

Live Fast, Die Young: Bad Girls Do It Well – A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of M.I.A’s Music Video “Bad Girls”

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Received: 1 June 2020 ▪ Accepted: 26 October 2020 ▪ Published Online: 6 December 2020

Abstract

Feminism has become part of the pop music discourse in recent years. Through M.I.A’s “Bad Girls” video, not only the image of empowered, independent, rebel women are portrayed, but also the celebration of culture and the relationship between women and men in an environment of equity is suggested. In order to propose an analysis and interpretation of “Bad Girls” video and song lyrics, a multimodal discourse analysis (Machin, 2010) is followed, as well as Halliday’s systematic functional linguistics framework. The findings from this analysis suggest a discourse of feminism and empowerment, but also inclusion and acceptance regardless of race, religion or gender.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, discourse schema, lyrics, feminism, M.I.A.

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze M.I.A’s music video for her song “Bad Girls”. For the purposes of this analysis, I will use a multimodal discourse analysis approach. The visuals in the video will be analyzed through the visual semiotic framework proposed by Machin (2010). Lyrics will be analyzed through Halliday’s clause relations in language (1978). I will also provide the literature that sustains this analysis, I will set context and background of the performer and I will finish with a conclusion that summarizes the most relevant findings from this analysis.

2. “Missing in Action”: About the artist

Maya Arulpragasam’s stage name is not a coincidence. Throughout her life, she has faced war and the debris of it. Born in London, at only six months she had to relocate back to northern Sri Lanka. When the civil war between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese government intensified in the 1980s, Maya’s father joined the militant Tamil Tigers. Therefore her and her family had to relocate and eventually return to London, where Maya studied visual arts and became involved in music.

Maya wanted to work with visuals and film. She became friends with Elastica’s lead singer Justine Frischman with whom she toured and directed some of Elastica’s music videos. This was crucial for Maya’s career in music, since she became familiar with the world of music and bands, “Learning what she felt and what she had gone through was helpful to me. I learnt not to

have a band because Justine had so many band issues. I thought I couldn't be in a band because bands break up – if you just rely on yourself you'll be alright" (Maya, 2018). The latter ultimately, made her realize that, if she was ever going to perform, she would go solo, and she has proven that she is not intimidated by anyone.

- Civil war and equity are some of the most relevant topics within M.I.A's music and lyrics. The latter might come from her roots and the experiences throughout her childhood back in Sri Lanka.
- M.I.A actively advocates for minorities, being herself conscious and aware of political issues, regardless of the consequences this have brought into her life and her public persona.
- M.I.A's feminism is built through her music but also in her defying attitude, not conforming to the typical pop artist image, she has questioned and confronted big enterprises and institutions, to prove once more, bad girls speak up and will not be silenced.

3. M.I.A: The ultimate bad girl

M.I.A's portrayal has been menacing to the media. "I talk talk talk," she raps, accurately, "until I piss 'em off" (Lamont, 2016). She is not your average pop idol. She talks about things no one wants to hear about. She acts in a way women in music, and in general, are not supposed to act. M.I.A seems to advocate for those who confront and question, "I think it's great that the newer generations are becoming more conscious and aware and political and opinionated. All of those things I feel like I'm a part of, and they're a part of me" (M.I.A, as cited in Rae, 2016).

M.I.A's confrontational and liberal behavior has not always been controversy-free. To serve as an example, one can Google M.I.A and multiple sensationalist headings might come pop up, such as her performance during the Super Bowl next to Madonna, in which M.I.A managed to flip a middle finger that was not rehearsed or agreed on previously. Later on, and after being sued, M.I.A claimed this gesture to be a "mudra", which refers to a hand gesture practiced in yoga positions and meditation. M.I.A (2013) stated "It's cultural! In my country, it's godly... Of course the NFL is not believing that, because the NFL does not believe in any other culture outside of the NFL" (as cited in *The Guardian*, 2013).

It is clear that, M.I.A has managed her career in her own terms and will not conform to social conventions. She talks about girls driving cars, such topic might not seem to be relevant or meaningful as one would think, but within the context of places in which women are not allowed to drive, it suggests revolution and empowerment for women.

4. Methodology

The approach I decided to follow in order to analyze the video is based on Fairclough's (2003) social practices. This framework suggests that discourse figures in three main ways within social practice: genres, discourses and styles.

Genres <i>(ways of acting)</i>
Discourses <i>(ways of representing)</i>
Styles <i>(ways of being)</i>

For genres, Fairclough (2003) considers that, writing or speaking represents ways of acting. He suggests that there are different genres, such as: interviewing, etc. In this case, lyrics and singing might serve as one way of acting, since it involves both writing and speaking.

