

Multimodal Analysis of British Theatre Websites: Polyphony of Modes

Tereza Cigánková

University of Ostrava

Abstract

This paper draws on a long-term research project analysing the websites of British theatre institutions, focusing on their multimodal character and the ways in which they constitute a new genre. The corpus analysed for the study consists of websites from three institutions: a traditional great house – the Royal Opera House, an acclaimed dance group – the Akram Khan Dance Company, and a representative of the field of physical theatre – the DV8 company (only the results from the first two companies are reported in this article). As each of the dance companies falls into a different sphere of dance art, their websites naturally provide diverse forms of layout, graphic arrangements and photograph placements. Exploring the mutual harmony and cooperation of the individual modes on the sites, this paper discusses primarily the modes of text and image (including layout, which determines the interplay between these modes) and their function within the meaning-making process and the overall image of the sites. The analysis is grounded in a number of methodological contexts: Bateman's framework (2008) for the layout analysis, Martin and White's system of evaluation in language (2005) for the textual elements, and Monika Bednarek's typology of evaluative expressions (2009) for the description of inter-modal relations.

Keywords: multimodality, theatre websites, dance, polyphony of appraisal, layout, evaluation

This article is an outcome of the Student Grant Competition grant, project no. SGS10/FF/2017 *Komunikace napříč kulturami: lokální a translokální rysy žánrů online i offline - Communicating Across Cultures: Local and Translocal Features of Genres in Online and Offline Environment.*

1 Introduction

The world of theatre is very diverse, and so are the ways in which this kind of art is (and

has been) presented to the public. Over the course of time, the promotion of art has taken many forms, from oral presentations and displays to large posters and billboards. These days, the medium that dominates (and naturally not only in art promotion) is the internet, with its digitalised formats, multi-layered sites and abundance of stimuli for viewers. The universe of the world wide web provides space for new genres, new combinations and variations that could hardly be imagined before – and when narrowing our attention to just one piece of this mosaic (theatre promotion) we can still be dazzled by the possibilities the internet provides. Multimodality is a natural result of the endeavour to appeal to multiple senses at the same time and thus to attract the attention of potential customers, clients or visitors. For this reason, the multimodal character of websites, in this case theatre and dance company websites, provides ideal material for analysis, as these sites make use of various modes and new, innovative features which appear and take root very rapidly. The websites of theatre institutions can take many forms depending on the purpose they serve and on the services or products they advertise. Therefore, no two institutions have identical advertising strategies – they tailor the design and organisation of their promotional discourse to the target audience and to the artistic style they prefer. Naturally, another factor here is the website designer, who decides on the final appearance of the site. However, it is certain that no website design is created randomly, without pre-mediation or without at least an idea of how to represent the institution in the best possible light.

The aim of the present study is to demonstrate how the modes on these websites are interwoven and how their relations can be classified within Bednarek's polyphony model. The mode of layout is first analysed to specify the placement of the individual visual and textual elements on the page – for this purpose, Bateman's concept of base units and his area model are employed. Attention is then focused on visual elements which have their own inner structure (drawing this time on the methodology developed by Kress and Van Leeuwen) and on the links between these elements and what can be described as evaluative language in the text (Martin and White's model).

2 Corpus

The analysed corpus consists of websites of theatres and companies based in the United Kingdom. Other countries were not included – firstly to limit the amount of data, and secondly to prevent the possible clash between texts produced by native speakers in the Anglophone environment and those translated into English from other languages in order to address a wider viewership. The websites were selected to constitute a diverse sample of dance promotion on the internet. For the purpose of the present analysis their entire scope had to be reduced to only two pages – the *homepage* and the *What's On* page (which can have different names on different websites – such as *Current projects*; its content is, however, very similar).

