Floating Signifiers - The Polysemy of Visual Signs in Conceptual Photography

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Abstract. Conceptual photography, as a unique art form, has developed an independent visual language system and codes order in the field of contemporary art. This paper aims to explore the polysemy of visual signs in conceptual photography from the perspective of semiotics. Specifically, the paper explains in detail how conceptual photography reveals Floating Signifiers and their dynamic changes in different contexts through the rich visual language elements such as graphics, colors, light and shadow, texture, and words, in combination with the theory of floating signifiers. It further explores how visual signs are interpreted and given new meanings by viewers in different cultural and social contexts. This study not only enriches our understanding of the inner mechanism of conceptual photography, but also provides valuable references for practical creation, which is of great significance in promoting the innovation and development of the contemporary art field.

Keywords: Conceptual Photography; Visual Signs; Floating Signifiers; Polysemy.

1 Introduction

In conceptual photography the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. In the West, conceptual photography has become an important part of contemporary art since the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s. It breaks through the traditional role of photography function as document and turns into an art form that expresses the thoughts and ideas of its creators.[1] In China, since 1997, when the term 'conceptual photography' was formally introduced in art exhibitions, this art form has mushroomed, not only enriching the art field, but also profoundly affecting the public's understanding and appreciation of art. Especially today, with the increasing development of the Internet, we have stepped into the 'age of reading pictures', and the position of visual images in culture is becoming more and more prominent.[2] This process of changes requires us to update and deepen our research on image theory to adapt to the development needs of conceptual photography in the new era.

However, behind the prosperity of conceptual photography, we also face the problem of uneven quality of works. Some works express concepts in a more straightforward way, while others are too obscure and ambiguous to understand while pursuing

conceptualism. This phenomenon poses a challenge to creators, how to appropriately shape and use visual signs in conceptual photography to achieve the communication and reconstruction of the meaning of the works, which is undoubtedly the first step in the visual expression of concepts. At the same time, the polysemous nature of visual signs also poses a considerable challenge to the audience's interpretation. In different contexts, viewers may have very different understandings of the same work, and this uncertainty and complexity not only increases the difficulty of interpretation, but also enriches its connotation and value.

Floating Signifiers Theory provides a new perspective for us to understand this phenomenon. The theory argues that in contemporary society, visual symbols no longer have fixed signifiers, and their signified are open and fluid. [3] This perspective not only complements semiotics' focus on fixed relationships within sign systems, but also helps us understand how signs are reinterpreted and given new meanings in different cultural, social and historical contexts. However, even though the floating signifier theory has demonstrated strong explanatory power in a number of disciplines, it has been applied relatively little in the specific art form of conceptual photography. Therefore, this study aims to explore the polysemy of visual signs interpretation in conceptual photography, and to propose possible theoretical frameworks and methods by analyzing the phenomenon of multiple interpretations of conceptual photographic works in different contexts, with a view to providing new perspectives and analytical tools for the study of conceptual photography.

2   Visual Language of Conceptual Photography

The word photograph was coined in 1839 by Sir John Herschel, and photography has functioned primarily as a document. However, with the rise of conceptual art in the 1960s, photography began to be given a new concept, that is, 'conceptual photography'. Its essence is the extension and evolution of conceptual art in the medium, which marks the transformation of photography from a mere recording tool to an art form that expresses the creator's ideas and concepts, and belongs to the category of contemporary art, which is different from the traditional documentary news and landscape photography.

Conceptual photography has formed a set of unique visual language system, which mainly conveys information to the viewer through graphics, color, light and shadow, texture, text and other visual language elements. For example, the light and shadow language system express different emotions and atmospheres through such elements as brightness, contrast, and color temperature. High color can convey a beautiful atmosphere, while dark color works can reflect emotions such as sadness; strong contrast works show a jumpy and fashionable feeling, while lower contrast gives a serene and solemn texture; works with cold color temperature show a faraway style, while works with warm color convey a peaceful feeling. In the system of compositional language, different correlations can be reflected through the position and connection of the subjects in the picture, and the balance of the picture can be achieved through the adjustment of color blocks and volume.

