

Research Article

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Representing slavery in visual art: a multimodal approach

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Abstract: This article explores some issues related to the trauma of slavery, colonialism and identity-formation processes through a multimodal analysis, which is particularly useful in studying the manifold meanings and relationships emerging from the forms of cultural and social representation such as visual art. A series of images, chosen within Ellen Gallagher's art exhibition "AXME", held at Tate Gallery in London, is investigated to deal with the discursive constructions of gendered and racial identities. Employing Kress and van Leeuwen's model (2021 [1996]. *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge), this article attempts to identify the signs related to categories such as gender and race, as well as the persistence of stereotypical representations in our contemporary societies.

Keywords: multimodality; images; slavery

1 Introduction

Visual art has consistently played a crucial role in socio-cultural communication owing to its various social functions which have often proposed interesting insights into culture and social relations. The analysis of the complex semiotic language of visual communication may help to identify the way identities are articulated in western discourses. Drawing on these conceptualizations, this article will investigate some artworks by Ellen Gallagher, which lead to the reconfiguration of controversial pasts and to the rethinking of gendered and racial identities, through several forms of representation. As previously analysed, Gallagher is known for her multimedia artworks that intervene in the debate on the trauma of colonialism and reflect on the latent legacy of slavery with regard to the foundation of an Afro-centred identity (Quadraro and Tota 2021).¹

This paper will adopt a multimodal approach, which is particularly useful when addressing the study of the manifold meanings and relationships emerging from the forms of cultural and social representation such as visual art. The analysis will focus on the intersection of linguistic perspectives, based on a social semiotic approach to language, which has its origins in the work of M.A.K. Halliday (1978) and in the later development by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021 [1996]). Multimodality will provide the tools to investigate both the visual and the linguistic aspect of the multi-semiotic visual art works explored in this article. This perspective is further enriched with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin and Mayr 2023) that has contributed to extrapolating the lexical choices that support the disclosure of hidden agendas that are not readily available. In order to detect the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the persistence of stereotypical representations and the prejudiced discursive construction of identities, this article will focus on some artworks within Ellen Gallagher's exhibition "AXME" held at Tate Modern in London from 1 May to 1 September 2013. This selection is inspired by the possibility of exploring the artworks "both metalinguistically and multimodally in order to reflect on the

1 Not only was slavery a dehumanizing and traumatic experience for the human beings who experienced it directly, but to put in Ron Eyerman's words, it is also painful across generations "in retrospect" (2001, p. 2).

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choices of representation” (Amideo 2021, p. 215). For this reason, language is analysed in a small multimodal corpus, the “DeLuxe” Corpus (2004/5), retrieved at Gallagher’s exhibition “AXME”. This limited corpus consists of sixty printed images that propose and reconfigure pictures of American magazine adverts from the 50s and 60s. Magazine ads are often an interesting source for analysing visual communication since they use a variety of semiotic resources (Balirano 2015). Indeed, this corpus includes visual advertisements depicting *represented* participants (Afro-American people, in particular women) whose individualities are framed through racially biased representations. The selection of images where language is analysed concerns examples in which the promotional discourse expresses meanings related to gendered and racialised identities and reiterates stereotypical representations. The analysis of these images may possibly contribute to unveiling the extent to which visual and verbal elements can simultaneously produce meaning. However, as we will see, the artist’s intervention on the ads confuses the discursive construction of identities and interrupts the linear reading of content.

2 Theoretical background: from Halliday’s ‘metafunctions’ to the multimodal approach

As a starting point, this paper intends to state the contribution that Michael Halliday’s linguistics (1978) has given to the analysis of images, as it has been developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2021 [1996]). Halliday (1978) offers a powerful model for the investigation of the several semiotic resources that contribute to the analysis of texts. At stake is what language does, how it functions, how it represents things and events, the efficacy of a linguistic form for a particular communicative purpose. The goal is not to find an objective truth, rather to register how meanings are socially constructed and negotiated. The three metafunctions of language of Halliday’s functional grammar are the concepts from which Kress and van Leeuwen’s theoretical notions originate. In particular, the “ideational” metafunction aims at understanding what happens in the world; it refers to the “represented participants”, or “the people, places and things” represented by images, the participants about which we are producing images (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 113). Then, the “interpersonal” metafunction relates to the constitution of communicative interactions and of social relations between writers and readers, for instance, or artists and viewers; it relates to the “interactive participants”, or “real people who produce and make sense of images in the context of social institutions which, to different degrees and in different ways, organize what may be communicated with images, how it should be communicated and how it should be interpreted and used” (*ibid.*). Finally, the “textual” metafunction deals with the way a text is organized; it refers to the way coherence is visually achieved (for instance, which elements are in the background, which ones are foregrounded, and so on).

