

Original Paper

Reconstructing the Visual Communication Semiotic System of Ceramic Sculptures

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Abstract

*This paper is committed to constructing a systematic analytical framework, aiming to conduct an in-depth exploration of the semiotic resources employed by the creators of New China's ceramic sculpture artworks from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the field of semiotic research on ceramic sculpture art, the academic community presents a dual-core research orientation: on the one hand, it focuses on “extra-textual” factors, emphasizing the investigation of contextualized social and historical elements that directly influence creative design decisions; on the other hand, it places “intra-textual” factors in a core research position. This orientation draws on the analytical logic of linguistic signs and defines ceramic sculpture, as a form of visual communication, as a semiotic system with systematicity and codability. This paper selects O'Toole's (1994) *Functional Analysis of Sculpture*, a typical theoretical paradigm of the “intra-textual” research orientation, and conducts a critical evaluation of it by integrating multi-disciplinary visual theories, so as to systematically reveal the limitations of this analytical method when interpreting the semiotic resources of ceramic sculptures in a specific historical period. On this basis, the paper further points out that to achieve an effective analysis of the semiotic resources of ceramic sculptures, it is essential to fully incorporate the inherent pluralistic and essential characteristics of visual communication.*

Keywords

Visual Communication, Semiotics, Ceramic Sculptures

1. Introduction

This paper aims to construct a systematic analytical framework to conduct an in-depth investigation into the semiotic resources employed by the designers of New China's ceramic sculpture artworks from the 1950s to the 1970s. Within the scope of semiotic research on ceramic sculptures, there are two core dimensions of concern: the first is the emphasis on "extra-textual" factors, namely the contextual social variables that act on the design decision-making process; the second is the high attention paid to "intra-textual" factors—this dimension defines such forms of visual communication (which are isomorphic to linguistic systems) as semiotic systems or structures with inherent logic. Taking the representative research case of "intra-textual" factors (O'Toole, 1994, *Functional Analysis of Sculpture*) as the object of evaluation, this paper integrates multi-disciplinary visual theoretical paradigms to reveal its research limitations and puts forward a core viewpoint: to achieve an adequate analysis of the relevant semiotic resources, it is necessary to prioritize and consider several essential characteristics of visual communication.

Some ceramic art critics argue that the image symbols employed in ceramic sculpture artworks are merely direct reflections of reality, and there is no clear boundary between image symbols and their referents—that is, there exists an inherent connection between the real world and artists' representations of it. Starting from extra-textual factors (i.e., social and historical contexts) and actual design decisions, these scholars have interpreted the representations of these image symbols. In contrast, inspired by Halliday's linguistic theory, O'Toole, in his academically influential work *The Language of Displayed Art* (1994), proposes that he has constructed a research paradigm centered on the ontological analysis of sculptural works. His research aim is to demonstrate that various design choices made by designers can be analogous to linguistic systems, thereby establishing a standardized "visual grammar"; furthermore, similar to lexical units in language, these design choices can form a complete semiotic system or meaning-generating system. To achieve an accurate description of this system, O'Toole draws on linguists' approaches to language research and creates exclusive academic terms to systematically explain the internal logic and mechanism by which various design choices generate specific meanings.

This paper analyzes the ceramic sculpture artworks of New China from the 1950s to the 1970s. Like most ceramic art critics, we emphasize the importance of extra-textual factors; meanwhile, similar to O'Toole, we also aim to explore how to describe and define the application of semiotic resources in ceramic sculpture artworks—these semiotic resources are used to convey specific discourses, identities, values, and events. However, by drawing on the research findings of several visual theorists, we have discovered that O'Toole's model attempts to rigidly apply linguistic models, yet ignores the diversity of various elements, characteristics, and attributes unique to this form of communication. Furthermore, we

have found that his analysis relies far more on extra-textual information than he acknowledges, which greatly undermines the practicality of this analytical toolkit. The research in this paper shows that the integration of the semiotic theories proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2002) and van Leeuwen (2005) with the semiotics-related studies by Barthes (1977) and Panofsky (1972) provides a feasible analytical path for research in this field. This path can not only retain the partial pursuit of descriptive rigor in O'Toole's theoretical system but also conduct research based on the internal logic of this form of communication. At the same time, it can clearly define the source of analytical conclusions—that is, clarifying whether they are derived from a specific context or from the ceramic sculpture artworks themselves.