Homepages are the most fruitful sources of material for analysis, as they function as “shop windows” for the whole website and include most of its crucial visual and textual artefacts. They also combine various genres – including public fora, video presentations, and links to Facebook or Twitter. Such a condensed amount of data is adequate for

a primarily qualitative analysis, and it allows us to concentrate on subtle details and mutual links between individual modes. What's On pages often include visual material concerning the current activities of the theatre/company, descriptive texts and video documentation.

The first webpages were drawn from the *Royal Opera House* website. This well-established and traditional institution enjoys a high status in British cultural life and attracts audiences from all around the world. Its website is colourful; it reflects the ROH's varied repertoire, showcases its mass productions and highlights its long tradition.

As far as *Akram Khan Dance Company's* website is concerned, it shows many contrasts to the ROH presentation. The colours, layout and image placement are all moderate, almost minimalistic, resembling objects of design. This also corresponds with the company's artistic character, as its performances are mostly from the sphere of contemporary dance and physical theatre.

This study focuses solely on the homepages of ROH and AKDC, specifically on selected units of visual and textual components which are analysed and presented as examples.

To illustrate the third sphere of dance theatre, I will briefly present the website belonging to a very experimental ensemble – the *DV8 company* (though this website does not form part of the present analysis). It should be acknowledged that this company has now built up a strong position on the world dance scene and is no longer perceived as genuinely shocking and ground-breaking. The company's website is based largely on images, reducing texts down to nothing more than the titles of the shows. Depending on the season and ongoing performances, the homepage includes parts of reviews, short picture captions, or reactions from some viewers.

3 Multimodality of a webpage

3.1 Reading images

Interest in multimodal discourse, and mainly in visual features accompanying (or functioning entirely without) texts, began some decades ago, with Gunter Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen among the first researchers to develop a system of categories and analytical rules to be applied specifically to multimodal texts. The modes were regarded as socially and culturally shaped (Kress 54, in Hiippala 28); this characterises the social semiotic approach to multimodality. Kress and Van Leeuwen's methodology can still be used for multimodal analysis today, when the printed medium has been largely replaced by digital space, because the visual organisation of a webpage is equal (if not superior) in importance to the message conveyed by the written text. Various properties of visual features have been taken into account, and three basic functions have been identified – these are based on M.A.K. Halliday's systemic concept of *metafunctions* (textual, interpersonal and ideational). As the authors state in *Reading Images: Grammar of Visual Design*:

In order to function as a full system of communication, the visual, like all semiotic modes, has to serve several representational and communicational requirements. We have adopted the theoretical notion of 'metafunction' from the work of Michael Halliday for this purpose. The three metafunctions that he posits are the ideational, the

interpersonal, and the textual. In the form in which we gloss them here they apply to all semiotic modes and are not specific to speech or writing. (Kress and Van Leeuwen 41–42)

Kress and Van Leeuwen introduced their own terms for the three functions, which cover two or more subcategories enabling a detailed description of visual components:

- *representational function*: narrative and conceptual images
- *interactive function*: contact, social distance, attitude
- *compositional function*: information value, salience and framing

The compositional meaning of images is realised through three interrelated systems: information value (given or new, ideal or real, important or less so), salience (achieved through size, colour, tone, focus, perspective, overlap, repetition, etc.), and framing (Kress and Van Leeuwen 165–183).

Kress and Van Leeuwen also paid attention to colours and elaborated on them separately, stating that “...colour can be used to denote ideational, interpersonal and textual meaning: it is metafunctional; but the resources of colour are not (yet) fully specified in semiotic theory to the extent that some other modes are” (351). Colour is undoubtedly a significant part of the websites’ image, but in this study it will be viewed as one of the qualities of an image.

