

“The Gift of Love” as a Discourse: A Visual Discourse Analysis

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Abstract:

The study investigates Farshchian’s masterpiece “The Gift of Love” within a visual discourse analysis to unravel its representational and interactive meanings illustrated through Kress and Van Leeuwen’s composition model (2006). “The Gift of Love” is one of Farshchian’s paintings about which little analysis is done in visual discourse field. The findings reveal a great interactive and representational meaning emerging in information value, salience and framing realized in “the Gift of Love”. First of all, the topic of the canvas is introduced to the reader. Next, a general idea about visual discourse analysis is mentioned. Then, the model on which the study is based is explained and finally, the analysis is done according to the model. Conclusion and works cited are presented in the end.

Key words: (visual discourse analysis, information value, salience, framing, the Gift of Love).

Introduction:

Human beings have utilized visual communication since prehistoric era. Several elements are incorporated into various designs to convey specific messages to the viewers. Signs, drawings, pictures, diagrams, animations, advertising illustrations, paintings, etc. are among plenty features used in visual communication.

“The Gift of Love” as a painting by the Asian artist Mahmoud Farshchian is one of the most impressive works that needs to be investigated and analyzed in order to figure out its silent words.

The abovementioned work is the object of the present study within visual discourse analysis.

Kress and Van Leeuwen’s composition model (2006) is applied in this study for its suitability for the selected sample.

Along with the model aforementioned, the study tries to answer the following question: What are the representational and interactive meanings of “The Gift of Love” characterized by information value, salience and framing?

It is hypothesized that there are tough signs of representational and interactive meanings of “The Gift of Love” through the systems information value, salience and framing.

“The Gift of Love”:

Mahmoud Farshchian (1930) is the father of Persian painting (miniature) and a prominent figure who has several works in Iranian art some of which illustrate the tragedy of Ashura. “The Gift of Love” is one of his most touching masterpieces done in miniature technique about which insufficient analyses have been done. The work is so impressive because of the innocent infancy demonstrated on the canvas.

The infant is the youngest martyr of Ashura in which Imam Hussein Peace Be Upon Him (henceforth PBUH) the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH)

and many of his family members and companions were slaughtered. Ashura is the 10th day of Muharram, the 1st month of the Islamic lunar calendar to which a specific respect is devoted that according to Islamic tradition, battle is forbidden in this month.

The martyrdom of the youngest person in Karbala is the most miserable event in Ashura, and it has become one of the masterpieces by Farshchian.

The oppression of the youngest son of Imam Hussein (PBUH) and the manner of his martyrdom are so impressive that after fourteen centuries, they still hurt hearts.

For more impact Farshchian placed Ali Asghar (as) as the nucleus of the scene and left the surroundings empty. The artist also used warm colors for the empty spaces of the painting to convey the hot weather and the thirst of the six-year-old infant to the viewer.

Farshchian has dedicated this work to the exhibition of the holy shrine of Imam Redha (as).

Mahmoud Farshchian was born in 1930 in Isfahan. His father, who was the representative of Isfahan carpet, after realizing his son's interest in Iranian painting and art, sent him to the best teachers to be trained. Farshchian spent the rest of his artistic career by going to Isfahan Fine Arts Center, European museums, teaching and creating dozens of paintings with different religious, mystical and nationalistic themes.



Visual Discourse Analysis (VDA):

In relation with discourse analysis (Gee, 2005), the grammar of visual design (Kress and Vanleeuwen, 2006), and semiotics (Hodge and Kress, 1988), VDA as an approach is generally used to “analyze art as a language and its use” (Alberts, 2016: 83). In other words, discourse is not merely dedicated to spoken/ written texts and it embraces visual texts as well.

Rose (2001: 136) suggests that “Discourses are articulated through all sorts visual and verbal images and texts, specialized or not, and also through the practices that those languages permit”.

The Meaning of Composition:

Kress and Vanleeuwen’s composition model (2006) suggests three principles of composition through which the “representational and interactive meaning of the image” are related to each other. By “representational” Kress and

Vanleeuwen (2006:48) mean the participants (including concrete and abstract things) about whom/ which the image or painting is produced. By “interactive” they mean all participants related with making the image or viewing and interacting with it.

Information value, salience and framing (ibid: 177) are three criteria in the composition model; 1) information value: the composition of elements according to the zones of their location relating them to the viewer and to each other, top/ bottom, left/ right, center/ margin, carry a significant value; 2) salience: the placement of the elements in the foreground or back ground, their contrast in tonal value, their size, etc. attracts the viewer’s attention to several degrees. Regardless of where elements are located, salience leads to different degrees of focus and significance (ibid: 201); 3) framing: the existence or nonexistence of framing devices (like vectors or lines) signify the connection or disconnection of elements to each other. The absence of framing or its presence respectively stresses “group identity” or “individuality” (ibid: 203).

The Information Value of Left and Right:

The Information Value of Left and Right as Kress and Vanleeuwen (ibid: 180–

1) suggest, elements located on the left of the composition are identified as given (something already known by the viewer), elements located on the right as new (something not yet known).

