

Miss Lovely Legs



Understanding different logics of enquiry

Methodology for
Urbanism

Miss Lovely Legs: Understanding Different Logics of Enquiry

Based on an exercise by Wendy Stainton Rogers (2006), "Logics of inquiry", in S. Potter (Ed.), *Doing Postgraduate Research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

All commentaries and testimonies in this exercise are fictional. They were written for teaching purposes and must not be cited as sources. The photograph is real.

1. Look

In this exercise you will discuss what can be grasped and understood from a single image, and what kinds of knowledge you can formulate from what you see.

Which questions help us understand this picture? How can we describe what we see in a meaningful way? Look at the photograph and discuss: What can you see? Who are the people in this picture? Where are they? What is the meaning of the event?



David Goldblatt, *Saturday Morning at the Hypermarket: Semi-final of the Miss Lovely Legs Competition*, Boksburg, 28 June 1980. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/84216>

2. Read three commentaries

Now read the three texts below, written about the event and the photograph. Which one comes closest to the knowledge you produced in step 1? What further insights do these commentaries give you? All pictures are AI generated.



Although one does not want to further denigrate the participants in such contests, nor ascribe personally malign motives to those who consume these images, the political implications of such 'cattle parades' are inescapable: women are turned into objects in a male-dominated world. Such practices are the visible manifestations of an all-pervasive patriarchal culture.

(Patsy Smith-Collins, International Journal of Feminist Studies)

Last Saturday, Charmaine du Preez won her semi-final of the Miss Lovely Legs competition at the Boksburg hypermarket. Charmaine is a second-year student at Sukses Secretarial College and says her hobbies are reading, watching films and going to the gym. Charmaine said that she was thrilled the judges chose her out of so many deserving competitors, and that she would try her utmost to live up to everything expected of her in the final. (Staff reporter, Boksburg Times)



In this photograph, Goldblatt again explores the semiotic (and now perhaps even nostalgic?) possibilities of 1970s suburbia, so fetchingly oblivious of the larger political forces playing themselves out in apartheid South Africa. The careful juxtaposition of the foregrounded white contestants and the predominantly black audience plays with the irony of white culture as an object of black consumption. (Mandla Nkosi, Art World)



3. Discuss in groups

1. What are the professional activities of the three writers? From which point of view does each of them see the photograph?
2. Is there a "correct" assessment of the image?
3. Can you describe the different logics of inquiry at play here? Think in terms of different points of view, and of the knowledge each community of practice needs.
4. Which questions is each writer answering? Write at least one question answered by the reporter, one by the feminist scholar and one by the art critic.

4. Hear three more voices

The three commentaries above all speak about the people in the photograph. None of those people speaks. Here are three who were there.



I only entered because my cousin dared me, and the prize was a weekend at the coast. Nobody tells you about the lights. They are so hot, and you can't see faces, only shapes. The man gives you a card with a number and suddenly that is who you are: Sixteen. My mother says it's harmless, it's only legs. Standing up there, it didn't feel like only legs. But I am not a victim either. I chose to go up there, and I would like someone to ask me before they write about me.

(Annelie Swanepoel, contestant no. 16)

On Saturdays I take the train from Vosloorus because the hypermarket is cheaper for school shoes. At the till my money counts the same as a white woman's. Outside, I must still carry my pass book. So yes, we stopped to watch. It was something to see. My daughter asked me why there were no girls like her on the stage. I told her some shows are for us to watch, never to be in. The white ladies who write about this contest never ask what we were thinking. They think we just came to stare.

(Grace Mokoena, shopper and mother of three, Vosloorus)



Saturday trade was up nearly a third on the morning of the semi-final. That is the whole point of a promotion. People come for the show and leave with a full trolley. It is clean family entertainment, and all our customers are welcome to watch, whoever they are. We do not mix business with politics. Who may enter is decided by the national organisers, not by me. My job is simple: fill the store.

(Dennis Holloway, promotions manager at the hypermarket)



5. Discuss again

5. The last three texts come from people in or around the photograph. What can they know that the reporter, the scholar and the critic cannot? Is a testimony data, interpretation, or both?
6. Whose knowledge is missing from the feminist scholar's account? What happens to the argument when "women" includes the women in the audience?
7. Think of your studio site. Who are its "contestants", "shoppers" and "organisers"? Which of their voices does your research design capture, and which does it speak for?

Notes for discussion

Read these notes only after your group discussion.

This exercise shows that a logic of inquiry does not depend only on the object being analysed. It depends on the questions one asks about the object and on the kind of knowledge one seeks to build.

The reporter gives a factual account of the event: facts that can be verified, enriched with a personal statement from the winner. The reporter is not neutral, however. The account implicitly treats the contest as positive and glamorous, a position that others would strongly oppose.

The feminist scholar writes about how such contests degrade and objectify women. Her interest is the political meaning of the contest and what it represents for the emancipation of women. From this position, such contests are "cattle parades" that belittle their participants.

The art critic analyses the image from an aesthetic point of view and situates it in its political and social context, apartheid South Africa. He discusses the aesthetic qualities of the 1970s suburb and ironically observes that white women seem to have become the object of consumption of black viewers, who are politically and economically oppressed.

The three testimonies add knowledge that none of the commentaries holds. The contestant knows what it is like to be looked at and numbered, and she refuses to be cast either as a glamour girl or as a victim.

The shopper sees the stage from a position that the scholar's general category of "women" leaves out: she may watch, but she may never stand there. Standpoint theorists argue that such positions make certain structures visible (Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1988), and that race and gender must be analysed together rather than one at a time (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981).

The organiser reasons in terms of footfall and turnover. His claim that business and politics do not mix is itself a political statement.

Different logics of inquiry stem from different communities of practice, each building knowledge relevant to itself and its audiences. But knowledge produced in one community must be communicated across communities and audiences. It must be formulated clearly, in language that people outside the community can understand, and it must be validated across communities. Otherwise one suffers from the "Humpty Dumpty syndrome".

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872), Humpty Dumpty tells a puzzled Alice: "When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

References

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