All the above-mentioned functions of visual elements are relevant in the present study, as none of the websites functions without the visual side. A feature shared by all three selected homepages is that they reserve a prominent place in the top part of the page, immediately below the upper bar, for salient and eye-catching images: here we can find photographs (or stylised pictures) usually related to upcoming premieres or the most successful productions, which have an eye-catching effect on viewers. To be precise, The ROH homepage is headed by a triplet of photographs promoting premieres of both the ballet and opera ensembles. These triplets are periodically changed, depending on the repertoire. The AKDC’s featured photographs are more stable, and they do not show any performance captures, but rather close-ups of the founding choreographer, Akram Khan himself. In addition, over a longer period of time, the website has stayed faithful to a black and white colour scheme, which also extends to its images. It is the DV8 company which differs most from the pattern described here. It uses screen-wide photographs or groups of thumbnails which do not leave much space for captions or longer texts. The images are colourful, expressive and raw (matching closely with the style of the whole company). In terms of stylisation, the ROH images are furthest from reality, while DV8 seems to approach naturalism.

3.2 Layout

Layout, a key element of the multimodal structure, helps to identify the links or relations between the individual modes. In the present study, attention will be paid to the mutual placement of visual and textual features and the interactions which thus emerge. To be able

to observe how layout contributes to the process of communicating a message, I draw on the model developed by John Bateman. This model is a practical tool that can be applied to any type of multimodal document (Bateman 107). Bateman's empirical approach and highly detailed systematisation of the arrangement of multimodal artefacts enables us to describe the layout structure of a webpage and, even more importantly, to identify those units that could form larger complexes and participate in polyphonic interactions. Bateman identifies three layers of a multimodal artefact: base level, layout level and navigation level. On the base level, so-called base units – the smallest units of analysis – can be recognized. On the layout level we can observe how the smallest units are gathered into larger units and hierarchically arranged. It is therefore the layout level that is relevant for the present study. Further, Bateman's *area model* provides a useful method of describing the organisation of a multimodal webpage, both due to its neutrality and due to its variability in terms of application. The findings presented in section 5 thus draw on the results of the area model analysis (Bateman 115).

4 Evaluation in text

4.1 Martin and White – the language of evaluation

Along with diverse visual elements, theatre websites also include texts in various forms. These pieces of writing are structured and distributed in specific ways over the individual homepages, depending on their purpose and function. Very often they accompany images, and they are embedded into a tailor-made layout template. If we put aside their form for a moment and focus purely on their content, such written discourse elements might be labelled as advertising texts or examples of institutional discourse because they obviously carry the specific properties of such texts and discourse, and they could also be analysed from the perspective of promotional strategies. However, my main focus here is not on advertising, but on the presence, distribution and character of evaluative expressions. Naturally, any artistic performance is evaluated – by the audience, by critics, by the artists themselves. And this evaluation will be positive or negative. Positive evaluation is potentially a powerful persuasive tool, and the choice of words that express this evaluation is often vital on websites. People simply seem to react differently to reading that a piece is brilliant rather than to reading that it is merely good. At the same time, evaluation leaves some space for ambiguity and allows for various interpretations.

The model for classifying evaluative expressions was provided by Martin and White, whose appraisal framework contains a system of categories that helps us to recognise evaluative expressions and group them according to their referential points and their purpose. In this way, the intuitive labelling of evaluative expressions that every viewer recognises at first sight becomes sharper and more formalised. The three main typological systems introduced by Martin and White are *appraisal*, *graduation* and *engagement* – describing, respectively, what and how is evaluated, to what degree it is evaluated (its scalar character), and who is involved in the evaluation. These three broad groups are further subcategorised so that they allow more space for detailed distinctions. The system that is most relevant for this study is appraisal, subsuming the categories of *affect*, *appreciation*

and *judgement*. Martin and White give detailed delineations of the borderlines between the categories, and they are very precise in listing the expressions which fall into the given groups. They admit, however, that ambiguity occurs in many cases and that the emotion-bound character of evaluation cannot be overlooked.

Martin and White's approach has been subject to criticism, but it has also received positive feedback from many linguists. It has since been enhanced and extended by many researchers who have applied it to other spheres of language and communication.

