

Book Review

Liu, Tao. 2021. *Visual rhetoric*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 495 pp., Hardback RMB 126, ISBN 978-7-301-32064-8.

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Visual rhetoric (《视觉修辞学》) is a comprehensive culmination of visual communication theories and the author Tao Liu's extensive examinations of Chinese visual rhetoric case studies over the years. As people's daily lives have taken a pictorial turn in recent decades, visual rhetoric studies, a subject first discussed by Roland Barthes in his seminal 1964 paper *Rhétorique de l'image*, has evolved into a significant study area, owing to the scholarly efforts of Thomas Benson, John Berger, Gunther Kress, Theo van Leeuwen, and Cara A. Finnegan, among many others. Visual rhetoric studies, in general, adopts a critical perspective to examine and deconstruct stereotypes and myths in images, posters, films, television, and advertising (Kenney and Scott 2003: 35–49), all of which have offered valuable insights into contemporary visual phenomena and prompted the need for a comprehensive and integrative investigation. *Visual rhetoric* unquestionably answers this call by compiling a comprehensive systematization of visual rhetoric ideas.

In nine chapters divided into two key sections, *Visual rhetoric* addresses the fundamental question of how meanings are created, communicated, and accepted, thereby bridging the divide between semiotics and communication studies. The contribution of *Visual rhetoric* is threefold. Firstly, *Visual rhetoric* provides a comprehensive systematization of visual rhetoric literature and how it has evolved over time, but also of the limitations of visual rhetoric within the Euro-North American historical configuration. Secondly, *Visual rhetoric* offers rich analysis of Chinese visual rhetoric case studies, which are all rarely seen in the existing literature. For instance, using the *Dianshizhai pictorial*, *Wanli Guanzhen*, and *Bo Jia medical practice atlas* as starting points, *Visual rhetoric* examines how the visual metaphor of “tumor” aided Western medicine in establishing its legal position in modern China. Last but not least, *Visual rhetoric* enables its readers to understand how image constitutes a useful lens for understanding culture, thoughts, values, and ways of life so as to provide a glimpse into the complex interconnections between political, cultural, economic, and interpersonal realms of experience. Trained as a communications scholar, Liu deftly weaves together his expertise at the intersection of media, literature, and culture and draws on literature on Chinese history studies.

The introduction to *Visual rhetoric* summarizes the history of visual rhetoric and explores how the study of visual rhetoric extends beyond linguistic rhetoric to visual text. It chronicles the evolution of visual rhetoric studies into a study field comprised of the following: the disciplinary context of the rise of visual rhetoric, classical works, concept formation, and the meaning mechanism. Liu points out that the study of visual rhetoric focuses on visibility and rhetoric, and reveals how visual persuasion can be deconstructed by exposing the meaning structure and rhetorical frameworks of visual texts. The introduction's central thesis is that, in addition to such "conventional" visual texts as images, movies, and videos, the research objects of modern visual rhetoric should also include visual physical texts such as plazas, museums, memorial halls, and amusement parks, as well as exhibitions, celebrations, and ceremonies.

Chapter 1, "Visual studies and visual rhetoric paradigms," discusses the epistemological distinctions between visual rhetoric and other image studies. This chapter categorizes visual rhetoric studies into five sub-areas: (1) rhetorical strategy, asking how visual texts can be encoded by discourse and how can they act on viewers rhetorically; (2) rhetorical effect, asking how visual signs and texts produce rhetorical effects and construct meanings; (3) rhetorical communication, asking how visual narrative is formed in the dimensions of text, discourse, and practice; (4) rhetorical language, which focuses on the study of visual grammar and the multimodal discourse of texts, regarding rhetorical structure as a multi-coding system, while connotations exist in specific rhetorical structures in the form of coding (that is, metaphor, metonymy, irony, fable, symbol, and other rhetorical structures as meaning devices); and (5) rhetorical acceptance, enquiring into how pictures and their reflections on images influence how individuals exist rhetorically.