Effective conceptual photography can skillfully use the visual language system of conceptual photography, placing each element on the most emotionally expressive 'punctum', which are not only visual focal points, but also signs with clear symbolic meanings. [4]As Roland Barthes put forward the concepts of 'STUDIUM' and 'PUNCTUM' in his book 'Camera Lucida', signs undoubtedly play the role of 'studium' and 'punctum' in conceptual photography. In conceptual photography, symbols undoubtedly play the roles of 'studium' and 'punctum'. Conceptual photography is also through these visual signs of 'studium' and 'punctum' role, stimulate the viewer's visual experience, triggering the viewer's inner experience, to achieve the resonance of thought, to complete the interpretation of the work. [5]

3   The Signifying Characteristics of Conceptual Photography

Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of semiology provides a key framework for understanding conceptual photography, namely that signs are composed of signifiers and signifieds. Signifiers - the form which the sign takes; and signifieds - the concepts it represents. [6]In conceptual photography, signifiers are embodied in visual images, which can be broken down into visual language elements such as graphics, colors, light and shadow, texture and words. These elements act as signs, directly affecting the viewer's senses and providing intuitive information about the work. The signified is the deeper meaning, thought, emotion or social comment implied behind these visual elements. The signified is abstract, and it needs the viewer's interpretation of the signifiers to perceive it indirectly. Thus, conceptual photography is often based on visual signs that convey deeper meanings to the viewer.

For example, 'The Two Ways of Life' by Oscar Gustave Rejlander, a pioneering photographer, which is inspired by the composition of Raffaello Sanzio da Urbino's 'Scuola di Atene'. However, in contrast to the original work, 'The Two Ways of Life' creates a strong visual impact and a critical atmosphere through the deliberate creation of chaotic scenes and an absurd plot. Compared with the 'elegant' scenes in the original work, 'The Two Ways of Life' shows a deep reflection on the moral choices of life under the appearance of 'vulgarity', reflecting the deeper meaning of the signified. Therefore, from a semiotic perspective, the meaning of 'Two Ways of Life' is a deep reflection on the moral choices of life. Therefore, from the perspective of semiology, the nature of conceptual photography is more highlighted, and it is easier for the viewers to understand the creator's real signifieds conveyed through each visual signs in the works of conceptual photography.

To sum up, signs are the key carriers for conveying the connotations and ideas of conceptual photography. Conceptual photography does not simply list and pile up the signs, but rather deconstructs and reshapes the visual signs and recreates them into virtual images, to express the photographer's ideas and views with individual characteristics. The Semiology Theory, as a discipline that analyses and interprets the meaning of signs, provides an effective interpretation tool for Conceptual Photography.

4   Polysemy of Signs in Conceptual Photography

In conceptual photography, visual signs carry rich connotations, and their meanings are not single and fixed, but show polysemy, which may be interpreted differently by different viewers. "The interpretation of conceptual photography is essentially an exploration of the relationship between symbolic reference and reference. In the process of interpretation, the relationship between the signifiers and signifieds is not fixed but is affected by the differences in the viewer's experience, experience and ideology. Therefore, the interpretation of conceptual photography will inevitably lead to different results, with multiple interpretations and multiple levels of meaning. [7]

For example, color, as an important signifier of visual signs, holds a very different symbolic meaning in different cultural contexts. In Chinese food photographer yumtang's 'Taste Bud Map' series, warm colors are cleverly used to recall people's nostalgic memories of food. In particular, the red colors of Chongqing hot pots are used to evoke not only the appetite, but also the warmth and boldness of the city. In Chinese culture, red is often a sign of happiness and celebration. However, in most parts of Africa, red is often associated with death and mourning. For example, red on the South African flag symbolizes the sacrifice and violence of the country's struggle for independence.

