

A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *Incognegro* (2008)

Marilyn M. Albert

Abstract—This study attempts to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) of *Incognegro* (2008), a graphic novel by Mat Johnson and arts by Warren Pleece, by applying Michael Halliday’s theory of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) (1994) for the written texts, i.e. the captions found on the images, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s Grammar of Visual Design (GVD), or what has been recently called Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) (1996) for the images themselves. The study employs, as well, Teun A. van Dijk’s modal of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (2004), in which power, racism, segregation, oppression, ethnicity, inequality, discrimination, identity, superiority, inferiority, dominant groups, and dominated groups are being analyzed. The study aims at showing the inequality, the oppression, the racial discrimination, and the exercised power Negroes previously suffered (1930s) in America, the land of freedom, and how this suffering is depicted through graphic novels for historical documentation. The study shows that the Whites considered themselves the dominant group, whereas the Negroes were treated as slaves, not even equal to human beings, and hence are recognized to be the oppressed and the dominated group.

Index Terms—Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA), Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), racism, inequality.

I. INTRODUCTION

This study aims at analyzing *Incognegro* (2008) by Mat Johnson through the application of multimodal discourse analysis, in which texts and images are being analyzed in a co-relative manner. The texts are being analyzed by Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar, namely the ideational (experiential) metafunction, and the images are being analyzed through the employment of Kress and van Leeuwen’s Systemic Functional – Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA). Both undergo a critical discourse analysis (CDA) by examining power, ethnicity, racism, equality and inequality, and consequently, revealing the dominant group and the dominated group between White Americans and Black Americans.

II. SYNOPSIS OF *INCOGNEGRO* (2008)

Incognegro [1] is written by Mat Johnson, an African American, who, due to his light skin, was considered to be a white man. He had some knowledge about black-born people who were able to be undercover and pass as white men among the whites, due to their light skin, and were able to investigate the lynchings, which are extrajudicial killing by a group of people, in other words, they are informal public

executions by a mob, in which they punish transgressors. Mat Johnson was inspired by a born twin, in which one was white and the other was black.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND FRAMEWORK

A. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is both a theory and a method [2]. The start of CDA network was launched by [3], [4], as well as van Dijk’s first book about ‘racism’ [5], [6].

CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that studies social power abuse, dominance, race, discrimination, and inequality [7], [8]; van Dijk, [9]-[12]. It is specifically concerned with how texts work to oppress people within social communities. In other words, it explores how language, social structures, and interactions between people relate to one another and to the exercise of power [13]. It is not a direction or a school; however, it offers a mode or a perspective of theorizing and analysis. It addresses social problems and power relations among different groups. In most critical work on discourse, power is considered a central notion.

Fairclough and Wodak [14] set eight tenets of CDA, which are:

“1. CDA addresses social problems, 2. Power relations are discursive, 3. Discourse constitutes society and culture, 4. Discourse does ideological work, 5. Discourse is historical, 6. The link between text and society is mediated, 7. Discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory, 8. Discourse is a form of social action” van Dijk [11].

B. Multimodality

Kress and van Leeuwen [15]-[17] base their theory of multimodal text analysis on the Hallidayan metafunctions, where the analysis consists of three kinds of constituents; participants, processes, and circumstances [18]. They embrace his model not because it works well for language, but because “it works well as a source for thinking about all modes of representation” [15]. Barthes [19], [20] mentions that images are polysemous and, thus, dependent on the verbal text in order to reach a definite meaning [21].

Kress and van Leeuwen [15] divide the application into narrative representations, conceptual representations, and interactive representations. The narrative representation targets the social action; it realizes the ideational (experiential) metafunction. The conceptual realization targets the social constructs, which realizes the interpersonal metafunction. Finally the interactive representation realizes the textual metafunction; it targets the position of the viewer.

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IV. METHODOLOGY

A. *Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG)*

Halliday first introduced his theory in 1985 [22], where he set the rules for textual analysis and determined the functions of the language through his three metafunctions: the textual metafunction, the interpersonal metafunction, and the ideational metafunction. In 2006, Baldry and Thibault [23] present their book in which they reintroduce the Hallidayan theory [22] along with the concepts and notions found in Halliday [24], and in Halliday and Hasan [25], Halliday [26], Halliday and Matthiessen [27], through which they introduce visual design analysis.

Halliday introduces the ideational or the experiential metafunction as the representation of the clause [28], which builds a mental picture of reality. The prominent factor in this metafunction is the verb which determines the function of the actor and the goal, thus transitive verbs are to be focused on, as they reveal the identity of the goal.

