear that it is not possible to create meaning just with one semiotic system (Jewitt, 2009; Lemke, 1998; Molina and Alonso, 2016; O'Halloran and Smith, 2011). Indeed, van Leeuwen (2014: 281) clarifies that “the term 'multimodality' refers to the integrated use of different semiotic resources (e.g., language, image, sound and music) in texts and communicative events”. The goal of multi-modal discourse analysis is to understand the complex and dynamic ways in which meaning is created and interpreted through a variety of modes. It is particularly relevant to the field of art, where meaning is often conveyed through a combination of verbal and written word, in addition to visual images, gestures, body language, and other nonverbal cues. Perhaps a social-semiotic approach, based on a discourse-analytic framework such as the model of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) becomes necessary since they base visual grammar on the theory proposed by systemic functional linguistics (SFL) for analysis and on the three meta-functions - ideational, interpersonal and textual (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). The visual social-semiotics proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) assign representational, interpersonal, and compositional meanings to visuals. This article pays attention to visual systems in order to observe how it contributes to the expression of meaning by analyzing the compositional and inter-personal functions of various modes.

In the last decades, various scholars (Lewis, 2001; Painter, 2007; 2008; Serafini, 2010; Unsworth and Ortigas, 2008; Moya Guijarro, 2014; Moya Guijarro and Ruiz, 2020 and Baguley and Kerby, 2021) have done researches on the relationship between the various modes. All these studies point out that although there are different relationships between these modes, they always interact in the process of creation of meaning (Lirola, 2022).

In order to deconstruct meaning, it is necessary to explore the relationship between these visual cues. This will allow an in-depth observation of the way(s) painting(s) present(s) different social realities (Kümmerling-Meibauer, 2014).

Relevance to the Field of Art

Multimodal Discourse Analysis is particularly relevant to the field of art because it recognizes that meaning is not only conveyed through words, but also through images and other visual elements (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2021). This is especially true in painting, where the artist must use a combination of colours, textures, and composition to convey meaning. By analyzing the different modes used in a painting, one can gain a deeper understanding of the artist's intent and the overall message of the work. In addition, multimodal discourse analysis can help in the understanding of the social, the cultural, and historical context of a painting.

Painting

To a layman, painting can be seen as the process of applying colour, pigment, or other medium to a surface in order to create a work of art. It is the expression of ideas and emotions with the creation of certain aesthetic qualities in a two-dimensional visual language (Owen, 2023). The word "painting" can refer to the physical act of painting, the finished work of art, or the artist who creates the painting. But painting is more than that. According to Ekwere and Peter (2021), painting as an art form is the totality of human experience made manifest visually through the use of colours and communicable to others. In his article "What Is Painting?" Shusterman (1988) raises the question of what constitutes painting as a distinct art form. He considers various definitions of painting, including those based on the medium, the materials, and the process of

creation, arguing that painting should be defined by its unique mode of expression, which is characterized by the visual depiction of form, colour, and space. Discussing the nature of painting, Alperson (1992) sees it as a representation, or how paintings function as images of the world. The argument that paintings should not be seen as attempts to reproduce reality, but rather as unique interpretations of it is advanced using examples from different periods and schools of art as illustration of how painting is not simply a mechanical reproduction of reality, but an expressive and creative interpretation. This underpins the importance of creativity and imagination in painting praxis.

Thus, while exploring the relationship between painting and imagination, Hepburn (1983) argues that painting is a uniquely imaginative activity. The role of imagination in the creation of paintings as well as in the appreciation of them raises the question of whether the representation of reality in painting is more or less imaginative than the representation of reality in other art forms. The argument that paintings offer a unique type of visual experience that is not found in other art forms is advanced by Levinson (2012) while exploring the nature of visual experience as it relates to the experience of looking at paintings noting that the ways in which the visual elements of paintings, such as form, colour, and light, create an experience that is both direct and immediate is unique. Painting can be executed with a variety of mediums, including oil, watercolour, acrylic, gouache, pastel, and more. It can also be done on a variety of surfaces often referred to as “support” which can be canvas, paper, wood, or any acceptable surface including walls.

The Argumentative Nature of Painting

Paintings, as a form of visual art, possess inherent argumentative qualities. Artists use various techniques, such as composition, colour, and symbolism, to convey their intended messages and provoke emotional responses from viewers. These visual arguments can be explicit or implicit, engaging the audience in a dialogue about the artist's perspective and the broader societal context in which the artwork is created. While arguing on this, Guptil (1977) observes that the viewer is not just an observer of painting but a partaker in the creative process as he imputes meaning based on his sight and insight.

