Appraisal Theory: Can It Be Applied to Visual Images in Isolation to the Text?

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Abstract

The role of women in Saudi society is changing, but even the process of reform is subject to multiple interpretations. This makes the role of resemiosis when interpreting visual media particularly important, perhaps more than a direct focus on the semiotic modes adopted.

Appraisal Theory captures this judgement process in terms of emotions experience by the reader/viewer and how the wider context such as the full news article, or even just the headline, forms a part of this process.

This argues that in contested situations resemiosis is a critical part of the process and sometimes the apparent interpretation of a single image (intersemiosis) can be different to the interpretation of the whole. In these cases, it is not just that different semiotic modes carry different meanings but that a focus on one in isolation can be misleading as to the overall intent.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory, Resemiosis, Intersemiosis, Meaning-making, Saudi Women, Media

Introduction

The role of women, and specific restrictions they face, in Saudi Arabia has regularly attracted adverse comment. To many non-Saudis the restrictions on the right to travel, social interaction outside the home and the ban on driving were seen as indicative of a profoundly authoritarian society

(Satiti, 2017). On the other hand, these comments took no or little account of the areas where Saudi women had freedom such as access to education, the right to run their own businesses or increasing access to the labour market. From 2017, a major series of reforms to the male guardianship have opened up public spaces, eased male control over the right to travel and lifted the ban on driving (Elyas & Aljabri, 2020). In turn this has generated contested narratives between those who see these as profound and fundamental reforms (Rizvi & Hussain, 2022) and those who argue the changes are, at best, cosmetic (Aldosari, 2018; Lacroix, 2019; Rizvi & Hussain, 2022) and still largely subject to male approval.

This presents significant problems in interpreting media, especially visual media, covering a field where opinions can be divergent and there may be a lack of trust as to the motives of presentations different to the views of the observer (Alhuthali, 2018). This argues that when studying the interpretation of images of women in contemporary Saudi society, while the conventional focus on semiotic modes, and their interaction (Iedema, 2003; Jewitt, 2005), is useful as part of an analysis the prior attitudes and emotional response of an observer are equally important (Martin & White, 2005).

This study takes a number of images, some photographs in natural settings, one from a magazine cover and a number of cartoon style images, and uses the concept of appraisal as a tool to explore the ways in which a viewer might respond to, and seek to interpret the images.

Literature Review

The representation of women in the Middle East, and Saudi in particular, has often been marked by stereotypes and prior assumptions in western media. The tendency has been to stress either backwardness and repression and on the substantial restrictions facing women in public life but with little note taken of how women have always been able to run their own businesses (Al-Asfour, Tlaiss, Khan, & Rajasekar, 2017) or access higher education. In effect by focussing on the severe restrictions, the net effect has been to overlook or downplay any agency of Saudi women (Satiti, 2017).

The legal changes since 2017 in Saudi Arabia, around guardianship limitations, the right to drive and more freedom to travel have notionally reduced male authority over women and allowed greater practical opportunities. As such, they have attracted attention both in the Western press (Elyas & Aljabri, 2020) and across the Arabic speaking world (Adel, 2019). More widely these changes are promoted by their supporters as a radical reset of social relations in Saudi Arabia and by others as far too limited and possibly cosmetic in nature (Boghani, 2019).

Increasingly, images have become important, to some extent supplanting the traditional use of text in constructing and carrying meaning.

This places an emphasis on creating a visual grammar as an important tool for reading images (Chen & Gao, 2014; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) make a distinction between the represented participants and the interactive participants in an image (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The objects (people but also background location and other information) are seen as the represented participant while both creator and viewer are the interactive participants. A key to distinguishing between image composition (narrative) and the interpretation (the conceptual process) is whether a vector exists given that "vectors are the marks of the narrative process" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 82).

The interactive participant (the reader or viewer) draws together meaning from the image using four main systems: contact; social distance; perspective; and, modality (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Contact depends on how the represented characters interact with the viewer, if they are looking directly at the viewer this can seen as 'demand' in that some form of direct response is expected (ranging from empathy to disgust). If this is lacking then the image is an 'offer' with a degree of passivity (Peng, 2022). In terms of demand, facial expressions are an important part of structuring the desired response. Social distancing relies both on the composition within the image (how close the represented participants are, technical issues such as camera view (close up or long range) and how much of the participants is shown (Padilla & Padilla, 2022). Camera view also builds up the perspective in the sense of looking down at the participants, up at them or at eye level. As with other social interactions these positions are often held to reflect the relative power and importance between the participants.