Halliday presents a classification of the clauses based on experiences in real life. According to this, he says that there is an actor, a process, and a goal. This classification of the clause differs according to who the actor is, what they are doing (the process), and on which goal the action is being processed, the goal. The processes are classified into three main types: mental, material, relational, and three subsidiary types: verbal, behavioural, and existential.

Material processes are the actions of doings or happening, as in *run* and *fall*. The participant who carries out the action is called 'Actor,' and the other participant who has the action done to or affected by it is called 'Goal.' The number of participants involved around a certain process are referred to as 'valency,' in which a process having one participant is known as 'monovalent,' a process with two participants is referred to as 'bivalent,' and a process with three participants is referred to as 'trivalent' [29].

Mental processes target the experience or the sense. They are further classified into cognition, such as *understand*, *believe*; perception, such as *see*, *feel*; affectivity, such as *love*, *admire*; and desideration such as *hope*, *desire* (p. 139). The participant, who sees, feels, knows etc., is known as the 'Senser.' The second participant, which is the perceived, the felt, the known, etc., is called the 'Phenomenon.'

Relational processes refer to the state of being or becoming, in which the "participant is characterised, or identified, or situated circumstantially" (p. 125). The notion of 'being' is divided into attributive and identifying, according to the meaning, in which the process is marked by the verbs *have* and *be*. The relational pattern is divided into 'attributive,' 'circumstantial,' and 'possessive.' The attributive consists of the entity, which is called the 'Carrier' and the description of that entity, which is called the 'Attribute.' The circumstantial is the same as the attributive but for the spatial meaning, as in *the bus is over there*. In the possessive structure, the participants carry different names, known as the 'Possessor' and the 'Possessive.'

B. *Systemic Functional – Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA)*

Systemic Functional – Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) is what Kress and van Leeuwen have named their

theory upon, based on the fact that their theory of how images are read is based upon Halliday's three metafunctions. It is a disciplinary kind of thought [30].

Kress and van Leeuwen [15] divide their theory into three meanings, which corresponds to the Hallidayan metafunctions. They start their theory with the representational meaning, which addresses the ideational metafunction. Then they move to the interactive meaning, which addresses the interpersonal metafunction, and finally, they discuss the compositional meaning, which addresses the textual metafunction.

1) *Representational meaning*

Representational meaning, according to Kress and van Leeuwen [15] consists of narrative structure and conceptual structure. The narrative structure comprises the action process and the reaction process, in addition to secondary participants called circumstances. The conceptual structure comprises the classificational process, the analytical process, and the symbolic process.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen [15], the narrative structure comprises three elements: the actor, the doer of a certain action, the vector, the process or the action that is done, and the goal, to which the action is directed.

If the three elements are available, this will be known as a transactional structure; if the goal is missing, then it will be called a non-transactional structure. When the actor does a vector to the goal, and in return the goal does a vector to the actor, this structure is called a bidirectional structure. If the goal is in between two actors, in which the goal is now a goal, now an actor for another goal, this kind of process is called conversion process, and the participants are no longer called actor and goal, but relay. When the actor and the goal are not found, only the vector, this in know, according to Kress and van Leeuwen [15] as geometrical symbolism.

According to Kress and van Leeuwen [15], the reactional process includes a reactor, the human who does a looking or a thinking process, a reactional process, the process of looking or thinking, and the phenomenon, the object looked at or thought of. The reactional process, like the narrative process, can be transactional or non-transactional, based on the presence or the absence of the phenomenon respectively.

Kress and van Leeuwen [15] provide a further classification of the narrative process concerning the type of the bubble balloon. They state that when the bubble balloon is a thought balloon, then the reactor will be senser, and the reactional process will be called mental process. If the bubble balloon is a dialogue balloon, then the reactor will be called sayer, and the reactional process will be called verbal process.

Circumstances are known as the secondary participants. There are three types of circumstances: locative, circumstances of means and circumstances of accompaniment. The locative circumstance has to do with the setting of the image. The circumstance of means is the tools used in a certain process, and finally the circumstance of accompaniment is the case where there is no vector, only the participants accompanying one another.

The conceptual representation is classified into classificational process, analytical process, and symbolic process. The classificational process deals with the superordinate and the subordinates. It includes two kinds of

taxonomies: the covert taxonomy and the overt taxonomy. The covert taxonomy is the taxonomy in which the superordinate is inferred from the subordinates, whereas the overt taxonomy is found in tree diagrams.

