

A Fiction: Discussion of the Design Quality of Contemporary Window Display

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ABSTRACT

Based on the theory of semiotics and the principle and method of intended interpretation, this paper discusses the essence, reason and current situation of the phenomenon of contemporary window display changing from object display to scene display. This paper holds that, the scene display of contemporary window display is actually a kind of fictitious meaning design, which demonstrates a three-stage relationship of design intent, display scene, and consumer experience. The ultimate realization of its design utility lies in the integration of the consumer expectations given by the former two and the consumer experience of the audience; in particular, it is worth noting that fiction and reality do not conflict, and narrative fiction and technical fiction still need to take the authenticity of consumption intention as the ultimate goal.

Keywords: Window display, Fiction, Intended interpretation, Consumer culture.

1. INTRODUCTION

At first, display of the window is the display of the merchandise, and the merchandise is the only focus of the window design. But when the buying chain changes from the sales chain, extends the consumption time, and gets its own independent space — the display of goods, especially the window problem also gets complicated. Many related studies focus on artistic design, psychological marketing and so on, with the visual presentation of harmony as the conclusion of the study. But why do consumers repeatedly pay for "beauty"? Where is the consumption of goods go? This paper holds that the issue of window display should not only stay at the design level of the category art, but also lie in a kind of fiction from form to meaning. The visual beauty has actually pointed out to the scene, which is a typical feature of the display in the consumer era, as well as a basic reading ability of the public as consumers.

2. PAST AND PRESENT

During the period of bartering, people ensure each other's quality by displaying, watching, and touching the objects, in exchange for personal needs. That is, people always unconsciously

demonstrate items to show their sincerity, and eventually successfully complete a win-win deal. In interpersonal relationships, "object displaying" itself is a kind of human nature, as what music is to emotional expression. Subsequently, general equivalents such as gold and currency were born. People could buy commodities in one direction, and the display of goods was no longer interchangeable between the two sides. Instead, it was realized through putting or hanging the goods to achieve the effect of clear presentation and welcome more customers at the same time.

This is a classic traditional display, based on the sincerity of the seller and the utility of the goods, buyers can touch them at any time to check. Even in the modern society, this is still a necessary basic way of display, displaying only "the thing itself", so that people pay attention to the value of the thing, such as good function, beautiful appearance, convenience for small size, etc.

It was not until the early 1920s when the Guangshi company in Shanghai introduced window advertising from abroad¹, that was another epochal way of display found, which grew rapidly with the development of the store. At first, the commodity

1. See Liu Bin. Discussion on Window Display. *Oriental Art*, No. 03, 1994: p21.

was confined to the closed window, and transparent glass realize the first separation between the goods and consumers. At this time, the change of display nature is self-evident. If the ideal process of traditional object display is to make customers "stand in front of the goods, watch it, touch it and buy it" ², modern displays focus on the viewing part and encourage the buying "action" by arousing customers' "attention, interest, desire and memory" (American psychologist Roland Hall's "AIDMA law" on consumer buying behavior) ³. Especially since the second half of the 20th century, the "viewing" culture of window advertisements has developed rapidly. Not only have theories such as "theater theory" ⁴ and "urban environmental art" ⁵ appeared, but specialized practical occupations such as window display division have also emerged.

The difference between "viewing" culture and traditional object display is far more than the physical distance between goods and people. The independence and expansion of display space give greater freedom to design, and the window for launching special products will not be abused in the redundant stacking of goods. Therefore, the display division uses individual exhibition shelves, lights, colors and other decorations to make the window into a rich and enticing picture of imagination — the display of objects in the window has been "contextualize". Essential things, such as furniture and clothing, are reduced to the mannequin with full emotions at home and good figure; non-essential items such as luxuries are also placed under colorful combinations and lighting. The scene-based window advertisement replaces trial with imagination, and people's attention is no longer limited to "the object itself". No matter the viewer approves or opposes it, the display of the pragmaticity of goods and objects has gradually faded away, and we half consciously enter into some kind of scene or sensory experience close to the scene.

As an extension of advertising in the three-dimensional world, the window introduces the artistic creativity in the plane into the three-dimensional object display field, prompting the

latter to complete the modern innovation. "As long as the object is only liberated in its function, the liberation of man, on the other hand, remains as the user of the object" ⁶. However, when the commodity begins to be viewed at a distance, from the touch trial to the design of special context, the object display is no longer confined to the object itself, it first obtains freedom from the space. Over the past decades, glass windows have evolved from closed to transparent and semi-permeable, becoming more and more integrated with the environment inside and outside the store, and having closer ties with the scenes and contexts.