However, in a contested situation (Kress, 2010), understanding is not just a product of the semiotic modes adopted or how they are combined (Lazarus, 1991). To address this step, the concepts of Appraisal Theory are useful (Martin & White, 2005) in particular if the presented image seeks to change behaviour or attitudes. In their model "attitude is itself divided into three regions of feeling, 'affect', 'judgement' and 'appreciation'. Affect deals with resources for construing emotional reactions" (p. 35) and this can be summarised as:
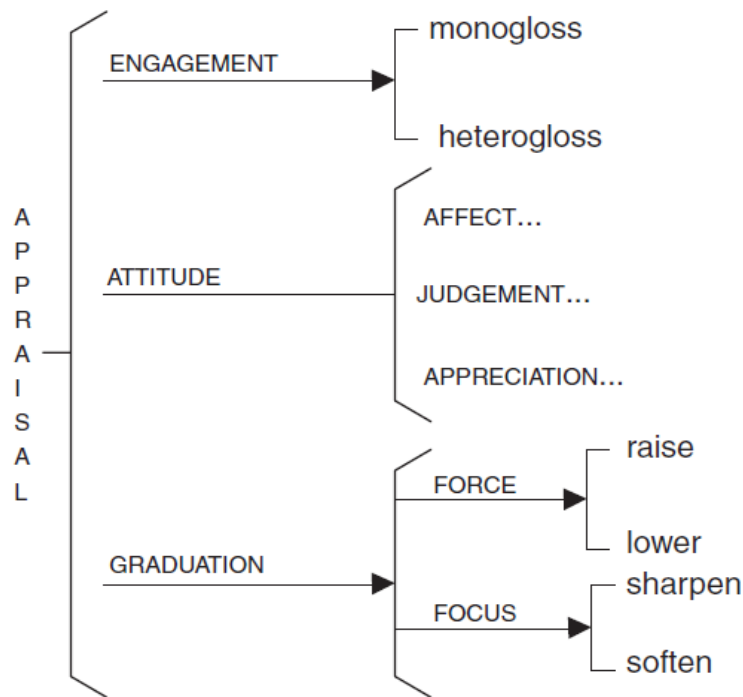
Figure 1. Outline of an Appraisal Framework (Martin and White, 2005, p.38)

This approach was initially derived by Lazarus (1991) to understand how a situation determined the reaction of an individual. He argued that this process used two major types of appraisal methods: 1) *primary appraisal,* where an individual tries to interpret an event; and, 2) *secondary appraisal,* where they try to understand the implications. Since Lazarus was primarily interested in stress, his argument was that stress (as an emotion) arose from this process of interpretation and understanding. This model was subsequently expanded to create a two process model of appraisal-response-re-appraisal (Smith & Kirby, 2001). In turn, differences have been drawn between appraisal using pre-learned schemas or conscious cognition (Gratch & Marsella, 2005). The focus on stress can readily to be transferred to emotions such as agreement or the implications of disagreement.

In this structure, *Attitude* is used to capture those elements in the image that are used by the reader to identify issues such as personal feelings and values. The sub-division of Affect captures the understanding of the emotions embedded in the image, Judgement reflects how the image indicates assessment of the character and behaviour of others and Appreciation relates to judgements of the value of specific things. Most often this aspect is socially determined as both creator and viewer will draw on the context (either within the text or in wider society) in order to judge

how appropriate something is. In this respect, judgement, in particular, is socially determined, both in the terms of the original author and of any subsequent reader (Coffin, 2003).

Engagement is used to reflect the degree of nuance in the images. Thus, the more categorical the presentation is, the more likely it will be described as Monogloss. If the image allows for multiple meanings or is used to contrast different concepts then it can be described as Heterogloss.

Graduation, in turn, is used to capture instances where the image is structured to either emphasise a particular point or to focus on a particular aspect. Thus, a neutral picture, indicating either lack of understanding or focus, will lack both aspects. As with the other categories it is also possible for any statement to have more than one aspect so a statement could stress both the focus and moderate the force if this was appropriate.

Research Design

This study is based on a small number of images that represent some of the changed social relations in Saudi society. As noted in the introduction they are a mix of photographs and cartoon style images. The approach is qualitative (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Symon & Cassell, 2012), using a small number of images that in turn allows for in-depth study as to how meaning making is constructed. The sampling frame was derived from an advanced Google image search for direct semiotic reference to Saudi women.

Findings

The first image is taken from a Getty photograph of the newly created Saudi women's team in training (Nureldine, 2021) and the second from a CNN report also on the creation of soccer/football league for women in Saudi Arabia (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020). Giving women access to both watch and play sport in public has been a major part of the post-2017 liberalisation and used as such to stress the importance of the changes. Of note, for both images the sight vectors are related to their current actions, not to the external observer (Peng, 2022).