Chapter 2, "Verbal-visual intertextuality and relations," discusses the formal meaning structure of multimedia texts comprising words and pictures. After reviewing Allan Paivio's concept of double coding and the resulting theory of language-graph interaction, this chapter points out that language is the dominant interpretive structure. Taking *Dianshizhai pictorial* in early modern China as an example, Liu explores the appeal of visuals to meaning in early modern China, arguing that contemporary Chinese pictorials do not extend beyond the history of painting poetry, comic strips, and illustrated novels. First of all, words are the main carrier to present plots and complete narration. Secondly, while visuals have a ritualistic and implicit meaning in rhetoric, the idea and content of the presentation must be clearly defined in words. The rhetorical meaning of images is ritual and implicit, but the theme and content to be presented need to be clearly determined in words. As is well known, traditional Chinese painting strives for spirit similarity rather than form resemblance. Therefore, poems on paintings need to

give clear hints of the objects and express the purport of the paintings. As such, the argument that language is used as a “tone-setting medium” provides a supplementary example for the more general study of the relationship between language and pictures. On this premise, Liu asserts that there is still a dialogical interaction between images and words, as seen by the meme-style communication of images and texts marked by games, sarcasm, and spoofs. Nowadays, people use photo-editing software to modify, adapt, and collage images at will, which destroys the consistency of narrative between language and pictures, causing tension between images and words. Images and words are self-contained and can engage in interactive discourse, offering complimentary, contradictory, and even mutually negative interpretations. This exchange between visuals and words significantly adds to the depth of rhetoric.

As it progresses, the book turns to delving into the relationship between societal context and rhetoric. Chapter 3, “Image interpretation: Context and codes,” explains how the meaning of signifiers varies according to context. Liu observes that the transient, incidental, and ambiguous nature of an image’s signifier and signified is due to its placement in several meaning fields, or contexts. To begin with, Liu focuses on the picture events that drive image practice development and identifies three factors that influence their meaning generation: the intertextual context, the situational environment, and the cultural context. The first relates to the mutual interaction between texts inside the text system, the second to the specific rules in the space–time field where events occur, and the third to the wider social and cultural system where the codes of collective memory play a basic role in interpretation. Liu distinguishes three types of situations in the discussion of a situational context: discourse situation, topic situation, and spatial situation, and proposes that they establish a visual frame, concentration symbol, and metaphoric tension of image narrative respectively, which provides a practical description of the ideographic mechanism for the rhetorical reproduction of events through images. In the discussion of cultural context, starting from the dialectical relationship between iconicity and conventionality, Liu elaborates on how the “similarity” of visual rhetorical symbols comes into being in cultural traditions and customs, which provides a semiotic explanation for how visual rhetoric emerges under different cultural code conventions.

Chapter 4, “Metaphor/metonymy and visual rhetorical structure,” deals with two basic rhetorical figures, metaphor and metonymy, attending to how they serve as the fundamental structure of visual rhetoric. Firstly, taking George Lakoff’s discussion on metaphor as the starting point, Liu explores metaphor and metonymy from a cognitive perspective. He then points out that the tenor and vehicle of metaphor are in different cognitive domains, but they are connected based on similarity. The tenor and vehicle of metonymy are in the same cognitive

