A Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Film Poster *No More Bets* from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

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Abstract: *In recent years, the rise of multi-modal discourse analysis (MDA) has expanded traditional discourse analysis centered on language. Movie posters, as a typical mode of multi-modal discourse, encompass unique visual and aesthetic effects and facilitate coordinated interaction among multi-modal symbols. However, most prior studies have concentrated on textual analysis within the film posters. As a visual and graphic medium, movie posters require more systematic research from a multi-modal perspective. This paper, grounded in the theory of visual grammar, focuses on the Chinese film "No More Bets" movie poster, delving into the language and image modes of the poster. Through microscopic analysis of the movie poster, it is hoped that this paper can reveal macroscopic social phenomena embedded within, achieving a deeper level of promotional significance, and assisting audiences in better understanding and appreciating the film. In conclusion, the research identifies the use of language and visual symbols in movie posters as crucial elements in constructing the cinematic meaning of the film poster. Additionally, the movie poster may instill a sense of social responsibility and suggest a broader societal concern with ethics and morality.*

Keywords: *Multi-modal Discourse Analysis; Visual grammar; Movie Poster; No More Bets*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, apart from verbal communication, most people use other symbolic signs to deliver information, such as images, facial expressions, colors, etc. The use of non-verbal semiotic resources has facilitated the emergence and growth of multi-modality. "Multi-modality refers to the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event, together with the particular way in which these modes are combined" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001).[8] The film poster itself is multi-modal, complex, and artistic. Analyzing from a multi-modal perspective can provide different interpretations of the film. Therefore, researchers have shifted from mono-modal discourse analysis to multi-modal discourse analysis such as text, image, sound, color, etc.

The application of MDA has been a prevailing trend, enabling researchers to study the topic from a multi-modal angle. A film poster is one of the most typical kinds of discourse that integrates texts and images. The design of a film poster can reflect the level and connotation of the whole movie to a certain extent, playing a very important role in movie publicity as it constitutes the first impression of the film. In the field of multi-modal discourse analysis, despite substantial theoretical progress, more research is required to broaden the scope of multi-modal discourse analysis in movie poster design, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of its complexity and diversity.

This study will adopt a qualitative method by using Kress & Van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar as a theoretical framework to analyze how visual mode achieves constructing meaning. In this way, the audience will not only appreciate the film from a new perspective but also better understand the film. The paper takes the poster "No More Bets" as a research object, making it a case study. The paper will analyze the movie poster from the perspective of representative meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning based on Visual Grammar. Representative meaning is analyzed from the aspects of the narrative process and conceptual process. Interactive meaning is investigated from the perspective of contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. Compositional meaning is investigated from the angle of information value, framing, and salience.

2. Literature review

2.1 Development of Multi-modal Research Analysis

Barthes (1977) was one of the earliest scholars concerned with multi-modal discourse. He studied the meaning of representation in the interaction between language resources and visual images.[1]. Metz was the first to approach film analysis from a linguistic perspective. He introduced linguistic analysis to film studies and collaborated with Taylor in exploring cinema's semiotic nature in the book Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema (Metz & Taylor, 1974)[11]. Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001) asserted that multi-modality involves using multiple symbolic modes within an integrated system to confirm the expression or execution of the same meaning in hierarchical order[8]. Machin (2007) stated that multi-modality describes the visual communication grammar employed by image designers, which is an analysis of rules and principles. The purpose of using it is to understand the more important elements such as framing, salience, proximity, color saturation, styles of typeface, etc[10].

In the course of MDA, key terms such as multi-modality, mode, modality, and medium are closely related. Thus, it is inescapable for us to differentiate the distinction and connection between them. Zhu (2007) suggested that the criterion for multi-modality is to identify the number of modalities or semiotic resources involved, defining it as involving two or more modalities or semiotic resources[13]. Hu (2007) defined multi-modality as discourse composed of two or more meaning-making mono-modal discourses[6]. Jewitt (2009) defined modality as semiotic resources used to express meaning in culture, distinguishing modes such as image, text, gesture, gaze, language, etc. He argued that multi-modality involves more than one means of presentation and communication, encompassing image, posture, writing, and other forms. According to Jewitt (2009), multi-modality consists of more than one means of presentation and communication, including images, posture, and writing[7].