For the second stage, representations refer “of the material world, of other social practices, reflexive self-representations of the practice in question” (Fairclough, 2003: 26). This figure suggests that, the same area can be represented from different perspectives. At this stage, language is used meaning but also as a semiosis of elements of social life. Regarding this analysis, the video might serve as the practice through which another representation of the song is made by the artist and the director.

Thirdly, Fairclough (2003) claims that the last stage is related to “discourse figures alongside bodily behavior in constituting particular ways of being, particular social or personal identities” (p. 26). Such bodily behaviors can be found within social interactions and the latter can be analyzed through genre. These social interactions might be found in different aspects of life, including arts. According to Foucault (1972) genre is used in cultural and media studies, film theory, and others. Therefore, and referring to this analysis, music video can be also analyzed through it.

Fairclough (2003) also proposes three major types of meaning: action, representation and identification. These concepts are defined by Fairclough (2003) as “Representation corresponds to Halliday’s ‘ideational’ function; Action is closest to his ‘interpersonal’ function, though it puts more emphasis on text as a way of (inter)acting in social events, and it can be seen as incorporating Relation (enacting social relations)” (p. 27).

When we analyze specific texts as part of specific events, we are doing two interconnected things: (a) looking at them in terms of the three aspects of meaning, Action, Representation and Identification, and how these are realized in the various features of texts (their vocabulary, their grammar, and so forth); (b) making a connection between the concrete social event and more abstract social practices (Fairclough, 2003: 28).

5. Critical discourse analysis

According to Wang (2010) “Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (p. 254).

Fairclough suggests that:

CDA aims to elucidate the discursual moment of social processes, practices, and change in its dialectical relations with other moments. It develops its theory, method, and agenda (objects of research) through transdisciplinary dialogue aimed at (a) coherent integration of discourse and discourse analysis (including detailed textual analysis) within social theories and methods of research, (b) development of its own theory of discourse and methods of discourse and text analysis in ways which are consistent with a dialectical view of social reality (as cited in Wodak & Chilton, 2005: 68).

However, for the purposes of this analysis, different approaches will be considered. The latter is necessary since an intransdisciplinary approach asks “how a dialogue between two disciplines or frameworks may lead to a development of both through a process of each internally appropriating the logic of the other as a resource for its own development” (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002).

In the following sections, I will introduce and describe the different frameworks I followed for this critical discourse analysis.

6. Hallyday’s systematic functional linguistics

Halliday’s SFL suggests that, as a social phenomenon, language is “functional if it is concerned with the mechanism of text structure, function and meaning” (Haratyan, 2011: 260). Therefore, language should be treated and analysed through these concepts. For the purposes of this analysis, Halliday’s systematic functional linguistics will be followed.

As stated by Haratyan (2011):

Halliday’s systematic functional linguistics and transitivity where linguistic wording and the socio culturally constructed meaning meet in texts attempts to demonstrate that underlying ideology in the texts should be probed beyond the linguistic surface. (Fairclough, 1989, 1995; Fowler, 1977, 1986; Fowler, Hodge, Kress & Trew, 1979 as cited in Haratyan, 2011: 260)

In this multimodal analysis, elements of discourse beyond linguistics, such as video and imagery, will be explored.

According to SFL, language has three metafunctions of ideational, interpersonal, and textual reflected in a huge system network of meaning potentials.

Ideational function	Interpersonal function	Textual function
The speaker or writer embodies in language his experience of the phenomena of the real world; and this includes his experience of the internal world of his own consciousness: his reactions, cognitions, and perceptions, and also his linguistic acts of speaking and understanding. (Halliday, as cited in Wang 1971: 332)	The speaker is using language as the means of his own intrusion into the speech event: the expression of his comments, attitudes and evaluations, and also of the relationship that he sets up between himself and the listener—in particular, the communication role that he adopts of informing, questioning, greeting, persuading, and the like. (Halliday, as cited in Wang 1971: 333)	“Language makes links between itself and the situation; and discourse becomes possible because the speaker or writer can produce a text and the listener or reader can recognize one... The textual function refers to the fact that language has mechanisms to make any stretch of spoken or written discourse into a coherent and unified text and make a living passage different from a random list of sentences.” (Halliday, as cited in Wang 1971: 334)

Based on the characteristics of each function, it is important to take into account that each represents an important element for discourse analysis. However, this analysis will focus on the textual function, since it is concerned with the recognition of the text in the lyrics and the spoken discourse in the song and video and the way in which they go from being a random list of sentences to a unified and coherent discourse. Therefore, in this analysis I will look at the different elements that make it possible to recognize a discourse. The elements I will analyze are: visual elements in the video and the lyrics of the song.