3. REASONS WHY WINDOW DISPLAYS GO FICTIONAL

Corresponding to the retreat of functional display is the low ebb period of functional consumption in modern society, which has been comprehensively described in Baudrillard's *The Consumer Society*. The relative abundance of things, the encouragement of the mass media, the collective transformation of individual happiness and other urge commodities to have additional advantages beyond the function, even in the original production process, this advantage is gradually "deeply engraved and implanted into every link of material production" ⁷. Mr. Wu Xingming believes that the basic value coordinates of design objects can be divided into three dimensions, namely, function, materiality and meaning ⁸. The sensation of objects still makes us pay attention to the objects themselves and receive the impact and joy from the perceptual level from their unique qualities, such as material, texture and mass surface. Meaning originates from our social experience and ultimately conveys a certain perception through the construction of symbols. Non-functional consumption, which we usually refer to, is based on the sense of things and consumption of meaning.

Just like the relationship between signifier and signified, symbols and meanings are just like two sides of a coin. However, in visual perception,

2. Chen Liping. *In-Store Merchandising*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2008: p129.

3. Chen Liping. *In-Store Merchandising*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2008: p267.

4. Chen Liping. *In-Store Merchandising*. Beijing: Renmin University of China Press, 2008: p102.

5. Lin Mei, Mou Xia. Visual Sensation Effect of Window Display. *Journal of Xi'an Institute of Engineering Science and Technology*, 2007 (05).

6. Jean Baudrillard. *The System of Object*. Trans. Lin Zhiming. Shanghai: Shanghai People Publishing House, 2001: p16.

7. Wu Xingming. *Aesthetics of Reconstruction Production — Research on the Ideological Dimension of Deconstruction and Cultural Industry Research*. *Literature and Art Studies*, 2011, 11: p8.

8. Wu Xingming. Reflection on the "Chinese Style" — Research on the Design Foundation of Chinese Modernity Quality. *Literature and Art Studies*, issue 10, 2012: p18.

meaning cannot be actually present, and can only prove its existence through symbols. The display of goods and objects naturally shifts to the compound meaning of absence by selecting symbols and combining scenes. In the process of viewing, the function and sensation of the object itself are also placed in a specific context, encouraging the viewer to perceive its utility and impact force through association. The window scene or the corner in the living landscape, or the unattainable fantasy, all point to some kind of absence, and people can only receive the intention of display through imagination, which is a kind of fiction itself.

In contemporary times, it is also an important background that promotes window display to be fictional, that is, consumer relationship has become the form of "super relationship" in the society⁹. On the one hand, since almost all goods can be put on the shelf to sell, consumption space expands suddenly. In the past when the choices are limited, each commodity could be exposed leisurely. Now, with so many products being swallowed up in the forest of things, how to effectively increase visual exposure is the primary problem of object presentation. On the other hand, to some extent, consumption is a relatively open and fair social structure, where everyone can buy and everyone can comment. Even if one doesn't participate in the current purchase, indirect judgment of the direction of the wind can be translated into an underlying sense of purchase. How to maximize the increase of object base and types of goods is another factor that needs to be considered. For window display, a kind of fictional design for viewing, it means how to gain the trust and favor of consumers in fiction and how to properly place the truth and beauty.

From the perspective of semiotics, this kind of fictitious problem can be dealt with effectively. Mr. Zhao Yiheng determined the symbolic process as: sender (intentional meaning) → symbolic message (textual meaning) → receiver (interpretive meaning)¹⁰; in the window display, this process can be transformed into: commodity (after being packaged by designers) → object display scene → consumer. Designers need to precisely control where the interpretive expectation point (i.e., "intended interpretation") to be expressed by the object display is, so as to make the meaning of the scene

demonstration clear but not so clear (i.e., "weak coding"). When different consumers arrive at the intended interpretation through watching, they will think by themselves, forming a paradoxical explanation vortex. People's rational thinking will provide the rational basis for the scene demonstration, and the perceptual experience will give the display a subtle and fuzzy sense of art. Open associative fiction is by no means a delusion or a lie. It is built on the premise of consumers' voluntary trust and acceptance. Just like the family scenery in the large French window in the home city, the viewers may be the family members with a happy family or the strangers who are lonely and wandering, but they can feel the sense of security of their imagination from the warm and stable space, believe in the effectiveness of household products and are willing to pay for it.

