



Original article

A Multimodal Discours Analysis of Street Art Politics of Banksy's Artworks

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses complex forms of multimodal communication, where graffiti artists display their drawings to attract an audience's attention and achieve their desired goals. Thus, this study examines how semiotic resources reveal artists' intentions in their drawings and how viewers understand the messages underlying their drawings. The research focuses on linguistic and semiotic levels to reveal the underlying ideologies by adopting Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2006) model to analyse six randomly selected images from Banksy's works by applying three patterns: representation, interaction, and composition. The use of the phrase-image linking technique aims to disseminate messages widely. It is noted that most graffiti discourses carry messages related to various topics which may be political or social. The study also demonstrates that visual media are widely used in linguistic context, as linguistic and visual styles form an interconnected relationship in constructing meaning derived from context.

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Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Social Semiotic, Semiotic Analysis, Social and Political Commentary

تحليل خطاب متعدد الوسائط للسياسات التعبيرية في فن الشارع لأعمال بانكسي الفنية

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المُستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة أشكالا معقدة من التواصل متعدد الوسائط، حيث يعرض فنانو الغرافيتي رسوماتهم لجذب انتباه الجمهور وتحقيق أهدافهم المرجوة . ولذا، تبحث هذه الدراسة الى فحص كيفية توظيف الموارد السيميائية للكشف عن نوايا الفنانين في رسوماتهم، وكذلك كيفية ادراك المتلقين للرسائل الكامنة في هذه الاعمال . تركز الدراسة على المستويين اللغوي والسيميائي للكشف عن الأيديولوجيات الضمنية وذلك من خلال اعتماد نموذج كريس وفان ليوين (2006) لتحليل ست صور مختارة عشوائيا من أعمال بانكسي الفنية ، ليتم من خلالها تطبيق الانماط الثلاثة الرئيسية لقواعد التصميم البصري هي: التمثيل، والتفاعل، والتكوين. وتهدف تقنية الربط بين العبارة و الصورة إلى نشر الرسائل على نطاق واسع. كما تظهر النتائج أن معظم خطابات الغرافيتي تحمل رسائل تتعلق بقضايا متنوعة، قد تكون سياسية أو اجتماعية. و تبين الدراسة أن الوسائط المرئية تُستخدم على نطاق واسع في السياق اللغوي، حيث تُشكل الأساليب اللغوية والبصرية علاقة تكاملية و ترابطية في بناء المعنى المستمد من السياق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب متعدد الوسائط ، السيميائية الاجتماعية ، التحليل السيميائية و التعليق السياسي والاجتماعي

Introduction

Discourse and ideology play a significant role in the formation and transmission of intended intellectual perceptions. The study of discourse does not focus solely on language but also aims to disseminate various cultural norms and ideologies. Graffiti, which consists of images and words drawn on buildings walls, is used by artists as a form of rebellion and protest against a particular political or social phenomenon, thereby attracting the attention of authorities. In this regard, graffiti can be considered a form of political discourse, competing with political statements from other discourses (Debras, 2019). According to Paltridge (2012, p. 38-41), "Many texts provide explanations not only through words, but also by incorporating other elements such as images, films, videos, and sound". Furthermore, the political or social functions of graffiti have long been identified. Political groups can use graffiti as a communication tool, as it relates to specific topics, including freedom, political reality, unemployment, humanitarian attitudes, and religious beliefs. In other words, writing or drawing can be used as a means of expressing one's ideology on a given topic, with ideology being the primary axis through which diverse concepts and influences are organised (Asidiky and Vindy, 2020). Semiotics also focuses on the study of signs within society, as it is part of social and general psychology. Whether watching a television program, reading a novel, contemplating a painting, or talking to someone, we actually observe the emergence of sign-based behavior. Images therefore, play a vital role in

