

Meta-function Analysis of Movie Posters from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

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Abstract: As an important advertising form of the movie, the movie poster plays an irreplaceable role in the publicity process of the movie and is receiving more and more attention. Based on the visual grammar theory of multi-modal discourse analysis, this paper analyzes the meta-functions in movie posters, studies the movie posters from the perspective of linguistics, and combines the visual elements such as images, colors, brightness, text and size to reveal the interaction between images and texts to form a multimodal textual meaning, to show the theme and metaphor of the movie. It is pointed out that analyzing and interpreting the composition of multimodal meaning not only helps readers to understand the main theme and connotation of the movie, but also helps to improve readers' cognitive ability in multimodal discourse.

1. Introduction

The movie poster is an important form of conveying movie information and attracting the audience. It conveys the theme and connotation of the movie to the audience through a unique and thoughtful visual design. The movie poster is a multi-modal discourse that integrates images, texts, fonts and colors. It is composed of a linguistic symbol system and a non-verbal symbol system such as color and image. The process that audience read a movie poster is actually the process of decoding a multimodal text that includes symbolic resources such as text, images, colors, and so on. Based on the Visual Grammar theory of multimodal discourse analysis established by Kress & Van Leeuwen, from the perspective of linguistics, this paper attempts to study the way a movie poster shapes the external image of the movie, and stimulates people's viewing interest, and achieves both highlighting the theme of the movie and enhancing the publicity of the movie.

2. Theoretical Basis

The purpose of language use determines the way of expression, that is to say, language has the possibility and function of multiple interpretations. Hence, Halliday, a systemic functional linguist, holds that language has three major functions, namely, conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function.[1] The three meta-functions of language constitute the most important part of functional grammar and are of great significance to the understanding of discourse. Conceptual function refers to the expression of people's experience in the real world, that is, reflection of the events, people and things involved and the relevant factors such as time and place in the objective and subjective world. Interpersonal function is the function that the speakers use language to participate in social activities. Textual function refers to the function of organizing linguistic components into texts in the semantic level.

In *Reading Images*, Kress & Van Leeuwen created a framework of image analysis by comparing the three meta-functions of Halliday's systemic functional grammar, and advocated that images are also social symbols. Based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, they extended the theory of Systemic Function to the visual model, and created Visual Grammar theory to analyze images with "representational meaning", "interactive meaning" and "compositional meaning" as the

corresponding elements and core content. [2] Visual Grammar shifts the focus of research to images, and holds that images are also social symbols. Different symbols can express the same theme and meaning. Visual Grammar can analyze the meta-functions of images from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis. Analyzing the interaction between language and images to form the operation mechanism of the text will help readers understand the images in the text and the meaning of the text.

3. Meta-Function Analysis of Movie Posters from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

3.1. Representational Meaning of Movie Poster

In the theory of Visual Grammar, representational meaning, corresponding to the conceptual meaning in meta-function, refers to the relationship between the image viewers and the image participants. Image participants usually refer to people or animals with life characteristics in the image, and the image viewers are the readers. Kress & Van Leeuwen distinguished two modes of image semantic relations: narrative reproduction and conceptual reproduction. Narrative image is regarded as a proposition. Participants interact through vectors, such as eye extension, finger direction, etc. Vectors are the symbol of narrative image.[3] Conceptual images (such as tables and maps) represent the essence and characteristics of participants' relative stability, and reflect the relationship between participants through attributes, categories and characteristics, including symbolic process, analysis process, etc. Movie poster mostly belongs to narrative images. It can highlight the theme of publicity through the objective form of movie pictures and main characters, and shows the characters' personality, social status, life experience and attitude through the vectors of different postures, movements and expressions of the characters. Through the design of typical actions which are full of personality among characters, movie poster can convey the relationship between characters to the audience, and stimulate people's interest in theme of the movie and desire to watch the movie.

Movie poster can choose symbolic objects to render theme of the movie, condense the complex plot and profound implications of the movie into simple and easy-to-understand visual symbols, which can not only make the audience understand the information in the shortest time, but also make the movie posters rich in artistry and philosophy, thus arousing the audience's resonance and ultimately getting recognition. Because of the artistic and philosophical nature of the poster itself, the complex plot and characters can be expressed through abstract symbols, thus giving different audiences different feelings, arousing their interest and desire, and reflecting the publicity value of the movie poster.

Movie poster shows the narrative theme and conceptual meaning of movies through multi-modality, because image viewers watch images from the standpoint of image designers, and receive image information at the same time. Sight line completes a communication process from sending to receiving. Image viewers extract the representational meaning of images by subjective recognition of images, which lays a foundation for interaction between image viewers and images.