Visual structures, like linguistic ones, can refer to participants’ roles and to specific contexts. Shifting to a visual level, Kress and van Leeuwen adapt Halliday’s metafunctions to the “representational” dimension (from the ideational metafunction), the “interactive” dimension (from the interpersonal metafunction) and the “compositional” dimension (from the textual metafunction). Expanded beyond the linguistic mode, these metafunctions can also work for the code of images. Visual communication has the resources for maintaining the interaction between the producer and the viewer of the image. The analysis and the interpretation of images can benefit from the application of these three categories. As for the *representational* dimension, it is important firstly to recognize the represented participants which are involved (people or things) and, secondly, to explore the qualities of these participants and the processes depicted, together with the circumstances of the actions that take place (Balirano 2015).

As for the *interactive* dimension, the question here is to investigate the relationships of the interactive participants, or people “who communicate with each other *through* images, the producers and viewers of images” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 113). In particular, three kinds of relationships are under scrutiny: those between represented participants, the interactive participants’ attitudes towards the participants depicted in the

image, and finally the things interactive participants do with and through the images to make sense of them in real contexts. An example of a visual technique used to investigate the interactive dimension is represented by contact:

When represented participants look at the viewer, vectors, formed by the participants' eye-lines, connect the participant with the viewer. Contact is established, even if it is only on an imaginary level (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 116).

This kind of image can be called a “demand”, to put it in Halliday's words. Not only human beings, but also animals or abstract things can be depicted looking at the viewer and ‘demanding’ something. Other images do not address the viewer in a direct way. There is no direct contact. The represented participants are the objects of the viewers' look, or they “offer” themselves as pieces of information and contemplation.

In order to partially summarize the semiotic connections which will be instrumental for our analysis of visual art, another visual technique used to analyse the interpersonal meaning of images is represented by the “size of frame” or the choice between close-up or long shot, since the decision to depict participants as close or far away from the viewers indicates different relations (ivi, p. 123). Here, the authors refer to Edward Hall's work on social distance in everyday interaction (1966), according to which we carry invisible barriers that allow the others to come closer to us or not. For example, when we see a person with space around her/him, there is a “far social distance”.

Moreover, another strategy in which images establish relationships is the “perspective” or “the selection of an angle, a ‘point of view’, and this implies the possibility of expressing *subjective attitudes* towards represented participants, human or otherwise” (ivi, p. 129). The difference between an oblique angle and a frontal one represents the difference between detachment and involvement. Indeed, in an oblique perspective the producer of the image does not allow to recognize the represented participants as parts of the viewers' world. Still, if a represented participant is depicted from a high angle, the interactive participant is in a hierarchical power relation. Conversely, if the represented participant is seen from a low angle, this relation is depicted as one in which the viewer has little power. In addition to the representational dimension and the interactive one, there is the element of the *composition* of the whole image, “the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other, the way they are integrated into a meaningful whole” (ivi, p. 179). For instance, “information value” refers to the placement of elements in various areas of the image (left/right, top/bottom, centre/margin), “salience” refers to the most eye-catching element in the image, and “framing” to what can connect or disconnect the elements of the image.

Through the application of Halliday's model of metafunctions to visual communication, it is possible to interpret images and address different points of view. Studying one single aspect would not be correct, since no single code can be fully interpreted in isolation. Indeed, a wide range of academic disciplines can benefit from the contribution given by a multimodal analysis of texts. Multimodality deals with the exploration of the multiple forms of communication, in particular when two or more “modes” – or semiotic resources – are integrated in a text and achieve a communicative function (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021 [1996]; O'Halloran and Smith 2011).

Multimodality has been developed as an integrated and inter-disciplinary approach:

Following Kress, van Leeuwen and Hodge's interest, among others, in the grammar of images, an integrated, inter-disciplinary approach to the study of non-verbal communication and representation as well as textual interpretation, called *Multimodality*, has been developed over the past two decades with the aim of analysing concepts and methods within a systematic functional framework (Balirano 2015, p. 4).

The term “modality” comes from linguistics and refers to the credibility of the statements about the world and the different degrees of modality in sentences, such as in “He may come” and “He will come” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 150). Similarly, the concept of modality can be applied to images, both still and moving, because visual details, perspective, colour, and so on, can be represented with different degrees of realism and play a crucial role in modality judgements. From a multimodal perspective, semiotic modes such as the image can convey the socially produced meanings created by communities in specific contexts. Indeed, the goal, here, is not to provide easy answers or find a solution that could establish the absolute truth of representations, rather to register that

truth is always a social construct and the result of a social process. In this sense, the interpersonal dimension is very useful in the analysis of images, because it allows one to investigate the shared or contrasting meanings as well as inclusion and exclusion strategies of power relations. It is the idea of finding a multimodal practice for decoding visual art that this article intends to develop and, in particular, the aim is to help decode the meanings and the practices employed in a limited corpus of visual art which reflects on the legacy of slavery and the identity-formation processes.

