

# *Analysis of Critical Metaphorical Discourse in Sculpture*

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**Abstract:** This paper applies O'Toole's visual semiotics approach to examine the critical metaphorical discourse within the globally renowned sculpture, Venus with Broken Arms. The study of critical metaphor in sculpture emphasizes, on one hand, the visual expression inherent to the sculpture as a medium; on the other hand, it focuses on the discourse conveyed by the sculpture, with the latter being of paramount importance and the central focus of our research. The visual communication embodied by the sculpture is characterized as a language system or code for information conveyance. The paper aims to develop a systematic method for analyzing discourse metaphors in sculpture and to construct a cognitive framework appropriate for studying critical metaphors within this art form. This framework will facilitate a deeper understanding of the mainstream meanings conveyed by sculpture discourse for observers.

## **1. Introduction**

The study of sculpture discourse originated internationally. In an earlier publication on Soviet propaganda art, Kruk<sup>[1]</sup> demonstrated how Soviet art and monuments sought to educate illiterate populations by infiltrating their everyday spaces with the messages of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. He elucidated how the Russian Orthodox Church regarded the icons used in monuments as mere reflections of reality, without establishing a clear demarcation between the iconic image and its referent—the natural relationship between the real world and the artist's portrayal of it. Kruk<sup>[1]</sup> initially interprets these illustrative representations through extratextual factors, such as social and political contexts, and through the actual design decisions. Conversely, O'Toole<sup>[2]</sup>, in "Demonstrating the Language of Art," drawing inspiration from Halliday's linguistics, claimed to offer a method for interpreting information external to the sculpture's "text" from an analysis beyond the sculpture itself. His aim was to illustrate how design choices, akin to language, form a grammar. Like words, these choices can be described as comprising an integrated system or code. As we continually encounter physical forces in our environment that compel and attract us, impeding movement, we experience image-pattern structures that both constrain and liberate. It is this human dynamic that sculpture<sup>[3]</sup> encapsulates. Sculpture multimodal discourse analysis integrates history and memory<sup>[4]</sup>. O'Toole develops a set of labels that, similar to a linguist's description of language, precisely indicate how these labels generate meaning.

This paper conducts a critical metaphorical discourse analysis of the renowned sculpture Venus

with Broken Arms, emphasizing, like Kruk, the significance of extratextual factors; and like O'Toole, it aspires to investigate how semiotic resources are employed to communicate specific events, discourses, identities, and values within the sculpture. O'Toole's model encompasses a variety of elements, features, and qualities. It incorporates the semiotic approaches of Kress & van Leeuwen<sup>[5]</sup> and van Leeuwen<sup>[6]</sup>, as well as the contributions of Barthes<sup>[7]</sup> and Panofsky<sup>[8]</sup>. The fusion of O'Toole's semiotic approach with Halliday's functional linguistics provides a methodology that endeavors to analyze the semantics of sculpture through critical metaphorical discourse analysis, ensuring that the analysis is rooted in the object itself and its context. This approach aims to make the mainstream meaning of the sculpture's discourse more comprehensible to the observer.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on O'Toole's three linguistic functions of visual semiotics and critical metaphor theory, this paper synthesizes the cognitive process and constructs a theoretical framework for the critical metaphor analysis of sculpture from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, as depicted in Figure 1 below:

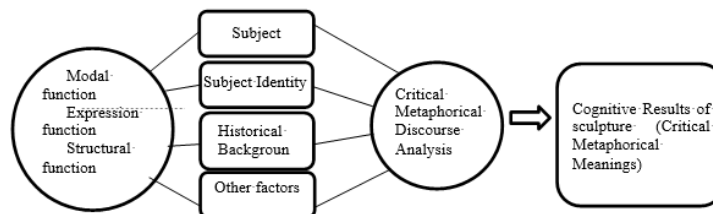


Figure 1: Theoretical framework model of critical metaphor analysis of sculpture

This paper examines the modal, expression, and structural functions of visual semiotics in oil painting to understand the cognitive processes involved in the interaction between the painting and the observer. Firstly, from the modal function perspective, the study explores how the oil painting subject—whether a person or an object—"communicates" and "connects" with the observer through the medium of oil painting. It also investigates how the subject's background, historical context, and other elements "communicate" with the observer and establish a "contact". Secondly, from the expression function viewpoint, the study delves into how the ideas encapsulated within the subject of the oil painting are conveyed and recognized by the observer. It further examines how the concepts inherent in the subject's background, historical context, and other elements are expressed and perceived by the observer. Finally, from the structural function perspective, the paper investigates how the lines and composition of the oil painting's main body are arranged in space to create visual aesthetics and facilitate cognitive transmission. It also explores how the thematic background, historical context, and other elements can generate visual beauty and cognitive transfer through spatial arrangement. The observer will then interpret the cognitive analysis results from the initial step, initially identifying the ontologies with metaphorical characteristics among the three functions: the subject, the subject identity, and other elements. Subsequently, the observer locates the corresponding metaphorical entities within the historical context. A cognitive conclusion is reached through the interplay of the noumenon and the metaphor, which may lead to praise or criticism, positive or negative evaluations, thus termed critical metaphor cognition. Overall, critical metaphorical cognition in oil painting represents the thoughts and meanings that the artist intends to convey.

## 3. O'Toole's approach to visual semiotics

O'Toole initiates his analysis by envisioning two visitors in an art gallery. He requests that they

express in concrete terms how the art conveys meaning, eschewing abstract terms such as "grace" or "charm," as well as historical art information. Consequently, they discuss their perceptions and responses to the artworks in unsystematic terms. O'Toole's objective is to foster an environment where people employ concrete and specific language; thus, in his experiment, the two visitors provide a shared vocabulary to describe how an art object serves a human function. This shared vocabulary constitutes the visual semiotic corpus. To develop and refine the visual semiotic methodology, O'Toole utilizes Halliday's<sup>[9]</sup> three linguistic functions.

Modal function: This refers to the strategy by which an artist or painter uses a medium to connect the art with the observer, serving an interpersonal function. Representational function: This pertains to the method by which we articulate our thoughts and ideas, also known as the thought function or the communication of ideas. Compositional function: In essence, this involves the spatial arrangement of forms, such as the harmonious organization of lines, and is also referred to as the function of coherence. These functions operate in concert but are analyzed separately for analytical clarity. Researchers examine the paintings and study how various features correspond to these functions. Each feature is analyzed at four levels: the subject, the subject's identity, the historical background, and other elements. This article will also perform a critical metaphorical discourse analysis of sculptures through O'Toole's visual semiotic approach, delving deeper into the operational nuances of this research method.

#### 4. Critical metaphorical discourse analysis in sculpture

This paper undertakes an analysis of the critical metaphorical discourse surrounding the world-renowned sculpture, the Venus de Milo in Figure 2, also known as Venus with Broken Arms. Crafted by Alexandros around 150 BC, this sculpture is currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

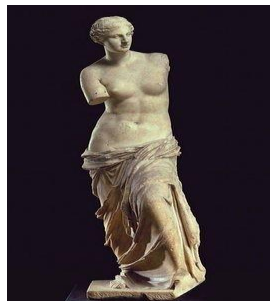


Figure 2: Venus de Milo

Utilizing O'Toole's visual semiotics method, this paper examines the critical metaphorical discourse of the renowned sculpture, Venus de Milo. Created by Alexandros around 150 BC, this sculpture, which is currently housed in the Louvre Museum in Paris, France, embodies the ancient Greek conception of beauty.

From the perspective of expression function analysis: the primary subject of this elegant statue is Venus, identified as the ancient Greek goddess of beauty. The statue's facial features exhibit the typical characteristics of Greek women: richness and three-dimensionality. The historical context is rooted in the ancient Greek belief in a pantheon of gods, led by Zeus, to whom they attributed life's fortunes and vicissitudes.

Analysis from the perspective of structural function: The statue's main figure is a semi-naked Venus, whose soft and voluptuous form, with a subtle hint of physical strength, embodies feminine charm: magnanimous, graceful, enchanting, and brimming with youthful vitality. As Venus, the ancient Greek goddess of beauty, she conveys an image of womanhood that is reserved, alluring, tender, and replete with strength and wisdom. The historical backdrop is the ancient Greek

advocacy for the unique beauty of women, who were considered equals to men in terms of intelligence and feminine power. This perspective not only offers aesthetic pleasure but also provides enduring reflection and profound intellectual enlightenment, capable of purifying the soul and instilling an awareness of human dignity, particularly the potential for goodness and happiness.

