Presented at the 11th World Congress of Semiotics, Nanjing, China, October 2012 Published De Gruyter Mouton in *Chinese Semiotic Studies Vol.10 No.2 pp229-245* Online: 19 July 2014. Print: August 2014

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/css-2014-0021

Title

Bridging Civilisations: The Application of Systemic-Functional Semiotics in the Comparison of Drawings from China and Europe

Authors

Professor Howard Riley PhD MA(Royal College of Art)

Head of School of Research & Postgraduate Studies

Faculty of Art & Design

Swansea Metropolitan University

De La Beche Street

Swansea SA1 3EU

Wales, UK

Email: howard.riley@smu.ac.uk

Amanda Roberts MA BA PGCE

Doctoral Candidate

Faculty of Art & Design

Swansea Metropolitan University

Email: Amanda.roberts@smu.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper discusses the application of systemic-functional semiotics in the analysis of visual materials, and, specifically, presents an original systemic-functional model that is intended to facilitate both the analysis and synthesis of drawings in a cross-cultural context. The model is explained as developing from Michael O'Toole's systemic-functional semiotic model for painting (O'TOOLE, 2011) itself an adaptation of Michael Halliday's systemic-functional semiotic model for language (HALLIDAY, 1973, HALLIDAY, 1978,

HALLIDAY, 1985) The article is illustrated with examples of work from China, Europe, and the authors' drawing practice..

Introduction

In his article *Pushing Out the Boundaries: Designing a Systemic-Functional Model for Non-European Visual Arts*, Michael O'Toole ((O'Toole, 2005) demonstrates how systemic-functional semiotics can reveal how ideological values are embodied within the conventions of drawing by analysing a scroll painting of 1689 by Chinese artist Gong Xian.

This paper takes O'Toole's premise as its starting point: that systemic-functional semiotics can reveal a variety of ideological positions through analysis of visual work produced in a variety of cultural contexts. Specifically, the paper compares the representation of both landscape and figure within European and Chinese art.

O'Toole's systemic-functional model, elaborated in his 2011 *The Language of Displayed Art*, is an adaptation of the English socio-linguist Michael Halliday's (1973; 1978; 1985) model for language which is adumbrated below in terms suitable for a discussion of drawing as a code of visual communication.

Before visual comparisons are made, a brief explanation of their theoretical basis is offered:

The Social Semiotics of Drawing

From a materialist point of view, drawings are produced through the selection and combination of particular surfaces, drawing tools, and the marks resulting from their interaction. But semiotically speaking both artists and viewers of drawings take up positions, adopt attitudes, points of view which are influenced by their positions within their sets of social relations. Such an ideological positioning involves a definite way of using signs, and a structured sensibility (an aesthetic) both grounded in a particular system of social relations. How the artist selects and combines the compositional elements of the drawing, and how the viewer relates to that drawing are both functions of the social contexts in which the work is (re)produced.

But to simply say that drawings reflect social structure, (or in the case of the Western tradition of life drawing, the social relations between artist, model and viewer) is too passive: drawing not only expresses the social context but is also part of a more complex dialectic in which drawings *actively symbolise* the social system, thus producing as well as being produced by it.

Variation in ways of drawing is the symbolic expression of variation in social relationships. Drawing systems are produced within society, and help to produce social form in their turn. This dialectical relationship is what Michael Halliday (1978:183) discusses in the phrase *social semiotic*. Halliday developed his theory during a long career which began with the study of Chinese language structures. He studied in China in the 1950s under Luo Changpei at Beijing, and Wang Li at Lingnan, before returning to England to take a doctorate in Chinese linguistics at Cambridge University. Such cross-cultural studies of languages provided him with insights into the variety of languages. Here, we adapt Halliday's insight to another code of communication common to all cultures, that of drawing.

Varieties of drawing

Of the two kinds of variation in language identified by Halliday (et al.1964), *dialect* expresses the diversity of social structure, and *register* expresses the diversity of social process. Whilst the meaning of *dialect* may be commonly understood, *register* may require further discussion. It refers to the fact that language usage varies according to the situation in which it is used.

In terms of drawing, *register* would refer to the variation in selecting and combining visual elements according to the purpose for which the drawing was produced.