domain, and their rhetorical essence is the same-domain reference. Thus, Liu describes the three cognitive tasks of metaphor as follows: giving context, framing, and producing meaning. Then, building on Roman Jakobson's discussion of metaphor and metonymy as the mechanisms by which syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes generate meaning, Liu deconstructs Lacan and Metz's discussion of the relationship between condensation and metaphor and displacement and metonymy, and delves further into the analysis of visual rhetorical structure. Liu asserts that visual metaphor may be classified into two types: constitutive and conceptual. The tenor and vehicle of the former are present in the visual structure at the same time, which can be understood as a collage of different visual elements in space or a montage of the time dimension. The characteristic of the latter is that the tenor is present in the visual structure while the vehicle is absent, so the existence of the vehicle can only be imagined utilizing conceptual schema. Likewise, visual metonymy can be divided into indexical metonymy and conceptual metonymy. In this regard, similarly, Liu makes a detailed and in-depth exploration on how to analyze the rhetoric of typical visual symbols representing China, such as dragon, panda, and national flag. However, the representational interaction between metaphor and metonymy in graphic texts involves complex meaning issues such as meaning extension, style endowing, and aesthetic meaning change at different levels, which further responds to the intertextual relationship between images and words proposed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 5, "Visual image and the image-constructing mechanism," digs deep into the meaning generation of images. In this chapter, the issue of image is examined in terms of the word-meaning debate in Chinese traditional literary theory, in which the rich umbrella term "word" includes language, rhetoric, and its expression medium. "Meaning" in the philosophical sense includes the way of the world or the way all things exist, as well as aesthetic experience, perception, and taste and charm in the literary and aesthetic sense. The theory that "words can't fully express meaning" (*yan bu jin yi*) represented by Laozi, Zhuangzi, Bi Wang, and Ji Lu holds that language itself sets a cognitive cage, and "meaning" is difficult to be reached by "words," thus giving rise to the emergence of "image." The term "setting up image to completely convey meaning" (*li xiang yi jin yi*) refers to the cognitive process of bridging the cognitive divide between words and meaning through image, whereas the sixty-four hexagrams are visual cognitive models with an inference function rather than replication. As such, the term "picture" transcends its original purpose as a means of linguistic replication. It is worth noting that Chinese traditional literary theory maintains that "image" is a superior carrier of meaning expression to "word," since it is based on the physical picture. As a result, the most important process of Chinese linguistic creativity is

comprehending and appropriating its core shape. Liu begins the examination of cultural pictures by defining their rhetorical core as follows: their meaning creation is based on the evocation, activation, and expropriation of images maintained in collective memory via the framework of visual metaphor in order to fulfill their symbolism. These debates over classical literary theory and Chinese reality contribute to the development of complementary Chinese thought in visual rhetoric theory.

Chapter 6, “Visual schema and image-recognition patterns,” discusses how schema, as meta-frames, i.e. the underlying language of frame generation, generate images through established structures and formal language. Taking the metaphor of image rhetoric in modern China as an example, Liu delves into the evolution of the image of motherland from being a “mother” to “Azhongge,” and proposes that this change from “container illustration” to “front-back illustration” means that its connotation changes from “protection” and “security” to “following” and “trust,” and that there are subtle political discourse changes behind it. Combining the cognitive study of visual rhetoric with cultural studies, Liu reveals how the narrative of masculinity and nationalism integrate and enhance one another.

Starting from Chapter 7, the book turns to broader theoretical and methodological aspects of visual rhetoric studies. Chapter 7, “Visual rhetoric methods,” mainly discusses the methods of visual rhetorical analysis for different texts, which Liu divides into three types: (1) media texts, represented by advertisements, movies, photography, cartoons, documentaries, and news pictures; (2) spatial texts, represented by plazas, supermarkets, memorial halls, museums, and celebration ceremonies, and (3) event texts, represented by image events on public issues. Liu points out that, although the visual grammar model can be used to clearly analyze the image meaning of media texts to give visual grammar a rhetorical perspective, the grammatical analysis must be carried out in a rhetorical context and with rhetorical meaning. In addition, the index system for the visual grammar model should be re-contextualized to critically interpret this text. A study on the visual rhetorical grammar of spatial texts should be conducted from four perspectives: spatial form, practice, ideography, and function, asking how the meaning generation of the function of public space is carried out visually. For example, how do multinational supermarkets, as public consumption spaces, metaphorically complete the community production of consumers while realizing the function of commercial layout through the regional experience inside supermarkets, and thus generate a cosmopolitan imagination? To conduct a visual rhetorical analysis of event text, it is necessary to grasp the condensed signs symbolizing the decisive moment and to discuss their life cycle and the cross-

media flow process using the image tracking method. This allows a chronological examination of the process of meaning evolution of image events.