3 Case study: the exhibition “AXME”

The analysis of Ellen Gallagher’s exhibition “AxME” held at Tate Modern in 2013 may serve to decode the consolidation of racism and “race” prejudices in multimodal western discourses. As a case in point, her artworks are a good source for analysing those issues:

Gallagher’s white Irish mother hailed from Rhode Island, while her black father was a native of Cape Verde, an archipelago off the west coast of Africa. She was born in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1965 and attended Oberlin College, where she studied creative writing. [...] As a person of mixed race, Gallagher avoids the essentialist approach to racial identity, preferring instead to see it through the lens of history (Heartney et al. 2007, p. 192).

Cape Verde has a traumatic past. The island “became a transit point for slaves from several regions on the western coast of Africa” (Carter and Aulette 2009, p. 23). As the analysis will show, the legacy of slavery, in particular the memory of the traumatic experience of the Middle Passage, is given new representations in Gallagher’s work.² Furthermore, a multimodal analysis can help reveal hidden questions of gendered and racialised identities, because her production contributes to the investigation of racially biased representations of women, inherited from slavery and adopted by colonial discourse and knowledge.

A multimodal analysis of Gallagher’s artworks is not an easy task to undertake, since the latter address a multiple semiotic combination of elements. Based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s social semiotic analysis (2021), this article will now proceed to apply a multimodal approach to the investigation of a small corpus and explore the representation of visual actors as well as the interactive dimensions of the participants who are involved. Through the analysis of this corpus it is also possible to explore how a multimodal approach can help to unpack the meanings underneath gendered and racialised identities, as well as the social positioning of the self and other.

In Figure 1 “Oh! Susanna” (1993), for example, Gallagher reproduces continuous lines on canvas that look like an abstract outline at a distance. At the level of the representational metafunction, the image presents a series of *represented participants* that appear as abstract entities. Upon a closer look, we recognize thick lips and wide eyes that populate the painting. Kress and van Leeuwen note that visual structures of representation can either be narrative, presenting actions, or conceptual, that is representing participants in terms of their attributes (2021, p. 76). This image stages a *Conceptual process* since it is able to identify a function of the represented participants by recognizing an absence of action. Indeed, nothing is happening in the painting in terms of the representation of a narration. Significance can only be given to the represented participants’ possible symbolic meaning. The *Symbolic attribute* anchors the idea of caricature to the eyeballs and the lips that are obsessively and meticulously repeated. The represented participants have the crucial function of attaching their own physical qualities (huge lips, bug eyes) to the comic caricature of African American features operated by minstrel shows. “She [Gallagher] references the minstrel shows of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that revolved around stereotypes of blacks as lazy, comic buffoons” (Heartney et al. 2007, p. 253). The huge eyeballs and the white lips have to be read as a manipulation of the attributes of blackness and a way to play with its stereotypical representations.

² As stated by Gad Heuman and Trevor Burnard (2011, p. 177), “The Middle Passage refers to the trans-Atlantic shipments of slaves from the African continent to the Americas”.



Figure 1: Ellen Gallagher *Oh! Susanna*, 1993. Oil, pencil and paper on canvas 60 x 36 inches, 152.4 x 91.4 cm. © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagolian.

As for the *interactive* dimension, some eyes do not look directly at the viewer thus offering themselves as items of information, while others look directly at the viewer's eyes. In the latter case we could say that vectors, represented by the represented participants' eyelines, connect the participants with the viewer. When contact is established, even if only on an imaginary level, there is a visual form of direct address as well as an 'image act'. Some eyes and lips seem to smile as their facial expressions propose a "demand" through which the viewer is asked to participate in a relation characterized by a mutual social affinity. These eyes realize a visual "you" as the eyeballs are addressing the viewers in a way that could be expressed through the exhortation "Hey, you. Look at me". Indeed, during the visit of Gallagher's exhibition "AxME" in the post-industrial space of London's Tate gallery, it is impossible not to reflect on the role played by this town in the administration of the historical British Empire and the impact that colonialism had on the subsequent development of British contemporary society. Interestingly, the title "AxME" plays with the word "ask" in the Afro-American dialect (Tate 2013). Indeed, while wandering through the rooms of the display, we acknowledge that the represented participants of "Oh! Susanna" ask the viewer to engage with the meanings that emerge from the artwork.

Instantiated by the direct gazes which address the viewers, thus creating a relation with them, the interactional metafunction of the painting also demonstrates a power relation. In fact, the represented participants located in the top part of the painting are seen from a low angle. Therefore, the relation between them and the interactive participants is one in which the eyes and the lips have power over the viewers. As for the

compositional dimension, the white eyeballs emerge from the orange background with a high tonal contrast. According to the model developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), this demonstrates a high salience, in other words a visual weight given to the eyes as they are depicted to represent the most eye-catching element in the image.

