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Introducing a Mixed Method for the Analysis of Urban Visual Culture texts; A Case Study on a Mural at Vanak Square, Tehran

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Extended Abstract

This paper aims to introduce a mixed research method for the analysis, reading, and interpretation of urban visual culture texts. To reach this goal, mural have been chosen as the most outstanding urban visual text. In order to do a case study, one of the outstanding wall-paintings located in Tehran's Vanak square, has been selected to be analyzed by a mixed method. The analysis of the visual text has been done in two stages including semiology and discourse analysis. For the first stage, we used O'Toole's semiotic method suitable for analyzing urban murals, and for the second stage, we employed Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Findings of the case study for the micro level showed that, key signifiers - as nodal points - of the text have been recognized as nature, city, man, and woman and the relationship and interaction between them have been distinguished in the form of binary oppositions such as nature (village)/city and man/woman. At the macro level, the main competitive discourses identified in the text, are Environmental Protection vs. Urban Sprawl and Masculism vs. Feminism, that are lively and actively in an antagonistic situation using their key signifiers. Finally, the dominant and hegemonic discourses through positive representation of their key signifiers can be considered as Environmental Protection and Masculism.

Keywords: semiotics, discourse analysis, visual culture, city, mural, Tehran

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INTRODUCTION

With a superficial and passing look at the surrounding environment at the streets and highways of Tehran, we notice that the city is enclosed by images in different types and formats. The images that are considered as text in communication science view-point, try to take the passerby's attention by showing-off, and every one of them has messages for their viewers in/directly. This point is not restricted to the case of Tehran, as a mega-urban area, because there is a consensus of opinions among most of the contemporary theoreticians and thinkers of the culture and media field, such as Baudrillard (1981), Debord (1988), Bryson (1988), Mirzoeff (1999), Heywood and Sandywell (1999), Rose (2001), Howells (2003), and Rojek (2007); they all have come to the conclusion that today societies have been affectively surrounded by visual culture.

PURPOSE

By doing a case study, the present paper aims two goals, including discovering the meanings and messages encoded in the sample visual text which is a mural painted on an apartment's wall located at one of Tehran's famous and crowded squares named Vanak, and secondly, to introduce a mixed method for the analysis of urban visual texts. Reviewing the relevant literature reveals an abundance of theoretical discussions on visual culture, and a deficit in the analytical methodology of visual culture. For the paper, the latter is more important. Research questions consists of three ones as follow: 1) What meanings are encoded in the visual text, and how they are produced and encoded? 2) What discourses could be recognized and how they construct our mind and identity? 3) How is the stance, situation and the position of the recognized discourses regarding each other? And which one is distinguished as the hegemonic one?

METHODOLOGY

Following Hall (1997) with his two methodological approaches, including semiotic and discursive approaches, and in order to have a comprehensive analytical method, the research method for analyzing urban visual culture texts will be a mixed one: consisting of semiotics and discourse analysis. First, in order to know about the description of meaning regime and meaning relations in the sample urban visual text, which is a mural, we use O'Toole's semiotic method suitable for the analysis of paintings. Then, to discover the discourses supporting the meaning relations and constructing the mind and identity in an urban visual text, we preferred to employ Laclau & Mouffe's discourse theory. O'Toole (2011), affected by systemic-functional linguist Michael Halliday, believes that in analyzing artistic works we can talk about three meanings/functions: representational, modal, and compositional. For analyzing painting works semiotically, he offers an analytical table consisting of

four units (picture, episode, figure, and organs) and three functions (representational, modal, and compositional).