The analytical process deals with the part and the whole. The part, according to Kress and van Leeuwen [15], is called possessive attribute, and the whole is called carrier. The analytical process is divided into structured and unstructured classification. The structured has its parts arranged in a certain order to form the whole, whereas the unstructured classification has the parts shown only, with no certain arrangement to reach the whole.

The symbolic process deals with what a participant means. The carrier is the participant whose identity is established in the relation, while the participant which represents the identity is called symbolic attribute. The symbolic structure is divided into two kinds of analyses: the attributive symbolic structure and the suggestive symbolic structure. The attributive symbolic structure is the structure in which the qualities are conferred to the carrier, whereas the suggestive symbolic structure is the structure which has a quality derived from the carrier.

2) Interactive meaning

Interactive meaning in Kress and van Leeuwen [15] targets the Hallidayan interpersonal metafunction. The interpersonal meaning deals with the represented participants, objects depicted in the image, and interactive participants, viewers of the image. According to Kress and van Leeuwen [15], interactive meaning is divided into three aspects: the contact, the social distancing, and the attitude.

The contact is the gaze of the eye, which can be demand or can be offer. The demand is when an object inside the image looks directly at the viewer's eye, which leads to connection between them. The offer is when no object in the image looks directly at the viewer.

The social distance is the distance between participants in the image. It could be a personal or an intimate when, where the participants are standing near each other, with no distance. It can be a social relation, in which there is some space between the participants, indicating that they are not intimate and have no personal relationship, and finally the impersonal relation in which there is a huge space between participants, indicating that they do not even know one another.

The attitude is divided into two kinds: subjectivity and objectivity. Subjectivity deals with the involvement of participants or their detachment, and it deals with the kind of angle, in which the low angle shows superiority, the high angle shows inferiority, and the eyelevel angle shows equality. As for the objectivity, it is found in charts and maps, no subjectivity in it.

3) Compositional meaning

The compositional meaning targets the textual metafunction in Halliday's SFG. It relates the representational meaning and the interactive meaning together. It comprises three aspects: the information value, the salience, and the framing.

It is the position of the object inside the image, in which it could be place at the top, at the bottom, on the left, on the right, in the center, or at the margin. The top is called the ideal, which indicates the satisfaction targeted by the viewer, the

bottom is the real, down-to-earth information, the left is the given, the right is the new information, the center is the significant information, and the margin is the dependent information.

Salience is the complex interaction between size, sharpness of focus, colour contrast, placement in the visual field, and finally the presence in the foreground or the background.

It is the presence of a line of separation between objects in the image, in which the stronger the framing is, the disconnected the participants or the objects in the image are.

V. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF *INCOGNEGRO* (2008)

Halliday's systemic functional grammar, namely the ideational metafunction, would be applied on the textual part, Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design would be applied on the images, and finally van Dijk's critical discourse analysis will discuss power relations, ethnicity, racism, and dominant and dominated groups.

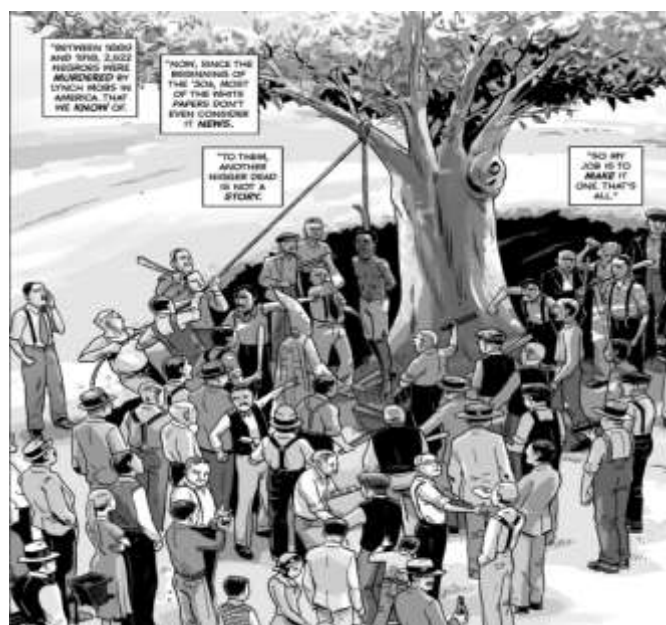


Fig. 1. A Sample from *Incognegro* (2008)