4.2 Bednarek and the concept of polyphony

Bednarek worked with Martin and White's system of evaluation and addressed cases where the system does not satisfy the needs of the analysed material and where the existing categories could be extended or new categories could be added; this is especially the case with those phenomena that straddle the boundary between two systems or two sub-systems, or those expressions which convey two ideas at the same time, depending on the point of view. Bednarek introduced her own set of categories which stems from the appraisal system but includes borderline cases and combinations of the above-mentioned categories. She likens her approach to *polyphony*, in which various distinct voices work towards the same harmonious unity. She thus identifies four major categories (Bednarek 110):

- 1) Fused appraisals
- 2) Invoked appraisals
- 3) Border phenomena
- 4) Appraisal blends

The *fused appraisals* and *invoked appraisals* categories are the most relevant for the present study because they correspond best with the character of the images and texts that are found on the webpages. Monika Bednarek explains fused appraisal as a combination of the three typological systems – *appraisal*, *graduation* and *engagement*. The adjective “brilliant”, for instance, merges appraisal and graduation, and it would thus belong in the category of fused appraisals.

Invoked appraisal refers to cases in which e.g. appreciation (one of the subcategories of appraisal) is inscribed in a text but invokes judgement (another subcategory of appraisal) – e.g. in *Tchaikovsky's brilliant piece*, the expression brilliant refers to both Tchaikovsky (judgement) and piece (appreciation) (Bednarek 110).

Bednarek applied her theory mostly to texts, contributing to a better identification and categorisation of evaluative expressions and a fuller explanation of their role in discourse. However, it is not only texts that are relevant here – they represent just one part of the multimodal complex of a webpage, as they represent just one of the modes. The idea of extending the application of Bednarek's model to other modes might be controversial, but it definitely merits research of its own. The modes can be seen as representing the voices of polyphony, because these also differ significantly from each other and combine to create the overall message. In the following sections, examples of polyphonic links will be demonstrated in examples.

5 Analysis

In terms of layout, the ROH homepage can be regarded as the most complex. Describing it briefly from the top to the bottom, it consists of several groups of base units. It is headed by an upper bar, below which there is a complex of several base units, defined by the colour background; it consists of a large photograph, a short accompanying text (one paragraph) and a triplet of thumbnails. In addition, the large photographs switch every 5 seconds to a new image. Nevertheless, the complex unit remains the same in terms of its structure. The pattern ‘picture + short caption’ recurs several times on the page – in the sections entitled *On Stage*, *Open Up*, *News and Features*. Different unit clusters can then be found in the section *Calendar* and in the bottom bar (footer).

On the webpage retrieved on 28th July 2016, one of the heading images shows three women, three leading cast members in the ballet *Anastasia*. The viewer can only see their faces – very pale, depressed, confused and scared, with messy, cropped hair. At the forefront we can see broken glass, or rather a broken mirror. The colours are shades of grey and black, with pale skin tones. Each of the three women is looking in a different direction and only the middle one is staring directly at the viewer.

In the related text, the following evaluative expressions are to be found (using Martin and White’s model): *compelling* (*exploration*) and *turbulent* (*wake of Russian revolution*) – which can be seen as participants in the polyphonic relationship. How, then, are they linked to the visual component (the top-page photograph)? Perceiving the two modes (textual and visual) as voices, it is clear that they are different in nature (different modes), but they both contribute to creating the message concerning the production that is to be premiered. Bednarek’s categories can now help us to be even more precise when describing the polyphonic rapport. The following summary provides the basic classification and depicts the mutual links between the evaluative expressions and the visual features:

Fig. 1 ROH homepage: Upper part - image-text interaction

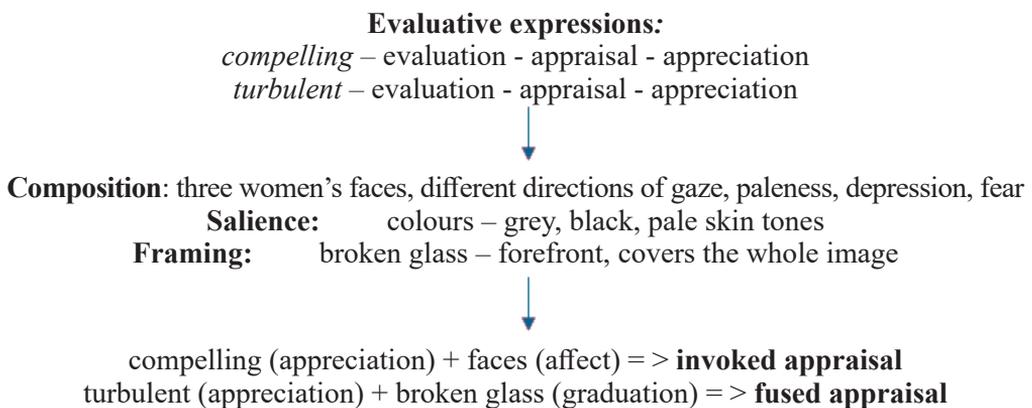


Fig. 2 ROH homepage: Upper part

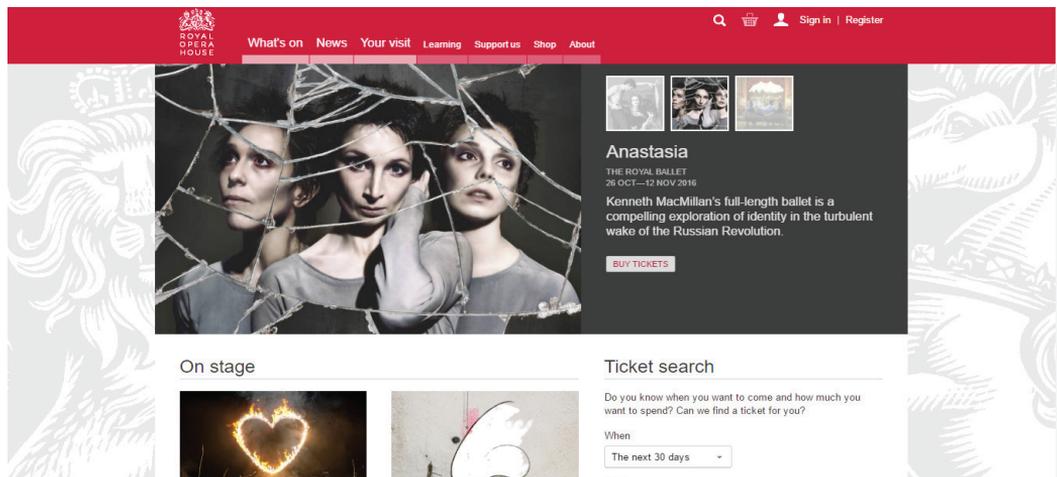
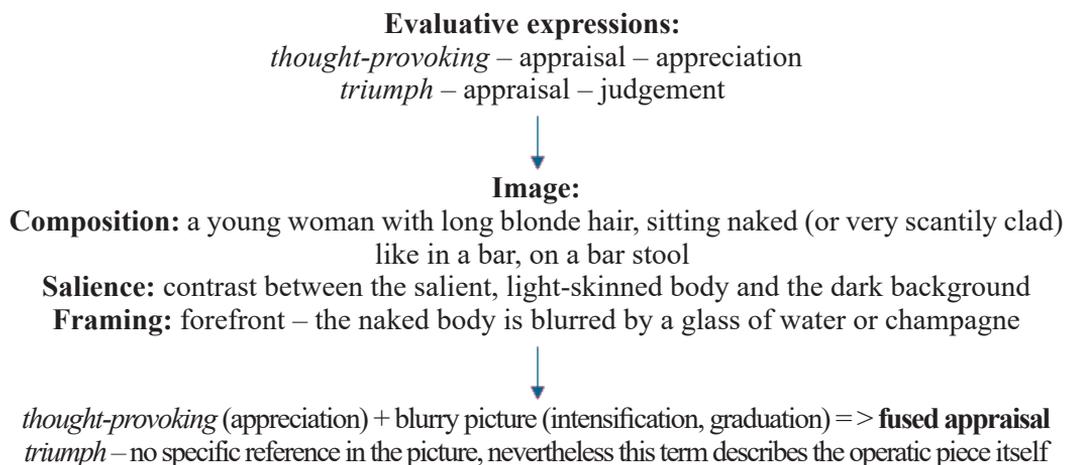