disseminating ideologies, as Eco (1976) notes that semiotics is culturally oriented and carries diverse interpretations. This research focuses on a multi-media analysis of the images created by the street artist Banksy whose sketches characterized by their political and social messages, which often appear suddenly on walls in cities around the world, particularly in Britain.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Overview of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Gibbons (2012) sheds light on the study of multimodality as not confined to a particular academic field, but it is also found in different systems, including medical discourse and literacy studies. The term "multimedia" first appeared and was popularised in the Sydney School of Semiotics by M.A.K. Halliday who notes that the analytical techniques used to analyze ancient words and images derived from semiotics. Furthermore, the development of linguistic strategies has enabled many scholars to apply them to ancient paintings and photographs, enabling them to analyse costumes as source of information not only about a person or their age, but also about a period, events, gestures, or actions (van Leeuwen, 2015).

According to Jewitt (2009, p. 14), the term multimodality means “methods that understand communication and representation as more than just language and that attend to the full range forms of communication people use, i.e. images, gesture, gaze, posture, etc., and the relationships between them.” The multimodality approach was defined by Van Leeuwen as: “the combination of different semiotic modes (such as image, language, and music) in a communicative event and text” (2005, p.28). Machin proposes that multimodality “illuminates the grammar of visual communication that is used by image designers. It is the analysis of the rules and principles that allow viewers to comprehend the meaning potential of the relative placement of elements, framing, salience, proximity, colour saturations, styles of typeface, etc.” (2016, p. 9).

Based on the above, the approach of multimodality is a valid standard for measuring and evaluating different modes of meaning. There are several methods by which multimodal data analysis can be conducted, such as social semiotic analysis, content analysis, conversation analysis, and others. Multimodal dimensions exhibit distinct properties derived from socially embedded dynamics and conventional structural orientations (van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2001).

2.2. Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis

The social semiotic theory of multimodal discourse analysis emerged from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory of language as a social semiotic or social phenomenon (1978, 1985). Halliday explains that language cannot be separated from society, as it is interconnected. From his perspective, language is the potential for meaning, evolving according to the needs of society at a given time (1978). Halliday considers language and social semiotics to be unique concepts that require verification through social processes, including culture, ideology, and individual relationships. In Halliday's (SFL), language is viewed as a social semiotic, and meaning is produced through social processes and should be interpreted within the sociocultural context (1978). Furthermore, O'Halloran posits that "the systemic functional or social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse analysis is concerned with the theory and practice of analyzing meaning arising from the use of multiple semiotic resources from discourses which ranges from written, printed and electronic texts to material lived-in reality" (2008, p. 444). According to Kress (2010, p.35), "the central point for the theory is that the society is the motor for communicational/semiotic change; for the constant remaking of cultural/semiotic resources; and production of the new." In other words, Jewitt (2016) explains that social semiotics theory provides a conceptual framework for multimodal analysis of the complex set of semiotic resources that exist and help create meaning when participants use these resources in communicative events. From another perspective, Adami (2016) argues that social semiotics is concerned with revealing the social values, ideologies, identities, and roles of authority presented in texts, and how individuals defend, prove, and oppose them through their choices in formulating signs. While Lock (1995) sees that semiotics is a broad field that studies the various types and signs and how they are expressed through different media and forms (Saleh, 2025). In other words, the theory of social semiotics multimodal examines how people use different modes of communication such as (language, sound, and image) to create meaning within a particular social and cultural context.

2.2.1. Semiotic Analysis of Graffiti Discourse

Graffiti art consists of works created on buildings walls, typically with spray paint. To understand the roots of graffiti art in popular and public spaces, graffiti and street art emerged in the early 1960s in Europe. France and Italy are considered major strongholds of graffiti art, with the latter being associated with hip-hop music in New York. According to Iveson (2010), both graffiti and street art, although local practices of public discourse, reached their peak in the early 1980s and later spread from

urban centers to other global locations. Despite efforts by urban authorities to control their presence in public spaces, especially buildings and moving trains, these art forms have become global despite attempts to eradicate them from the streets. Both graffiti and street art highlight the aesthetics and rights of individuals in urban centers. These art forms challenge established aesthetic norms and often conflict with prevailing cultural tastes driven by elites and the interests of powerful social actors involved in spatial design. The tension between these two perspectives highlights how aesthetic ideologies and individual rights are intertwined within the political and economic structure of cities (Gonçalves & Milani, 2022, p.427).