Since the mid-1990s, under the influence of Halliday's linguistic theory, a new wave of research has emerged in the field of visual semiotics. Traditional semiotic studies (Barthes, 1972; Sebeok, 1994) mostly focus on the connotative interpretation and symbolic mechanism of individual signs, while this new round of emerging research centers on revealing the integration rules of visual elements and characteristics, and is committed to exploring their functional operation mode as a systematic existence or visual grammar. Among them, the theoretical framework proposed by O'Toole in *The Language of Displayed Art* has provided important ideas for research in this field, thereby spurring a series of explorations by linguists on visual signs (Baldry & Thibault, 2007; O'Halloran, 2006; Ventola & Hofinger, 2004). The core goal of such research is to analyze how visual elements and forms in diverse communication carriers such as films, new media, and advertisements realize the linguistic communicative functions defined by Halliday (1978). In terms of research scope, O'Toole's analysis initially focused on paintings, and later gradually expanded to three-dimensional communication forms such as sculptures and architecture. Based on this, this study will first sort out the interpretive logic of O'Toole's theoretical model: on the one hand, it follows his existing research path to examine the specific application paradigm of this model in painting analysis; on the other hand, for three-dimensional visual signs, it supplements more empirical observation conclusions, aiming to improve the practical verification of this theoretical model.

O'Toole's semiotic analysis of art is based on the theoretical presupposition of "dual-subject interaction in art galleries". Its core question is directed at: under the premise of stripping away vague evaluative terms such as "elegance" and "charm", and abandoning the prior knowledge of art history and presupposed interpretive information, how should the two subjects effectively communicate the process of artistic meaning generation through concrete language. He points out that there exists a problem of "lack of linguistic systematicity" in the current academic descriptions of artistic perception and response. Therefore, the core goal of his theoretical construction is to: establish a systematic linguistic system that can be used for the concrete expression of artistic feelings, and extract a set of universal analytical terms to explain the internal mechanism of meaning production in works of art.

To achieve this theoretical goal, O'Toole introduces Halliday's (1978) three major linguistic communicative functions as the analytical foundation, and adapts them to the research context of art

semiotics, thus forming three core functional dimensions, which are specifically defined as follows:

Modal Function: Corresponding to the “interpersonal function” in Halliday’s linguistic theory, it specifically refers to the way artists or sculptors establish a connection between their works and recipients through artistic techniques, with the core lying in analyzing the interaction logic between the artistic text and the receiving subject.

Representational Function: Corresponding to the “ideational function” in Halliday’s linguistic theory, it focuses on the recipient’s cognitive path towards the content presented in the work of art, and its essence lies in exploring the transmission mechanism of ideas and meaning connotations within the artistic text.

Compositional Function: Corresponding to the “textual function” in Halliday’s linguistic theory, it mainly focuses on the arrangement rules of spatial forms within the artistic text, typically such as the organizational mode of “lines and rhythms”, with the core lying in analyzing the formal structural logic of the artistic text.

The three aforementioned functions exhibit a “synergistic interaction” in artistic texts; however, to enhance the accuracy of analysis, it is necessary to classify them into distinct dimensions. In specific analytical practice, researchers need to identify and categorize the characteristics of artistic texts such as paintings and sculptures, and match them to the corresponding functional dimensions. Furthermore, the analysis of each functional dimension must cover four progressive analytical levels, namely the work level, the plot level, the figure level, and the element level, thereby forming an analytical model of “function-level” bidirectional coupling.

2. Core Challenges in the Construction of Visual Communication Analysis Methods

Current research indicates that the academic community faces multiple core challenges in the systematic construction of visual communication analysis methods. Firstly, there is ambiguity in defining the semiotic attributes of analytical objects, as they are not symbolic systems as regular as language in the traditional sense. Although research can be conducted on the meaning potential embodied in various traits and characteristics of visual elements, such potential needs to be incorporated into multiple dimensions such as cultural conventions and metaphorical associations, rather than simply applying the logic of linguistic analysis and solidifying it into a set of standardized “codes” for interpretation. In this context, the research paradigm proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen regarding the meaning potential of color and typography holds significant reference value. This research takes Halliday’s metafunctional theory as its theoretical foundation but breaks through the limitations of the traditional framework, focusing the core of the research on the functional realization paths of visual traits and characteristics, rather than directly treating metafunctional theory as a preliminary presupposition for analysis. Secondly, different from the analytical logic of linguistic symbols, visual communication forms possess a high degree of integrity and correlation, making it difficult to decompose them into independent constituent elements according to clear boundaries, nor to

clearly divide them into combinatorial structures of different levels. This poses significant difficulties for the refinement of analytical methods.

