Unlocking visual texts: Investigating multimodal trends

Abstract:

This paper focuses on a number of graffiti, which occurred in numerous female lavatories of a postsecondary school in Malta. Most of these visuals were accompanied by written text, which mainly expounded issues related to sexualities and romantic relationships. These visuals testify to the need of female students to express themselves in environments, which go beyond formal education in classrooms. Through these visual images, students attempted to create spaces where they could give voice to their feelings, doubts, struggles, perplexities and hopes in relation to sexual feelings and encounters. In the absence of sexuality education in the curriculum, the images are understood as having provided a possible form of visual literacy, through which new ways of learning about the sexual and the intimate could have been sought. This type of literacy could have been the result of the students' effort to resist a desexualized school policy. The analysis of three particular graffiti is employed through a poststructuralist and multimodal approach, in order to draw out possible implications, which this type of literacy could have had on their learning.

Introduction

The contemporary world is often viewed as one, in which images are naturally and continuously replacing words (Hoffman and Goodman, 2009). From this perspective, there seems to be a general agreement that we live in a visual world (Howells and Negreiros, 2012). The saying 'One image is worth ten thousand words' is usually acclaimed as holding some truth in acknowledging the value of images. However, this saying seems to regard an image as an entity or as one massive whole. The aim of this paper is to critically analyse such a perspective and offer an alternative way of understanding images. Specifically, this paper presents a framework, through which an image and its 'codes' (i.e. the messages it transmits) may be unlocked. The designed framework, called the UNLOCK framework, is multimodal in nature (Cremona 2011) and does not regard the image as a whole entity but as a mechanism, which breaks it down into different components; i.e. modes or channels through which messages can be presented and transmitted.

This UNLOCK framework presented by George, is interwoven with poststructuralist perspectives by Joanne. Our interpretation of the three graffiti images, draws on these two methodological frameworks. This method of analysis has come into being through our diverse backgrounds and different epistemological approaches. We acknowledge that it is explorative in nature and recognise intersecting and differing patterns in our understanding and interpretation of the images. The unlocking of texts, which emantes from a multimodal approach, resonates with poststructuralism, which regards reality as being multifaceted, fragmented and diverse. Both approaches hold that generalizations could be misleading. Although the UNLOCK framework might suggest that the

interpretations of visuals derived from it, emanate from a well defined paradigm, the multimodal interpretation is not presented as exclusive or as the only acceptable one, but as embracing other interpretations. The very last step of the UNLOCK framework acknowledges the importance of other possible interpretations, deriving from multimodal and non-multimodal perspectives alike.

The study and its context

The three images presented digitally in this article form part of a collection of graffiti, which were drawn and written by numerous female students, who attended a postsecondary school in Malta. These graffiti were found drawn on the toilet doors some time between 2003-2006 (Cassar 2007, 2009). The vast majority of them were anonymous. In some cases, the words and the images seem to be unrelated and disconnected with each other and in others there seems to be a functional relationship between them. This relationship interweaves the words and the pictures through a variety of possible meanings across the different themes discussed. We do not consider the images as merely an addition to the written texts but as an integral part of the debates that occurred through the graffiti.

The criteria for choosing these three images was based on our intuition and guided by our search for visuals, which evoked some form of meaning to us. The underlying themes of most of the graffiti address numerous related issues such as birth control, abortion, erotic pleasure, sexual fulfilment, gender identity, self-esteem, belonging, shame, cheating and jealousy. We tended to link these three images with these themes, but we acknowledge that this link might not have been intended by the graffiti artists.

In order to contextualise the study we chose to present another fourth image, which depicts a notice written by the school's administration. This notice states:

WARNING
COLLEGE RULES FORBID ANY FORM OF PHYSICAL INTIMACY.
THOSE CAUGHT HUGGING OR KISSING WITHIN THIS CORRIDOR SHALL BE
REPORTED TO THEIR PARENTS AS WELL AS TO THE ADMINISTRATION.
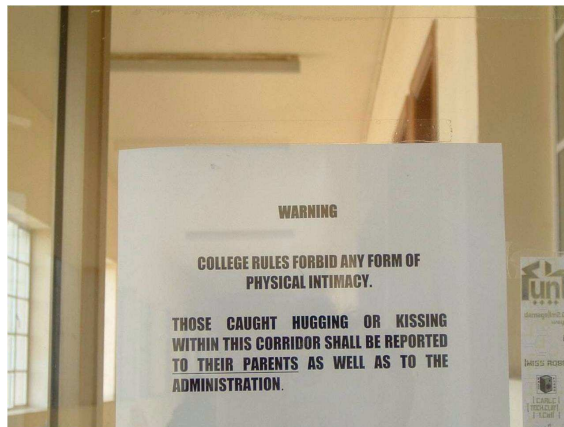
This warning could be found in one of the school's corridors and refers to the prohibition of public manifestations of sexual and physical expression like holding hands and kissing within the school's precincts. The graffiti generated within the confines of the female lavatories could be considered as attempts at deconstructing this rule. The graffiti could also have provided ways of counteracting the prohibition of an education, which supports the exploration of the self and the understanding of adolescents' feelings, thoughts and longings related to sexualities.

