

Analysis of Critical Metaphorical Discourse in Oil Painting

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Abstract: Utilizing O'Toole's approach to visual semiotics, this paper examines the critical metaphorical discourse within renowned oil paintings, such as the Mona Lisa. The metaphorical elements in oil painting manifest as visual expressions, arising from the artful interplay of canvas, lines, and colors. Through this medium, the discourse of oil painting is communicated, allowing the audience to deeply understand and appreciate the underlying meanings and societal implications, thereby evoking imagination and emotion. The paper analyzes the language of oil painting as a systematic linguistic code for information transmission and meaning expression. This study aims to develop a scientific methodology for analyzing metaphors within oil paintings and to construct a cognitive analytical framework for critical metaphors in this art form. The goal is to facilitate clearer communication and comprehension of the oil painting discourse and to achieve a more profound interpretation.

1. Introduction

This paper conducts a critical metaphorical discourse analysis of the globally renowned Mona Lisa, emphasizing factors beyond the visual imagery. The study focuses on elucidating how semiotic resources articulate specific events, narratives, identities, and values within oil paintings. O'Toole's model encompasses various image elements and features, drawing on the semiotic methodologies of Kress & van Leeuwen^{[1][2]}, van Leeuwen^[3], and the scholarly contributions of Barthes^[4] and Panofsky^[5]. The synthesis of O'Toole's semiotic approach with Halliday's functional linguistics furnishes us with a research methodology. This paper endeavors to critically analyze the semantics of oil painting discourse through a metaphorical lens, ensuring that the analysis is rooted in the artwork and its context. This approach aims to facilitate the transmission of the dominant meanings within oil painting discourse to the observer.

2. Theoretical Framework

According to O'Toole's three linguistic functions of visual semiotics and the cognitive analysis of renowned oil paintings through critical metaphor, this paper synthesizes the cognitive process and

formulates a theoretical model for the critical metaphor analysis of oil paintings from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, as depicted in Figure 1 below:

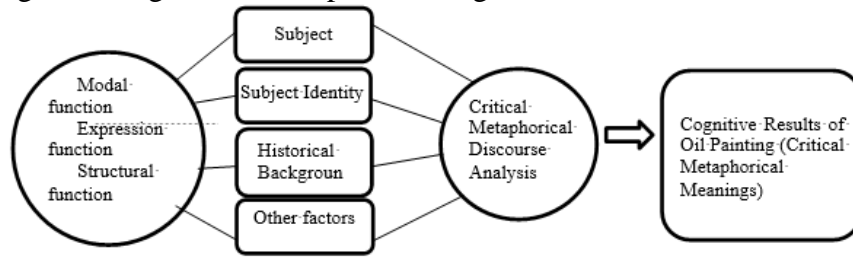


Figure 1: A cognitive model of critical metaphor in oil painting

3. O'Toole's approach to visual semiotics

O'Toole's analytical framework begins by imagining a pair of art gallery patrons. He encourages these individuals to describe the artwork's meaning in tangible terms, avoiding vague notions like "elegance" or "appeal," and steering clear of historical art trivia. As a result, they engage in a dialogue that is unstructured, sharing their personal interpretations and reactions to the art pieces. O'Toole aims to foster a conversation where participants use precise and concrete language, which allows the two gallery visitors to develop a common lexicon for articulating the anthropomorphic roles of an art piece. This shared, specific terminology forms the basis of the visual semiotic corpus.

To refine the visual semiotic methodology, O'Toole draws upon Halliday's triad of linguistic functions:

- 1) Modal Function: This is the artist's or painter's method of using a medium to create a connection between the artwork and the viewer, fulfilling an interpersonal role.
- 2) Representational Function: Also known as the ideational function, this involves the expression of the self and how concepts are conveyed.
- 3) Compositional Function: This relates to the spatial arrangement of elements, such as the balanced organization of lines, and is also known as the textual function.

While these functions work in unison, they are examined separately for the sake of analytical precision. Researchers scrutinize paintings and explore how various elements align with these functions. Each element is dissected at four levels: the subject, the identity of the subject, the historical context, and additional components.

This paper will also conduct a critical metaphorical discourse analysis of sculptures utilizing O'Toole's visual semiotic approach, further exploring the intricate workings of this research technique.

4. Critical metaphorical discourse Analysis in oil painting

Figure 2 depicts the 'Mona Lisa,' an oil painting by Italian Renaissance master Leonardo da Vinci, which currently resides in the Louvre Museum in France. Analyzing this iconic work through O'Toole's visual semiotics method, we can dissect its modal, expressive, and structural functions.



Figure 2: Mona Lisa

From the perspective of modal function of O'Toole's visual semiotics method, the main body of the graceful and graceful statue in the oil painting is Mona Lisa. The main identity of Mona Lisa is the wife of a fur merchant in Florence, who was only 24 years old at that time. The Mona Lisa in the painting presents a subtle smile, and the inner joy is revealed between the eyebrows. With superb painting skills, the artist shows the smile that flits across the woman's face, especially the slightly turned corners of the mouth and the relaxed laughing muscles, which make the Mona Lisa's smile calm, peaceful and meaningful. This is the beautiful expression of the unique reserve of the educated women of the ancient Italian middle class, showing the mysterious brilliance of human nature.

