

# A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN AND SYMBOLIC MEANING IN THE DOCUMENTARY 'THE PAINTING OF LIFE VINCENT VAN GOGH

by :

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## Abstract

*This study analyzes visual representation in a documentary video about Vincent van Gogh through the lens of deconstructionist semiotics and visual communication design principles, with particular focus on the application of Dadaist style and experimental typography. The research is motivated by the crucial role of design consistency in effectively conveying symbolic messages through visual media. Employing qualitative methods, the study examines characteristic Dadaist elements such as collage, random image fragments, and unconventional typography in expressing a narrative of rebellion. Findings indicate that the opening bumper successfully creates a "rebel" impression through deliberately chaotic visual composition, while stylistic inconsistencies in the credit titles diminish overall visual integrity. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of harmonious integration between Dadaist aesthetics and narrative messaging to achieve effective and meaningful visual communication design.*

**Keywords:** Dadaism, Documentary Video, Semiotics, Vincent Van Gogh, Visual Communication Design.

## INTRODUCTION

The process of art analysis constitutes an inseparable component when evaluating artistic works. Beyond serving as a means to articulate the critic's perspective, analysis functions as a tool to dissect and examine the artist's creative cognition through alternative lenses (Marianto, 2019: 110). This analytical approach aims not to critique by identifying flaws, but rather to explore a work's developmental potential. The present study develops an art criticism framework oriented toward constructive analysis through methodological approaches, thereby minimizing subjective bias while maintaining analytical objectivity.

This article examines the documentary film *The Painting Life of Vincent van Gogh*, which chronicles the artistic journey of the renowned Dutch post-impressionist painter. Van Gogh's work transcended his era, as his expressionist style remained underappreciated during his lifetime. According to Serupa.id (Thabroni, 2018), expressionism represents a visual art movement emphasizing the artist's internal creative impulses, standing in antithesis to Impressionism's focus on naturalistic representation prevalent during that period.

The documentary's visual elements amplify these expressionist qualities, necessitating precise analytical tools for meaning deconstruction. Jacques Derrida's deconstruction semiotics

proves particularly suitable for revealing implicit meanings. Derrida's concept of *différance* enables deeper signification uncovering, where the disjunction between signifier and signified generates new meanings (Rusmana, 2014: 267). Deconstructive semiotics not only deciphers implicit content but actively expands semantic possibilities.

Complementing Derridean analysis, visual communication design theory provides essential tools for decoding visual elements. As Tinarbuko (2021) establishes, layout constitutes the fundamental organizational system in design, managing relationships between visual components. This study particularly focuses on typographic elements and layout structures functioning as symbolic codes within the documentary's motion graphics and bumper designs.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach using the method of deconstructive semiotic analysis, while also connecting the findings with relevant data and theories in visual communication design. The data examined in this study was obtained through observation of visual elements in the documentary film *The Painting Life of Vincent Van Gogh*, specifically focusing on the design of the opening bumper and the credit title section, both of which relate to the presence of design elements. The analytical process involves identifying symbolic codes that emerge, based on semiotic theory, and linking them with theories of visual communication design and typography. The following section outlines the methodology relevant to this discussion.

### Visual Communication Design

In brief, visual communication design is a field of study that focuses on visual elements, which include images, typography, color, and form. All of these visual elements are organized through layout. The layout itself serves as the command baton that orchestrates the arrangement of these visual components (Tinarbuko, 2021).

In visual communication design, typography is one of the elements that categorizes letters into several types or typefaces. Generally, these are divided into several categories, including sans serif, which refers to letters without strokes or “feet”; serif, which refers to letters with decorative strokes; and script, which refers to letters that resemble handwritten strokes (Rustan, 2011). Each of these typefaces has its own characteristics that determine their appropriate use in specific contexts. For example, serif typefaces are typically associated with formal settings.

Layout, in general, is defined as the arrangement of visual elements or components within a design. Therefore, the presence of a layout is crucial in design, as it contributes to the effectiveness of the message being conveyed. According to (Kusrianto, 2009) the existence of layout itself is relatively flexible, as there are no universally fixed rules governing it. Therefore, it requires a designer's sensitivity in arranging design elements to ensure the layout is not only effective and efficient, but also visually appealing.

