

## **Integrating Visual Semiotics in Interpretation of “*Tugu Negara*”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study analyses the commemorative of national monument, *Tugu Negara*, using visual semiotics approach in interpreting the potential meaning of gesture and symbols. Visual semiotics studies have focused on factors from outside the ‘text’, which includes the implicit meanings of each feature of a particular monument. The analysis primarily utilized O’Toole’s framework (1994, 2011) for exploring national monument and accounting insights on how the monument represents several meanings by analysing its features. This framework offers a systematic technique for examining the monument in terms of its constituent components in a hierarchical order that is Work, Figure and Member. O’Toole provided three communicative functions of language of monuments inspired from Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory which are modal function, representational function and compositional function. This study found that *Tugu Negara* as a war monument of Malaysia, symbolizes leadership, unity, solidarity, victory, enthusiasm, strength, bravery, sacrifice and misery. By the same token, this war monument also comprises a meaning of violence and defeat.

*Keywords:* Meaning, language of war monument, *Tugu Negara*, visual semiotics

### **INTRODUCTION**

“There can be no words without images”  
--- Aristotle.

Signs, symbols and images have been used as a means of communication since the beginning of humanity. With visual imagery people interpret and understand the meaning of signs and symbols. Semiotics complemented language studies by intensifying the scope of studies and

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focusing the multimodality of human communication. Multimodality describes communication practices in terms of the textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual resources - or modes - used to compose messages (Murray & Joddy, 2013). In this paper analysis will focus on visual aspects of *Tugu Negara* that compose messages using visual semiotics approach - a sub-domain of semiotics that explores the way the visual communicates messages.

Visual semiotics is a field of study which began in the 1990s and described by Jewitt and Oyama (2001) as involving “the description of semiotic resources, what can be said and done with images (and other visual means of communication) and how the things people say and do with images can be interpreted”. By means, visual semiotics is a tool to interpret the messages hidden in the symbols, signs, images, gestures, spatial and icons. Visual semiotics focus on how visuals communicate and the system ruling their practice. The system ruling practice is related with cultural and traditional criticism. Therefore, interrelations between these two fields are essential when describing the denotation and connotation of *Tugu Negara*.

Abousnnouga and Machin’s (2010) study illustrates that the analysis of language of World War I monuments – Cardiff statue and Tunbridge Wells - through semiotics perspectives found that the features of each monument comprise multiple meanings. The analysis was based on O’Toole’s framework of analysis the language of sculpture inspired from Hallidayan linguistics approach. The studies focused on the style

and design of each monument by analysed the pose, gaze, size, material and form. Each pose represents connotation or denotation meaning with specific assumption. For instance, the war monument of Cardiff statue displays positive values which reflect the feeling of calmness and peace, and not aggression or fear. Also, Tunbridge Wells’s monument which depicts one soldier in the monument stripping his helmet in order to reveal his head. This pose represents the action of revealing oneself to the power of God in Christianity. The hat’s removal also indicates the meaning of individual spirit and sense of invulnerability.

Abousnnouga and Gillian (2012) in their study of British Commemorative War Monuments using social semiotic approach explored the potential underlying meaning of the monuments. The existence of the monuments is semiotically to commemorate war and deliver grief to families who lost their beloved members during the war. Based on their study it was found that the British Commemorative War Monument conveys messages of bravery and sacrifice for the country. By applying the O’Toole’s framework of analysis, the language of sculpture, the results showed that the war monuments represent the cultural connotation which provides hegemony framework to form a historical value towards future generation.

Another study which also utilized O’Toole’s framework is that of Bowcher and Liang (2013) who analysed the two statues of Chairman Mao. The analysis of Chairman Mao found that the statues were being used

as a historical monument in order to teach the public about the history of communist party, remind the formation of Republic of China, instil national pride, and provide a spiritual enlightening experience during the Red Tour.

