# A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Movie Posters Based on Visual Grammar

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**Abstract.** Based on visual grammar of Kress & Van Leeuwen, from the three perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, this paper conducts a multimodal analysis of the movie poster *Youth*, to achieve the establishment of meaning and the realization of propaganda, thus validating the interactive and complementary relationship among symbols in multimodal discourse resource. The paper also reveals the method of constituting the multimodal discourse meaning through interaction of image and text. Analysis and interpretation of the composition of multimodal meaning of the movie poster not only help the readers deeply understand the connotation of the movie, but also help readers improve their cognition of multimodal discourse.

## Introduction

In the context of the information age, multimodal discourse analysis has become a hot topic in the field of linguistics. Since the 1990s, based on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, scholars have extended the study of social signs of language to multimodal communication activities such as images, sounds and movements. Among them, the framework of visual grammatical analysis created by representative figures Kress & Van Leeuwen provides certain theoretical basis and analytical methods for multi-modal discourse analysis.

Multimodal discourse refers to a discourse that uses hearing, vision, touch and other senses to communicate through language, image, sound, action and other means and symbolic resources.[1] Multimodal discourse includes advertising, media, video and other modes. Among them, movie poster is the most widely contacted discourse form, which conveys movie theme and connotation to the audience through unique visual design. Movie poster is a multimodal discourse that integrates image, font, text and color. It is composed of linguistic symbol system and non-linguistic symbol system such as color and image. The process of people watching a movie poster is the process of decoding a multimodal discourse that includes text, image, color and other symbolic resources.[2] The role of multimodal discourse analysis is to help readers to effectively integrate the meaning of multimodal discourse formed by multiple symbols, so as to better understand the connotation of discourse. [3]

## 1. Theory of Visual Grammar

Halliday, a systemic functional linguist, holds that language has three major functions: conceptual function, interpersonal function and textual function. Conceptual function refers to the expression of language to people's various experiences in the real world, that is, to reflect the events, people and things involved in the objective and subjective world, as well as relevant factors such as time and place. Interpersonal function refers to the function of speakers to use language to participate in social activities, and discourse function refers to the function of organizing language components into idioms at the semantic level. [4]

In *Reading Images*, Kress & Van Leeuwen create a framework for image analysis by comparing the three meta-functions in Halliday's systemic-functional grammar and consider images as social symbols.[5] They created a visual grammar theory of analyzing images with "representational

meaning", "interactive meaning" and "compositional meaning" as corresponding elements and core contents. Visual grammar shifted its research focus to images, believing that images are also social symbols, and different symbols can express the same theme and meaning. Visual grammar analyzes the metafunctions in images from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, and analyzes the joint action of language and image to form the operating mechanism of discourse, which helps readers to interpret images in discourse and better understand the meaning of discourse.

## 2. Multimodal Discourse Analysis in Movie Poster *Youth*

Adapted from a novel by Yan Geling, a Chinese novelist, the movie *Youth* tells the story of a group of young people in an army art troupe in the 1970s. Liu Feng, a helpful boy, and He Xiaoping, a rural girl who suffered discrimination from women soldiers of the troupe, accidentally left the art troupe, and involved in the bloody battlefield. They experienced sweet, bitter, comrade-in-arms parting and reunion in collective life of the art troupe. Years later, former comrades Xiao Suizi, Hao Shuwen, Chen Can, Lin Dingding and other heroes have different life destination. The public release of the movie *Youth* has been well accepted by the general audience, and has been praised both by the public and the box office. In addition to the wonderful story in the movie, the well-designed poster of *Youth* has attracted wide attention. It should be said that the movie's success is inseparable from the elaborate posters (as shown in Figure 1).



Figure 1. Movie Poster *Youth*

The text and image of the movie poster *Youth* are perfectly matched, with obvious multimodal characteristics, which profoundly shows the theme of youth in the movie and has a strong visual effect. Based on the visual grammar proposed by Kress & Van Leeuwen, this paper analyzes the three aspects of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, reveals the multimodal textual meaning of the poster of youth, and interprets the generation and transmission of image meaning under multimodal discourse.

### 2.1 Representational Meaning

In visual grammar theory, the representational meaning corresponds to the conceptual meaning in the meta-function. Representational meaning visually constructs the essence of the events, participants and environment in the image. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen, the representing mode of image includes narrative representation and conceptual representation, and the mark to distinguish narrative representation from conceptual representation is whether there is a vector in the image. A vector is a diagonal or diagonal line formed by an element in an image, which is a line connecting one or more participants.