The application of visual communication design theory in this scientific article focuses on the areas of typography and layout implementation within the bumper design of the documentary video

### Jaques Derrida's Semiotic Deconstructive



Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction, as briefly discussed by Hoed, (2011), is a form of critique directed at Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of signs. Derrida challenges Saussure's notion of a fixed relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified*, which Saussure believed to be static. This critique of structuralist thought is known as post-structuralism, where the process of interpreting signs involves dismantling and critically analyzing them (Rusmana, 2014).

According to Rusmana, (2014: 267) Derrida's deconstruction theory builds upon Saussure's concept of *difference*, emphasizing that the meaning of signs must be understood as context-dependent, changing across different times and situations. Thus, meaning is not fixed—it evolves. Deconstruction, therefore, is an effort to dismantle a sign without binding it strictly to the relationship between signifier and signified, thereby uncovering new meanings within the sign itself (Artha, 2021) explains, deconstruction can serve as a tool to reveal the hidden or implicit meanings within the signs present in a work of art.

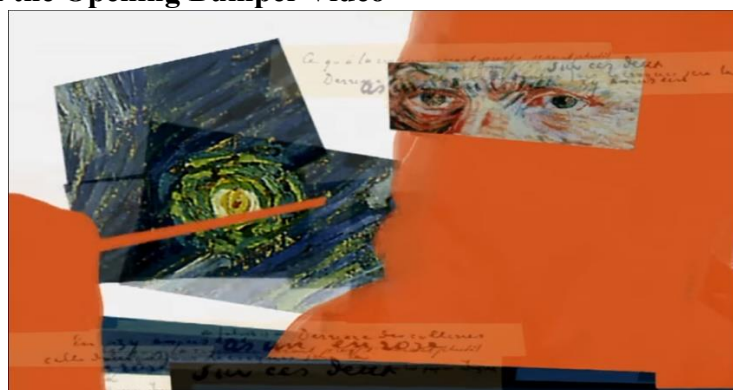
As an evolution of the concept of *difference*, the process of meaning-making in deconstruction is inherently linked to structuralism—specifically, to semiotics. By critiquing and opposing structural systems, deconstruction introduces binary oppositions, which become the foundational element of its approach. As Hardiman, (2015) notes, certain conditions must be present for deconstruction to function as a process of interpretation, one of which is the existence of binary oppositions as the initial basis for analysis.

## RESULTS AND EXPLAINATION

In the analytical process carried out, the approach involved breaking down and mapping the various components of the visual elements that appear in the documentary video "*The Painting Life of Vincent Van Gogh*," followed by identifying and mapping the symbolic meanings implied within them. The following is a detailed explanation,

### Visual Communication Design Analysis

#### Dadaism Style in the Opening Bumper Video



**Picture 1. Screen Capture of Bumper Video**  
Sources : (Molijn, 2008)

The Dadaist-style layout, which emerged in the early 20th century, is known for its anti-aesthetic characteristics and the use of unconventional elements. In the opening bumper design of this documentary video, the style is evident through the use of collage, featuring cut-out fragments of Van Gogh's painting "*Starry Night*" alongside the silhouette of the artist himself.



According to (Schenker, 2024), the collage form inherently creates a sense of fragmentation, which is a hallmark of the Dadaist style. This visual form symbolically conveys a sense of *chaos* and reflects the *rebellious* nature often associated with the artist, Vincent van Gogh.

The use of collage techniques in layout design is often employed to evoke an unusual atmosphere and to challenge existing visual norms. This aligns with the application of Dadaist style in this documentary, which not only emphasizes visual aesthetics but also conveys a deeper message about Van Gogh's courage in expressing himself through his art.

### Typography as an Element of Visual Communication



**Picture 2. Typeface of Bumper Video**

Sources : (Molijn, 2008)

Typography plays a crucial role in visual communication design, especially in conveying messages effectively. In this documentary video, the use of various typefaces—such as Sans Serif, Serif, and Script—creates an engaging visual contrast. According to (Rustan, 2011), the combination of diverse typefaces can create visual dynamics and emphasize the intended message.

The typography used in the opening bumper design functions not only as a decorative element but also as a tool for conveying symbolic meaning. For instance, the use of modern and minimalist Sans Serif typefaces can be associated with boldness and assertiveness. In contrast, the use of Serif typefaces conveys a more formal impression, creating a visual opposition to the Sans Serif.