Bateman (2013) analyzed the film with multi-modality. He indicated that multi-modal film studies cannot simply use linguistic theory to analyze films but must make up for other shortcomings in film theory from a linguistic perspective[2]. Daiva (2018) believed that although many researchers have explored different elements of the film, few studies involve the interaction of different symbol resources. While subtitles do more than present the film's dialogue, they are an important medium for information transmission through the use of different symbol resources. Therefore, he analyzed the subtitles in American romantic comedy films from the perspective of MDA and explored the specific meaning conveyed by the interaction among content, typesetting, and color[3]. Subsequent linguists successively explored symbol systems, specifically referring to the process of selecting symbols based on their characteristics and how this process is influenced by the cultural context. They particularly focused on the synergistic effects generated by symbol characteristics, ultimately integrating the selected symbol features into the overall framework to construct meaning.

2.2 Relationship between Language and Image

The construction of meaning relies on the collaborative interaction of various symbolic resources. According to Zhang (2009), the relations among different modes consist of both complementary and non-complementary aspects[12]. The complementary relationship involves reinforcement and non-reinforcement. Reinforcement occurs when one modality serves as the main form to convey meaning, while the other mode only highlights the expressive effect. For example, when one delivers a speech, spoken language is the main form of communication, and gestures, facial expressions, or videos played serve as reinforcement. The non-reinforcement relationship shows that different modes complement each other to construct meaning, especially the combination of visual mode and linguistic mode. For instance, when playing a video, both images and language are necessary for the transmission of information; otherwise, the information will be difficult to understand. Non-reinforcement refers to three types of relationships: coordination, coalition, and intersection. In the coordination relationship, different modalities interact with each other to express full meaning, and the meaning is incomplete once one modality disappears. In a coalition relationship, different media can convey full meaning just with one modality. For example, what a narrator says helps interpret what an actor is conveying. Different modalities can also intersect with each other. For instance, one can converse with others while watching TV plays.

2.3 Research Gap

In the field of multi-modal discourse analysis, although some scholars have used visual grammar to

analyze film posters, there has been little research on film posters in the practical application of individual cases. Many studies haven't fully utilized visual effects and slogans of film posters to give references for successful marketing elements and key audience attractions in popular film posters.

However, this deficiency serves as a catalyst for further expanding research in multi-modal discourse analysis of movie posters, aiming to provide a new perspective on the complexity and diversity of film poster design. Additionally, this new film has not been analyzed from the perspective of Visual Grammar, so it is hoped that this paper could provide the audience with different perspectives for interpretation. Simultaneously, it aims to not only offer a detailed description of non-verbal symbols at the micro level but also to explain social phenomena at the macro level through discourse analysis (Jewitt, 2009)[7]. This research uses visual mode to analyze how the meaning is constructed in the movie poster and will provide some suggestions on achieving good shooting effects for film posters.

3. Multi-modal analysis of poster of No More Bets

3.1 The Introduction of the Film

"No More Bets" is an anti-fraud crime film released on August 8, 2023, addressing current societal issues. It marks the first in-depth exploration of the entire overseas online fraud industry chain in Chinese film history, presenting a novel and representative theme. Additionally, the poster's design plays a crucial role, especially for such a captivating film. Cleverly combining textual themes and visual elements, crafting a cohesive and attention-grabbing poster that effectively conveys movie information helps establish anticipation and allure among the audience. Therefore, this paper aims to conduct a comprehensive multi-modal analysis of the "No More Bets" film poster, revealing the mechanisms and effects of its meaning construction.

3.2 Visual Grammar

Kress and Leeuwen's Visual Grammar is rooted in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. Hasan (1989) posited that language is a form of social semiotics, but beyond language, there exist other forms of meaning expression, including artistic forms such as painting and music[5]. In accordance with how visual symbols embody the three meta-functions, Kress and Van Leeuwen developed visual grammar. They expressed meaning differently, enlightened by Halliday's idea of the three meta-functions, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. They expanded this theory into the non-linguistic modalities[4]. Furthermore, Kress & Van Leeuwen declared that images and other patterns (such as language) can also carry out three meta-functions: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meanings. In their book "Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design," they proposed that images also assert themselves as social symbols, and then they advanced the theory of visual grammar and offered a multi-modal method for visual analysis. What is expressed in language through the choice of words and semantic structure may be expressed through the choice of line, color, and perspective in visual images. Subsequently, they introduced narrative representation and conceptual representation as manifestations of representational meaning, akin to the transitivity system in language. Elements reflecting interpersonal meaning encompass factors like contact, angle, and distance, while those reflecting discourse meaning include information value, salience, and framing[9].