From this social semiotic perspective, any social context may be understood as a temporary construct, mapped in terms of three variables which Halliday (1978:33) calls *Field, Tenor,* and *Mode.*

Field of social process – what is going on at the time of production of the drawing.

- *Tenor* of social relationships the type of drawing we produce varies according to the level of formality, of technicality, of need for clarity of communication, etc. It is the role relationships the drawer, the subject matter, the viewer and their interrelationships that affect the variations.
- *Mode* of symbolic interaction in the sense that how we draw, and with which particular medium, varies with our attitude; from the clinically objective through the poetically gestural to an absent-minded doodling,

The Functions and Systems of Drawing

Any code of communication (language, dress, drawing ...) has three main functions: to represent some aspect of our experiences of the world; to both express our attitude, mood regarding our experience, and to position the receiver in terms of mood and attitude towards that which is being represented; and thirdly to structure these two into a coherent, perceptible form. These functions may be termed the *representational*, the *interpersonal*, and the *compositional*.

The parameters of social context, *field, tenor*, and *mode* are systematically related to the functions of the semiotic model. In fact, those meanings that constitute our understanding of any particular social situation are made visible through the selection and combination of elements within the semiotic model.

Parameter of social context	Function of drawing through which a social situation is realised
Field (what is happening)	Representational function

Tenor (who is taking part)	Interpersonal function
Mode (what part the semiotic code plays)	Compositional function

Figure 1 The Parameters of Social Context

Such a model which theorises how the functions of drawing operate within a social context relates specific choices to specific social contexts. We are thus able to imbue the relationship between code and social structure with dialectic resonances.

The chart shown here, Figure 2, is an attempt to map these functional relationships for the whole domain of drawing, and is an adaptation of O'Toole's (2011) format for analysing paintings. It should be noted that each term within each box of the model – for example, *Theme* in the first box - represents the whole range of available selections embraced by the term itself: every theme available to the artist (or indeed for the viewer's interpretation.) Each range of available choices implied by all those terms is what Halliday meant by *System:* a Hallidayian *system* represents a range of available choices. Hence the term *Systemic-Functional* semiotics!

. Function Level of Engagement	REPRESENTATIONAL (what is depicted)	INTERPERSONAL (how the viewer is positioned in terms of mood and attitude)	COMPOSITIONAL (how is it depicted)
--------------------------------------	--	--	---

The Work as Displayed	Theme Narrative Genre Representational/abstract Interplay of episodes/passages	Attitude, Modality Rhythm/Focal points Intimate/monumental Public/private Dynamic/static	Overall format and size Gestalt relations: horizontals, verticals, diagonals Frame/Mount/Light Range of colour/B&W Systems of geometry: perspective, orthographic, axonometric, etc.
Episodes of the Work	Actions, events central to narrative supporting narrative	Orientation of viewer Perspective/non perspective Gaze/eyework Modality: happy/gloomy, calm/excited etc.	Relative position in drawing Interplay of figures/passages Contrast of tone/texture
Combinations of marks (sub-assemblies)	Direction Transparency/opacity Atmosphere Time of day Surfaces/edges	Distance Force Heavy/lightweight Flatness/illusions of depth	Relative positions of marks Relative sizes of marks Division of picture- plane: ratios, angles Overlap of shapes/tones
Individual Marks	Effects of light on surfaces and media (air, water) in the environment	Hard/soft Stylisation Matt/gloss Wet/dry Indices of maker's movements	Position within picture plane Texture of surface Medium Size relative to picture- plane

Figure 2 The Functions and Systems of Drawing

Each System in the systemic functional semiotic chart represents specific choices made by the artist, who makes compositional selections that serve to position the viewer, who is then free to make decisions about their stance/attitude towards whatever is represented in the

work. A Postmodern understanding positions meanings generated as socially and culturally dependent . Social semiotic analysis is intrinsically suitable for generating multiple interpretations and may be applied across a multiplicity of viewing experiences. The analysis of works demonstrated in this paper will necessarily reflect understandings related to twentyfirst century Western European perspectives.

The Systemic-Functional Model in Action 1: Landscape

As O'Toole (2005:96) observes:

Particular systems may dominate in the realisation of each of the functions in any one visual culture, and each system may be realized in particular culturally characteristic forms and patterns...