The Information Value of Top and Bottom:

The Information Value of Top and Bottom as (ibid: 186) summarize is that the placement of the elements in the upper part is presented as “what might be” or the Ideal while the lower part is figured out as “what is” or the Real.

The Information Value of Center and Margin:

The Information Value of Center and Margin as (ibid: 196) note is that the nucleus part of the information is placed in the middle and all other elements are located around it.

Below is the illustrating figure of “the meaning of composition”.

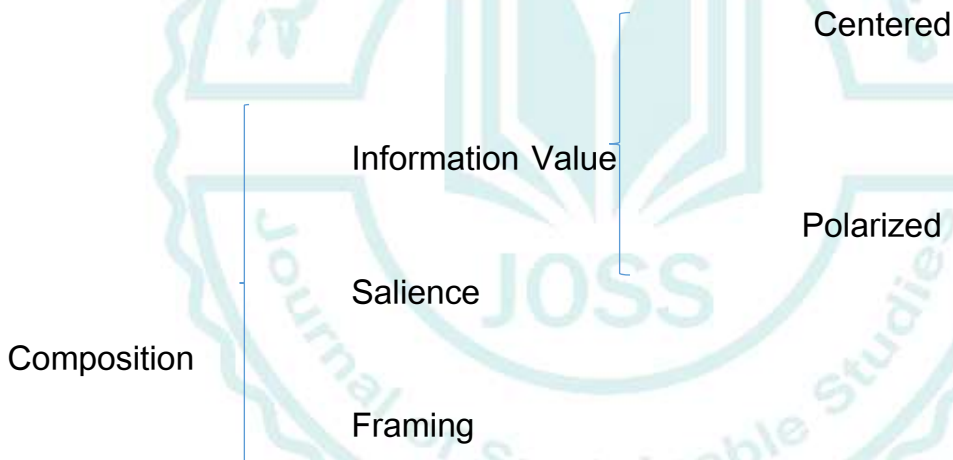


Fig 1. 1 The Meaning of Composition (Kress and Vanleeuwen, 2006: 210)

The Analysis

Information Value in the Gift of Love:

The composition is centered in the canvas. The significant centralization means that the element(s) is the nucleus of the composition and the kernel in the information which is intended to convey to the viewer. The father's hands are carrying the slaughtered infant and present it as he is offering a gift to the heaven. His hands are up-warded similar to the prayer position.

The white light is forwarded from the sky of to the infant that inspires the ideal situation; the light is forwarded from the heaven for accepting the gift (the infant).

Infant's death is illustrated through his horizontal angle. Having displayed the position of the wound in his body, the infant is painted in a side view.

From the interactive view point and despite the fact that the viewer feels a high level of sympathy towards the infant, the infant's face is depicted from the side view and his face is towards the sky so that the painter could demonstrate it closer to the sky than to the viewer.

Salience in the Gift of Love:

The father is foregrounded and the infant backgrounded, since the viewer is able to imagine the severity of the situation in which a father carries his slaughtered son on both hands.

Within the similarity of contrast between father's hand and infant's face, death is depicted for both participants (for the infant as the slain participant and for the father because of the harshness of the shocking event as if the father was also about to die). This is when both elements are depicted in pale color.

The length of the arrow which is targeted to the infant's throat is more than infant's length. What is more, the arrow is of a triple type that is with three sharp points that illustrates harshness and inhumanity towards an innocent creature like the infant in the canvas.

The yellow color implies the desert of Karbala and the drought. The white color displays innocence of both participants. The green shows the nobility of Prophet Mohammad's family, blood, and birth. The red is added not only to the infant's throat for it is shot by the triple-pointed arrow but also to the father's hand that signifies the wounds on his body as well.

Despite the fact that it has not received the greatest amount of light, the infant has a sharper focus and as a backgrounded, complicated and the smallest element, it is the most eye-catching participant of the composition, while the most significantly, the father has received the light, it is foregrounded, the simplest and the largest element in the composition. From the interactive meaning, the viewer faces the father with an anonymous world and the impossibility of understanding that world since he is engaged with much more important issues that his face is not painted so the viewer is never capable of realizing it.

Framing in the Gift of Love:

The vector is a mean to disconnect the viewer from the infant because the infant is now a martyr.

The presence of framing in this composition stresses the individuality, and the rareness of the participant (Imam Hussein PBUH) as well as his behavior in presenting the gift.

Father's face is not illustrated at all and from the interactive point of view, the viewer feels closer to the infant than to the father. This shows the strangeness and disconnection of the father to the viewer for the greatness of pain he feels for losing his infant on the one hand and the huge satisfaction he has for presenting the gift to the heaven on the other hand. This is to the extent that the painter disconnects the participant from the viewer in order to depict the degree of that massive pain and satisfaction in the same time.

Conclusions:

The study qualitatively scrutinizes the representational and interactive meanings of the image painted by Mahmoud Farshchian (1930) within the framework of visual discourse analysis incorporating Kress and Van Leeuwen's composition model (2006). The question of the study is answered through the analysis in revealing the representational and interacting meanings of "The Gift of Love" through the systems information value, salience and framing. In much of the canvas the harsh and severe scenes facing the viewer (interactive) and relating them to the participants (representational) are figured out.

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