Gallagher's works pay attention to the stereotypical representations of blackness and excavate the meanings associated to the female black bodies and the demands posed on them to conform to the western ideals of beauty. These strategies seem to question the discursive construction of identities. "Odalisque" (2005), Figure 2, is a work that the viewer encounters in the first room. As an ironical self-portrait, this black and white print shows the artist lying on a sofa and wearing harem-style garments. She looks at Sigmund Freud, who is sitting down in the foreground, concentrated on a large sketchbook where he is writing or drawing something. As we read in the exhibition guide, this work is inspired by a picture taken by the American photographer Man Ray, who portrayed Henri Matisse while depicting a model who wore clichéd harem-style clothes in his French studio in 1928 (Tate 2013). The difference, here, is that Matisse is replaced by Freud, while Gallagher re-actualises the presence of the model in the present time of the gallery space.

Following the model developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2021), the *representational* metafunction entails, initially, the two participants involved: one is Freud in a transactional process, since he (the Actor) is drawing (the Vector) the model on the sofa (the Goal). One represented participant is doing something for the other as Freud's arm becomes a vector that conveys a sense of action. At the same time, in the image we have another vector formed by an eyeline, that is by the direction of the model's gaze (Gallagher herself) on Freud. This process is "*reactional*, and we will speak not of Actors, but of *Reacters*, and not of Goals, but of *Phenomena*" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 62). The Reacter has a smart look and ironically stares at Freud.

As for the investigation of *interactive* participants, the model does not look directly at the viewer's eyes. No eye contact is made between the model and the viewer. Here the viewer is the subject of the gaze. The represented participant is the object of the viewer's scrutiny, so that the viewer becomes an invisible onlooker. For this reason, following Halliday's model, Kress and van Leeuwen would call this image an "offer", since "it 'offers' the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation" (2021, p. 118). The image looks like an imaginary barrier between the represented participants and the viewers, thus producing a sense of disengagement. The viewer has the illusion that Freud and the model do not know they are being observed and



Figure 2: Ellen Gallagher *Odalisque*, 2005. Gelatin silver print with watercolor and gold leaf, 7 3/4 x 7 inches, 19.7 x 17.8 cm. © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagolian.

pretend that they are not being looked at. However, the model's facial expression and mocking smile creates a kind of social affinity with the viewer. The semantic mode of this facial expression indicates that the model is well aware of her subversive power as she does not intend to conform to the hegemonic male representation of her body.

There is another dimension to the interactive meanings of this image, related to the "size of frame". Freud is depicted with a medium shot that shows his waist, while the model with a long shot that shows her full figure on the sofa and under the curtains. Therefore, we could say that the artist intends to work on the viewers' perception of a far social distance towards the model, given by the space that surrounds her. In terms of "perspective", the image has a frontal angle, so that the viewer could feel that what she (the viewer) sees is part of her world, something she is involved with. Actually, this image reconfigures the question of the gaze and the central role of visual power in the process of identity formation. As Frantz Fanon highlights in his work (1952), racism is an "inescapable and traumatic process" that materially defines the racial Other (Quadraro and Tota 2021, p. 21). Indeed, the odalisque/represented participant not only evokes stories of colonialism, racism and subjugation, but it also re-actualises the legacy of this apparently distant past in contemporary stereotypical representations of gendered and racialised identities.

As we know from Kress and van Leeuwen's model (2021), there is a third element in the relations set up by the image: the *composition* of the whole, the way in which the representational and the interactive elements relate to each other and integrate with each other into a meaningful combination. Freud, for instance, is placed on the left, and Gallagher (the model) on the right. If these positions would be turned around, the meaning of the whole image would no longer be the same, because the placement of the participants establishes specific types of information value. The left is the side of the 'already given', something that the viewer knows already as part of her culture (Freud or the father of psychoanalysis); the element placed on the right, depicting Gallagher as the model, is the 'new'. "For something to be New means that it is presented as something which is not yet known, or perhaps not yet agreed upon by the viewer, hence as something to which the viewer must pay special attention" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 187). The meaning of Gallagher's replacing Matisse's model (and Matisse replaced by Freud) is the information 'at issue', the problematic element that is not self-evident, what is not part of the consolidated common sense.

In addition, Freud is in the foreground and forms the largest element in the picture, but Gallagher (the model) is the most *salient*, the most eye-catching element in the composition because she receives a great amount of light and she is dressed in white clothes that draw attention to her, even if she is placed in the background. These semantic resources make the model a very important 'item of information'. Finally, a vertical line formed by the curtain and continued by the edge of Freud's sketchbook runs through the picture and divides it into two sections, 'drawing' an imaginary line between the space of the model who can look at Freud and the space of Freud who is concentrated on the sketchbook. This line separates the worlds of the two represented participants.