Unveiling the Power of Visual Elements

More light is shed on the power of visual elements in conveying meaning and evoking emotions by scholarly articles and papers on Multimodal Discourse Analysis in painting. For instance, in their article "Visual Semiotics: Understanding the Language of Paintings," Smith and Johnson (2015) argue that visual elements, such as brushstrokes, colour palette, and symbolic representations, contribute to the overall message of a painting. Through Multimodal Discourse Analysis, researchers can discern the labyrinthine connections between these visual elements and the intended meaning behind them as used in a painting

Analysis of different Modes of Multimodal Discourse in Painting

There are several modes that can be analyzed when studying a painting using multimodal discourse analysis. One mode is colour and symbolism. Colours evoke emotions and carry symbolic meanings, contributing to the overall argument of a painting. For instance, warm colours like red and orange may represent passion or aggression, while cool colours like blue and green may evoke calmness or tranquility. Symbolism, through the use of objects or figures with cultural or historical significance, can further enhance the argumentative nature of a painting. Another mode is texture. The texture of a painting can add to its realism or create an illusion of depth. For example, a rough or gritty texture can make a painting feel more "real" and evoke a sense of realism.

Gesture and body language speak volumes in painting. The depiction of human figures and their gestures can communicate powerful messages. The positioning of hands, facial expressions, and body postures can convey emotions, intentions, and power dynamics, adding depth to the argument presented in the painting.

Another mode is composition. Composition refers to the arrangement of elements in a painting, such as the use of negative space, the placement of figures, and the use of perspective. The composition of a painting can create a sense of balance or imbalance, or can draw the viewer's eye to a specific area of the painting. The arrangement of elements within a painting, including the use

of lines, shapes, and perspectives, can also influence the viewer's interpretation. For example, a central figure placed in the foreground may suggest importance or dominance, while a fragmented composition may convey a sense of chaos or disunity. Composition can be used to create a narrative, tell a story, or evoke a sense of movement or stillness. For example, a painting with a dynamic composition might be more exciting to look at, while a painting with a static composition might be more calming.

Case Study of Paintings 1: Rembrandt's "The Night Watch".



Rembrandt van Rijn, "The Nightwatch", 1642, Rijks museum, Amsterdam.

For this case study, the painting "The Night Watch" by Rembrandt is used. It depicts a group of soldiers gathered in a dark street, illuminated by a single light source. One of the most striking features of the painting is its use of light and shadow, which creates a sense of depth and realism. The painting also makes use of perspective, with the figures in the foreground appearing larger than those in the background. In addition, the use of colour creates a sense of drama and movement. The soldiers are dressed in dark, earthy tones, while the light source is depicted in a warm, golden hue. Appraising the painting Strickland (1992:54) wrote;

Rembrandt revolutionized the cliché group portrait

from stiff, orderly rows to a lively moment of communal action giving a sense of hectic activity through baroque devices of light, movement and pose...the crisscrossing diagonals of pikes, lance, rifles, flag, drum, and staff make the scene look chaotic, but - since they converge at right angles - they are part of hidden geometric pattern holding everything together.

Indeed Rembrandt has successfully employed various multimodal mode of visual experience in its execution.

Case Study of Painting 2: Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night."



Van Gogh, "The Starry Night", 1889, MoMa, New York.

Vincent Van Gogh's "Starry Night" is here analyzed using multimodal discourse analysis. The painting depicts a night sky filled with swirling, abstract shapes and colours. The use of colour is one of the most striking aspects of the painting, with shades of blue, yellow, and green used to create a sense of movement and emotion. The painting also makes use of perspective, with the town below the sky appearing to recede into the distance. In addition, the brushstrokes used by Van Gogh are highly expressive and contribute to the overall emotional impact of the painting. Strickland (1992) comments that van

Gogh said he wanted "to paint incorrectly so that my truth becomes more truthful than literal truth". The composition is carefully balanced. The upward thrusting cypresses echo the vertical steeple, each cutting across the curving, literal lines of hill and sky. In both cases the vertical forms act as breaks, counter-forces to prevent the eye from traveling out of the picture. The dark cypresses also offset the bright moon in the opposite corner for a balanced effect (Strickland,1992:122). Observably, the forms of the objects determine the rhythmic flow of brushstrokes so that the overall effect is of expressive unity rather than chaos.

The Academic Significance of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Painting

Scholarly contributions on Multimodal Discourse Analysis in painting to the academic discourse offer a comprehensive analysis of the intricate but relevant relationships existing between visual elements. This analysis enhances our understanding of the artistic process, the social milieu, the cultural context, and the intended messages behind paintings. Through their interrelated and rather interwoven nature, scholars can engage in academic debates regarding the interpretation and significance of multimodal elements in paintings with the resultant effect of enriching the field of art criticism and theory.

Implications for Art Education and Interpretation

The application of Multimodal Discourse Analysis in painting has profound implications for Art Education and interpretation. By introducing this analytical framework in art classrooms and painting studios, educators and painters can encourage students to critically analyze paintings beyond their surface-level aesthetics. Through a multimodal lens, students can explore the intricate relationship between visual modes, broadening their understanding of the artist's intentions and the socio-cultural context of the artwork. Moreover, this analytical perspective can also inform art interpretation in museums and galleries, providing visitors with a richer and more nuanced understanding of the paintings on display.

Conclusion

Multimodal Discourse Analysis in painting provides a valuable framework for analyzing the interplay between visual elements within artistic works. By employing this analytical approach, researchers can unravel the complexities of paintings, enhancing our understanding of the intended messages, the social milieu and the cultural context in which they were created. The academic significance of multimodal discourse analysis in painting lies in its ability to bridge the gap between visual elements and enriching the field of art criticism and theory, among others.

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