The proposed UNLOCK framework highlights the context of the images as a mode in itself. The social and cultural contexts surrounding the graffiti (Cassar 2009) point towards aspects of Maltese society, which are closely linked to a predominantly catholic morality and which treat sexual issues as taboos. The warning reflects the schools' disciplinary attitude and regulatory discourses, which sought to punish and penalise students for being affectionate in certain ways.

Defining visuals: From wholes to modes

A visual is often described as a text, which transmits messages by addressing sight (Lester, 2006). The broad umbrella term 'visual' is often understood as referring to different genres including photos (Boeije, 2009), cartoons (Beineke, 2011; Dabell, Keogh and Naylor, 2008; Naylor and Keogh, 2010; Pathmanathan, 2009), drawings (Anning and Ring, 2004; Crabtree, 1988; Jolley, 2010) comics (Bowkett and Hitchman, 2012; Rodgers, 1992; Warren, 2011) and other different types of art works (McInally, 2003).

Whereas one can identify and recognize the different types of visual genres available, when reading visuals, one often stops at rather an initial level of reading, that which treats visuals as a whole. Instead, a deeper reading of the visual text should acknowledge that a visual is made up of different components, through which messages may be channeled to the reader (Mavers, 2011). These channels, called modes, among others include colour, written graphics, layout, order, directionality and the context, the visual is derived from (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006). Therefore one visual is made up of a combination of various modes (i.e. multimodal), irrespective of what the genre is.

Proposing a multimodal framework

A multimodal stance in relation to visuals, implies that a visual entails a code transmitted through the various channels – i.e. technically called modes. The reader, on seeing the visual text consciously or unconsciously starts deciphering the code and interpreting (or in lay terms reading) the message it presents. Based on this 'unlocking the code' metaphor, the following UNLOCK framework is proposed to describe the various levels of how visuals could be interpreted multimodally. The depth of interpretation increases with each step.

Understanding and meaning(s) obtained from an initial reading (O'Regan, 2006);
Number of obvious modes – identifiying the superordinate mode(s). Superordinate modes are the leading mode(s) used in the particular text on which all other modes depend and thus the one transmitting the main message (Kress, 2010);
Look out for subordinate modes which eventually help to form a fuller picture; these compliment the message transmited by the *superordinate* mode opted by the designer of the text;
Other 'hidden' modes – namely less visible *subordinate* modes which however are less obvious to point out (Cremona, 2012);
Context as a mode: knowing details from the particular context leads better understanding and to a more fair interpretation of the picture;
Keeping doors open: allowing for different interpretations.

Possible interpretations

The multimodal perspective presents a practical implementation of the UNLOCK framework of the three selected visuals. Initially each picture was analyzed multimodally, following the proposed framework step by step. Due to limits of space, only an overview of the most salient points derived from the overall interpretation are presented. The following is the first of the three images, which provide the basis for our analysis:

Visual 1
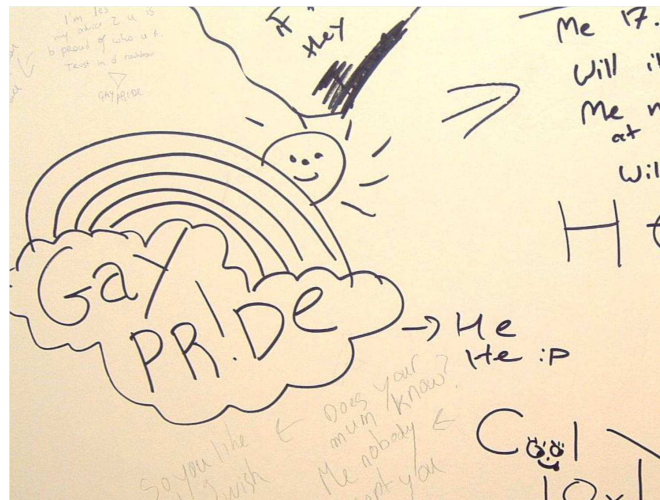
The superordinate mode in Visual 1 at a first glance seems to be composed of graphics (i.e. written text). The message conveyed is how proud one should be of one's homosexual orientation. This message of pride however is *ratified* (i.e. confirmed) through other less obvious subordinate modes.