In the research process, it is also necessary to establish an evaluation mechanism for the importance of various features and traits of visual elements. The construction of this mechanism must be fundamentally based on the inherent attributes of the features and traits, rather than simply proving their ability to carry one of the functions described by Halliday through classification. In essence, current research is in urgent need of a set of scientific tools to enhance the ability to accurately describe visual communication content. Based on this, compared with a systematic theoretical framework focusing on “analysis”, constructing a research framework with “description” as the core orientation is more in line with the practical needs of current visual communication analysis.

3. Style and Design

The ceramic sculpture art of New China from the 1950s to the 1970s took “art serving socialist construction” as its core orientation. In style shaping and design practice, it formed a unique paradigm characterized by “ideological nature guiding aestheticism and practicality integrating artistry”. It not only inherits the craft genes of traditional ceramic sculpture but also reconstructs a visual expression system conforming to the context of the times, thus becoming an important carrier of cultural communication and spiritual cohesion in a specific historical stage.

In terms of stylistic characteristics, ceramic sculptures during this period took realism as the main keynote, integrated distinct idealistic and symbolic overtones, and constructed a visual language that is “recognizable, empathetic, and transmissible”. In terms of image creation, the works generally followed the creative principle of “typification”: Images of workers, peasants, and soldiers were mostly presented with upright postures, vivid expressions, and dynamic body movements. For example, details such as “hands firmly gripping steel drills” and “taut arm muscles” in sculptures of steelworkers enhanced the sense of labor strength through exaggerated body proportions. Images of revolutionary heroes focused on the spiritual portrayal of facial expressions; elements such as resolute eyes and tight jawlines became iconic symbols, conveying firm ideals and beliefs. Meanwhile, the stylistic expression combined both “simplicity” and “sense of ritual”: Folk-style sculptures with rural themes from local production areas (such as rural women transplanting rice seedlings and children feeding chickens) retained the rough texture and vivid charm of traditional clay sculptures. Large-scale public sculptures (such as square monument-style ceramic sculptures) created a ritual atmosphere in line with the collectivist spirit through symmetrical composition, heavy sense of volume, and solemn color matching. Together, they formed a stylistic spectrum where “grand narration” and “daily narration” complement each other.

At the level of design logic, ceramic sculptures during this period took “function priority and context adaptation” as the core principles, achieving a deep coupling between “creative goals and usage scenarios”. Firstly, in terms of theme design, the works were closely centered on the themes of the

times, forming four core theme categories: “production and construction”, “revolutionary history”, “national unity”, and “folk life”. The theme of production and construction focused on labor scenes in factories and rural areas, such as the “Group Sculptures of Commune Autumn Harvest” and “Technicians by the Machine Tool”, which conveyed the enthusiasm for socialist construction through concrete scenes. The theme of revolutionary history was based on major historical events or heroic figures, such as “The Red Army Marching Through the Grasslands” and “Liu Hulan’s Martyrdom”, realizing the inheritance of revolutionary spirit through the eternal nature of ceramic sculptures. Secondly, in terms of form and size design, the works were strictly adapted to the needs of usage scenarios: Small ornaments for home display (mostly 10-30 cm in height) mostly adopted round and regular outlines to avoid sharp shapes, and their lightweight design facilitated daily placement. Medium-sized sculptures (50-150 cm in height) for display in units or squares emphasized visual impact, adapting to the viewing distance of public spaces by thickening outline lines and enhancing a sense of dynamism. Giant sculptures (over 2 meters in height) for large-scale memorial venues adopted modular design to reduce production difficulty, and formed a response with the environment through a unified stylistic language. Thirdly, in terms of craftsmanship and material design, a “graded adaptation” strategy was formed: Works with key themes used high-quality materials such as high-white clay and purple sand, combined with fine decorative techniques like famille rose and blue and white. For example, the “Revolutionary Hero Ceramic Sculptures” produced in Jingdezhen used high-white clay to create a delicate texture, and then used famille rose to render the colors of costumes, enhancing artistic expression. Mass-produced popular works adopted improved porcelain clay and simplified craftsmanship, reducing costs through standardized mold production to meet the cultural needs of the masses, thus achieving a balance between “elite creation” and “popular communication”.