Fig. 1 illustrates the polyphony between the featured photograph and the related text (see also Fig. 2). In the short text caption, two evaluative expressions can be identified. They both represent the system of *appraisal* and the subcategory of *appreciation*. The interplay with the content of the picture (classified into the categories of composition, salience and framing) can be labelled as *invoked appraisal* in the first case and *fused appraisal* in the second.

Another example from the same page is a combination of a thumbnail photograph and a short caption (the ‘On Stage’ section, in the middle of the page, retrieved later). Even though the text is short (serving as one of the inside-the-list descriptions) evaluative expressions can be found in it as well:

Fig. 3 ROH homepage: Manon Text – image-text interaction



(*Manon Lescaut is a triumph*) and being an inscribed appreciation, evaluates the author of the opera at the same time and could thus be identified as an instance of ‘**invoked judgement**’.

As can be seen in Fig. 3, the evaluation in the text is not always linked directly to the content of the picture. While the expression *thought-provoking* finds corresponding features in the image (which intensify the expression’s evaluative meaning), the other expression *triumph* is more closely linked with other parts of the text. As it refers at the same time to the piece and to the author (meaning that it functions as both appreciation and judgement), it falls into the category of *invoked judgement*. Thus the polyphonic relations may occur not only between the modes, but also within the same mode.

The third and last example from the ROH homepage is the following, from the same ‘On Stage’ section:

Fig. 4 ROH homepage: Mad Hatter – image-text interaction

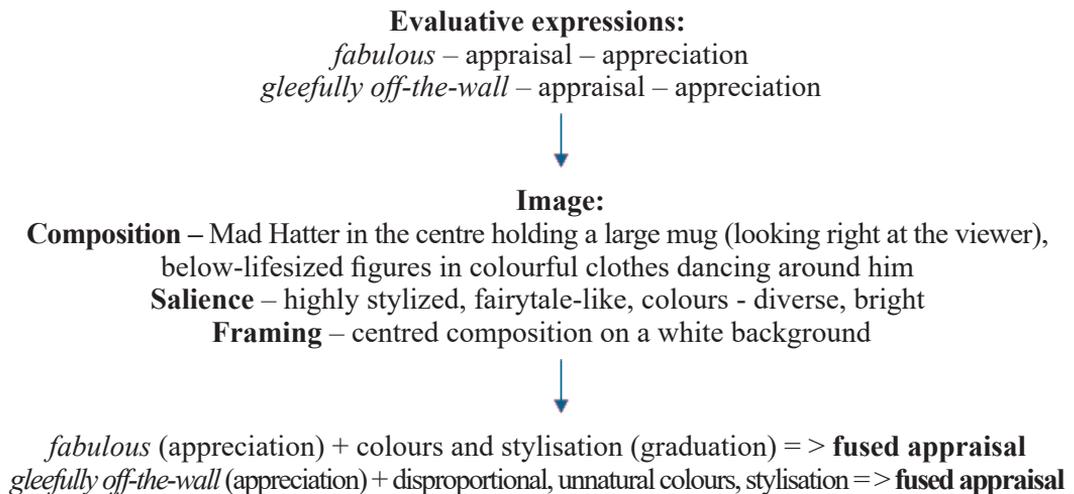
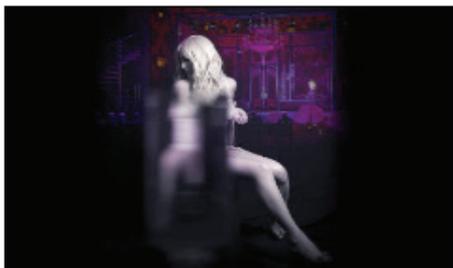