In addition, Young (2014, p.94) states that graffiti and street art choose a radically different use of the city, which invites us to look at the other side of the urban landscape, where public spaces that reveal different ways of living in this urban landscape.

Crossick and Kaszynska (2016) consider street art as a contemporary art form that has evolved within the urban landscape, reflecting the city's ever-changing social, political, and economic conditions. It encompasses not only graffiti but also murals, sculptures, and other diverse artistic expressions integrated into the urban environment. This art form serves as a cultural marker-capturing social change and expressing community values- or an outlet for repressed emotions and sentiments.

2.2.2. Social and Political Commentary

Social and political commentary is the rhetorical use of graffiti to express social, cultural, political, and economic issues within a society. This is often done with the aim of bringing about or promoting change by raising awareness of a particular problem and appealing to a sense of justice. Proponents of street art have begun to use multimedia to enable urban artists to make more explicit political and social statements, blurring the line between street art and political protest. Studies confirm that those who talk about politics are more likely to engage in political activity in other ways (Dalton 2009), for example, through voting, electioneering, and other forms of civic participation. Moreover, graffiti operates as a semiotic resource through which political meanings are constructed, positioning it in dialogue with non-traditional communicative forms. However, little attention has been paid to graffiti as a form of sociopolitical discourse or its consequences, if any (Ferrell 1993). Furthermore, Oliver and Steinberg (1990, p. 140) explain “graffiti in the context of the Gaza protests as “a kind of billboard for the Palestinians.” Although now illegal, the absence of alternative media and the formation of graffiti schools allowed graffiti to institutionalize within Gaza society”. For example, Gröndahl points out that both Hamas and Fatah employed professionally **trained** calligraphers, and that Hamas restricted its

calligraphers from painting on walls until they **obtained** certificates from several courses. Ultimately, the emergence of graffiti became linked to environments where it was part of the political community.

3. Methodology

The current study adopts Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual social semiotics due to its status as a well-established and widely applied framework for analyzing visual communication. They emphasize that different semiotic media (including images, animation, and other graphics) interact rapidly in constructing the implicit meanings conveyed by texts. Kress and Van Leeuwen state that the analysis must begin with Halliday's systematic functional linguistics (SFL) to determine the basic system. This study applies Halliday's three meta-functions, which are:

1. **Representational patterns** primarily refer to people and places, and this pattern also refers to the representation of interactions and conceptual relationships between them.
2. **Interactive patterns** primarily refer to the resources that build relationships between the viewer, the creator of the visual text, and those represented by the texts.
3. **Compositional patterns**, refer to the function by which representational and interactional patterns integrate to form each meaning.

Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) explain that representational style constitutes a visual composition of the image and is achieved by participants (such as people and objects) with the intention of integrating the participants with each other. The visual structure of representation can then be either narrative or conceptual. Narrative representation presents actions and events, while conceptual representation expresses the participants' deep perspective on the essence of things, i.e., they are viewed through structure, meaning, and layer. Interactive representation is achieved through three types: (1) Contact, which is classified into two types: demand (looking at the viewer) and offer (absence of sight), in which the classification is intentional on communication or the difficulty of maintaining visual contact with others. (2) Social distance, which can be achieved by changing the size of the frame and is established through three elements: close-up, long, and medium shots (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006; Hu and Luo, 2016). (3) Attitude, which is classified into two types of visuals: objective and subjective. Finally, the third pattern, the compositional refers to the connection between the representational and interactive meaning of an image through three elements: salience, information value, and framing. Below is a diagram of Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual social semiotics, its divisions, and its subdivisions.