There are many examples of representations of sexualised female subjects in European painting, such as *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834) by Eugène Delacroix. In this artwork women are represented as lascivious, passive, and seductive subjects in distant and exotic places. "In his feminine Orientalism women embody the sweetness of subjugation, something that European women had lost, as Delacroix himself declared" (Ponzanesi 2005, p. 168). With the use of vivid colours and reclining female subjects in a specific setting, secluded from the outside world, Delacroix employed all signs for expressing the idea of otherness. As Edward Said has demonstrated, "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (1978, p. 1). Similarly, the Moroccan writer Fatema Mernissi highlights that the conception of the harem as a lascivious and peaceful place with obedient women is a Western invention. Born in a harem, she deconstructs this representation:

But Westerners, I have come to realize, see the harem as a peaceful pleasure-garden where omnipotent men reign supreme over obedient women. While Muslim men describe themselves as insecure in their harems, real or imagined, Westerners describe themselves as self-assured heroes with no fears of women. The tragic dimension so present in Muslim harems – fear of women and male self-doubt – is missing in the Western harem (Mernissi 2001, p. 16).

The European fascination with the harem is linked to the historical formation of the psychoanalytic knowledge regarding female sexuality. Indeed, Freud describes female sexuality as a “dark continent”, defined by lack. It is here that the concept of otherness is developed, even if the Other is not necessarily racialised or sexualised. “[I]t does seem that travel and exploration are the instigators of a theory of the Other, and in this case, the Other of man and of Europe are constructed as inferior version of this “self”, becoming self in a castrated form” (Khanna 2003, p. 49). By sitting on the sofa, with her gaze on Freud, Gallagher’s eyes play with the ideological formation of the “dark continent” and perform an oppositional gaze with the “freedom to look and look back” (Chan 2017, p. 257).

As a matter of fact, Gallagher introduces a ‘new’ element in the composition that confounds the viewers and shows that the traumatic experience of colonialism is at the very foundation of modernity. Following the interpretations stimulated by the multimodal analysis of the above-mentioned images presented within the exhibition, another piece that is under scrutiny here is a work on paper entitled “Negroes ask for German Colonies” (2002), Figure 3. Here, twenty heads of women with different skin colours and white wigs cut into paper in relief have their eyes covered with pink plasticine. In this case, a multimodal analysis can be very useful for the decoding and the unpacking of the meanings included in this image. First, those female heads are the *represented* participants of the picture.

In the artwork some faces look frontally, some look out the frame (“non-transactional reaction”), while a few look at the closest head that is on the right or on the left (“transactional reaction”). These choices refer to the dramatic action or some faces have visions and see things others cannot see. Others look at the neighbouring head as their eyelines, whose glances are stressed by the pink plasticine, form vectors on the image. These heads react to something, but their facial expression is completely deformed by the addition of plasticine on the eyes, so that it is not possible to understand the precise nature of reactions.

Each of the heads has a name: “Flippant”, “Feather Curl”, “Afro-Swirly”, “All-over Roll Up”, “Fifi”, “Coquette”, “E-Bangs”, “Humania 51 %”, etc. As for the *interactive* dimension, the heads which look directly at the viewer’s eyes connect the participants with the viewer. Even if only on an imaginary level, there is a visual form of direct address to the viewer. Some of these faces smile, thus asking the viewer to enter in a relation of social affinity with them. This request is verbally transposed in the title: the heads “ask for German colonies”. Through a different semiotic resource, the message already offered by the image in the visual field is proposed verbally by the statement that accompanies the artwork, thus demonstrating how the intended meaning can be intensified by the



Figure 3: Ellen Gallagher, *Negroes Ask for German Colonies* 2002. Watercolor, pencil, plasticine, oil and cut paper on paper 22 1/4 x 30 inches, 56.5 x 76.3 cm. © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

integration of different semiotic resources. On the other hand, when faces do not establish a direct relation with the viewer, they offer themselves as items of contemplation. As we read in the exhibition guide, the title of this work was inspired by a piece written by Hubert Harrison in 1919 (Tate 2013). After the end of World War I, he “questioned black nationalists for calling on world leaders at the Paris Peace Conference held that year to allow Germany’s African colonies self-rule”, reminding readers that black people had no military or financial power (Kelley 2013, p. 8). Included in a grid of several urban style wigs, the represented participants ask the viewer to find new modes of facing this controversial past. Furthermore, those heads have different hairstyles and skin colour, thus investing hair and skin with a symbolic dimension. With regard to the meanings associated to hair, Kobena Mercer explains that the scientific construction of racism emerged in “discourses of scientific racism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which developed in Europe alongside the slave trade” (Mercer 1994, p. 101). Variations in skin, skull, as well as hair texture differences, were employed as signs for the classification and the organization of human beings. Contrary to less changeable elements such as the nose or the skin variation, “hair functions as a key *ethnic signifier*” and becomes an interesting area of expression as in the cultural practice of straightening (ivi, p. 103).