Fig. 5 ROH homepage: On Stage section



Manon Lescaut
 THE ROYAL OPERA



The Mad Hatter's Tea Party

The simple, almost minimalist layout of the Akram Khan Dance Company's homepage reflects the progressive nature of the ensemble, and especially of its head choreographer Akram Khan. Unlike the ROH homepage, its colours are reduced to shades of grey, black and white, the space is less diverse, and there is less text. On the other hand, there are gifs and large photographs that attract the viewer's attention. The longest and most elaborate piece of writing includes some examples of evaluative expressions; however, this text is not (according to Bateman's model – see section 3.2) linked directly with any image. Nevertheless, it is, spatially, closest to a page-wide close-up of Akram Khan himself, so it would be plausible to perceive and understand the two artefacts as related units. The evaluative expressions identified in the text are the following:

Fig. 6 AKDC homepage: About the company – image-text interaction

Evaluative expressions:

- foremost innovative* (dance companies) – appraisal - appreciation
- critically acclaimed* (work) – appraisal - appreciation
- (the company has) *a major international presence* – appraisal - judgement
- (the company) *enjoys* (busy tours) – appraisal - judgement
- (dance) *can transcend* – appraisal - appreciation
- (dance) *can break through many barriers* – appraisal - appreciation



Image:

Composition: close-up of the choreographer's face, looking down on something, profile, expression of the face showing concentration, commitment, thoughtfulness

Salience: black and white colours

Framing: dark contours of the face with a light-grey background

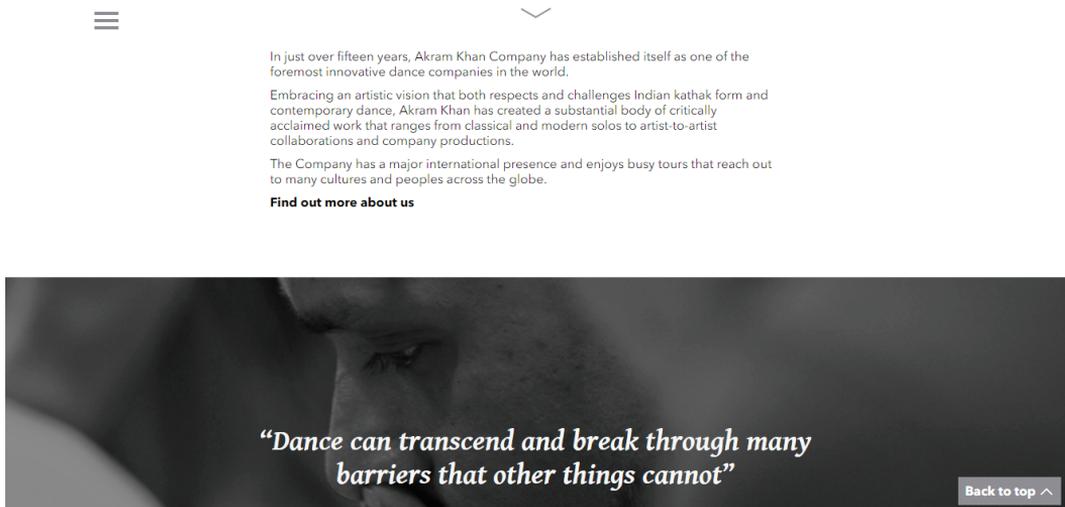


Possible combination:

Appraisal (appreciation + judgement of the company) + the face of the choreographer (concentrated, thoughtful) => **fused appraisal**

Appreciation in text (see the examples above) + judgement in the picture (the choreographer) => **invoked appraisal**