Figure 2. First Saudi females football team By Nureldine (2021)

Figure 3. Saudi female football team From CNN, Kottasova & Thornton (2020)

In terms of attitude these two images affect and judgement are the important sources of evaluation. Without the additional information that the context is Saudi the primary attitude towards the first is one of essential normalcy. The players are dressed as one would expect many footballers are in training and their entire focus is on the footballs. This image is from a report published by CNN "Saudi Arabia Secures Victory in Its Debut Women's International Match" (Nureldine, 2021). The article notes that the idea of the women's team playing an international is indicative that for some women, at least, the changes since 2017 have had a demonstrable affect on their lives (Aldosari, 2018; Kottasova & Thornton, 2020). Note that while seen as a broadly positive outcome, some critics have stressed that the reality

is that women need permission to play sports rather than having a fundamental right to do so.

Figure 3 is slightly different in that the number of player's wearing Hijabs marks this clearly as happening in an Islamic country but again the extent of any explicitly Saudi context only comes from the wider article.

In terms of engagement, figure 2 can be described as monogloss. Although there are multiple actors in the image the consistent focus is on the footballs they are individually working with. Figure 3 is Heterogloss in that it is open to multiple interpretations. That the eyelines of the more visible individuals do not meet could suggest they have different focus. Equally the interaction of the coach and her players could be positive and supportive or equally could be highly critical. A similar distinction could be drawn in terms of Gradation with the meaning of Figure 2 having a clear and consistent focus while figure 3 is more complex.

Figure 4. HRH Hayfa bint Abdullah Al Saud, source: (George, 2018)

The controversy around a 2018 cover for Vogue Magazine (George, 2018) showing a Saudi princess preparing to drive a car was reported by CNN (Young, 2018). The Vogue image and accompanying narrative were designed to show that the ban on women driving had been lifted. The CNN report noted that even after the decree was implemented women who had long campaigned for the right to drive had been arrested. An alternative reading is that the image makes it clear that the new rights are well embedded. The subject of the image is a member of the Saudi royal family

and both the structure of the image and the place of its original publication are unambiguous as to what is happening.

In terms of image design, the subject is looking directly at any viewer, described as a demand for attention, and presumably in this case, empathy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). This is perhaps an example of an image where the intended affect and some of the responses vary radically. The intent is to showcase the reforms using an image based around wealth and elegance. However, external judgements were less favourable juxtaposing the relative privilege of the subject of the photograph with the ongoing detention of other women who had campaigned for this change. The image as such is intended to by Monogloss with a single focus of the woman in the car but again this is an instance where the range of judgements give it a Heterogloss outcome. In terms of graduation the image is clearly designed to emphasise a particular point and this is shared between both favourable and unfavourable readings.

The next two images are stills from two videos produced by Human Rights Watch in 2016. The first covers the restrictions on travel resulting from the male guardianship system (Human Rights Watch, 2016a) and the second issues around domestic abuse – again resulting from the powers of the male guardianship system (Human Rights Watch, 2016b).
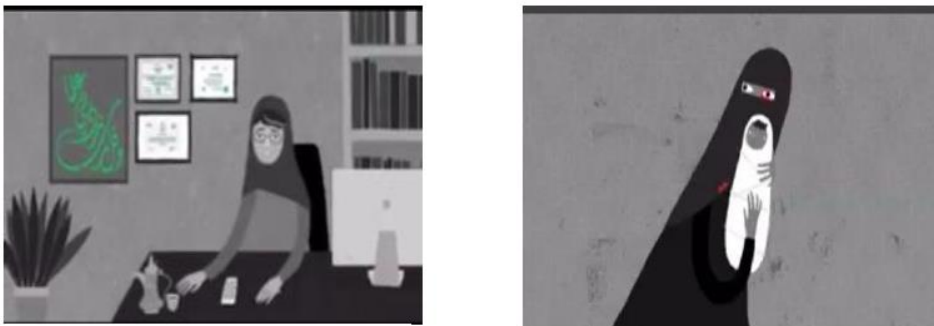

Figure 5. Campaign against Male Guardianship

The first image is taken from a narrative where the female subject has the chance to present at a prestigious conference but cannot gain the needed attention or permission from her son (who holds the guardianship). In the second image, the subject is fleeing domestic abuse clutching her young baby.