For Laclau and Mouffe (1985), discourse is not a combination of sentences, as Foucault says, rather a series of signs. They believe that discourse is formed by the partial fixation of meaning around certain nodal points; a nodal point is a key privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered. Because a discourse is always constituted in relation to an outside, it is always in danger of being undermined by it, that is, its unity of meaning is in danger of being disrupted by other ways of fixing the meaning of the signs. Therefore, discourses can be understood as contingent, incomplete structures in the same undecidable terrain that never quite become completely structured. Hence there is always room for struggles and competitions over what the structure should look like, what discourses should prevail, and how meaning should be ascribed to the individual signs. For doing a discourse analysis based on Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical concepts, we need to ask some questions as follow:

- 1) What are the key signifiers in organizing the discourses identified in the text?
- 2) How have chains of equivalence been employed in the text to establish identities rationally?
- 3) How have identities of opposition been constructed in the text?
- 4) Are there struggling and competing discourses in the text? And how is hegemony established?

As a case study and in order to have our mixed method being tested, we selected a mural, an outstanding urban visual text. Our sample is located in Vanak square, one of Tehran's well-known squares. The picture follows:



Picture 1. The picture of a Mural in Vanak square, Tehran, Iran



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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results show that the production of meaning is done in layered way and in three levels of representational, modal, and compositional as O'Toole's semiotic model. At the first level, we see two men, located in the focal position of the painting, leaving an urban zone behind and walking toward a green natural region while carrying two kids on their shoulders. Besides that, there is a woman, located in the marginal position of the painting, bending down from an apartment's window, while shaking a piece of cleaning cloth and looking toward the men. At the second level, at the modal layer, we notice the agenda-setting of natural elements and the male characters that leads to the absorbance of audience's attention and involving him/her into the messages and meanings encoded in the painting such as the beauty and cleanliness of the nature, the health and calmness resulted from being in contact with nature, and preference of the higher social position of men in contrast to women. Having analyzed the third level, some critical points have been revealed including the conduction of viewers' eyes toward the nature, agenda-setting of the opposition between urban constructions and natural elements, introduction urban constructions as a threat to the nature, preference of nature/ natural elements over the urban elements, giving the central position of the text to the nature/ natural elements, making nature/ natural elements peaceful and pleasing to audience, reproduction of traditional social roles for men and women with masculinist approach, and invitation of the audience to return to nature.

Regarding identification of the discourses available at the text, results show that some recognized signifiers such as nature, city, man, and woman play the role of nodal points to create the binary opposition discourses of Environmental Protection vs. Urban Sprawl and Masculism vs. Feminism. In order to be able to talk about the way discourses try to construct our identity, we need to recognize the dominant ones because of their preferred position and having the advantage of taking audience's attention. Here, semiotic findings indicate that the discourses of Environmental Protection and Masculism have dominance over the other ones. The dominant discourses try to impose their meanings and messages to the audience's minds as the preferred ones. In this way, the discourse of Environmental Protection attempts to have influence in two ways, including making the sensitivity in audience concerning the protection of nature against its destroy and pollution and also encouraging the urban immigrants return to their villages to reduce the population of urban areas. By the same logic, the discourse of Masculism tries to conserve and reproduce the patriarchal values and traditional social roles in the family and society.

CONCLUSION

Our current social environment, especially in metropolises such as Tehran, is full of images. Consequently, our visuality is surrounded by various semantic networks affecting our vision to the world and the process of socialization in/directly. The duty of the researcher is to decode the meanings layered and the codes encoded at the text and to reveal the relations between the signifiers which help us identify the discursive orders. Each of discursive orders oppose each other to impose themselves as the preferred and hegemonic discourse of the text.

In the case study which was a critical reading of a mural in Tehran's Vanak square, we tried to employ a mixed method to be thorough covering both micro and macro details and be suitable for the analysis of urban visual texts. In relation to the mural which was a simple beautiful wall-painting at first look, results disclosed layers of meaning encoded at the text and the opposing discourses struggling with each other over gaining the dominance and hegemony.

NOVELTY

Reviewing the relevant literature reveals an abundance of theoretical discussions on visual culture, and a deficit in the analytical methodology of visual culture. The innovation of this paper is to introduce a mixed method to be thorough covering both micro and macro details and be suitable for the analysis of urban visual texts. It uses semiotics for finding micro details and for discovering macro details, it employs discourse analysis.



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