Kruk and Sergei (2008) also analysed Soviet monumental propaganda in Leninist. Kruk believed that monumental propaganda in Leninist conveyed through artistic monuments such as painting, sculpture and urban architecture. Monuments were planned as tools to communicate key political ideas to the illiterate. Stalin statues have been used for political motivation especially during 1949 on the eve of Stalin's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

As a war monument, *Tugu Negara* commemorates the soldiers who died during World War II and Malayan Emergency in struggle for freedom. Even though this monument was built to symbolize the sacrifice and unity, many people are unaware of its meanings. *Tugu Negara* also carries aesthetic values that should be defined and explained to the public. This study will explore and describe the potential meanings and aesthetic values that embody the *Tugu Negara*. This effort is essential to instil and enhance the sense of patriotism value among Malaysians.

## METHODS

Visual semiotics is based on a hypothetically principled account of the way features of the language (in this study, the language of monument) and features of context show systematic correlation. The fundamental

of this approach originated with Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory. This concept has been adapted and modified by O'Toole (1994, 2011) to analyse a sculpture through his study *The Language of Displayed Art*. By applying this approach, the connotation and denotation of potential meaning for each feature of the monument could be comprehensively interpreted.

Halliday's SFL theory mentioned that "in any situation, a speaker or listener simultaneously attends to three main things: the nature of activity, including subject matter involved (Field), the social relations of participants, the roles vis-à-vis one another (Tenor), and the medium through which the exchange is taking place, either spoken or written and whether there is some channel through which meanings are being conveyed, such as telephone or computer (Mode)." According to this statement, it can be concluded that for a language, the main things such as field, tenor and mode are aligned with experiential features (O'Toole's labelled as representational function), interpersonal features (modal function) and textual features (compositional function). O'Toole defined each function as below:

- Representational Function  
This is the way that 'what the statues represents' and the ideational function or how ideas are conveyed.
- Modal Function  
This is the way 'how the statues relate to us' through the use of devices to make the statues by the sculptor.

- **Compositional Function**  
This is about arrangement of forms in the space and the function of coherence.

the potential meaning of *Tugu Negara*. The meaning doesn't necessarily come out visibly, it often exists latently and waits to be revealed, analysed and read. As mentioned above, visual semiotics is the study of meaning and significance based on visual sense through three-dimensional analysis: syntactic, semantics and pragmatics based on the three functions. By using this approach, this study would figure out the potential meaning of the monument systematically and comprehensively.

Basically, all three functions work together but are separated to facilitate analysis. Table 1 shows the details of analytical framework of monument based on O'Toole's approach. This paper adapts descriptive technique in fieldwork studies by applying functional analysis in interpreting

Table 1  
*Analytical framework of monument based on O'Toole's approach (2011:34)*

Function / Unit		Representational	Modal	Compositional		
WORK	Process	Scale		Volume		
	Theme	Mass		Proportion		
	Peripeteia		Modality		Independence	
			Equilibrium		Openness / Closure	
			Palpability		Fixed / Mobile	
			Message		Cohesion	
			'Address'		Material	
		FIGURE	Participants	Scale Characterization		Relative position in
			Body	Mass		Gestalt
Act	Equilibrium			Parallelism		
Movement / Stasis	Expressiveness			Static / Dynamic		
Position			Address		Fixed / Mobile	
			Vitality		Rhythm	
			Line		Material	
			Solidity			
		Relation to Light				
MEMBER	Basic Physical Forms	Fullness of Realization		Texture		
	Drapery	Raw / Polished		Rhythmic		
		Stress Factors		Relations		
				Material Qualities		

Table 1 shows the framework of analysis proposed by O'Toole. In this framework, a rank scale has been suggested as a parameter

to analyses the artefact. By presenting the concept of rank, O'Toole provides a systematic way to analysis the artwork

in terms of its constituent components in hierarchical order which are WORK, FIGURE and MEMBER. Each rank contains several items to examine according to the representational, modal and compositional functions. In visual semiotics analysis, such as monument, the main parameter is Work which is the whole monument. This parameter focus on process involved to build the monument. The second rank of parameter is Figures which are composed a detail part of the monument. Moving from Work to Figure then Member, analysts move from the general picture to the finest detail in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the makeup of the whole. This concept of rank recounts the scope study from the preliminary point to the whole object and its components. During the analysis of each parameter, several factors being account such as social context and political factors in determining the underlying meaning of the monument.