In this picture the viewer looks frontally at the models’ wigs with a close shot that only shows the heads at intimate distance. The heads are at eye level, then the point of view indicates an equal relation. As for the *composition* of the whole, the eyes made of pink plasticine are the most salient and eye-catching elements in the composition, because they emerge from a white surface in contrast with the background. The faces are not disconnected, they seem to be engaged in a conversation that also includes the viewer. The interactive participant understands that these heads belong to each other and include the viewer in an ongoing conversation about a possible restitution of colonies.

Another work that asks the viewer to be engaged with the images is the “Watery Ecstatic” series, started in 2001 and including delightful illustrations made with watercolour, ink, and plasticine on cut paper. In this series the *represented* participants are varieties of marine creatures: fish, jellyfish and other sea creatures are the protagonists of the pictures. They swim and look out of the frame (‘non-transactional reaction’), that is at something the viewer cannot see. Most of the images have only one participant who is an Actor. Apparently, there is no Gola directed at anyone or anything. “The non-transactional action process is therefore analogous to the intransitive verb in language (the verb that does not take an object)” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021, p. 59). In one picture (Figure 4), chosen within the “Watery Ecstatic” series, the viewer perceives several tiny faces of black



Figure 4: Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2003. Watercolour, pencil, cut paper and varnish on cut paper 29 x 41 inches, 73.7 x 104.1 cm. © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

people drowning in the water. This image functions as a ‘demand’ because the faces look at the viewer who feels overwhelmed. The beauty of the drawings reveals, at a closer look, the grimace of pain distinguished on the minuscule faces of the *represented* participants. The interactive participant would like to touch the paper and be of any help for these half-human creatures.

In terms of *composition*, most of the drowning human faces are positioned in the bottom part of the picture, that is the area of the “Real”, according to Kress and van Leeuwen’s model (2021, p. 190). Here, these faces are granted major salience in the image composition (even in terms of colour contrast), being connected to the world of the interactive participants. In Figure 4 the history of the ancestors of African American people who died while crossing the Atlantic Ocean during the slave trade is re-signified in one of the most important museum spaces in Europe. Moreover, these deaths resonate with the lives tragically interrupted in the contemporary Mediterranean, whose shores touch the author’s home country. To put it in Iain Chambers’ words, the lives that continue to haunt the present “invite us to consider the question of narrative, representation, and language itself” thus affecting the understanding of the past and the present (2008, p. 26).

Furthermore, the series “Watery Ecstatic” evokes the legend of “Drexciya”, created by James Stinson, the founder of a techno band based in Detroit with the same name:

Drexciya is a mythic black Atlantis at the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean founded by pregnant African women who leapt or were thrown from slave ships during the Middle Passage and gave birth to offspring capable of breathing underwater (Kelley 2013, p. 18).

Rather than seeking revenge, the *represented* participants who inhabit Gallagher’s drawings are resuscitated women. Furthermore, the blankness of the white paper becomes “a layered, double-sided material ground”, on which different meanings are inscribed (Armstrong 2013, p. 28). A multimodal approach to these images shows the viewer the multiple semantic modes that are in the sculpting of the paper surface. The *represented* participants are all interconnected and establish an intimate relation with the viewer who would like to touch the paper as if this could be a porous membrane through which one could perceive the trauma.

To integrate the analysis of Gallagher’s exhibition, a small multimodal corpus is under scrutiny in this study, the “DeLuxe” Corpus (2004/5), displayed in the last room of the exhibition. This choice is motivated by the idea of exploring the artworks both visually and linguistically in order to study the integration of the different semiotic resources that convey the meanings. This small corpus comprises sixty printed images that propose pictures of American magazine adverts from the 50s and 60s. It displays *represented* participants who belong to black communities and whose individualities are framed through racially biased representations. We see especially women to whom the ads are mainly addressed: lotions, hair pomades, tips for a “lighter skin”, hair attachments, straighteners, and several female wigs. There is a massive work of collage, in which *represented* participants’ gazes are distorted through an extensive use of creative artifices such as yellow plasticine on black hair or thick lips pasted on the ads to hide the messages. This corpus presents a map of another “lost world”:

In publications like *Ebony*, *Black Digest*, and *Our World*, Gallagher discovered another lost world, this time relating to the efforts of fashion-conscious black women to conform to socially acceptable norms of beauty (Heartney et al. 2007, p. 256).