4. THE WAY OF THE WINDOW DISPLAY COMPLETING THE FICTION

Wilde had a keen question: is it that art imitates life, or life imitates art? In the context of contemporary consumption in which art is immersed in life, this question becomes more complex and difficult to argue. But what is certain is that things full of artistry are always relatively easy to stand out and present themselves to people. This is about the unique appeal of art to the senses, from the visual effects indicated to the implicit interpretation of meaning. Attracting the attention of the audience is the first issue of window design. From this point of view, it is inevitable for art to enter the exhibition.

From the perspective of semiotics, Mr. Zhao Yiheng gives a new definition of art, that is, "the symbolic text character which makes the receiver reach transcendence from mediocrity by means of form". The sayings of "sublime" and "lofty" ("sublime" in the original text) have similar quality, but the former is more focused on "the utility function of art"¹¹. In window displays and more commercial art, art and design collaboration is often the means rather than the subject of entry. Pure spiritual detachment is correspondingly reduced to an associative sense of pleasure, making most of the audience without art enlightenment from the experience of life to some extent capture the empathy in psychology, which, in turn, grants

9. Wu Xingming. *Narrowing and Deviation: An Idea That Must Be Broken in the Current Cultural Industry*. *Modern Literary Magazine*, 01, 2013: p31.

10. Zhao Yiheng. *Semiotics: Principles & Problems*. 3rd edition. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2015: p49.

11. Zhao Yiheng. *Defining Art from Semiotics: A Return to Functionalism*. *Modern Literary Magazine*, 01, 2018: p13.

the commodities higher evaluation, in content, scenery, material, light, color, etc. And an atmosphere of harmony and refinement always helps to remove consumers' discomfort and defense against utilitarian business

Commercial window art also takes authenticity as the basic criterion, and consumers' expectation before purchase and use experience after purchase need to achieve a balance within a certain range. For example, a famous underwear brand routinely creates a theatrical runway show in the window. The dark and hazy scenes, the beautiful models with warm light focus, the iconic wings, etc., the dreamlike setting is obviously unreal, but still conveys the concept pursuit of sexiness and charm. At this time, the audience receives a good wish for life, but its comfortable quality or aesthetic effect is still the most basic competitiveness of commodities.

According to the trigonometric symbol process described above, Mr. Zhao further proposed the four basic types that the receiver "agree to take"¹²: "faithful/fake" intent → "credible/untrustworthy" text → willing to accept. The following is the application of window fiction in this paper.

4.1 "Faithful/Fake" Intent → "Credible/Untrustworthy" Text → Being Willing to Accept

Customers believe in the truthfulness of the display content, and the description of the scene exactly matches their consumption expectations, so they gladly accept the product recommendation. Right now, whether the utility of the commodity itself is consistent with the display is still unclear; if the product quality is good, the seller will enjoy a win-win situation and be shown as a nice enterprise; if the customer experience is slightly inferior, as long as the customer does not blame the seller for the defects, it will still be a more satisfactory and mutually beneficial consumption. This type reflects the unity of text from beginning to end, which is embodied in the following aspects: goods and objects have certain functions, window display has corresponding use scenes arranged according to functions, and customers consider purchasing after understanding function. Therefore, this kind of operation mode often appears in the consumption with a relatively clear orientation, such as home clothing stores that emphasize comfort and beauty, dessert and cake shops that emphasize image and

taste, etc. And the products of them are expendable, highly visible repurchases or, for example, luxury brands that give their owners some sort of identity. Such companies tend to build honest, trusting relationships with their customers.

4.2 Faithful Intent → Untrustworthy Text → Being Willing to Accept

Consumers still accept recommendations in the face of unreliable displays, and there are two situations. First, customers trust the objects rather than the display of objects. They ignore and forgive the failed design of the window, but trust the enterprise brand behind and the past use experience. In the other occasion, customers face the display of ironic rhetoric. They understand the deep meaning through the expression, but actually they have received the sincere intention of the business. This type actually reflects the extension of common sense beyond the text, especially the latter, which relies more on the viewer's personal perception or knowledge experience. Taking an exclusive shop of sunglasses in Taikoo Li of Chengdu as an example, all kinds of new and exaggerated installation art with the theme of reconstruction of the new world after the tsunami can be seen from the French window outside the shop. It makes it easy for the viewer to get the amazing vitality that the designer hopes to convey, which is not only the embodiment of the avant-garde style of commodities, but also the expression of the innovative consciousness of enterprises. Ironic display is rather risky because of the freedom of interpretation, but it is increasingly favored by designers and customers. As mentioned above, the relatively open intention gives consumers more independent and relaxed interpretation space. Once a reasonable explanation of self-satisfaction is found, customers will get an extra sense of pleasure like solving puzzles.