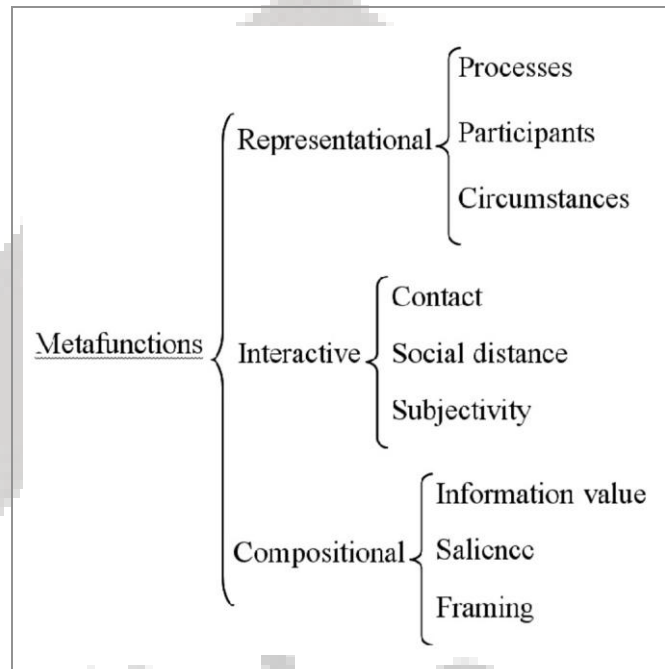
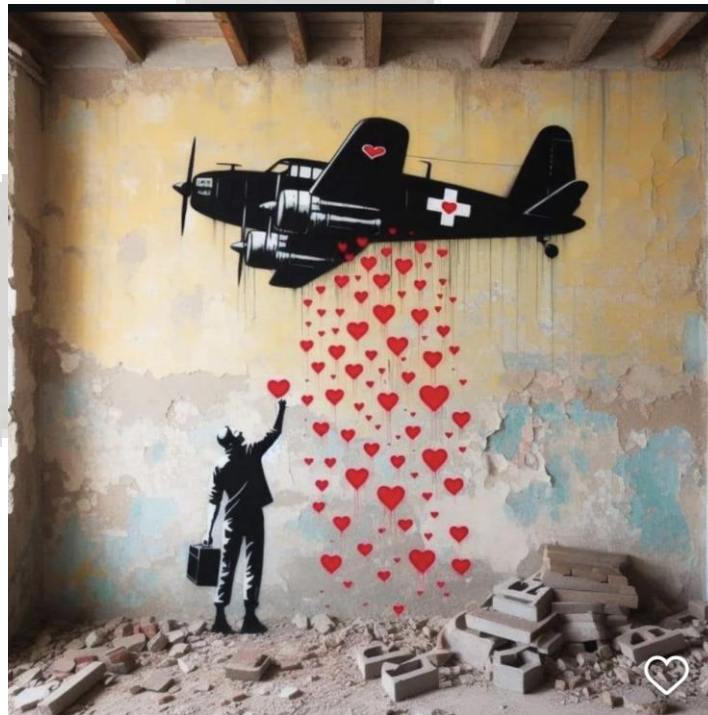


Figure 1.(Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) metafunctional framework)

4. Data Analysis

This section presents and discusses a selection of six images by the enigmatic graffiti artist Banksy from his Instagram account, which depict, criticize, and satirize politics, war, and capitalism. Multimodal means that there is a text and figure to analyze manifestations of each image according to Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) model of visual social semiotics. The analysis focuses on a different interpretation of the semiotic resources selected in Banksy's artworks. Each image carries a powerful message related to social justice, anti-violence, and freedom, and can be interpreted through specific forms of meaning, including representational, interactional, and compositional meanings used in his artwork to represent specific issues.