These choices of representation are rarely arbitrary decisions on the part of the artist, but can represent and realise - make visible – the different ideologies to which the artists are affiliated.

For example, a comparative analysis of Claude Lorrain's *Landscape with Country Dance* (Figure 3) with its near-contemporary, Kuncan's *Landscape after Night Rain Shower*, (Figure 4) can demonstrate how certain of these Systems reveal ideological differences between the two, and how other Systems operate in very similar ways to position the

viewer in terms of their mood and attitude towards the subject-matter depicted.



Figure 3 Claude Lorrain 1640-41, Landscape with Country Dance. British Museum.



Figure 4 Kuncan, 1660 Landscape after Night Rain Shower. The Palace Museum Beijing.

A widely-held understanding of the differences between Chinese and European conventions for the depiction of three-dimensional space upon a two-dimensional surface is based on the systems of projective geometry favoured by each culture. For some time it has been understood that the cultural belief systems prevalent in Renaissance Italy gave rise to the development of Artificial Perspective, which places the viewer at the apex of the Euclidean cone of vision, as in the Lorrain drawing. For a similar length of time it has been understood in the West that such an egocentric ideology has not prevailed in Chinese visual culture, hence the more prevalent use of non-perspectival projective geometries such as Vertical Oblique projection (Dubery and Willats, 1983) in the Kuncan drawing. It is also worth noting here that within the Interpersonal Function the 'landscape' format of Lorrain's drawing is conducive to a reading of space as a wide vista, whereas Kuncan's choice of 'portrait' format is conducive to a reading of space as vertically structured. However, the wide range of geometric projections is but one System for positioning the viewer spatially – part of the function labelled the *Interpersonal* in Figure 2: other Systems at work on the viewer may be discerned in both Western and Chinese image-making, such as Focus, Gaze and Modality all at work in the three Functions simultaneously.

Differences between the artists' cultural values fully emerge when the following aspects of the interpersonal function are considered: orientation and focus of the viewer, the direction of the gaze and paths of eye movement, and the representation of distance through illusions of depth.

Lorrain grounds the viewer directly in front of the centre of the represented landscape and slightly elevated, as though positioned on a slight slope facing the scenery. The landscape is revealed as a stage set, trees and foliage to the sides and details in the foreground serve to frame the central narrative, the dancers themselves. These compositional choices allow the viewer to connect with the scene, we are invited to join the festive activities. The viewer's gaze is gradually drawn from this prime central focus, into a circular clockwise eyepath

from the cows in the foreground through the dancing figures, up the tree into the bright tonal block of the sky and drawn along the horizon line, taking in the picturesque idyll, down the facing trees and onto the goats, unattended and falling off the cliff. The narrative of the story reveals itself as the viewer's gaze is directed through the picture, and the landscape, characteristically for its cultural genre, recedes into the background.

Kuncan positions the viewer at some point in space, not grounded as in the Lorrain drawing, but gazing over an inaccessible and misty depth of landscape in which the point of focus varies as the eyework of the viewer roams from the bold diagonals of the rocky outcrop at lower right towards the high tonal contrast of the foliage in the centrally positioned foreground tree. The diagonal of the tree branches leads the eye to the finely detailed crane, the simply-constructed hut and, eventually, a human figure, lower left, hardly differentiated from his surroundings and who faces out of the pictorial plane. The line of the hut's roof draws the viewer's eye back into the landscape and the delicate upward sweep of the brushstrokes, suggesting undulating bamboo, lead us to the bridge affording access to the series of rather more sophisticated buildings that climb the gradient of the landscape, centre right. The continued upward sweep of these buildings form a curve across the picture connecting to the facing cliffs, upper left, upon which sits the highest, isolated building facing directly into the calligraphy which completes the composition. In Kuncan's work the potential narrative play between the crane, the seated figure and the buildings is made incidental to the expanse and grandeur of the landscape they exist within. His compositional choices serve to distance the viewer from the scene; we are awed by the mystery (mistery?) and monumentality of this landscape and we are reminded of our infinitesimally tiny significance in the presence of such soaring surroundings.