4.3 Dishonest Intent → Untrustworthy Text → Being Willing to Accept

This is somewhat similar to the second type, but the rhetorical display of the latter focuses on the quality, style and service of the goods. The former, however, firmly exposes the "fiction" to the consumers, showing the undisguised uselessness, this approach is often applied to the consumption of meaning. It should be noted that this paper also includes the sense of object consumption in this type of consumption, which is also often used to encourage people to collect or decorate in the way of feelings/art, although such a perceptual

12. Zhao Yiheng. *Semiotics: Principles & Problems*. 3rd edition. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2015: p261-267.

explanation is often one-way and self-identified. This type of display is mostly embodied in the coordinated effects showed within or outside the text, such as some anonymous characters and paintings entering the commercial space. At this time, the virtual atmosphere is far more than the actual commitment, and consumers are not able to judge the value of the object. In the end, they choose to buy it out of personal preference, which belongs to perceptual purchase. Under the double negation, there can also be an affirmative artistic effect out of two negatives. Consumers choose to buy out of loyalty to the brand concept, which is also a kind of emotional impulse purchase.

Each of these categories is likely to be rejected as long as consumers express distrust or dislike and alarm, each of these types can be subject to rejection. Therefore, the fictional display of window objects is still based on the good shaping of the brand image.

5. FICTIONAL UPGRADE: ONLINE SHOPPING AND SMART WINDOWS

Window display is a kind of advertisement design conforming to the requirement of modernity. The expansion of space marks the liberation of object display. The latter is no longer confined to the rigid presentation of its own functionality, but faces the street crowd and evolves into scene layout, forming a more free and open relationship with the surrounding. This kind of relationship is characterized by fictionalization, because scenization is an associative process of saying one thing and meaning another, pointing to the meaning of absence and leading the audience to imagining some daily perceptual experience. However, fiction is by no means the same as falsehood, let alone a lie. As the subject of viewing, interpreting and experiencing commodities, consumers have the right to refute and reject at every stage. The essence of consumption is an open and fair voluntary agreement between both parties, rather than a unilateral repressive symbolic coding activity. The scene is fictional, and the final effect of the display simulation may not be realized, but the intention referred to is real, the perceptual expectation of the object being soaked is also exact, and the artistry is an effective way to edit the text.

By introducing the increasingly advanced virtual technology into window display, object display is entering a new round of transformation. Emerging smart windows begin to adopt

multimedia projection, including touch, motion, sound, tracking, lighting and other interactive modes. If the traditional modern display still takes the goods and objects as the main role, and echoes with the scenery and calls out the potential perceptual experience, the immersive intelligent window gradually makes the consumer become the operator of the scene. Distant visual viewing once again enters the stereoscopic integrated sensory experience, and consumers are allowed to consume in advance to a limited extent. The fictionality is strengthened, while the degree of emulation and artistic requirements are also improved. But the final link of consumption will fall back in the consumer's daily life, so that the truth of the fiction is verified. People will not repurchase products whose consumption experience is far lower than their consumption expectations. Therefore, false design is not reasonable in either narrative fiction or technical fiction stage.

In recent years, online shopping has already become a convenient living habit for people. However, the construction process of shopping malls and department stores has not slowed down but entered another climax. It begins to cover hotels, cinemas, amusement parks, office buildings and so on, and has become a miniature real world integrating life, work and leisure. Such integration continues along the lines of the accumulation of abundance, the series of combinations predicted by Baudrillard half a century ago. The entry of Internet shopping, while preempting the sales terminal turnover, instead promotes the transformation of the identity of the store, and its display and experience functions may be further enlarged. Window display, as an important deputy to convey the concept of product function and style, its narrative fictional issues will also develop a more complex picture.

6. CONCLUSION

In recent years, online shopping has already become a convenient living habit for people. However, the construction process of shopping malls and department stores has not slowed down but entered another climax. It begins to cover hotels, cinemas, amusement parks, office buildings and so on, and has become a miniature real world integrating life, work and leisure. Such integration continues along the lines of the accumulation of abundance, the series of combinations predicted by Baudrillard half a century ago. The entry of Internet shopping, while preempting the sales terminal turnover, instead promotes the transformation of the

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Jin You.

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