Through the collaborative innovation of style and design, the ceramic sculpture art of this period not only fulfilled the communication mission of “visualizing the spirit of the times” but also established a unique historical coordinate for the development of New China’s ceramic art in balancing traditional craftsmanship with modern aesthetics, and individual expression with collective aspirations.

4. Gaze

Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) research focuses on the realization path of “speech acts” through images, and the theoretical origin of this core concept can be traced back to Halliday’s (1985) systematic interpretation of language functions. In daily verbal communication scenarios, the subject’s speech practice usually carries four fundamental speech acts: first, the transmission and notification of information; second, the provision of services or physical goods; third, the inquiry and acquisition of specific information; fourth, the request and demand for goods or services. It is worth noting that the issuance of each speech act implies a corresponding responsive mechanism that is either expected or potential.

Based on the aforementioned theoretical framework, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) propose that

images, as a non-linguistic semiotic system, possess the ability to fulfill two core functions: “offering” and “demanding”. This means that when audiences are in the process of receiving and interpreting images, they can perceive the communicative logic and interactive relationships constructed by the images, which are similar to those in daily verbal interaction scenarios, thereby forming communication and feedback at the semiotic level.

In the semiotic structure of “demand-type images”, the image subject constructs a direct visual interaction channel with the viewer through the visual directionality towards the viewer. Essentially, this visual interaction mode constitutes a “dialogue invitation” with clear intentions, which enables the viewer to generate a sense of confirmation of self-presence during the process of symbol reception.

This perceptual experience is similar to the psychological state of an individual being directly addressed in daily social contexts, thereby triggering the viewer’s subconscious response tendency and behavioral presupposition. Undoubtedly, the specific direction and connotative interpretation of such “demand” intentions need to be comprehensively defined based on multiple symbolic elements such as the facial expressions, body postures, and scene contexts of the image subject.

In sharp contrast, within the semiotic system of “offer-type images”, the image subject presents a visual orientation that turns away from the viewer, leading to a break in the direct visual interaction between the viewer and the image subject. In this context, viewers often fall into a psychological cognitive state of “not being perceived by the image subject”. At this point, the viewer’s role orientation is more akin to a neutral onlooker or an implicit voyeur, and their attention is directed towards the pure observation and interpretation of the symbolic entities presented in the image, such as scene narratives and character images, rather than participating in the interactive relationship constructed by the image.

This model can be effectively applied to the in-depth analysis of the thematic sculptures of “The White-Haired Girl” (Figure 1) and “Mulan Changing Her Clothes” (Figure 2). It is worth noting that neither of these two figure sculptures has established a direct eye contact relationship with the viewer, which makes them unable to convey a clear response appeal to the viewer through the visual behavior of “gaze”. In sharp contrast, the visual orientations of these sculptures present two typical forms: one is the posture of looking upward, and the other is looking toward the horizon in the upper front direction. From this, it is not difficult to infer that such image behaviors essentially belong to the category of “offer-type” rather than “demand-type” which carries the meaning of active appeal.



Figure 1. Glazed Lamp Stand “The White-Haired Girl” with High-Temperature Colored Enamel

Creation Time: 1970s

Creator: Collective Creation Group of Jingdezhen Sculptural Porcelain Factory



Figure 2. “Mulan Changing Her Clothes” with Color Decoration

Creation Time: 1950s

Creator: Zu Wenxuan, Central Academy of Fine Arts

On this basis, a core question emerges: Why did the creators deliberately avoid the presentation method that enables the sculptures to make eye contact with the viewers when designing them? Adopting a design strategy where the figures make eye contact with the viewers would inevitably trigger a series of unavoidable problems: once the figures establish direct eye contact with the viewers, it will naturally prompt the viewers to develop a psychological tendency and behavioral possibility to respond. In a specific historical context, the authorities aimed to guide the public to recognize the figures shaped by these sculptures as “an integral part of another world (i.e., the spiritual dimension carrying glory and the brilliance of classical civilization)”. Against this background, the design scheme of eye contact between the figures and the viewers undoubtedly has potential destructiveness, and may even cause catastrophic impacts on the established communication goals. In contrast, the design of having the sculptures look toward the horizon is more in line with the needs. From a metaphorical perspective, this visual symbol accurately signifies the outlook for the future and the unremitting pursuit of lofty ideals.