Fig. 7 AKDC homepage: About the company



As Fig. 6 and 7 demonstrate, the featured text on the AKDC website includes many evaluative expressions referring to the company. Most of them represent the subcategory of appreciation, even though it is arguably possible to label them as examples of judgement (depending on whether the company is viewed as a group of living persons or as an abstract unit). These expressions in the text represent one voice, while the content of the photograph (a close-up of the choreographer) stands for another voice. The two voices combined then lead us to the category of *fused appraisal* (appreciation intensified by the content of the image) or invoked appraisal (appreciation conveyed by the evaluative expressions in the text which, if the picture is taken into account, actually judge the person of the choreographer).

6 Conclusion

Bednarek’s approach proved to be beneficial for the multimodal analysis, even though the original typology had to be adjusted in several ways to fit the interplay of modes, their characteristic features and nature. Nevertheless, the categories introduced by Bednarek are useful tools for explaining how textual and visual components, along with the layout which determines their closeness or distance, are linked and how their connections might be labelled.

Simultaneously, a certain amount of ambiguity is typical of the type of webpage that is the focus of this article. Ambiguity in texts, as well as in images, is present on websites that are produced especially for promotional purposes, as this ambiguity enables the website to address a wider range of viewers (not imposing any given set of facts but leaving space for individual interpretations). The evaluative expressions were identified according to Martin

and White's criteria, but it must be borne in mind that evaluation is based on emotions, and it depends to some extent on the perspective of the researcher.

Very often the combinations of features in a text and an image fall into the category of *fused appraisal*, as the picture functions as an intensifier of what is expressed in the text. The analysis shows that the modes hardly ever act against each other; when they are related by means of layout and clearly form one complex – even if they use distinct expressive tools, typical of the mode – they support each other in the meaning-making process. They are not represented equally among the results – the categories of fused appraisal and invoked appraisal proved to be the most frequent in this multimodal analysis, but as they share some characteristics with the other two categories of border phenomena and appraisal blends, it is plausible that also the other two categories may also be present.

Finally, the role of layout cannot be neglected, as it influences (to a certain degree) the communication among all the modes. The three sets of webpages showed three distinct layouts, generating various combinations of the visual and textual modes.

List of figures

- Fig. 1 ROH homepage: Upper part – image-text interaction
- Fig. 2 ROH homepage: Upper part
- Fig. 3 ROH homepage: Manon text – image-text interaction
- Fig. 4 ROH homepage: Mad Hatter – image-text interaction
- Fig. 5 ROH homepage: 'On Stage' section
- Fig. 6 AKDC homepage: About the company – image-text interaction
- Fig. 7 AKDC homepage: About the company

Bibliography

- Bateman, John A. *Multimodality and Genre*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Bednarek, Monika. 'Polyphony in Appraisal: Typological and Topological Perspectives'. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences* 3.2 (2009): 107–136.
- Hiippala, Tuomo. *Modelling the structure of a multimodal artefact*. Helsinki: Unigrafia, 2013.
- Kress, Gunter. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. London: Routledge, 2009.
- Kress, Gunter, and Theo Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: Grammar of Visual Design*. Routledge, 1996.
- . "Colour as a semiotic mode: notes for a grammar of colour." *Visual Communication* 1.3 (October 2002): 343–368.
- Leeuwen, Theo Van. *The Language of Colour: An introduction*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Martin, John, and Paul White. *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Thibault, Anthony, and Paul J. Baldry. *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis. A multimedia toolkit and coursebook*. London: Equinox Publishing, 2006.

Tomášková, Renáta. "Towards a Multimodal Harmony: On the Layout of University Websites." *ELT: New Horizons in Theory and Application*. Eds. Christoph Haase, Natalia Orlova, and Joel Cameron Head. 163–188. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015.

Address:

University of Ostrava

Faculty of Arts

Department of English and American Studies

Reální 5

701 03 Ostrava

Czech Republic

tereza.cigankova@osu.cz