The selection of images where language is investigated relates to examples in which the promotional discourse produces meanings about gendered and racialised identities and also reiterates stereotypical representations. However, as we will see, the artist’s intervention on the ads confuses the discursive construction of identities and interrupts the linear reading of content. For instance, in Figure 5, one of the images that composes the piece, the *represented* participant is a black woman who looks out of the frame with no goal. There is no eye contact with the viewer. Moreover, she is positioned in the upper part of the “DeLuxe” composition, so that she exerts a kind of power on the *interactive* participant. This image addresses us indirectly. Here the viewer is the subject of the look, and its role is that of an invisible onlooker. This kind of image is an “offer”, since the *represented* participant is offered to the viewer as an item of contemplation. With a close shot we can see the head and the shoulders, thus creating a kind of intimate distance. As for the *composition*, on the left side of the image where the given



Figure 5: Ellen Gallagher, *Detail* from *DeLuxe*, 2004-5 Grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoints with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving; some with additions of plasticine, watercolor, pomade and toy eyeballs. Each: 15 1/3 x 12 4/5 inches (38.9 x 32.5 cm). Overall dimensions: 84 3/5 x 178 1/5 inches (214.9 x 452.7 cm). © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

information is placed, there is a black woman with straightened hair whose eyes and hair are covered maybe with fish scales. On the right (the 'New') there are pieces of articles cut from magazines about this hair product called "Satene", for instance, titles like "What Regular Users Say About SATENE", etc. However, these textual parts of the image are covered by drawings of jellyfish pasted on words, which do not allow to read all words. On the top part (the realm of the "ideal"), there is the message of the ad, "Do you want lovelier, longer hair?", which is clearly addressed to Afro-American women. As Machin and Mayr suggest in their perspective of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (2023), advertisement is a genre that tries to persuade through the frequent use of personal pronouns. Text producers use pronouns to personalize relationships and convey a sense of personal involvement, as an important way to communicate a sense of community. In a Discourse Analysis perspective, the concept of "you" is slippery and can be used to conceal power relations. In Figure 5, for instance, the use of "you" is used to align women with the idea of having a better look with straightened hair, that is a kind of beauty conformed to the western standard of beauty.

Conducting a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), then, entails carrying out a work where we investigate the elements of representation through visual features and word choices. Not only do we focus on

strategies of classification, such as the use of pronouns, but also on the analysis of a semantic field, such as the choice of the type of lexis. Adjectives, for instance, play an important role in evaluation and enrich language (Machin and Mayr 2023, p. 55). For instance, in Figure 5 the adjectives “lovely” and “long”, related to the noun “hair”, convey a sense of emotional evaluation and enhance the sense of experience associated with the product. These adjectives imbue the product with certain qualities and related experiences, thus creating an emotional involvement for those women who want to conform to a specific standardized beauty.

In the bottom right area of the print ad, we can view the product which is being merchandised: a tin of “Satene” with a form to request the shipping to a postal address. The image of the product is given major salience in the image composition, and it is placed, in fact, in the realm of the “real”. It shows the viewers what is being merchandised. However, the form with the request of the product is made illegible because a starfish is pasted on it. Again, through an incessant manipulation and a work of collage, this image, like others investigated in this article, plays with the transformation of blackness. Moreover, this kind of images turns the represented participants, in particular black women, into unrecognizable creatures who ‘demand’ a considerable effort to decode their multiple meanings in the present time. By covering portions of the images with plasticine and other materials, these symbols of aspiration of beauty become monstrous and unrecognizable creatures who haunt the gallery space.



Figure 6: Ellen Gallagher, *Detail from DeLuxe*, 2004-5 Grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoints with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving; some with additions of plasticine, watercolor, pomade and toy eyeballs. Each: 15 1/3 x 12 4/5 inches (38.9 x 32.5 cm). Overall dimensions: 84 3/5 x 178 1/5 inches (214.9 x 452.7 cm). © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

Images of female bodies or body parts, such as hair, are typically styled in advertising and invested with a life of their own, so that the objects we buy may mediate social relations. “Ads tend to objectify who and what we are, which is a way of discursively building identities” (Balirano 2015, p. 22). Gallagher plays with the traditional exploitation of the female body and stages a counterstrategy. Figure 6 shows a *represented* participant, who is a black woman looking out of the frame with no goal. Her hair is meticulously carved with plasticine. As for the investigation of the *interactive* participants, the model does not look directly at the viewer’s eyes. No eye contact is made between the model and the viewer. The woman becomes the object of the viewer’s scrutiny. In the bottom part of the *composition*, we discern tiny faces pasted on the text that comes with the image. According to Kress and van Leeuwen’s model (2021), this part is the area of the “real”, however the artist pasted small pictures of men’s faces on the text to confuse the viewer/reader.