3.2.1 Representational meaning

Representational meaning is associated with the ideational function of language in functional grammar. According to Kress & Van Leeuwen (2006), representational meaning is composed of the narrative process and the conceptual process. The distinction between the two is the presence of a vector. The "vector" is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants. Narrative process means that when a vector is connected with represented participants, it shows that the represented participants are performing something for each other. The vector can be formed by lines, outstretched arms, an arrow, and tools, etc. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) proposed that "narrative processes serve to present unfolding actions and events, processes of change, transitory spatial arrangements". It can be further divided into the action process, reaction process, verbal and mental process. The reaction process has two elements: the reactor and the phenomenon. The reactor refers to the participant who views what happens in the image. The phenomenon means what is being observed by the reactor. The reactor refers to the participant who views what happens in the image[9].

The movie poster for "No More Bets" constructs a comprehensive image reflecting the film's plot by

depicting the main characters and their surrounding environment. The seven individuals showcase varied expressions and postures, presenting different action processes. The poster can be broadly divided into three parts: the central foreground featuring the male and female protagonists, other significant characters as the middle ground, and the fraudulent factory serving as the background.

This film poster summarizes distinct action processes, delineating three primary sections: the central foreground featuring the protagonists, the middle ground highlighting other significant characters, and the background portraying the fraudulent factory. In the foreground, Pan Sheng looks resolute, gazing forward with eyes reflecting a high degree of determination and his engagement in intellectual challenges. Anna, positioned leaning against Pan Sheng's chair with her body inclined to the left, forms two vectors: one on each side symbolizing her connection with Pan Sheng and showcasing her support and collaboration. Wang Chuanjun, portraying Lu Bingkun, stands to the right behind Pan Sheng and Anna, tilting his head to the left with a disdainful expression and a commanding gaze. Sun Yang, playing Acai, places his right hand on Lu Bingkun's chair, leaning against him with a fierce expression and posture, Wang Dalu, portraying Gu Tianzhi, sits on an iron chair with a smiling face and innocent eyes, hinting at his helpless and victimized state after falling prey to deception. Behind him stands Song Yu, played by Zhou Ye, standing to Gu Tianzhi's right, with crossed arms and a gaze revealing a sense of justice. Yongmei, playing Officer Zhao Dongran, standing to the right of Lu Bingkun. She had a kind of righteous look on her face. This elaborate composition of characters and their spatial relationships form a narrative process, skillfully utilizing vectors, expressions, and postures to convey nuanced meanings and evoke specific emotions within the audience.

Reaction process. When the vector is formed by an eyeline, it is shaped by the participants' gaze direction. In the reactive process, the participants' eyes form vectors. There are seven main participants in the poster, and their eyes are directed straight ahead, creating vectors within the image.

Conceptual process represents participants in terms of their generalized and more or less stable and timeless essence, in terms of their class, structure, or meaning (Kress &Van Leeuwen, 2006)[9]. This process consists of three kinds of processes: classificational process, analytical process, and symbolic process.

In the film poster, compared to the dynamic narrative representation, conceptual representation is subjective by emphasizing the relationship between language and vision, focusing on the use of symbols such as color and characters. Each person on the poster represents a different identity, usually reflected by the design of their clothing. Pan Sheng, an aspiring programmer, is dressed in the typical attire of a coder, with a disheveled appearance and a dirty yellow vest. Anna, compelled by survival pressure to fall into the high-paying trap as a model, showcases refined attire and accessories, highlighting her external attractiveness and vanity. Wang Chuanjun, playing the role of Lu Bingkun, sits with crossed legs in a sophisticated green swivel chair. As the head of the fraud factor, with glasses and a well-groomed appearance, his clothing exudes sophistication. Sun Yang, portraying Acai, disguised as the company's personnel, is seen in a shirt, embodying a genteel and businesslike appearance. Wang Dalu, as Gu Tianzhi, a recent graduate preparing for a new life, presents a casual and fashionable style, reflecting his higher education and favorable family background. Zhou Ye, playing Song Yu, a recent graduate who remains clear-headed and rational, avoiding easily falling into scams, is dressed in simple attire. Yongmei, as Officer Zhao Dongran, symbolizes her identity with a military green jacket, reflecting her role as a police officer. The costumes thus serve as visual cues, aiding the audience in understanding the characters' backgrounds and roles within the film. The clothing design for each person on the movie poster reflects their respective identities and backgrounds.