5. Materials and Form

Panofsky (1972) emphasized that not only form but also material can convey the attitudes of a specific era and culture. The art of ceramic sculpture in New China from the 1950s to the 1970s, as a vital carrier of the creative orientation “Art Serves the People” under a specific historical context, saw its material selection and formal language deeply align with the social and cultural demands of the era, forming a visual paradigm that integrates functionality, ideological content, and craftsmanship.

In terms of material application, ceramic sculptures of this period took regional traditional clay and industrially improved porcelain clay as core carriers, demonstrating the characteristics of “prioritizing practicality and adapting to local conditions”. On one hand, traditional materials such as Jingdezhen Kaolin, Yixing Zisha (purple clay), and Shiwan clay became mainstream choices for depicting revolutionary heroes, images of workers and peasants, and folk scenes, thanks to their mature plasticity and firing stability. For instance, the Jingdezhen porcelain sculpture *The Red Lantern* (Figure 3) utilized the delicate texture of high-white clay to shape Li Yuhe’s resolute image through sharp facial contours. The clothing folds adopted the technique of “concise knife carving + famille rose outlining”, which not only preserved the linear beauty of traditional porcelain carving but also highlighted the integrity of revolutionary figures. Shiwan clay, with its unique rough texture, endows sculptures of labor scenes with a strong sense of realism and power. On the other hand, with the advancement of industrialization drives like the “Great Leap Forward”, some production areas attempted to use improved porcelain clay for large-scale production. By lowering the firing temperature and simplifying raw material formulas, they increased the output of sculptures to meet the cultural needs of the masses. Although there was a slight compromise in material delicacy, it enhanced the popularity of art dissemination.



Figure 3. “The Red Lantern” with Color Decoration

Creation Time: 1970s

Creator: Collective Creation Group of Jingdezhen Sculptural Porcelain Factory

In the dimension of formal language, ceramic sculptures of this period took realism as the core paradigm and integrated distinct symbolic and narrative characteristics. From the perspective of modeling logic: Figurative sculptures generally followed the creative principle of “typification”. They created visually inspiring images by exaggerating characters’ body movements (such as workers’ hands tightly grasping tools and peasants’ upright torsos) and intensifying facial expressions (such as the resolute eyes of heroic figures and the bright smiles of the masses). Scene-based sculptures focused on plot construction. Thematic works like “Commune Autumn Harvest” and “Steelmaking Upsurge” restored production and life scenes through group sculptures, forming a “readable” visual narrative. Meanwhile, the form design balanced practicality and decoration. Small ornaments mostly adopted rounded and regular outlines, facilitating mass production and daily placement; large-scale public sculptures, through symmetrical composition and a sense of heavy volume, conveyed the spirit of collectivism and the momentum of the era, achieving the unity of “ideological content, artistry, and

ornamental value”.

6. Conclusion

The new generation of semiotic research paradigm inspired by Halliday's linguistic theory is providing a groundbreaking approach for the analysis of painting, sculpture, and other artistic media. Its core contribution lies in moving beyond the enumerative analysis of isolated signs and instead constructing a universal theoretical framework that can be used for the description and interpretation of artistic texts. In O'Toole's relevant research, as Keeffer (1996) commented, the study demonstrates “an impressive depth of knowledge, art historical background, and aesthetic detail” (p. 305), yet it fails to clearly verify the complete construction of the aforementioned universal theoretical framework. Although this research provides a useful reference for analyzing the functional implications of various elements and characteristics in artistic texts, its research design has obvious limitations: on the one hand, it improperly conflates observational data with contextual knowledge; on the other hand, its conceptual system is complex and lacks clear definitions. This makes it difficult for the academic community to evaluate the actual degree of improvement it brings to the understanding of the “meaning-generation mechanism of artistic objects”. In contrast, the cutting-edge research findings by Kress and van Leeuwen have significant advantages. Their research not only deeply absorbs the observational research paradigm from Barthes' semiotic theory but also integrates the contextual analysis and historical dimension from Panofsky's art history research, demonstrating a more solid theoretical advancement in the process of constructing a universal semiotic analysis framework.

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