One of these is font (also linked directly to the main subordinate mode). The fact that capital graphics were used almost throughout the visual accentuates this sense of pride. The letter 'i' depicted upside down might denote the perceived 'unbalanced' nature of gay people. In Malta – thus also focusing on context as a mode – people with a homosexual orientation are often referred to as *maqlub* or *imċaqlaq* (i.e. translated literally as 'upside down', 'opposite' and 'not straight'). This could explain why the slanted letter 'i' (a letter also referring to the self) was used. Furthermore, the letter 'i' could also have been intended as an exclamation mark, thus conveying a sense of wonder. In multimodal terms, this becomes an *iconic gesture,* which ends up symbolising how strong the message being transmitted should come across to the reader.

Reverting the attention to colour as a mode, one observes that black is dominant. This could further accentuate this sense of pride. The artist wanted other viewers to see the visual clearly and transmitted the idea that the message portrayed was important. This compares starkly with the almost illegible and hidden message in grey, featured at the very bottom of the image.

Visual 1 could be considered an attempt at deconstructing the hegemony of the homosexuality 'grand narrative'. To demonstrate '*Gay PR!De*', a girl drew a rainbow and the sun, which are usually synonymous with peace, warmth, life and light. The sun has the form of a smiling face, which implies that it is sympathetic towards gay people. Yet the words 'gay pride' are enclosed in a cloud, and still confined within boundaries. One reaction to this drawing was: '*You are great Cheers for tolerance and difference*'. These visual representations could be considered as an example of breaking away from heteronormative dominance and arrogance and of resisting the principles of homophobia.

Visual 2

What at first appears as a rough figure (Visual 2) done with no plan or intention turns out to be a very creative meaningful figure. A first reading of the image would focus on the

fact that the author uses graphics i.e. writing the word KISS for three consecutive times. However, stopping at this level – thus only considering language and written graphics as the predominant mode on which the interpretation should be built – would not only be incomplete, but at times also misleading (Norris, 2004). While keeping in mind that the author wanted to talk about kisses and/or kissing, the shape and layout, though less visible than the used graphics, turn out to be the two most salient superodinate modes. Without both modes the multimodal interpretation would be incomplete. Other less obvious subordinate modes – including colour, directionality (i.e. the way how written graphics are arranged) and symmetry – also play a very important role to complete the interpretation. The latter helps the viewer perceive further details and thus reach a deeper interpretation.

Amalgamating all these modes together, a possible multimodal interpretation of the picture would indicate that the author could have been referring to three different types of kisses, given at different stages of a relationship. The first Kiss (i.e. the one on the left) might refer to the one lovers give each other. This interpretation is ratified because of the abbreviation 'bf' which usually stands for 'boyfriend'. Furthermore, the letter K has a shape which could remind the reader of a woman's breast. The directionality (i.e. the way the graphics iSS in the word KISS are written) is upwards. This could show that the author was thinking of a relationship, which starts from scratch and possibly climaxes. This peak is drawn parallel to the central kiss.

The central kiss is presented as the next step towards the climax and also appears protected by the heart-shaped figure, which metaphorically could be symbolizing love. This is also protected by the other two kisses placed on each side of the central figure. The very centre of the visual is the product of this central kiss. This product is the baby (or fetus) figure-like shape at the very end of the heart-shaped symbol protecting the central kiss. The third kiss – i.e. the one on the right side of the image – is the most abstract, which at first seems the hardest to read. In fact, this abstraction could in itself be a mode used to symbolize the lack of certainty surrounding intimate relationships.