**Structural Function Analysis:** The subject of Alexandros's sculpture, Venus de Milo, stands tall and graceful, her soft drapery cascading down to reveal a plump, symmetrical, and elastic torso. A slight spiral twist infuses the body's undulations with rhythm, highlighting the curvature of the human form. The statue's facial features, such as the oval face shape, straight nose, full chin, simple bun, serene eyes, and slightly turned mouth, exude an aura of reserve and wisdom. The statue eschews both coquettishness and a delicate, gentle, self-pitying demeanor, instead presenting an image of grace, elegance, dignity, and charm. Despite the absence of arms, this imperfection bestows upon her an abstract identity, diminishing her mythological and literary character while enhancing her aesthetic and symbolic significance. The statue's torso, under its impeccable beauty, allows for a richer imagination of beauty without arms. As the goddess of beauty, the statue not only amply displays the moving charm of female physical beauty but also powerfully conveys a connotation of beauty and humanistic values beyond the physical, imparting a sense of purity and nobility. This perfect fusion of external and spiritual beauty is undoubtedly a concentrated expression of the ideals of truth, goodness, and beauty, affirming and celebrating human strength and beauty. Hence, since its discovery, it has been highly valued and deeply cherished globally. Historically, the Venus de Milo's exquisite lines have earned it a place as a rare treasure in the Louvre, serving as an enduring symbol of beauty and sublimity, reproduced in countless figurines and displayed in homes worldwide, offering perpetual aesthetic enjoyment.

From the point of view of critical metaphor, this sculpture perpetuates the metaphor through the image of Venus, the ancient Greek goddess of beauty. The body is Venus, and the metaphor extends to human nature and feminine beauty. As human beings, we each possess a unique sense of beauty, a happiness inherent in our humanity. Women, like men, are embodiments of wisdom and strength.

## 5. Research Results

The linguistic purpose of sculpture is to depict society and history, to exhibit human nature and artistic phenomena, and to reflect and influence the fundamental direction of public thought. Based on the critical metaphorical discourse analysis of the renowned sculpture Venus de Milo, this paper identifies the consensus reasons for the formation of the sculpture as follows.

Firstly, from a social perspective, the metaphorical construction of sculpture is grounded in the shared cognition and experiences of people within the same society. Each sculpture is crafted to serve a specific societal context and is constrained by the cognitive framework of a particular social culture. For instance, in feudal Chinese society, the general populace could not perceive the grandeur of the feminine ideal embodied in the ancient Greek sculpture Athena. Socially, sculpture reflects a nation's will and political stance; for example, the Sphinx merges the monarch with the divine beast, exuding a powerful sense of majesty and mystery, conveying to the people the pharaoh's divine rights, the state's will, and the sacred, inviolable connection with the gods.

Secondly, from a historical standpoint, sculpture is a product of history because it bears deep historical "marks." Sculptures from specific eras exhibit distinct characteristics, such as the Renaissance sculpture David. David profoundly reflects the humanism of the Renaissance through the medium of sculpture. It appears to celebrate and praise ancient Greek notions of human nature and the human form, signifying that people have emerged from the dark constraints of the Middle Ages and have come to fully recognize humanity's boundless power to transform the world. History is one of the wells of artistic inspiration and the solid "foundation" of art.

Lastly, from a cultural angle, sculpture acts as a mirror of culture. A particular sculpture embodies a particular culture. The metaphorical mapping in sculpture typically transitions from the concrete to the abstract, where "concrete" refers to the visible and tangible medium of the sculpture, and "abstract" pertains to the intangible and invisible culture. Michelangelo's David exemplifies the Renaissance period's celebration of human nature's greatness, the belief in human beings' infinite power to change the world, and the aspiration for liberation from oppressive political constraints. Thus, sculpture is a gateway to cultural understanding.

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

## 6. Conclusion

Utilizing O'Toole's visual semiotics method, this paper constructs a theoretical framework for the critical metaphor analysis of sculpture from the vantage point of cognitive linguistics, specifically examining the renowned sculpture Venus de Milo. The model initiates analysis by considering the three linguistic functions (modal function, expressive function, and compositional function), followed by an in-depth examination of the sculpture's discourse through a critical metaphor lens, culminating in a more nuanced understanding of the sculpture's semantic content. Additionally, this paper delves into the underlying reasons for the creation of sculptures, identifying three primary sources: social, historical, and cultural factors. The theoretical framework for critical metaphor analysis in sculpture is of significant value, as it empowers the observer to extract the discourse information from sculptures through a scientifically rigorous linguistic and cognitive analysis, thereby facilitating the reception of the sculpture's mainstream meaning and the perpetuation of cultural heritage.

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