In the following section, I will discuss the approach I decided to follow in order to analyze these different elements of discourse within the video and lyrics.

7. Multimodal discourse analysis approach

For the purposes of this analysis, I considered that a multimodal discourse analysis was one method I could use to scrutinize data from video, as well as a means to study the context and participants’ communications and interactions with others (both verbal and non-verbal) (Chan, 2013). As I previously mentioned, both elements verbal (song-lyrics) and non-verbal (visuals-gestures-poses) were considered for the analysis.

In addition to the latter, I considered that a multimodal discourse analysis was one useful way to analyze the ways that sounds, images and words can have particular meanings and sum up to a broader picture or message (Machin, 2010: 6). I considered that in this particular case, video and lyrics had an important relation: one seems to complete the other. As I had previously watched the video, it was evident that the imagery, costumes, gestures and attitudes portrayed in the video had a rather explicit intention, there was an underlying sense of freedom and celebration, while still demanding for equity and showing a clear stance on feminism. However, it was important to find an approach that would allow me to look at the different elements and analyze their meaning. The multimodal analysis seemed to be the framework to approach.

Chan (2013) defines multimodal discourse analysis as:

a research methodology that involves collecting research data, usually in the form of videos of people undertaking activities, and sometimes includes the collection of research artefacts such as written materials (for example, student workbooks, worksheets, practical assessment check-sheets, written assessments), audio recordings of conversations, interviews which are recorded and transcribed, and questionnaires. (p. 71)

The main objective in the analysis to use these different tools and Halliday's systematic functional linguistics, as a way to "transcribe videos in a way that allows us to best describe and analyze the way that sound, image and word work together, *multimodally*, to show they interrelate to form a single communicative act" (Machin, 2010: 185). In the following section, I will introduce the visual semiotic analysis of the video and I will provide a description of the latter.

8. Visual semiotic analysis of the video

According to Kress and Van Leeuwen "visual semiotics can be described as the attempt to elaborate something such as a visual syntax, in analogy to, and at the same time different from, the verbal syntax...verbal and visual communication cover the same areas of creating meaning... they use the same mechanisms of meaning construction" (as cited in Wodak & Krzyzanowski, 2008: 84). It is important to address how both verbal and visual elements communicate meaning. In this sense, a visual semiotic analysis allows this to happen, as both mechanisms of meaning construction are taken into consideration and they are both analyzed in a way that, once they are put together, they convey meaning and back up the discourse.

In order to achieve visual semiotics, Van Leeuwen (2001) suggests two important questions: what do images represent and how? What ideas and values do people, places and things represented in images stand for? I considered that these two questions alluded to both concepts of denotation and connotation. Therefore, I decided it was important to include both concepts. In order to analyze the visuals from the video, I decided to choose the most outstanding scenes from the video, alongside with a chart in which I provide a literal description of what one can see in the video (denotation), as well as a column with the description featuring the connotation of each visual. Since lyrics were also considered in the multimodal analysis, they were also featured in the chart as an aid for the connotation of each visual. That way, the three elements together intend to analyze the discourse as a whole.

In the following section, I will explore lyrics and the importance of them for this multimodal analysis. I will also explain how lyrics will be approached through discourse schema and a brief description of the latter.

9. Lyrics analysis

It seems relevant to analyze lyrics as well, since lyrics “are one way an artist tells us how to listen to them, how to put meanings into their music. Lyrics are not only about artists telling stories but also communicating discourses of their identity” (Machin, 2010: 77). As stated towards the beginning of this paper, the identity of the artist is relevant not only for creating a persona, but because it seems highly linked to her own beliefs and ideologies. Therefore, it is worth analyzing the lyrics and the meaning the artist is trying to put out there in the world and what the artist might suggest to the listener.

For the analysis of the lyrics, rather than structure, I looked at discourse schema, which is related to culture and values. In order to approach lyrics this way, Machin (2010) suggests to:

“ask what happens in the song at the most basic level... in other words, we look for the activity or discourse schema that underlines the song. This kind of analysis not only applies to narratives but to all genres. It is not an analysis of the form of the text but the analysis of the form of the knowledge that underlines the text. Not all songs have a basic schema of activity, although many do. And while a number of songs may appear to be simply love songs, closer analysis often reveals different underlying schema and therefore differences in values, behaviors and identities. (p. 78)

Since the role of lyrics is relevant to analyze the discourse within a song, I featured a chart with the visual denotation and connotation of the most outstanding scenes in M.I.A’s video, as well as how the lyrics are linked to these visuals and how they all combined communicate meaning.