3.2 Interactive Meaning of Movie Poster

Interactive meaning is the extension of interpersonal meaning in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. It refers to the interactive relationship between images and viewers, and also includes the viewers' attitudes towards the content of images. Its constituent elements are visual contact, social distance and attitude. Kress & Van Leeuwen pointed out that "Image has an image behavior when conveying meaning, which is realized by the gaze system of the participants. There are two kinds of gaze expression: acquisition and provision." [2] If an image participant has eye contact with an image viewer, it indicates that there is a "request", which is called "request" image. On the contrary, it constitutes a "supply" image. If there is no eye contact between the characters in movie poster, there is no imaginary interpersonal relationship, only to provide information. If there is eye contact with the viewer, imaginary interpersonal relationship with the viewer thus is established. The eye contact is to

show the personality of the person, seek attention and recognition from the viewers, increase the communication and interaction between the poster and the viewer, and play the role of poster publicity.

Social distance determines the relationship between participants and viewers usually through the frame of lens view. The social distance in an image is determined by the distance of the image, that is, the closer the distance is, the closer the relationship between the participants and the viewers is; the farther the distance is, the farther the relationship is. [4] Through the design of different social distances, movie poster shows the social relationship between the characters and the audience, either close to life or far from real life. The background of the movie can be designed by common distance, which reflects the environment of story development.

Attitudes in images are realized by perspectives, which are divided into vertical and horizontal perspectives. Horizontal perspective includes both positive and oblique perspectives. The front view shortens the distance between the image participants and the image viewer, and makes the image viewer integrate into it. The slant view enlarges the distance between the image participants and the image viewer. Vertical perspective includes three angles: vertical view, horizontal view and upward view. If the image viewer overlooks the image participant from the perspective of vertical view, it reflects the strength of the image viewer; the perspective of horizontal view reflects the equal relationship between the image participant and the image viewer; and the perspective of looking up reflects the strength of the image participant.

3.3 Compositional Meaning of Movie Poster

In Systemic Functional Linguistics, textual meaning corresponds to compositional meaning. There are three kinds of realization resources: information value, framing and salience. Information value is achieved by the placement of various elements in the image. In the poster text, the information value and significance of the movie title are the strongest, so the font of the movie title should be larger, while other information with low information value can be used in smaller fonts. According to Kress G. & Van Leeuwen T., the top position is “ideal” and the bottom position is “real”. Ideal information is also general with the most prominent information. True information refers to specific, specific and practical information. The position of the person or object in the image reflects the information value of the image. Information in prominent positions is foreground, while others are background. Accordingly, the details of the movie’s cast, production company mostly appear the bottom of the poster. On the other hand, movie plots and classical screenshots are usually placed on the top of the poster. In many posters, the text of the movie title has been carefully designed to enrich its formal aesthetic sense, increase the value of information, enhance its visibility and readability, express the content to be conveyed more vividly and accurately, and have more visual impact.[5] The movie title, the movie slogans and the release time reflect the interaction between language and non-language factors. It fully mobilizes the multi-modal taste and analysis ability of the image viewer, and is an important factor to help them better understand the image text.

Framing shows that the relationship between the elements is connected or cut off by splitting lines. Movie posters can choose different scenes in the movie to show the theme of the movie. Because the information conveyed by the image is more direct and clear, rich in content and diverse in form, making the poster appears more dynamic.

Salience refers to how deeply elements such as the shade of lines and the color of the image attract the people’s attention. Significance can be achieved by placing it in the foreground or background, contrast of hue values (or colors), relative size and brightness. Salience is the degree to which the various elements in the image attract people’s attention. A successful design of a movie poster should be clear text arrangement, so that the audience can quickly capture the attractions of the movie. If the format of printed text is single, dull and unclear, it cannot achieve a good reading effect. Movie poster can highlight a message through large fonts and space, such as leading actors or famous directors who can enhance the value of the movie, which can attract the people’s attention and quickly transmit the movie information. Movie posters can also highlight a certain part of the picture through color,

brightness, and enhance its prominence, which can not only increase the visual charm of the poster and impress people, but also play a prominent role in the theme of the movie.

4. Summary

Through different meaning expression, movie poster forms a multi-modal planning, shapes a textual meaning by such symbols as images, text, color and so on, to convey the theme of the movie, fully reflect the performance means and ideological content of the movie, realize the purpose of transmitting visual symbols and attracting audience. Therefore, analyzing the multimodal meaning of image discourse from a multimodal perspective can improve people's awareness and ability of multi-appreciation. In a word, movie poster shows obvious multi-modal characteristics, so it is necessary to combine linguistic symbols with visual symbols to comprehensively research them, so as to fully and accurately understand the connotation of such multi-modal discourse. It must be pointed out that the theory of Visual Grammar can explain the mode of constructing discourse meaning by language and other non-language signs in movie poster. Multimodal discourse analysis based on Visual Grammar can not only help people dig the deeper meaning of the images, also help them better understand the theme of the movie poster.

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