2.1.1 Narrative Representation

Most of the movie posters belong to narrative images, which are generally used to highlight the theme of propaganda through such objective forms as movie poster images and main characters.

Vector is a sign of narrative images. Through such vectors as distinctive character movement, posture and facial expression of the characters, movie posters display the characters' personality, social status, attitude to convey the relationship between the characters, visually stimulating people's interest in the movie theme and an urge to watch movies.

The image participants in movie poster *Youth* are eight male and female protagonists, whose movements, body language and eye contact form a vector, thus forming a narrative image. Hero Liu Feng and heroine He Xiaoping wear the shirt and trousers of the army uniform, and other six men and women sitting on both sides of them were in swimsuit. The two protagonists' position is in the center of the poster image, and the way they dressed shows two similarities of the hero and heroine, suggesting that the two people in the movie plot are interwoven with the similar fate. Heroine He Xiaoping's hairstyle, dress, are completely different from that of six other men and women beside the pool. The traditional plait and fairly uniform are different from the other five girls who wear fashionable swimsuit and short hair, which suggests that she has not fit in with the group, so she was always the object of bullying. The only standing Liu Feng in the poster is in contrast with other people sitting by the pool in the image, which shows that he is the focus of the poster image and his importance in the story. In the image, Liu Feng's military shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows and his hands are propped up on his hips, and a deft gesture that conveys a message is consistent with Liu's ability, enthusiasm and generosity in the story. He smiled and looked forward with eager anticipation. The red background of the poster allows people to see the blood of heroes in the smoke of war. The hazy background of soldiers hunched over the battlefield and walking cautiously with guns gives the audience a glimpse of the most beautiful moment of cruel youth. In the background, the focal point on the left is the profile image of Liu Feng on the battlefield, with stains all over his face, lowered eyelids and dignified eyes, showing the heavy mood of Liu Feng after he was punished, begging for death on the battlefield to regain his good reputation.

2.1.2 Conceptual Representation

Conceptual representation refers to the representation of the categories, structures and meanings of images. Conceptual representation includes relational process and existential process. There is no vector in conceptual representation. Conceptual images can show the relatively stable nature and characteristics of participants, and reflect the relationship between participants through attributes, categories and features, such as symbolic process and analysis process.[6] Movie posters usually choose symbolic objects to render the theme of the movie, and condense the complex plots and esoteric connotations of the movie into simple and understandable visual symbols, which can not only enable the audience to quickly understand the information in the shortest time, but also make the movie posters rich in art and philosophy, so as to arouse the resonance of the audience.[7]

Above the poster is a cluster of blooming pink peach blossoms stretching delicately in the image. The peach blossom symbolizes "love" and yearning for a better life. Movie title in both English and Chinese artistic fonts (Youth) is located in the peach blossom branches with bright and eye-catching font. The last stroke of Chinese character "华" is an embodiment for beautiful women dancing posture, attracting the audience's attention, and highlighting the dance in the movie content and elements, which suggested that the hero and heroine's love story is related to the dance, remaining the beautiful image of beauty. The overall message of the poster is consistent with the background and theme of the movie. The artistry of the poster makes the complex plot and characters expressed through abstract symbols, so as to give different audience with different feelings, stimulate their interest and desire to watch the movie, and reflect the propaganda value of the movie poster.[9]

## 2.2 Interactive Meaning

In the theory of visual grammar, the interactive meaning corresponds to the interpersonal meaning in the metafunction, that is, the relationship between the image maker, the object represented by the image and the image viewer. Therefore, the interactive meaning not only refers to the interactive relationship between the image and the viewer, but also includes the viewer's attitude towards the image content.

2.2.1 Visual Contact

Kress & Van Leeuwen points out: "when images convey meaning, they all have an image behavior, which is implemented by the gaze system that represents participants. There are two kinds of gaze expression: taking and providing."[4] If the image participant has visual contact with the image viewer, it indicates that there is a "demand", which is the "demanding" image. This, in turn, constitutes the "providing" image. Visual contact is associated with eye contact of the participants in the image, creating an imaginary contact relationship. If there is no visual contact between the characters in the movie poster, there is no imaginary interpersonal relationship and only serves to provide information. If they make visual contact with the audience, they can establish an imaginary interpersonal relationship with the audience. Their eyes can show the personality characteristics of the characters, seek attention and recognition from the audience, increase the communication and interaction between the poster and the audience, and play the propaganda role of the movie poster.[8] In the movie posters *Youth*, eight men and women are smiling in the picture on the right side of the direction with no eye contact and communication between the audience and image viewer. There is no imaginary "visual contact", no imagine relationships between participants and spectators, thus it belongs to "providing" image. The audience have no idea about what they are staring at and thinking about, which stimulates their interest in watching the movie.