4.1.1 Analysis of Image (1)

Figure (2) published by Banksy ,23/Nov/2024

When viewing a picture, the representational function of visual grammar is to indicate the interconnected relationship that the artist wants to express to attract the attention of passersby to social and political ideas and messages. This piece exemplifies the way the acclaimed artist Banksy communicates socio-political events worldwide, with specific reference to countries enduring armed conflict, including Palestine. The artist embodies his painting in a narrative form. The image presents a central figure: a man in casual clothing, carrying a bag. There is a relief plane flying above him, dropping humanitarian aid in the form of red hearts. The place surrounding the man is destroyed, indicating the destruction of neighborhoods and homes caused by the bombing. This interactive narrative process includes both the agent and the target. Here, we find the participant who creates the vector, "the relief plane," is the agent, and the participant who benefits from it, "the man," is the target. In addition, the image depicts a reactional process, as it represents the direction of the man's gaze heading towards the relief plane.

This interactive narrative process, which represents the smiling man's appearance towards the plane and his vision of it, reflects his feelings of joy and happiness, as he sees this plane came loaded with

hope and its arrival in the affected areas indicates the concerted international and local efforts to provide support, aid, and restore hope for life to them in light of the harsh conditions. This depicts the graffiti artist's process of "symbolic attribute", as he used the universal symbol of love "red heart", affection, and friendliness as humanitarian aid, indicating support, love, and solidarity with them under harsh conditions.

4.1.2. Analysis of Image (2)



Figure (3) published by Banksy ,20/December /2024

On December 20, 2024, Banksy posted an image on Instagram depicting a mysterious artwork of Virgin Mary breastfeeding Christ Child. The image's pictorial meaning is embodied through two main dimensions: narrative and conceptual. The narrative process involves Virgin Mary (the main participant) and the Christ the Child she is breastfeeding (the target). The conceptual approach of this artwork prioritizes the expression of ideas through the interplay of typological and symbolic aspects.

Symbolically this image has been interpreted as symbolizing Palestinian mothers and children suffering during genocide, as Israel continues to ignore the two arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for committing war crimes and crimes against humanity against Palestinians in Gaza. The artist relies on visual metaphor, a key innovative tool to design the image's meaning. The image symbolizes the mural, depicting the Virgin Mary breastfeeding the Christ Child, with what appears to be a drain in her breast with a rusty

red stain in place of the mother's nipple, making her appear as if she has been shot. The communicative function is established here through the systematic aspects of the image's perspective and the role of civil and the international community through their solidarity and support for the Palestinian people and the demand for Palestine's freedom. Consequently, most of Banksy's artworks address the humanitarian challenges and hardships faced by the Palestinian population, expressing solidarity, emphasizing the human perspective, and inviting viewers to observe the conditions on the ground.



4.1.3. Analysis of Image (3)

Figure (4) published by Banksy ,13/August /2024

The mysterious graffiti artist Banksy posted the following (figure three) titled "Animal Liberation in London Zoo" on Instagram on August 13, 2024. Through the depiction of relational elements, the artist seeks to attract attention to the painting and shed light on a range of social and environmental issues, inviting critical inquiry. Over nine consecutive days, Banksy unveiled a collection of artworks depicting different animals around the city. This prolific outpouring of enthusiasm excited Londoners and graffiti fans in particular. It was an amazing search for endangered works. Among these artworks, seen on Tuesday morning, was his drawing of a gorilla outside London Zoo, appearing to be lifting a curtain to allow birds and other animals to escape. In the representational narrative process, the vision of the gorillas lifting the curtain is the "agent" and participant that follows it—that is, the animals and birds are the "goal". Simultaneously, the image employs a conceptual process rich with symbolic meanings. The gorilla symbolizes strength and courage, while the seal and birds are symbols of flexibility, ability, and adaptation.