Having identified such diametrically-opposed cultural beliefs regarding the relationship between mankind and landscape expressed through the Systems at work in the Interpersonal function, let us see what our systemic-functional model can reveal about the two cultures by addressing the Representational Function. There are discernible similarities within these two drawings: at the level of engagement The Work as Displayed, both images figuratively represent rural landscapes. But despite their initial similarities, a further consideration of the works in relation to their representational function reveals clues to their different cultural influences and references, as we shall see: The *Episodes* of both drawings suggest a rural idyll, figures and buildings are harmoniously incorporated into the landscapes, and at the Combinations of Marks level of engagement, both drawings are executed in pen and sepia ink, with line worked on top of an underlying ink wash. There is a shared delicacy and a sensitivity in the mark making that creates a similar atmospheric quality in both works and which suggests that elements of the landscape have been carefully observed, even though selections from the Systems of projective geometry, gaze and focus position the viewer differently, as discussed above. However, Individual Marks that describe the textural quality of the foreground foliage and log in the Lorrain landscape and the complex arrangement of the rock bedding plane in Kuncan's image are combined with more generic and culturally specific forms of mark making. For example, both images define larger tonal blocks with wash, but the Lorrain landscape further defines areas of tone with fine line hatching. This is most evident in the foreground rocks, but also discernible in the foliage on the tree and in the clouds. Hatching, which uses closely spaced parallel lines to provide illusions of depth and shade, is a method of delineating tone embedded in the

European tradition, evolving from woodblock engraving. Highly developed in the drawings of Leonardo da Vinci, (Figure 5)



Figure 5 Leonardo da Vinci c1510-11 *The Muscles of the Shoulder* (detail) Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2012.

the technique became closely associated with Renaissance drawing which, through its subsequent association with the Academy, came to epitomise the formal traditions of European art. Hatching is not used in Kuncan's work. Instead the stylisation of the marks forming the tree in the compositional foreground have a *calligraphic* quality to them. The lines describing the forms of the trees are defined and applied in confident strokes without

the need for additional layering, indicating the importance of the direct calligraphic tradition of Chinese painting.

Within the drawings as displayed, the initial static atmosphere of the works is countered by Kuncan's fluid and dynamic brushwork, and by Lorrain's narrative played out by the dancing figures and their unattended goats. Mark making and narrative respectively create tensions between stillness and movement thus engaging the viewer through this apparent contradiction.

To sum up: for Lorrain, the landscape appears as a backdrop to the represented narrative, in Kuncan's drawing the narrative is inconsequential and insignificant in relation to its landscape setting. Such contrast might be understood as indicating a European preoccupation with the *Picturesque*, whereas the East ponders upon the *Sublime*.

The Systemic-Functional Model in Action 2: The Figure

Along with landscape, the human figure is one of the most common genres in art. This section analyses the representation of the figure within two cultures; contemporary China, and the contemporary practice of one of the authors, Roberts.

Engaging with Zhang Dali's installation *Chinese Offspring* at the level of *The Work in Context* (this work was displayed in the Saatchi Gallery, London in 2009), Figure 6 indicates the high degree of perceptual intrigue engendered through the contrast of exterior and interior lighting as the viewer glimpses the hanging figures from a distance.



Figure 6 Zhang Dali 2003-5 Chinese Offspring Saatchi Gallery, London 2009.



Figure 7 Zhang Dali 2003-5 Chinese Offspring installation view, Saatchi Gallery.

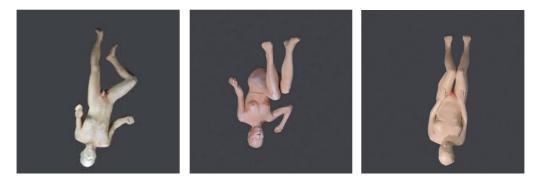


Figure 7a Zhang Dali 2003-5 Chinese Offspring (details)

Within the installation room, the life-size resin-moulded figures are displayed hanging from the ceiling, out of reach of the visitor, but close enough for the viewer to observe individual differences in the poses of these otherwise anonymised figures – no distinctions of dress or other codes of personal identity. A further opposition to that between individuality and anonymity is emphasised by looking up to these inverted

figures, positioning the viewer in a most uncomfortable attitude: the dignity of the figures' elevation contradicted by their undignified suspension by the feet, connoting a complete lack of control over their situation. Such oppositional compositional choices might be associated metaphorically with the wider cultural oppositions apparent in contemporary China: the shift from a rural way of life to an urban one, entailing the turning of lives upside down, in the common phrase; the necessity for many of the rural-based population to work in the construction of the rapidly-growing cities, abandoning their rural individuality to urban anonymity.