In the following section, the semiotic analysis of the video and the systematic functional linguistic analysis of the lyrics will be presented.

10. Video and lyrics analysis



Image 1. Fire burning behind M.I.A (Source: M.I.A’s “Bad Girls”)



Image 2. Horse in the middle of the desert (Source: M.I.A’s “Bad Girls”)

DENNOTATION	CONNOTATION	LYRICS
<p>As the video starts, we can see M.I.A facing the camera as some fire is going on in the background. Throughout the video, we can see a man in a horse in the middle of the desert, while in some others scenes, we see young men performing tricks with cars, better known as “Saudi drafting” which refers to “an illegal street racing phenomenon that emerged in the late 1970s that involves trying to “drift” a motor vehicle at speeds of up to 260 km/h (160 mph) across wide highways... Such thrill-seeking behavior is very alluring to young Saudi males.” (Ramisetty-Mikler & Almakadma, 2016: 2)</p>	<p>In the beginning, and also throughout the video, Arabic references are shown (for example: a man on a horse in the middle of the desert). As told by Romain Gravas, director of the video: “The idea was to compile Arabic references –fantasized or not- into a pop video. Pop videos usually show American kids in their element. Here, you got Arab kids in an insane car rodeo element” All of these elements might allude to portray what to most westerns seem to represent Arabic culture. The intention might be to show it in a way people recognize these references but also in a way people can see how war is not the only reference in this culture.</p>	<p>-</p>



Images 3 and 4. Girls riding cars (Source: M.I.A’s “Bad Girls”)

DENNOTATION	CONNOTATION	LYRICS
<p>A woman in a fancy and trendy gear sits on the car as she holds the wheel. She stares daringly to the camera.</p> <p>Two women drive a car as they both wave their arms outside the window.</p>	<p>This might be a reference to what bad girls do, in this particular context: driving. Arabic women are not supposed to drive, however, this woman seems to be in charge and not afraid to do so. As we hear in the lyrics, “suki” means “drive” in Arabic. Also, it is the imperative singular feminine, so, it has an additional subtlety of telling a <i>female</i> to drive (as cited in Genius, 2011). She might be encouraging women to empower themselves and lead a bad girl lifestyle, a free life.</p> <p>According to M.I.A, bad girls not only rebel to impositions, they also enjoy this freedom regarding of the consequences. They blast music as they drive and own their own money to get chains and fancy attire or dress the way they want to.</p> <p>Now the daring attitude also takes part within the lyrics. She warns that not every man or person would be able to take a girl like her, meaning that not everyone is fond of feminism and freedom of women, not everyone could hang with her.</p> <p>She is not going to stop. Neither is feminism. Freedom of women has started and bad girls will not stop regardless of social constraints of gender. An action such as trembling might refer to the fear or rejection empowered women might cause to people who do not agree with this ideologies.</p>	<p>“Suki, suki, I’m coming in the Cherokee, Gasoline There’s steam on the window screen Take it, take it World’s bouncing like a trampoline When I get to where I’m going, gonna have you trembling”</p> <p>“Live fast, die young, bad girls do it well My chain hits my chest when I’m banging on the dashboard My chain hits my chest when I’m banging on the radio”</p> <p>“Hold me closer if you think you can hang...”</p> <p>“When I get to where I’m going gonna have you trembling...”</p>

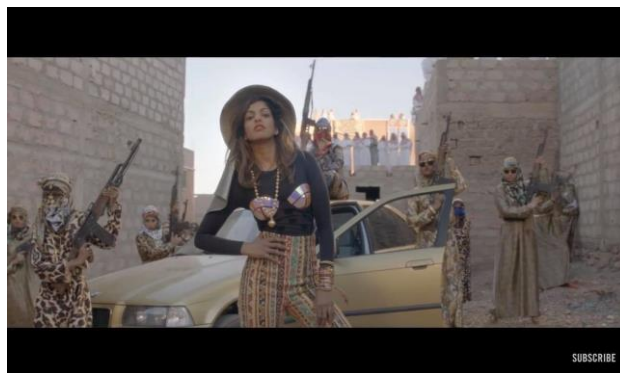


Image 5. M.I.A and women holding guns (Source: M.I.A’s “Bad Girls”)

DENNOTATION	CONNOTATION	LYRICS
We see a group of women in fancy yet traditional gear, holding guns; M.I.A is at the front, defying the audience.	Some people might find feminism and empowered women as threatening. M.I.A is up front about her stance and will blow people's minds.	"Hands up Hands tied Don't go screaming if I blow you with a bang!"