The artist used visual metaphors in this drawing, which depicts a gorilla lifting the curtain at the entrance to the zoo, revealing birds and a seal emerging from under the curtain as if escaping the zoo, which houses over 10,000 animals. In the darkness, two twinkling eyes appear from under the curtain. This drawing conveys the artist's call for the return of nature to urban spaces and for animals to live freely throughout the city after being lost due to urban expansion, the climate change crisis, and other issues and disasters that have threatened wildlife with extinction. The interaction between the image elements and the viewer visually encodes the artist's desire to highlight the perspective from which he indirectly addresses us. We also notice here that the audience's thoughts are divided into two groups. Some see it as a call for the return of wildlife to the city, while others believe that the mysterious artist often uses gorillas as tools in his works.

He uses animals to replace humans to convey social and political messages, including recent right-wing riots, comparing them to wild zoo animals. In short, the rhetorical strategies behind this painting represent a different image and ideas through which the artist draws the viewer's attention to the compositional dimension of this painting through two aspects: informational value and importance.



4.1.4. Analysis of Image (4)

Figure (5) published by Banksy ,29/May /2025

On May 30, 2025, the famous British artist posted a new artwork on Instagram from a quiet street in Marseille-France. The artwork depicts a dark lighthouse emitting white light, creating a distinctive optical illusion around the shadow of a column in the street, accompanied by a stenciled phrase: "I

want to be what you saw in me." The artist used a pixelated visual technique. The representational function manifested in the painting's narrative, via a process of reaction, has provoked widespread speculation. On the other hand, the conceptual focus of this image revolves around the symbolic processes and semiotic elements in the painting, which may be indicative of a specific thing or phenomenon. The artist chose Marseille because it is a city brimming with art, foreigners, and life. The image depicts a lighthouse that might be formed by a shadow cast by nearby stone blocks in the street. These blocks, in turn, resemble the figure of a person, inspired by the traffic lights on that street. The lights resemble lighthouses and include ventilation holes similar to the image. Written on the image in italics is the phrase "I want to be as you saw it." Here, the artist appears to have used a phrase in his artwork inspired by the song "Silently" by the American band Lonestar, which includes the lyrics: "I want to be what you see in me, I want to love you as you love me." He used italics in writing it for several purposes, the most important of which is to emphasize or contrast a specific part of the text and to distinguish foreign words and phrases.

In short, we note that context is always a pivotal element in understanding Banksy's work. This particular work seems devoid of any clear spatial connotations, which further complicates the interpretation of this image. The couple appearing in the accompanying image of the mural also remains unidentified, which makes the usual human frame missing this time.



4.1.5. Analysis of Image (5)

Figure (6) published by Banksy ,19/August /2020

On August 19, 2020, the mysterious British artist Banksy posted a surprise on his Instagram account, surprising his fans who are accustomed to leaving his famous graffiti on walls. This time, he left some

graffiti on a ship at sea. In terms of representational meaning, the graffiti on this ship encompasses two processes: narrative representation and conceptual representation. The image depicts a ship painted in white and pink, decorated with his own drawing of a girl wearing a life jacket and holding a heart-shaped buoy, inspired by one of his famous drawings, "The Balloon Girl." In this depiction, the ship functions as the central figure, while the rescue of migrants in the Mediterranean constitutes the main thematic focus. On the other hand, the conceptual meaning consists primarily of symbolic processes. The ship is named "Louise Michel," after the 19th-century French anarchist activist. It is noteworthy that the ship's administrators are a group of feminist activists for whom rescuing migrants is a struggle against fascism and racism. The interactive dimension of this image is achieved through three systems: the image's gaze, power relations, and political and social position. The image provides a visual form for indirect discourse without any communication. Thus, it presents the main participant in the image's viewer as an information element, through which the artist highlights the human aspects and the front-page perspective from which he calls on humanitarian organizations to intervene and participate in migrant rescue operations, following the intense migration spree witnessed in the Mediterranean and the attempts of thousands of migrants to cross to Europe. This journey may be fraught with danger and tragic results, which adds to the image's media value and greater focus.