Figure 8 Zhang Dali 2003-5 Chinese Offspring (detail)

At the level of engagement *Individual Marks*, the viewer notices that each suspended figure is indeed marked with its individual number, but also with the common label *Chinese Offspring* and the signature of the artist (Figure 8). Could the conventions of the artworld – the provenancing activities of labelling, dating and signing of works – here be

construed as an ironic comment upon the controlling activities of the state, both in the spheres of workers control and population control policies?

In any case, Dali's representation of the human figure breaks with the traditional conventions of Chinese art, a trait we shall also discern in the seemingly traditional charcoal representations of the life model in Roberts' practice, discussed next:



Figure 9 Amanda Roberts 2012 Emma Extended Drawing. charcoal on paper

A useful entry point to the semiotic analysis of Roberts' *Extended Drawings* series is the mapping of the specific parameters of the particular set of social relations existing at their execution onto the three functions identified in Figures 1 and 2:

Field: A private studio drawing session.

Tenor: Female model and female artist interact at close quarters, with the artist directing the model's pose, and shifting viewing/drawing positions at regular intervals.

Mode: The interaction is realised visually through a series of charcoal drawings taped together, unframed and displayed in a variety of dispositions; wall-mounted, floor mounted.

The image underpinned with this basic background information already generates a series of assumptions and associations. The close proximity between the model and the artist during the drawing process within a private drawing studio suggests a level of intimacy and familiarity.

The initial impact of the Functional Compositional structure of The Work as *Displayed* is the scale of the drawings. The represented figures are large, and viewed within the context of the studio, dominate the viewing space. The scale of the works is accentuated by the figures' lack of containment within either a frame or a single sheet of paper. Each figure expands and fills the compositional plane, although the figure, and the multiple viewpoints represented within it, is enclosed within a figurative compositional whole. The absence of any background, other than areas of blocked tonal differentiations that operate as a ground against which the form of the body is defined, combined with the unframed edges of the work counteracts the concept of the drawing as an autonomous space. Instead, the figure inhabits the space within which it is exhibited. Since the drawings represent a single figure, narrative interplay exists, not between figures depicted within a pictorial composition, but between the represented figure and the viewer within this shared space. The small studio restricts remote viewing positions and encourages the viewer to move along or around the works. This mirrors the working practice with both the artist and viewers' positions variable and active, the represented figure static. This corresponds to conventional associations of the female nude with the 'viewer active/model passive' but the scale of the works, experienced within a restricted area, allows the represented figures to physically dominate the viewing space. The compositional decision not to frame, from the range of choices (what Halliday termed a system) labeled in Figure 2 as the system of Framing/MountingLighting, carries significant semiotic potential; the resultant edges and the physical mass of the represented figures imbue the drawings with a dynamism at odds with the passivity of the represented pose, and challenges viewers to make sense of - to resolve - the tensions thus set up. At the level of

engagement *The Work as Displayed*, the compositional choices of close-up viewing positions and a variety of viewpoints, together with the choice of medium – organically-expressive charcoal – afford the viewer opportunities to compare the perception of pictures with the perception of our four-dimensional world: we view the world from a moving path of observation. This reality of the perceptual process is implicit in these drawings, rather than obscured in the conventions of a single-point perspective projection system of geometry, and affords the viewer opportunities to experience pictorial perception as a movement through space.

The *Extended Drawings* each compositionally represent a single figure, the viewer engaging with a narrative representation of a specific person. *In Emma ; Extended Drawing,* (Figure 9) the focus of detail on the woman's (Emma's) face and tattooed arms recognizably represent individual identity. This emphasis on singularity is contrasted with the stylised and simplified drawing used to represent her body and the genre of life drawing, traditionally associated with generalized representations of the female body. Despite the geometric contortions resulting from the multiple perspective system that represents divergent viewpoints within a contained form, Emma appears comfortable, and her direct gaze suggests a confidence participation in her relationship with the viewer. Unlike Zhang Dali's figures, and despite her reclining pose Emma is neither static or passive and projects a level of control.