TABLE I: BETWEEN 1889 AND 1918, 2,522 NEGROES WERE MURDERED BY LYNCH MOBS IN AMERICA THAT WE KNOW OF

Between...	2,555 Negroes	Were...	By...	In America
Circumstance	Goal	Material Process	Actor	Circumstance
We	Know	Of		
Senser	Mental Process	Phenomenon		

TABLE II: NOW, SINCE THE BEGINNING OF THE 30s, MOST OF THE WHITE PAPERS DO NOT EVEN CONSIDER IT NEWS

Now	Since the beginning of the 30 th		
Circumstance	Circumstance		
Most of...	Do not even...	It	News

Senser	Mental Process	Phenomenon	Phenomenon
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Actor	Material Process	Goal	Circumstance
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TABLE III: TO THEM, ANOTHER NEGRO DEAD IS NOT A STORY

To them,	Another Negro dead	Is not	A story
Circumstance	Identified	Relational Process	Identifier

In Fig. 1, a white crowd is seen gathered around an event, in which a Negro is being hanged by a rope on a huge tree. Some of them are grabbing the rope tightly, in order to make sure that they reach their target. Some other people are seen talking together, laughing, drinking, talking on the phone, and some are seen holding sticks.

In terms of narrative representation, the people grabbing the rope are the actors in a transactional process, as they are grabbing the rope, which is considered the circumstance of means, in order to make sure that the Negro, the goal, is hanged to death. People holding the sticks are actors in a transactional process, as well, and their sticks are circumstances of means. The others who are just looking at the Negro are considered reactors, which makes the Negro the phenomenon they are looking at. Finally, people who are drinking, taking, or laughing are considered actors as well.

The image as a whole is a kind of an action and a reaction towards the Negro, who is the only goal and phenomenon in here.

In terms of interactive meaning, the image is an offer; it does not demand an action from the reader, except to see what is going on. The distance is impersonal; it shows the reader the whole situation, and the horizontal angle is a mixture of frontal and oblique, in order to make the reader a viewer only, preventing them from being able to rescue the hanged Negro. The vertical angle of this image is high, allowing the reader to look downwards to demean the action which is taking place.

In terms of compositional meaning, the information value is left to right, in which the left, which is the given, shows a mere crowd gathered in a certain place; however, the right, which is the new, shows what they are gathering around, which happens to be a hanged Negro.

The image is salient somehow; the details are not required here, but the whole image, that what is required by the author to reach the reader, the action as a whole.



Fig. 2. A Sample from *Incognegro* (2008).

TABLE IV: AFTER THEY BEAT HIM NEAR TO DEATH, THEY USUALLY CAP IT OFF WITH SOME RITUAL DE-MASCULATION.

After they ...	They	Cap it off	With some...
Circumstance	Actor	Material Process	Circumstance
They	Beat	Him	Near to death

In Fig. 2, a man wearing a cloak is holding a knife in his hand and apparently, as stated in the caption, de-masculates the Negro, in which a huge scream comes out of the Negro from the pain of this brutal action.

In terms of narrative representation, the man in the cloak is an actor in a transactional structure, the Negro is the goal, and the knife is the circumstance of means.

In terms of interactive meaning, the image is an offer, the distance is social, the horizontal angle is oblique, in an attempt to show the reader a glimpse of that brutal action, and finally, the vertical angle targets the eyelevel, indicating that this deed is real.

In terms of compositional meaning, the information value is left to right, in which the left shows the man in the cloak, while the right shows what the man is doing to the Negro, in addition to the out-of-pain scream coming out from the manacled Negro. The image is salient in which the man in the cloak is foregrounded, indicating superiority over the Negro, who is backgrounded, showing his incapability to salvage himself.



Fig. 3. A Sample from *Incognegro* (2008).

TABLE III: ANALYSIS OF IMAGE 3

1. After that, like house cats with dead mice, they tend to play with the body, particularly if it was a soldier.

After that	Like...	They	Tend to play	With...
Circumstance	Circumstance	Behavior	Behavioral Process	Range

2. Crackers hate to see a uniform on a soldier.

Crackers	Hate to see	A uniform	On a soldier
Senser	Mental Process	Phenomenon	Circumstance

3. They usually strip those guys first.

They	Usually strip	Those guys	First
Actor	Material Process	Goal	Circumstance

In image (3), a man is seen satisfied with the whole scene, and another nearby man is drinking some wine. The strange thing is the presence of some children with their families and the fact that no one interferes to stop that brutality, as if they were watching a show.