In terms of affect, in the first picture the subject is gazing downwards, in a pose often seen as invoking pity and empathy. In the second picture the gaze is direct but also indicative of fear (and perhaps a degree of secrecy). Taken in isolation both images lead to a judgement of sympathy for the subjects and concern at the wider situation. The longer video in the

first case shows the arbitrary nature of the denial to travel and in the second the ongoing consequences of the abuse – including that the subject has no right not to return to her husband. Both images can be seen as Monogloss, perhaps not a surprise as both are produced by an organisation campaigning for very specific changes. This is also reflected in terms of Graduation, in that there is little ambiguity either in the actual chosen stills or the full video. The next two images (Lannes, (2018; Steinberg, 2018) are taken from a New York Times article published in 2018 after the ban on driving was lifted (Aldosari, 2018). The wider article notes the potentially far reaching nature of the changes but also that this will mostly only apply to women with supportive guardians who can access the new freedoms as opposed to those in more conservative social groups.
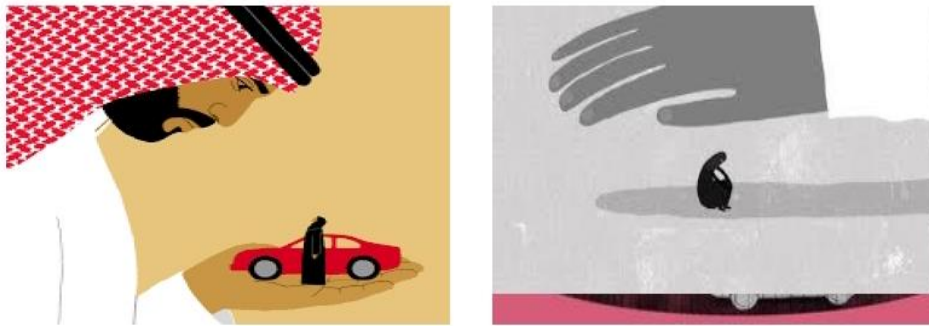

Figure 6. Women access to driving, New York Times 2018

In both images in terms of affect the overwhelming impression is one of residual control. In the second it is not even clear if the female subject is actually being allowed access to a car or if this is being withheld. The difference in this regard reflects the wider article's argument that the changes are significant but very limited.

The first image is slightly heterogloss in that the male gesture could be any of continued control, concern that the new rights are well used or simply passing away previous restrictions (the flat palm away from the body). This carries over into a consideration of the degree of graduation. Both these images have a clear focus (women driving) but, as with the accompanying article, the images show how these new rights have come with significant restrictions.

Conclusion

The examples in this paper include two photographs taken in relatively natural settings (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020; Nureldine, 2021) a posed photograph for Vogue magazine (Young, 2018), two cartoon style images from a human rights pressure group (Human Rights Watch, 2016a,

2016b) and two cartoons (Lannes, (2018; Steinberg, 2018) from a New York Times article (Aldosari, 2018) that stresses the retention of male control despite the lifting of the absolute ban on women driving (and of note, a theme absent from the original Vogue article).

In general the two natural photographs can be seen as more heteroglass and subject to interpretation (especially figure 3). In many ways what stands out about figure 2 is the relative normalcy of the image, without the context of the CNN report it could be any group of women undertaking football training. Figure 3 (Kottasova & Thornton, 2020) is in many ways the most complex. There are multiple vectors of direct gaze and towards the floor and the mix of headgear indicates an Islamic country but it is still not obviously Saudi Arabia. Equally in both figures the focus of the subjects is internal, there is no direct interaction with an external observer.

Figure 4 stands out due to the difference between the message intended in the photograph and the more complex reporting in the wider article. The intent is to stress freedom and the lifing of restrictions with the subject gazing directly at the camera. The context provided by the wider article becomes critical to any understanding of the range of meanings. To a large extent, this is an instance where observers will see what fits their prior assumptions. In that sense the actual semiotic make up of the image is secondary.

The two Human Rights Watch images clearly show a degre of grief, loss and lack of control. The two from the New York Times of male control which might be benevelant or indicate that restrictions can still be imposed. In this sense the wider context is important but is perhaps less critical to a reading of an image than in the three photographs.

So in terms of resemiosis, we may apply our prior beliefs to the photograph alone but in most cases the intent of the creator, of the reporter and to some extent the observer can only be derived from the setting of the image. This is perhaps more important the more complex an image is. Even with the New York Times discussion we lack some key information. Is the coach angry with her team – a possible interpretation given the relative eye vectors? Is she simply trying to explain something and downward gaze becomes indicative perhaps of concentration?

Equally the case could be made that this too is perfectly normal. Different football coaches use different motivational techniques and the key message is that some women, at least, in Saudi Arabia can now take part in public, professional, sport.

Thus it is essential to study an image in terms of its internal semiotic modes. How it is built up, how it demands attention from the observer and in some situations this might be enough to complete the process of moving

from the image to an interpretation. In many cases we need to also access secondary contextual information, even if all this is is the article headline.

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