The differences in geographical cultures make the viewer's interpretation of the signifiers show remarkable diversity, thus giving visual images a profound polysemy of meaning.[8] As a form of representation, visual images provide intuitive signifiers visually, but it is often difficult to comprehensively and deeply reveal the signified meanings behind them. From a semiotic point of view, the content presented by visual images is only the 'signifiers', while the signified, i.e. the deeper meaning and extension behind the image, is often difficult to be fully revealed only by the content of the picture itself. The viewers' life background, education and the way of acquiring the image information will have an impact on their understanding of the visual images.

5   Floating Signifiers: The Interpretation of Signs in Conceptual Photography

Floating Signifiers theory provides us with a powerful tool to understand the polysemy of visual signs in conceptual photography. Structuralist anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss first proposed the concept of floating signifiers, which refers to signs that do not have a fixed meaning, but whose meanings change according to the context and can be used to express different contents. Floating Signifiers has its roots in linguistics and semiotics, but few people have introduced these concepts into conceptual photography.

The semiotician Roland Barthes does not specifically use the term 'Floating Signifiers', but he believed that any image is polysemous, and that embedded in its signifieds are a 'floating' meaning, where the viewer has an open interpretation of the visual signs.[9] Therefore, this paper believes that Floating Signifiers emphasizes the fluidity and polysemy of signs, in contrast to the relatively stable relationship between signifiers and signifieds in traditional semiology. Floating Signifiers complements semiology' focus on fixed relationships within sign systems, helping us to understand how signs are

reinterpreted and given new meanings in different cultural, social and historical contexts.

Cindy Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" of the late 1970s, for example, Sherman conceives a conceptual project that she then realises in photographs. Inspired by female characters in films, she dresses herself as a victim, a tease, a character icon, a demon, etc., but these self-portraits have no specific identity or story to tell. In these works, the self-portraits become floating visual signs whose signifiers (self-portraits) and signifieds (social roles and identities) are not fixed but open and polysemous. They can reflect the original face of the hidden dirt of society, or the doomsday carnival of the common people, or a continuous story full of intrigues. With the random combination of violence, sexuality, darkness, repression and indifference contained in the works, viewers see both what is expressed in the works and the stream-of-consciousness form that the viewer's self-experience associates with the works. Viewers attach different meanings to these images according to their own cultural backgrounds, gender concepts and personal experiences. In this way, Sherman's work embodies the concept of floating signifiers.

Through the Floating Signifiers theory, we can better understand how the visual signs in conceptual photography generate multiple meanings in different viewers' interpretations. This not only reveals the complexity and richness of conceptual photography, but also highlights the importance of cultural background, personal experience and emotion in the interpretation of signs.

6   Conclusions

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of the visual language system of conceptual photography, revealing the emotions, atmosphere, as well as the creator's thoughts and concepts that are conveyed through the elements of graphics, colors, light and shadow. As signifiers, these visual elements directly affect the viewer's sensory experience, while the deeper meanings and ideas behind them are signified and need to be perceived by the viewer through interpretation. This relationship between signifiers and signifieds is the key to conveying deeper meanings in conceptual photography.

The findings of this study emphasize the polysemy of visual signs in conceptual photography and the non-fixed relationship between the signifiers and the signifieds. By analyzing conceptual photography in different contexts, this paper finds that the meanings of signs are open, fluid and deeply influenced by the viewer's personal background and experience. Different viewers have different interpretations of the same visual signs, and this multiplicity of meanings not only enriches the connotation of conceptual photography, but also enables the works to cross cultural and linguistic boundaries and resonate with a wider public.

This paper borrows the Floating Signifiers theory to provide a tool for understanding the polysemy of visual signs in conceptual photography. In contrast to the relatively fixed sign relations in traditional semiotics, Floating Signifiers emphasizes the fluidity and openness of sign meanings. For the viewer, this theory facilitates the reinterpretation and assignment of new meanings to visual signs in different cultural, social and

historical contexts. For creators, the Floating Signifiers theory also provides an in-depth understanding of the multiple meanings of visual signs, encouraging them to pay more attention to the multi-level interpretation of signs and cultural resonance during the creative process, to create conceptual photographs with greater depth and breadth.

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