### Overview of *Tugu Negara*

The *Tugu Negara* is a war monument located at the famous Lake Gardens, Kuala Lumpur. There are five major components occupying the 48,562 sq meter space surrounding the monument: the monument,

the pavilion, the surrounding gardens, the fountains and the war memorial. It is the first national monument to commemorate more than 11,000 soldiers who died during the struggle for freedom through World War II and Malayan Emergency. This historic monument has also marked a record for being the tallest detached group of bronze statues in Asia. *Tugu Negara* was commissioned in 1963 to replace the Memorial Monument of War and accomplished in 1966 inspired by Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra Al-Haj. It was designed by a sculptor, Felix de Weldon and officially opened to public on 8 February 1966. There are seven bronze figures of man on top of concrete made from emerald coloured stone from Sweden measured 30 x 24 feet. The basic information about the features and dimensions of the monument are listed in Table 2. The plinth of the monument was written with 'Dedicated to The Heroic Fighters in the Cause of Peace and Freedom, May the Blessing of Allah Be Upon Them' and Malay version "Memperingati Perwira-perwira yang Berjuang untuk Menegakkan Keamanan dan Kebebasan, Moga-Moga Allah Cucurkan Rahmat ke atas Mereka" in Jawi script on the right and left of Malaysia's Coat of Arms (See Figure 1).

Table 2  
Basic information of *Tugu Negara*

Material	Statue: bronze; Plinth: stone from Sweden, granite
Height	Statue: 15 m (49.21 ft) - four times bigger from human normal size Plinth: Approximately 12 ft
Weight	Each statue approximately 1 tons

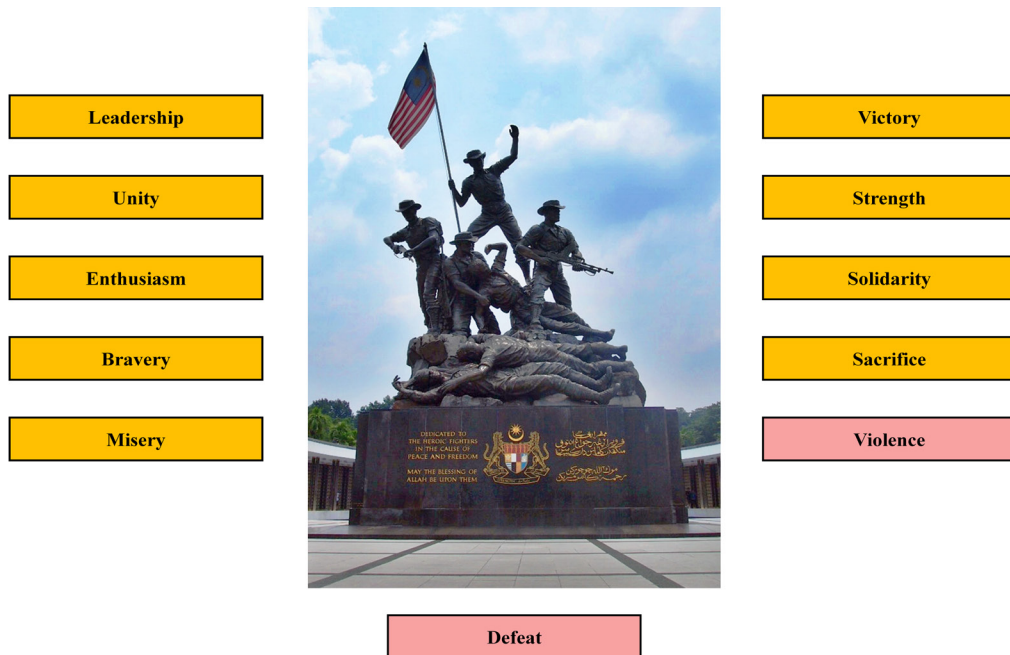


Figure 2. The *Tugu Negara* at Jalan Parlimen, Kuala Lumpur  
 © Photograph: Rozaimah Rashidin, 2016