2.2.2 Social Distance

Social relationship determines the social distance between people, and the social distance in the image is determined by the distance between the image framing distance. The closer the distance is, the closer the relationship between the participants and the viewer is. The farther the distance, the more distant the relationship. Design of movie poster *Youth* takes the battlefield as the perspective, and the battlefield background where soldiers stoop forward with guns in the fog reflects the overall environment of the development of the story. The image participants and the image viewers show a kind of alienated social distance. The battlefield and the eight protagonists do not form an intimate ownership and personal relationship, and do not have a personal emotional color. Eight characters is the close shot in image, also is the key point of the image, revealing the characters of complex emotions, closer to the participants and image viewer's personal distance, established a close relationship, close to the audience and the relationship between the characters, make it easier for the audience to feel the storm of the life movie characters drift from place to place.

**2.3 Compositional Meaning**

In visual grammar theory, the meaning of composition corresponds to the textual meaning of meta-function. The meaning of composition is to express meaning through composition. The meaning of composition integrates the representational meaning and interactive meaning of the image to form a discourse, which reflects the connotation of the movie from three aspects: information value, framing and significance.

Salience is a dimension of compositional meaning, which means the different degrees of attraction by the elements for the viewer. "No matter where they are placed, salience can create a level of importance of each element, choose more important, more worthy of attention than others" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). There are a series of factors interactive with salience, namely, size, position, perspective, color and so on.

Salience can be realized by foreground or background, the contrast of hue value, relative size, sharpness and brightness level of the image. Movie poster *Youth* makes the swimming pool picture prominent through color, brightness and other skills, enhances its distinctiveness, increases the visual charm of the poster, impresses people, and plays a role in highlighting the theme of the movie. In the poster, the eight leading actors are placed in the foreground of the image, occupying the center of the image. Their facial expressions and body movements are vividly conveyed, which not only indicates their salience, but also indicates their central position in the movie. The profile of Liu Feng, the leading actor on the left side of the red background, is the largest figure in the poster, which shows that Liu Feng plays an important role in the movie and has the highest salience.

Salience is also expressed by various elements in the image, such as the thickness of lines and the intensity of colors. The thicker the line, the stronger the color, the higher the salience is. On the contrary, the salience is lower. In the poster of Youth, the text is arranged in a clear order, so that the

audience can quickly catch the attraction of the movie. Chinese movie titles is placed at the right side of character images, which account for a large space to highlight important information. Its bold strokes and unique artistic font are outstanding, which shows that its salience is the highest to attract the audience and survey video message. Text and image complement each other and realize the function of information transfer.[9]

Through the popularity of the director, the purpose of propaganda of the movie is achieved to enhance the value of the movie and reflect high salience. "Leading actor Huang Xuan" and "screenwriter Yan Geling" are placed on the lower left and right sides of the poster respectively. The font size and color clarity are inferior to the title of the movie, but superior to other cast and crew names and other information. The darker, slightly smaller fonts than the director's name suggest that they are important information in the poster, having less salience than the title of the movie. Information with relatively low values, such as release time of the movie and names of other cast members, was used in smaller type and darker colors, with low salience.

## 3. Summary

The theory of visual grammar can interpret the mode of constructing discourse meaning jointly by language and other non-language signs in movie posters with multimodal characteristics. The study of language signs, colors and images can reveal the multimodal textual meaning of movie posters. Taking Kress & van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the theoretical framework, the paper makes a multimodal analysis of the movie posters *Youth*, from the three perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, thus revealing the way constructing a multimodal discourse meaning through complementary relationship of various symbols and interaction between the image and text. The analysis and interpretation of the composition of multimodal meaning will not only help readers to understand the connotation of movie, but also help readers to improve their cognitive ability of multimodal discourse. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis of movie posters based on visual grammar can help readers to dig out the deep meaning in images and better understand the connotation and propaganda function of movie posters.

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