3.2.2 Interactive Meaning

The interactive meaning describes the relations between the producer and the audience of the image. That is to say, images have two kinds of participants: represented participants and interactive participants. The former refers to the people, places, and things shown in images, while the latter refers to the people who express their opinions with each other through images. The interactive meaning is composed of contact, social distance, attitude, and modality (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006)[9].

Contact. Halliday (1994) proposed that speech acts have four functions: offer information, offer goods and services, demand information, and demand goods and services[4]. Clearly, we can notice that social semioticians extend the "modality" of interpersonal meanings in Halliday's systematic functional grammar to other symbolic systems besides language symbols. Based on these functions, Kress and Van Leeuwen extended it to visual analysis. The concept of contact can be divided into the demand act the and offer act. The key point of distinguishing between the demand act and the offer act is whether the represented participants and the interactive participants have direct eye contact. In demand images, the

represented participants and the viewer have direct eye contact, while in offer images, the represented participants and the viewer have no direct eye contact. He states that any images must be either a demand act or an offer act.

From the poster, all participants are looking directly at the camera, as if they are looking at the viewers. In the center of the image, Pan Sheng furrows his brows, giving a "demand" gaze through his face and facial expression, making it demand act contact and allowing the audience to be somewhat involved. Through this, a strong sense of anticipation is created for how the characters in the movie will overcome difficulties. This momentarily generates a powerful emotional resonance, and together with Pan Sheng, the audience learns about enhancing the awareness of safety.

Social distance reveals relations between the represented participants and the viewer. There are three kinds of social distance: the close-up, the medium shot, and the long shot. The audience's perception of social distance and intimacy with the participants in the image can be conveyed through the proximity of the camera lens. In visual grammar, the broader the range captured by the lens, the more distant the social distance becomes. When designers use close-up shots, the social distance between the audience and the participants is closer, indicating a more intimate relationship. The audience can vividly experience the encounters and psychological activities of the participants in the image. Conversely, when designers use long shots, the social distance between the audience and the participants is greater, creating a more ordinary relationship with a sense of distance between them.

From the poster, the overall presentation of the participants in the poster enhances the atmospheric feel of the story. The use of long shots helps portray more objective and realistic content, enhancing the viewer's sense of immersion. Presenting the whole scene reveals that the participants in the image and the audience share a close and intimate relationship in society.

Attitude refers to the choice of angles or points of view. It indicates the possibility of presenting subjective attitudes to the represented participants. It means the selection of perspective. Attitude or the selection of perspective has two aspects: horizontal angle and vertical angle. The vertical angle is composed of three aspects: high angle, low angle, and eye-level angle. The high angle enables the subject to look small and meaningless. If we see the subject from a high angle, the interactive participant possesses power over the represented participant. The low angle makes the subject look impressive and commanding. If we see the subject from a low angle, the represented participant owns power over the interactive participant. If the image is at an eye-level angle, there is no power involved, and the represented participant and the interactive participant are in equal relation.

This poster is shot from an eye-level perspective, representing an interaction of equality. The frontal view narrows the distance between the audience and the participants, indicating an equal relationship. The poster designer aims for the audience to engage in the movie with an equal posture, enhancing the sense of presence.

Modality refers to "the truth value or credibility of statement of the world" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006)[9], namely, it refers to the plausibility of the given message. Color is the most important one among these modality markers. Based on the brightness, color saturation, and contrast of the image, it includes three parts: high modality, medium modality, and low modality.