### VISUAL SEMIOTICS OF NATIONAL MONUMENT *TUGU NEGARA*

The visual semiotics analysis of *Tugu Negara* found that the monument represents leadership, victory, unity, strength, enthusiasm, solidarity, bravery, sacrifice and misery. It also connotes symbolism of violence and defeat. The analysis of *Tugu Negara* will be divided into three functions, i.e. representational, modal and compositional.

#### Representational Function of *Tugu Negara*

In the analysis of ‘what the monument represents’, the visual resources of the monument convey a basic information on the idea of the character, social status, position and actions.

**Process, theme and peripeteia.** The *Tugu Negara* represents a group figure of human statues. Analysis at the level of WORK involves analysing the process, theme and peripeteia of the monument. *Tugu Negara* was built to commemorate soldiers who died during the struggle for freedom, thus the theme of this monument is remembrance of war. The significant event underlying the *Tugu Negara* construction was inspired by Malaysia’s first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra al-Haj during his visit to United States of America. He was inspired by the Marine Corps War Memorial which was also known as Iwo Jima Memorial designed by the same sculptor, Felix de Weldon. The peripeteia of this monument was to replace the predecessor of the national monument which was an interwar-

era cenotaph originally initiated by the colonial British administration and now the cenotaph has been relocated in the same compound of *Tugu Negara*.

**Participants, body, act, movement and position.** The analysis at the level of FIGURE is very crucial because it encompasses a monument with seven different figures. The monument consists of five soldiers from the Malay Regiment and two communist soldiers. The body of the statues is anthropomorphic which is identical with human body. The first statue is static in the middle of the monument and holding the *Jalur Gemilang* and this act is connoting **victory** and leadership, while being flanked left and right by two more armed soldiers. The left statue is armed with a machine gun while the other statue is holding a bayonet. Both statues represent strength, unity and enthusiasm. In the centre of the monument, there is a statue of one soldier lying on the other which signify solidarity, sacrifice, misery and bravery. Whereas the other two statues represent the communist soldiers that lay prostrate on the plinth which imply violence and defeat.

**Basic physical forms and drapery.** At the level of MEMBER, the analysis involves looking at the arts of sculptured figure. As mentioned earlier, the monument comprises of five Malays soldiers and two communist soldiers. This can be identified through the different drapery, uniform and hat of each statue. The uniform of the statues replicated

is life-like. The Malay soldiers wear a combat boots and civil war slouch hats while the communist soldier wears ankle cut tactical boots and military cadet hats. Moreover, the military cadet hats also contain sign of five-pointed star which is universally known as a symbol of communism. This indicates the lay prostrates' statues are representing communist soldiers.

### **Modal Function of *Tugu Negara***

As with analysis on 'how the monument relates with the viewers and the space', it is important to look at the place and range of features.

**Scale, mass and modality.** The total height of the monument is 15 metres (See Table 2) with the fraction 'scaled up accordingly' (O'Toole, 2011). By sculpting a statue with a size that is four times larger than an ordinary human being, it suggests that the statue metaphorically represent "larger than life" which gives a visual sense of heroism and gigantic to the monument. Mass is related with the space; mass exist within space. The mass of the monument would be at centre of gravity as the monument is placed at the centre of the complex surrounding by fountains, pavilion with three domes and garden. Modality engaged with the sense of authenticity either life-like, exaggerated, attenuated or abstract. *Tugu Negara* is represented in a very life-like manner but with exaggerated size in term of scale. This is a great resemblance with authenticity, and hence is a reliable illustration.