Image 6. Saudi drifting (Source: M.I.A's "Bad Girls")



Image 7. M.I.A surrounded by men (Source: M.I.A's "Bad Girls")

DENNOTATION	CONNOTATION	LYRICS
We see men playing tricks in the car as the audience salutes them. Then, we see M.I.A on top of a car surrounded by other men.	It seems that, for women and men to get along in an environment of equity is difficult; Bumps might refer to a complicated road, but in this video M.I.A celebrates bad girls and also men who ride along with them. Being a bad girl is not an easy road to follow but she is willing to take it and whoever comes along with her has to be aware of the problems or "bumps" along the road. She is changing lanes, she is not going to stay on the side society has told her to.	"Yeah, pull up to the bumper game, yeah with a signal cover me, cause I'm changing lanes..."

	<p>She broke the rules. She broke the standards by which women are taught to behave, she is among other men and she is being herself. This break, more than destruction represents the start of a life for women: the road is not easy, but she is on her way and once she arrives to her destination, people will know what she meant. This might allude to the fact that, women's voices are rising and people, whether accept it or not, are aware of it. Bad girls will not remain in silence.</p>	<p>“Had a handle on it, my life, I broke it when I get to where I'm going, gonna have you saying it”</p>
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Image 8. M.I.A on top of a racing car (Source: M.I.A's "Bad Girls")



Image 10. M.I.A dancing and partying (Source: M.I.A's "Bad Girls")

DENNOTATION	CONNOTATION	LYRICS
<p>M.I.A is on top of a racing car as she fixes her nails. She seems unimpressed and in control. Later on, we see M.I.A with golden chains and unique gear.</p>	<p>M.I.A shows she is on top, not only literally but metaphorically speaking: she is the boss. She has the control of her life. She is not scared of doing something so daring and dangerous in the context of a sexist society. Again, some references to cars and driving: naught to bitch, might refer going from 0 to high speed. Rather than speed, she uses the term "bitch" a word often used to</p>	<p>“Going naught to bitch, I'll see four million Accelerating fast I can do this in a second</p>

	<p>describe women who are free and not afraid to speak up. As a woman who is not afraid of speaking up or breaking the rules (metaphorically and in real life, such as the Super Bowl incident previously mentioned) she is not afraid of going fast.</p> <p>By looking in the rear view she might refer looking at things that you have left in the past or behind, in this case: boys who kill women just because culture allows it.</p> <p>Automatic in this line might refer to an easier or less complex task, such as M.I.A embracing the role of a pop star, but she is not willing to, she will not conform to the archetype of a female pop singer. No one can stop her, she will speak about and demand the things that oppress women.</p>	<p>Lookin' in the rear view, swaggin' goin' swell Leavin' boys behind 'cause it's legal just to kill</p> <p>Shift gear, automatic, damned if I do Who's gonna stop me when I'm coming through?"</p>
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11. Conclusion

In this paper, I presented a multimodal analysis of M.I.A's "Bad Girls" music video. The multimodal analysis featured Fairclough's (2003) social practices analysis framework, Halliday's systematic functional linguistics and Machin's (2010) visual semiotic analysis of the video. I explored some of the most important visual and linguistic elements used in M.I.A's political and feminist discourse in her lyrics and music video.

According to the findings from this multimodal analysis, M.I.A's stance regarding gender and gender roles becomes evident. The attitude, attire and lyrics throughout the video are consistent with a feminist and empowering discourse, however, it is also contrasted with the appearance of males alongside with women. The latter suggests a celebration in which women and men unite in an environment of peace and equity. Saudi drifting is showed as well, probably as a metaphor of one risky behavior that, despite of its dangers, in the context of the video, seem to unite people. This might refer to how the idea of both genders uniting might be still perceived as daring and threatening to some, but how M.I.A is willing to defy the limits and invite whoever is willing to ride with her such rocky road.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the University of Guanajuato for the support and encouragement for research, as well as the opportunity to be part of their student community for my bachelors and now for my masters. I would also like to thank professor Dr. Troy Crawford for his advice and valuable feedback while conducting this analysis.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The author declares no competing interests.

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