4.1.6. Analysis of Image (6)



Figure (7) published by Banksy ,14/December /2020

On December 14, 2020, the anonymous British artist Banksy posted a mural on Instagram titled "Achoo," one of his most famous works that emerged during the quarantine period. As usual, Banksy captures an ordinary moment and amplifies it in a striking artistic style, making us rethink our societal

behaviors. In terms of narrative and conceptual representation, the painting depicts an elderly woman sneezing violently, sending her dentures, cane, and bag flying into the air against a slanted wall of a house in Bristol, England. The slanted wall adds a dynamic dimension to the painting, suggesting she is nearly flying from the force of the sneeze. The painting represents a reactionary process in which an elderly woman wearing heavy winter clothes appears to lose her balance (the agent), while the force of the sneeze, so intense that the objects she is holding fly into the air, is represented (the target). On the other hand, the conceptual meaning of this painting focuses primarily on symbolic processes. The artistic and symbolic interpretation of this image is the sneezing that the painter used to symbolize mockery of the COVID-19 pandemic at its peak. Sneezing and coughing were a source of terror and anxiety about infection. The painting demonstrated the effect of a single sneeze in shaking the old woman and the objects she carries, a humorous and sarcastic metaphor for the power and impact of the virus on society, especially the vulnerable, the elderly. The interactive dimension of this image is achieved through three systems: the visualization of the image, power relations, and society's dimensions toward this pandemic. The images interpret the critique of the culture of excessive fear toward sneezing and coughing during the pandemic, which has become, for us, a phenomenon that scatters everything around us. The painting also presents a visual form of indirect discourse without any communication. We present the main participant in the images as the element of information, conveyed through a play on position and slope, as the angle of the sloping wall was cleverly used to make the elements of the painting point upwards, giving the impression that the sneeze is so powerful that the mirror flies in the air. This combination of the real environment and the mural helped Banksy convey the meaning of the painting to his audience, and is one of his most prominent features. The artist also enhanced the image's media value by highlighting societal fragility amidst crises and the dark humor in our lives. He also criticizes the media and society for exaggerating responses to health phenomena, frightening people, and diminishing their resolve to confront disease. In conclusion, the painting of the old woman was not the only satirical and humorous painting; rather, it was a clever and direct visual commentary on the era in which we live, where sneezing is a source of danger in this tense atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

The study results reveal that visual media may play a significant role in the meaning –making process and in shaping the discursive strategies evident in Banksy’s works. The representations revealed that the graffiti artist employed meaningful symbolic processes and visual metaphors because his messages were always intended to attract the attention and understanding of viewers around the world. Kress and Van Leeuwen’s 2006 model was applied to the six selected drawings, applying the three modes of meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional. Through these modes, the visual semiotic elements of the image emerged, and the visual compositions were analyzed to shed light on the artist's obscure ideas toward an ideology of meaning.

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Appendix

Fig 1	https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Theoretical-framework-of-Kress-and-van-Leeuwens-visual-grammar_fig2_388838726
Fig 2	https://www.facebook.com/groups/351897251164931/posts/533372009684120/
Fig3	https://www.instagram.com/p/DDpGU2WMwoV/?igsh=cGNqeHNxcDMyM3Rx
Fig 4	https://www.instagram.com/p/C-mm6DzMmZc/?igsh=MWphMjU0NzZieDRodQ==
Fig 5	https://www.instagram.com/p/DKPUg56MqyT/?igsh=ZXd2dHd1NmFyeDJk
Fig 6	https://youtu.be/fWky1cKBwIc?si=PrDpmGgaPrhrwOC
Fig 7	https://www.instagram.com/p/CIn6guyMPeS/?igsh=MTJxNTBINHJoOHdoMQ==