**Equilibrium, palpability, message and 'address'.** The monument is vertically built with a height of 15 meters on the plinth which is 3.7 meters above the ground. With this height, it would create a barrier to avoid the visitors from touching the monument (Palpability). The monument is positioned in the middle of the fountains and seems like an island because it is surrounded with water. This would represent a message of retrospection of the war in struggling for freedom on nations. O'Toole (2011, p. 39) stated that 'address' in statues is primarily concerned with gaze. The Malay soldiers' statues' gazes are looking ahead into the distance and do not make any eye contact with the viewers. Abousnnouga and Machin (2010) find that, this kind of gaze is metaphorically symbolised 'to the future and high ideals'. Meanwhile, the statues' were being sculptured without any gaze.

**Scale characterization, expressiveness, vitality, line, solidity and relation to the light.** At the level of FIGURE, the monument was sculptured in a very detail manner. The monument was moulded and solid by the use of bronze as its material. Subsequently, the monument was positioned on the granite cubic plinth, which is higher from the ground. The characterization and expressiveness of the Malays soldiers' statues are very proud (with open lips), prepared (due to the armed postures), sad (with downturned lips) and misery (frown lines). In terms of relation to the light, the monument is facing the sunrise which means

towards northeast. It can be concluded that it symbolises as a hope to the nations.

**Fullness of realization, raw and stress factors.** The analysis at the level of MEMBER involves the fullness of realization which is very detailed in terms of the sculptured and polished. The local authority of Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) is in charge of the maintenance of the monument. *Tugu Negara* is stressing the messages of leadership, victory, unity, bravery, enthusiasm, strength, solidarity and sacrifice.

#### **Compositional Function of *Tugu Negara***

In analysing the compositional function, it is crucial to focus on material, texture and relation to space of the monument.

#### **Volume, proportion, independence, closeness, fixed, cohesion and material.**

The monument is located at Jalan Parlimen, Kuala Lumpur which is walking distance from the Lake Gardens. It is located in the middle of area measuring 48,562 sq meters surrounded with fountains, pavilion and gardens. There are two entrances to the *Tugu Negara* either via the staircases or main streets. If the visitors use the staircases, they will see the left side of Memorial Monument, whereas the main streets will bring them to the front of the Memorial Monument. Although *Tugu Negara* is fixed in open area, it is surrounded by gardens and fountains; which makes the monument relatively closed and protected (Closeness).



The materials of the monument are made from bronze while the plinth is granite. Bronze has been one of the most extensively used material for sculpture. According to Abousnnouga and Machin (2010), bronze connotes a sense of 'tradition, or more accurately, timelessness'.

**Parallelism, static, fixed rhythm, texture, relations and material qualities.** The analysis at the level of FIGURE and MEMBER involves the parallelism and rhythmic of the monument. The cubic plinth supporting the statues brings a sense of parallelism and rhythmic structure. Besides that, the arrangement of each figure of the bronze statue plays an important role to balance and stabilize the monument. The bottom of the monument is designed with the laying prostrate statues which gives the steady structure of the monument. Subsequently, there are two statues standing on the left and right of the centre piece. This structure established rhythmic arrangement of the monument. Meanwhile, the highest statue is positioned at the back of the others and become the focal point of the monument. With the steady and stable arrangement, the relation between the monument and plinth becomes sturdier. A unity rhythmic is established by the way of statues arrangement followed with the qualities of the material.

## CONCLUSION

This article has applied O'Toole's (1994, 2011) approach to the analysis of the language of monument. As mentioned

earlier, this is the crucial part of the analysis because it involves different gaze, posture, gestalt and characteristic of each statue in one monument. The results of analysis found that each statue complement each other in denoting and connoting numerous meaning: leadership, unity, solidarity, victory, enthusiasm, strength, bravery, sacrifice and misery. Malaysia's *Tugu Negara* also signifies violence and defeat. Hence, *Tugu Negara* plays an important role in encouraging and uplifting; and aims at instilling a sense of national patriotism. As a commemorative site, the monument depicts the victory of the forces of democracy, peace and freedom over the communists.

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