In terms of narrative representation, the shown man is a reactor in a transactional structure, and the whole cheerful mob with the hanged Negro is the phenomenon. The man

drinking wine is an actor in a transactional structure, the wine is the goal, and the bottle is a circumstance of means.

The presence of some kids in that situation is a means of accompaniment, which in fact symbolizes a whole concept of brutality, being implanted in the minds of the kids at a very young age, stating that hanging a Negro and playing with him like a mouse, and de-masculating him is a kind of a normal show they should be used to seeing it every day.

In terms of interactive meaning, the image is an offer, again the reader has nothing in hand to interfere and rescue the Negro. The fact that the man standing and looking is drawn at a personal distance to the interactive reader and at a large distance with the hanged Negro signifies that this man resembles every reader; they can view the whole situation; however, they cannot interfere; however, being at a large distance from the hanged Negro signifies that this man has no intention to interfere, in addition to being satisfied with what is going on.

The horizontal angle is frontal, permitting the reader to replace the man standing in that scene and replace him, in addition to have the vertical angle in an eyelevel, indicating the reality of that scene.

It's the reader's choice now to choose whether they want this standing man to symbolize them by being there satisfied and have no desire to interfere, or to choose to detach themselves from that man by being willing to interfere but are unable to because of not being there at that time.

In terms of compositional meaning, the information value is left to right, showing the man on the left and the hanged Negro on the right. The salience of the image is shown in the satisfaction of the standing man, who is foregrounded, unlike the mob with the Negro who is drawn in the background of that image.



Fig. 4. A Sample from *Incognegro* (2008)

TABLE IV: ANALYSIS OF IMAGE 4

1. They have other uniforms in mind.

They	Have – in mind	Other uniforms
Behavior	Behavioral Process	Range

In image (4), the dead Negro is shown, covered in blood from his eyes; apparently the knife has reached his eyes and blinded it, in addition to a clown's uniform covering his body.

In terms of narrative representation, the dead Negro is a means of accompaniment; he is already dead. The clown's uniform covering his dead body is a symbol of sarcasm and contempt for a Negro soldier, who is supposed to be wearing his outfit; however, he is demeaned and scorned by the mob, who, in their opinion, is a clown.

In terms of interactive meaning, the image is an offer; there is nothing the reader could do to him; he is already dead. The distance is social; it's preferable to have it like this, in the author's opinion, to reduce the negative effect of the

de-masculation on the reader. The horizontal angle oblique, again in attempt from the author to reduce the negative impact on the reader, and the vertical angle is the eyelevel, again, indicating the reality of that scene.

In terms of compositional meaning, the information value is left to right, in which the right, which is the new, shows the clown's uniform, the blinded eyes, and the dead body. The image is quite salient; indicating the brutality of what has happened to the reader, and at the same time, indicating the normality of that every day scene to the white mob.

VI. APPLICATION OF CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) deals with power abuse, dominance, race, inequality, discrimination, and exercise of power. As van Dijk [31] states, action and situations undergo the ideological square which emphasizes positive things about US, and deemphasizing the positive things about THEM, in addition to deemphasizing the negative things about US and emphasizing the negative things about THEM.

In *Incognegro* (2008), power abuse, discrimination, and inequality are clearly shown from the very beginning of the graphic novel, starting from the act of hanging an innocent Negro, de-masculating him, blinding his eyes, covering him in a clown's outfit, and finally, playing by his dead body as a cat playing with dead mice.

The reader could realize that this discrimination is based on the color difference; the white people regard the black ones as their enemies, so it is from beneficial point of view that they are doing the right thing to get rid of those Negroes. They are trying to defy their deed by stating that this is for the white people's benefit. Meanwhile, what the Negro has done as crime, for instance, to set on ground the reason why he has been arrested and killed in that way is not mentioned; apparently, it is for the color reason, not for any committed crime.

By killing that armless Negro in that way, they show the people and prove to themselves that they are the dominant party and that all other parties are the dominated ones. The fact that it is stated at the very beginning that it is not something new to them to kill a Negro every day is a clear evidence for their power abuse over the weak parties, who are the Negroes.

VII. CONCLUSION

This paper has tackled Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), Kress and van Leeuwen's Systemic Functional-Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA), and van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on *Incognegro* (2008), showing how those theories and frameworks are used in the analysis of images and their captions, in order to study the ideology of the author in a systemic and a theoretical way.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author, Marilyn M. Albert, has chosen this graphic novel and has applied two theories and one framework on it,

in an attempt to study the ideology of the author in a systemic way, based on what has once happened in the US.

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