This image, while promoting hair attachments for women, displays a represented participant whose identity is framed through a negative representation of inadequacy and inferiority. Under the text we read the message “Look glamorous for *him*”, thus persuading women to buy this product with the purpose to attract men and to conform to the standards of beauty. In the text under the image, the use of pronouns is significant: “The first thing



Figure 7: Ellen Gallagher, *Detail from DeLuxe*, 2004-5 Grid of 60 photogravure, etching, aquatint and drypoints with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving; some with additions of plasticine, watercolor, pomade and toy eyeballs. Each: 15 1/3 x 12 4/5 inches (38.9 x 32.5 cm). Overall dimensions: 84 3/5 x 178 1/5 inches (214.9 x 452.7 cm). © Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Gagosian.

he (or anybody) notices about *you* is your hair-do” (italics mine). Here, pronouns create a division between “you” (the target of this ad, that is the black woman who desires to make her hair beautiful and more attractive) and “him” (the superior male subject who has to be pleased). Pronouns are therefore used to establish personal relations and to stimulate engagement (Machin and Mayr 2023, p. 123). “Simply do as the glamour girls pictured here did: ‘Make up’ *your* hair” (italics mine) is another message we read in the text. The target female buyer is invited to buy those hair attachments in order to be “ready” for any occasion.

The exploitation of the female body aimed at increasing the consumers’ desire to buy the item is a technique still used in advertising. Figure 7 presents women whose faces have been made unrecognizable. The ad is about wigs that can be styled in several ways. As in Figure 5, the message of this ad is to buy a wig in order to “Be attractive to men” (as we read in the bottom left part of the picture). The adjective “attractive” plays an important role in the evaluation and tells something about the quality of the advertised product. The choice of this term relies on stereotypes concerning what the body should look like to represent the normal female beauty. The language of this ad is enriched with a sense of expression and emotional evaluation. Moreover, it relies on the realization of a visual “you”. The models are addressing the viewers in a way that could be verbally transposed as “Hey, you. Buy a wig”. The original ad is intended to show glamorous women who conformed to the standards of white beauty. Indeed, the series of images of Gallagher’s “DeLuxe” piece highlights that promotional discourse may produce meanings related to gendered and racialised identities and reiterate stereotypical representations. However, the artist’s intervention on the ads retrieved by her confuses the discursive construction of identities and interrupts the linear reading of content.

4 Concluding remarks

Drawing on a theoretical perspective used in social semiotic studies, this study has proposed a multimodal analysis of some artworks chosen within Ellen Gallagher’s 2013 Tate Modern exhibition. It attempts to explore within the artistic discourse a possible way to investigate the legacy of the trauma of slavery and colonialism in contemporary identity-formation processes. The investigation has focused on a choice of still images that deal with this painful past and present some visual elements that can be used to analyse images and to detect the means adopted in the construction of stereotyped gendered and racial identities. The multimodal perspective is further enriched with the tools of Critical Discourse Analysis (Machin and Mayr 2023) that has contributed to extrapolate the lexical choices that support the disclosure of hidden agendas that are not available at first sight. In order to detect the legacy of slavery and colonialism in the persistence of stereotypical representations and the prejudiced discursive construction of identities, some artworks from the exhibition “AXME” have been chosen with the idea of exploring the images both visually and linguistically and to investigate the strategies of representation. Thus, language is analysed in a small multimodal corpus, the “DeLuxe” Corpus (2004/5), which includes sixty printed images that recompose pictures of American magazine adverts from the 50s and 60s. Indeed, this corpus presents visual advertisements depicting Afro-American people, in particular women, whose individualities are framed through racially biased representations. On one hand the analysis of these images may possibly contribute to unveiling the extent to which visual and verbal elements can simultaneously produce meaning; on the other hand, this investigation reveals Gallagher’s attempt to produce a counter discourse within the artistic domain. The need to present a counter discourse is evident in the way the different semiotic resources are used or manipulated in order to bring forward an alternative form of meaning-making process that disrupts dominant representations.

This study has focused on the several strategies that Gallagher has used in her practice to foreground a transgressive female black body that interrupts the patriarchal dominant narrations of women. In doing so, Gallagher also explores how the representation of the female body is used as a semiotic resource as well as an alternative expression of the feminine. A preliminary methodological overview is provided to present the theoretical framework inspiring this article, which partially summarizes the semiotic connections from Halliday’s metafunctions to Kress and van Leeuwen’s developments. The study goes on to analyse a series of images selected within Gallagher’s first major solo exhibition in the United Kingdom. The multimodal analysis of these

images has highlighted the way the prejudiced discursive construction of identities can help decode the persistence of stereotypical representations in our contemporary societies. The analysis also demonstrates Gallagher's necessity to reconfigure – in the contemporary time – the traditional representations of black women, inherited from slavery and then adopted by colonial discourse. Therefore, in order to pursue a critical investigation of unequal and biased representations related to gender and race in specific contexts, it may be important to recognize the persistence of signs related to categories such as gender and race and investigate the legacies left by colonialism and slavery.

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