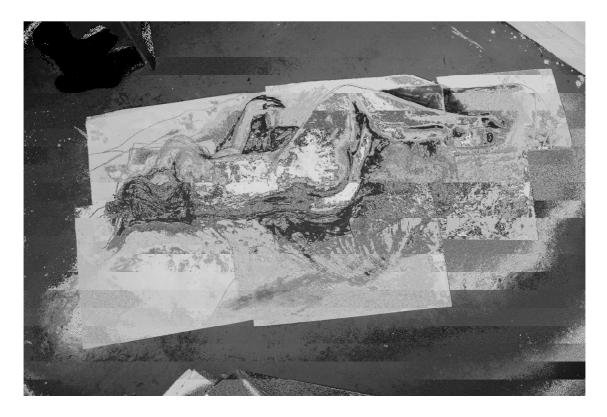


Figure 10 Amanda Roberts 2010 Tonya: Elevated Perspective, charcoal on paper.

Modality within the *Interpersonal Function* of the *The Work as Displayed* is inextricably linked to the viewer's own preconceptions and expectations. Figure 10,*Tonya: Elevated Perspective* is a representation of a woman lying naked on the floor. The drawing is also displayed on the floor, resulting in an elevation of the viewer's position. The power relationship between the depicted form and the viewer is explicit, the viewer looks down onto the represented body. How the viewer interprets this positioning is liable to differ from individual to individual. While producing the drawing Tonya was peaceful and self contained, but this might not be interpreted in the image produced. The figure could be open to sexual objectification, the model's eyes are averted from the viewer, the position she lies in could be interpreted as sexually responsive, but the figure is also vulnerable and exposed. Emotions generated will depend on the viewer's personal and particularised response to being placed in this relational position to the represented figure. The permutations of potential meanings to do with gender/power relations, both between artist and model and between the drawing and its viewers, may well stimulate those viewers to reconsider their individual preconceptions about, and stances towards, the possible permutations of those relations.

Ambiguities and contradictions identified in the *Extended Drawings* can be seen as reflecting the concerns and the interests of the artist. Feminist theorists have established that historically representations of the female nude are produced by men for a presumably male audience . (Clark 1960, Pollock 1988, Broude and Garrard 1982) As such , figurative representations of the female body are susceptible to an objectifying and voyeuristic male gaze. The position of a female artist, working in the life drawing room, producing figurative representations of another woman, remains unfixed and undefined. Semiotic analysis reveals and articulates the fact that ambiguities and tensions of the artist's position are embodied in works produced.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that particular choices made from the available range of choices (Halliday's *Systems*), when realised in culturally characteristic forms, reveal – confirm in many cases – the ideologies of those cultures. What has been construed in those cultures as 'natural' is revealed through systemic-functional analysis to be culturally-constructed.

References

- BROUDE, N.and GARRARD, M.1994 *The Power of Feminist Art.* New York: Harry N. Abrams.
- DUBERY, F. & WILLATS, J. 1983. *Perspective and Other Drawing Systems,* London, The Herbert Press.
- CLARK, K. 1960 The Nude. London: Penguin.
- HALLIDAY, M.A.K., McINTOSH, A. and STREVENS, P. 1964 *The Linguistic Sciences and Language Teaching.* London: Longman.

- HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1973 *Explorations in the Functions of Language*, London, Edward Arnold.
- HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1978. *Language as Social Semiotic: the Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning,* London, Edward Arnold.
- HALLIDAY, M. A. K. 1985. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar,* London, Edward Arnold.
- KREITLER, H. & KREITLER, S. 1972. *Psychology of the Arts,* Durham, NC, Duke University Press.

O'TOOLE, M. 2011. *The Language of Displayed Art* (2nd ed.), London, Routledge. POLLOCK, G. 1988 *Vision and Difference:*. London: Routledge.

O'TOOLE, M. 2005. Pushing Out the Boundaries: Designing a Systemic-Functional Model for Non-European Visual Arts. *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, 1(1), 85-99.