Meanwhile, the more decorative Script typeface reflects creativity and self-expression. The combination of these three typefaces results in a unique blend that, at first glance, may appear randomly placed. However, this very characteristic aligns with the principles of Dadaist design. The visual arrangement resembles the use of collage—placing different, and even contradictory, visual elements together into a unified whole.

## Deconstructive Semiotic Analysis and It's Relevance to Van Gogh



**Picture 3. Bumper of Video**

Sources : (Molijn, 2008)

Van Gogh, though known as a painter with realist and impressionist styles, is also considered a pioneer of post-impressionism and expressionism. Works like "Starry Night" don't merely represent nature, but also express an application of deconstruction before the term became popular. This is reflected in Van Gogh's "rebellious" nature - his defiance against the traditional rules of impressionism which held that imitation of nature was the true form of art. However, Van Gogh chose to break free from these conventions and express his emotions through art, thus giving birth to what we call expressionism.

In the context of this documentary's design, the use of cut-out images from "Starry Night" and Van Gogh's silhouette can be interpreted as an attempt to convey this "rebellious" nature. Graphic designer Warner Krol appears to communicate that Van Gogh's courage in expressing himself through his works represents a form of rebellion against existing art conventions. This manifestation of "rebellion" is further emphasized by Krol through the use of Dadaist style, showcasing collage fragments of Van Gogh's paintings. Moreover, the intentionally torn pieces of "Starry Night" are not mere illustrations, but a double act of deconstruction - simultaneously tearing apart and reconstructing the Van Gogh myth. The artist's faint silhouette appears like a lingering ghost, present yet absent, blurring the boundary between the creator and his creation. This deliberately unrefined Dada style becomes the most honest visual language to reveal the complexity of the creative mind.

Every element in this design exists in a state of unresolved semantic tension. The seemingly chaotic collage actually contains ever-shifting patterns of meaning that refuse to settle into a single interpretation. The fragmentation of Van Gogh's work is not destruction, but rather a binary opposition between liberation and constraint from emerging conventions. Thus, each fragmented piece tells its own story. Here, the documentary doesn't merely narrate an artist's rebellion - it actively rebels against conventional storytelling itself.

## Issues with Design Consistency



**Picture 4. Credit Title of Video**

Sources : (Molijn, 2008)

Although the opening bumper design of this video is very engaging and meaningful, there are weaknesses in design consistency, particularly in the credit titles section. The attractive, symbolic design only appears at the beginning of the video, while the credit titles seem ordinary and poorly integrated with the overall design. This creates the impression that the design only focuses on the opening section, thereby reducing the overall visual integrity. The inconsistency in design is also evident in the typeface selection for the credit titles, which doesn't reflect the Dadaist style, using only a single sans-serif typeface.

## CONCLUSION

The analysis of the documentary video "The Painting Life of Vincent van Gogh" utilizes visual communication design theory, specifically typography theory and the application of Dadaist layout style. Additionally, the emerging meanings are examined through Jacques Derrida's semiotics of deconstruction, with emphasis on uncovering deeper layers of meaning.

An interesting aspect lies in the implementation of the bumper design and overall visual style of the documentary, which employs Dadaist aesthetics by combining: a silhouette of Van Gogh painting, elements from "Starry Night," and three typefaces (serif, sans-serif, and script) - all of which bear no direct connection to Van Gogh's actual artistic styles of realism, impressionism, and post-impressionism. Through these symbolic codes, the video's designer aims to associate the "rebellious" nature of Dadaism with Van Gogh's unconventional ideas that differed from prevailing artworks of his time, ultimately establishing him as a pioneer of post-impressionism who paved the way for expressionism.

Regarding the visual meanings, the intentionally torn collage of "Starry Night" serves not merely as illustration, but as a dual deconstructive act - simultaneously tearing apart while reconstructing the myth of Van Gogh. The seemingly random collage actually contains evolving patterns of meaning that refuse to be confined to a single interpretation, appearing repeatedly throughout.

The main weakness lies in technical design execution, where the Dadaist visual style disappears in the credit titles, revealing a lack of consistency in the overall design approach.



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