Chapter 8, “Visual framing analysis,” calls for a visual turn in frame theory, and holds that images set up a negotiating space in which different subjects compete for meaning. Therefore, the role of the visual frame lies in determining the legitimacy of subjects with different meanings in images and providing guidance for the uncertainty of meaning. Liu points out that, compared with frames in written language, visual frames have richer production forms, which can be presented directly in visual form utilizing element opposition and color contrast, can create scenario conflict according to binary opposition coding, and can set up conflicting frames by activating different cultural images. The visual framework can be divided into five types or levels: 1) indicator framework, which mainly displays image themes, such as background, content, subject attributes, and behaviors, corresponding to the content theme system; 2) semantic framework, which pays attention to the distance, modality, information value, and salience of each element of the image at the visual grammar level, corresponding to the visual language system; 3) narrative framework, which follows the narrative time and space of images, subject opposition, language–picture interaction, etc., corresponding to the narrative structure system; 4) argument framework, which concerns how visual argumentation is realized through facts, emotions, and knowledge, corresponding to the rhetorical argumentation system; and 5) cognitive framework, which discusses metonymy, metaphor, and image schema of images at the visual psychological level, corresponding to the cognitive model system. Based on the theoretical arguments, Liu takes Western news data as the research object, and reveals the process of transforming data about China into visible illustrations and narratives. In the first step, the semantic framework of power is reset in the process of data selection by transforming the chain of data into a matrix of data. Second, the demonstration framework is set up by rearranging the visual elements of relativity and reconstructing the facts. Then, time and space are re-visualized to conceal China’s subjectivity and build an altered visual rhetorical landscape. Finally, this chapter criticizes the implicit construction of “data otherness” using the theory of “cultural markedness” put forward by Chinese semiotician Yiheng Zhao, and reveals how data visualization about China conforms to and strengthens the production of prejudice about China in Western media as the inclination of “markedness” changes.

In establishing a theoretical framework of new research topics, scholars have to deal with the key task of reorganizing the academic traditions. Chapter 9, “Visual rhetoric criticism,” focuses on how traditional rhetoric and new rhetoric provide a critical perspective for the study of visual rhetoric. First of all, Liu points out that the five propositions of traditional rhetoric that center on “persuasion,”

namely invitation, disposition, style, memory, and delivery, respectively correspond to the study of visual discourse construction, visual text structure, visual formal language, visual symbol function, and visual communication strategy. Then, Liu discusses the four major themes in Kenneth Burke's new rhetoric that are centered on "identity," namely rhetorical identity, the dramatic pentad, rhetorical situation, and fantasy theme, and suggests that they correspond to the placement of images to viewers, the rhetorical narration of images, meaning rivalry, and symbolic generation of images respectively. Liu develops an innovative visual critique paradigm, dubbed the CIMIA model, which is composed of five connected rhetorical dimensions: context, ideography, metaphor, image, and culture. The corresponding rhetorical principles are interpretation structure, concept production, cross-domain mapping, symbolic image, and frame reconstruction. With the construction of the theoretical model complete, Liu returns to the level of visual practice and discusses how image events pictorially act on social mobilization. He takes the concept of *punctum* put forward by Barthes as the starting point in the formal analysis, and indicates that its formation is not only "selected" on the aggregation axis, but that it also plays a role in the analogy or contrast relationship with other substituted components, and its opposition, conflict, and anomaly have become the basis for mobilizing image meaning. Currently, most image events appear in the form of performative visual action. Therefore, further research should also examine the interactive relationship between image text and society, how to evoke images outside the picture through metaphor, how to construct an intertextual system, how to establish an intertextual system, and how to generate repertory structure in action.

As a semiotic researcher specializing in Chinese rhetoric, I have to remark that *Visual rhetoric* has the potential to have a particularly deep influence on visual studies by presenting novel theoretical models and perceptive interpretations of contemporary China's pictorial age. *Visual rhetoric* understands images as lenses and diagrams to unpack the complexity of social life, with an interest in combining semiotics studies, communication studies, and history studies. The book is a crucial step for those that are in the business of teaching and studying semiotics and its influence on non-Western histories, identity, and governance. However, there are some factors that may deter its readers from completely engaging with it. Non-Chinese readers may require sophisticated translation in order to approach Liu's categorizations and terminology with ease. Additionally, readers may want additional contextual knowledge in order to comprehend the case studies of Chinese visual rhetoric.

References

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