Analysis from the perspective of expressive function: The primary subject, the smiling Mona Lisa, exudes a quiet, eternal, and indifferent expression that is naturally present. Her identity as a merchant's wife conveys the reserved allure of the educated women of the ancient Italian middle class—gentle yet powerful. The historical backdrop of the Renaissance, a European intellectual and cultural movement spanning from the 14th to the 17th centuries, originated in Florence and spread across Europe. This period was marked by a shift towards secular values and a critique of the medieval period under Christian rule. The Mona Lisa embodies the divine and human brilliance, affirming the significance of human existence beyond the natural state, a central theme in the works of artists like Leonardo da Vinci.

Analysis from the perspective of structural function: In composition, in order to strengthen the characteristics of the Times of the characters, Da Vinci broke the traditional way of composition, breaking through the portrayal of women to the abdomen. In fact, the medieval church believed that the belly below is lust, and the absurd rules prohibiting the portrait below the belly. When Da Vinci painted people below the belly, he was in open opposition to medieval views. The painting completely eliminated the deadwood rigidity of medieval painting and showed a fresh vitality; Its aesthetic value is first reflected in this advanced aesthetic ideal. The aesthetic significance of Mona Lisa mainly lies in the brilliance of human nature emanating from the figures; Before that, even human figures had a more or less religious flavor. Leonardo Da Vinci successfully used the technique of "fading away" in his painting of Mona Lisa. In the "Mona Lisa", the boundary between the figure and the background is not clear, the outline of the figure is not so clear, and it seems to blend into the background. Especially in the corners of the eyes and corners of the figure, the author deliberately uses the "fade method" painting technique, so that the corners of the eyes and corners of the mouth are gradually integrated into the soft shadow, resulting in a subtle artistic effect, which greatly enriches the meaning of the image. In the portrait of Mona Lisa, the vivid red circles and hair around the eyes cannot be expressed without the most elaborate portrayal. The eyes and face are also natural and decent, with thick eyelashes, each of which has been carefully depicted, twists and turns freely, as if from under the skin, extremely realistic.

From a critical metaphor standpoint, the oil painting uses the image of Mona Lisa as a metaphor for human nature and feminine beauty. Her pose has been elevated to a sacred symbol, representing not just an artistic law, but also the impact on the surging tide of Renaissance humanism. It reflects the manifestation of a noble and refined ideal within the spiritual returnee and the awakening mind.

5. Research Results

The linguistic purpose of oil painting is to depict society and history, to exhibit human nature and artistic phenomena, and to reflect and influence the fundamental direction of public thought. Building on the critical metaphorical discourse analysis of oil paintings presented above, this paper distills the following consensus on the formation of oil paintings.

Firstly, from a social perspective, the metaphorical construction of oil painting is grounded in the

shared cognition and experiences of people within the same society. Each oil painting is crafted to serve a specific societal context and is constrained by the cognitive framework of a particular social culture. For instance, in feudal society, the common people could not perceive the profound feminine radiance embodied in the Mona Lisa. Although each oil painting serves a distinct society, there is also a shared human cognition and experience.

Secondly, from a historical standpoint, oil paintings are the progeny of traditional history because they bear deep historical "imprints." Paintings from specific eras exhibit distinct characteristics, such as Raphael's Sistine Madonna from the Renaissance period. Through the medium of oil painting, the Madonna profoundly reflects the humanistic ideals of the Renaissance. It appears to be an appreciation and celebration of ancient Greek notions of human nature and the human form, which essentially signifies that people have emerged from the dark constraints of the medieval period and have come to fully recognize the magnificence of motherhood and human nature. History is one of the wells of artistic inspiration and the solid "foundation" of art.

Lastly, from a cultural angle, oil painting acts as a mirror of culture. Certain paintings embody specific cultural values. The majority of metaphorical mappings in oil painting transition from the concrete to the abstract, where "concrete" refers to the visible and tangible medium of oil painting, and "abstract" pertains to the intangible and invisible culture. The portrait of Helena Fourment shows that affluence and luxury are the norm in aristocratic culture, while the Mona Lisa embodies the wisdom and beauty of middle-class women. Thus, oil painting is a gateway to understanding a particular culture.

The social, historical, and cultural reasons for oil painting interrelate and depend on one another to actualize the metaphorical construction of oil paintings. Concurrently, they lay the groundwork for the cognitive model of critical metaphor in oil painting and offer a perspective for the critical analysis and comprehension of metaphor. From a linguistic standpoint, oil painting has made significant contributions to the dissemination of language and culture.

6. Conclusion

Utilizing O'Toole's visual semiotics method, this paper conducts an analysis of the critical metaphorical discourse found in renowned oil paintings worldwide and establishes a cognitive model for the critical metaphors in oil painting from the vantage point of cognitive linguistics. This model begins by examining oil paintings through the lens of three linguistic functions—modal function, expressive function, and structural function—before delving into an analysis of the discourse within oil painting from a critical metaphor perspective. Ultimately, the model aims to achieve a more precise understanding of the discourse conveyed by oil paintings. The paper also explores the underlying reasons for the creation of oil paintings, identifying three primary sources: social, historical, and cultural factors. The critical metaphor cognitive model for oil painting holds significant value, as it enables observers to extract the discourse information from oil paintings through a scientifically rigorous linguistic analysis. This process facilitates the transmission of the mainstream meanings of oil paintings to the observer, thereby maximizing the expression of the paintings' discourse.

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