The security of commitment within a romantic relationship were described as producing satisfaction, whereas short-term relationships were considered "waste of time". Visual 2 portrays the following situation:

> *Do you think it's normal to date a guy for 9 months? And we'r still not together? We make love to each other and we both enjoy it. I know it's not a matter of sex because we don't do it so often. Lately he has been searching for many girls on msn this situation is disturbing me a lot and during the night I always end up crying so much. what am I to do when I told him that this situation is distressing me he ignored me he just told me that I"m very special to him and they're only friends…. Uff I don't now. I love him I really do Help!!*.*

Sexual expression without some form of commitment generated confusing feelings, which some girls struggled over. The repeated word 'kiss' provided an image that could

have enabled the desire to connect sexually and/or affectionately. The narratives surrounding this image demarcate a sense of anxiety and describe an array of 'relationship problems'. Through their exploration of possible solutions to these problems, the female students could have created some imaginary desires. Their first-person narratives, woven together with drawings, could have formed a strategy of communication and self-discovery operating within marginalised school settings. This could have arisen out of their need to compensate for feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy. This drawing could have been an attempt to establish a sense of control and overcome doubts and perplexities related to 'love'.

Visual 3
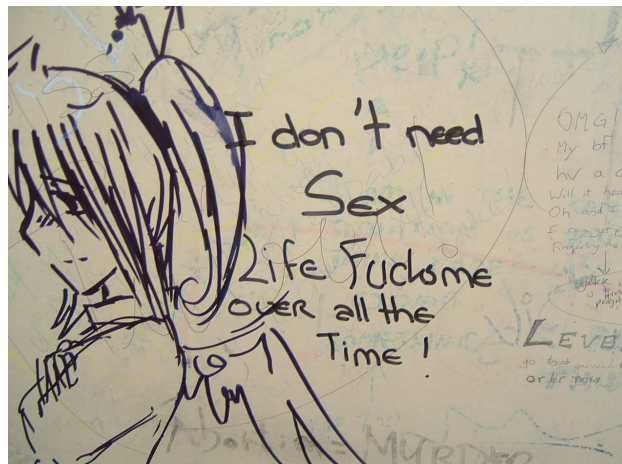
Visual 3 might at a first glance show that whoever was drawing this image could have been an assertive type of person. This could be the meaning derived from the strong slogan written in black graphics, which alongside with font and colour are subordinate modes. However, when seen as a whole, there is much more meaning in other subordinate (at times hidden) modes used by the artist.

The embodied modes – i.e. those coming out from the human body (Norris, 2004) all show that no matter how strong the assertion might sound through words, there still seems to be uncertainty in what the *participant* (i.e. the figure being represented) in the picture is saying. These embodied modes among others include:

- the tense body language,
- the averted gaze or the fact that the figure in the image is not making any direct eye contact with the reader,
- unhappy facial expressions,
- the crossed hands and the body turned to the side i.e. non frontal posture.

Furthermore, the proxemics or the 'perception of space' (Hall, 1966, p. 115) seems more distanced between the figure and reader/viewer of the text due to the long hair covering the face. One other feature in the picture is the wing-like shape seen attached to the back

of the figure. This *iconic gesture* could symbolize angel wings and might also refer to a sense of detachment from sexual drives and experiences.

Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) hold that usually the elements placed on the left side in a visual are presented as a given, while those presented on the right appear as new and with less certainty. Adopting this generalization, when interpreting this particular visual, would ratify this aforementioned sense of uncertainty. Since the written text is placed on the right side of the visual and the participant on the left, this might show that the artist is presenting herself as the given, who is still haunted by the challenges of life, which she is summarizing as new and uncertain for her by presenting this on the right side of the visual.

Implications for Visual Literacy

Literacy is considered a social practice (Slater, 1997) and images, which are positioned in social settings, like the graffiti contribute towards a personal form of visual literacy. Through the graffiti community, sexuality issues were slowly 'coming out' by means of the hidden curriculum. This unique type of visual literacy enabled students to bring their sexual histories to the fore and discuss personal matters. This literacy emerged from the students' humanness and encompassed their feelings, vulnerabilities, anxieties and intimacies surrounding their everyday interactions, experiences and lives.

Adolescents create their own symbolic language through their behaviour, not only to attract new friends and lovers and win peer acceptance, but also to challenge the hegemony of institutions (Willis *et al,* 1990, p.15). We perceive the graffiti as constituting a symbolic, gendered language, which they could have employed to address issues, which needed to be settled. In creating a sort of subversive, visual culture, they attempted to communicate through silence. This implies that "young people seem to turn deliberately to the informal and to resist administered symbols" (ibid.). The girls' interactive, provocative and intrusive writings and drawings might have functioned as an expression of their indirect resistance to their educational institution or to other institutions. The graffiti images served as vehicles, through which the transmission of culture and sexual norms and morality occured inside an educational institution, thus shaping the ways that sexualities were perceived, discussed and performed. The three visuals presented in this article are representations of student cultures and confirm that "visual images are sensuous in ways that are particular to them" (Duncum, 2004, p. 257).

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