From the poster, the color saturation of the "No More Bets" poster is high, mainly using four colors: yellow, blue, green, and black, belonging to high mood. The combination presents multiple visual elements, achieving the alternation and fusion of warm and cool colors, creating a strong visual effect and deepening the viewer's impression of the poster. In terms of color saturation, the bottom of the poster has a dark tone, symbolizing the cruel deception the protagonist faces, representing the dilemma the protagonist wants to escape. The middle green glow surrounds the country, with green symbolizing justice. Darkness is surrounded by green. The top of the movie title "No More Bets" is in golden yellow, symbolizing money and highlighting the theme of deception. The designer highlighted the film title in yellow to draw more attention. The release date "August 8th" in the lower-left corner of the poster is highlighted in golden yellow, and the white text slogan at the bottom left of the poster "One more person watching, one less person deceived" serves as a warning. The color contrast is sharp, guiding the audience's gaze and serving the purpose of warning, succinctly conveying the core theme of the movie. High color saturation can capture the audience's interest, make them linger on the poster, and arouse curiosity about the movie.

3.2.3 Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning is used for relating the representational and interactive meanings of the image

and integrating them into a meaningful and unified whole. This compositional meaning consists of three interrelated systems: information value, salience, and framing.

Information value means that the placement of different elements in images. Different placement of elements conveys different information values according to their position of the image. Regarding position, information value can be divided into three aspects: left and right, top and bottom, center and margin. The information value at the top presents ideal information, while the elements placed at the bottom convey real information. The center and margin refer to whether an element is placed in the middle of the image; if so, it is central element, and other elements are margin elements. The central elements usually represent the most significant information, while the margin elements provide subservient information.

In the poster, the central position represents the core information with the highest information value. The two foreground characters, Pan Sheng and Anna, occupy the largest proportion of the entire poster, emphasizing their protagonist status and making it clear to the audience that they are pivotal in the plot. The poster exhibits a distinct "center-edge" structure, with central elements providing primary information and edge elements offering secondary information. The background features the victims of the fraudulent factory, serving as idealized information that aids in understanding and presenting a comprehensive depiction of the events. Additionally, at the bottom of the poster is basic information about the producer, director, actors, etc., all of which is actual information. The release date is positioned slightly left of the center, and the visual elements are relatively clear. The background elements are responsible for providing surrounding context and secondary information, while the text at the bottom of the image introduces the collaborative partners for the entire film, containing real information.

Salience refers to the degree to which different elements in an image attract the viewer's attention in terms of size, front-back position, color saturation, and other factors. An image usually includes different degrees of salience; some information about the image is crucial and worthy of notice, while some information is secondary. Salience is judged by foreground and background, color contrasts, relative size, and differences in sharpness. The most salient part is often placed at the central position of the image.

In the image presented by the poster, viewers are immediately drawn to the release date, appearing in the bottom left corner, prominently positioned, vivid in color, highly contrasting, and exhibiting strong salience, creating a visually impactful effect. They occupy a larger space on the poster, with stronger colors and contrast, making them visually more prominent. In the poster, the numbers appear in the bottom left corner with a relatively large font size, significantly enhancing the visibility of the release date, and making it highly conspicuous. The majority of the poster's space is occupied by various actors, with the faces of the main cast visible, dressed in vibrant colors. This design choice by the poster designer guides the audience to observe the characters, emphasizing the importance of paying attention to both the characters and the screening time.

Framing is concerned with the connection or separation of depicted elements in the image. When the framing devices are used, the elements of the image are often separate from them. When framing devices are absent, the elements of the image are usually connected. Framing can connect or separate different elements through vectors, color, visual shape, etc. Framing refers to the relationship between different elements.

In the film poster, all characters are presented together to give a thorough impression to the viewers. The poster designer emphasizes that the entire image is a unified whole, so the characters on the poster are not clearly separated from the background, indicating that the entire scene is integrated. It requires connecting various elements to infer their relationships.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper analyzes multi-modal discourse based on the theoretical framework of visual grammar, combined with examples. In the discourse mode of the movie poster, the picture, color, and other symbols in the image together participate in the construction of the film theme. The exploration underscores the intricate interplay of visual elements in cinematic communication, shedding light on the depth and significance of multi-modal discourse in the realm of film analysis. Next, the major findings will be presented, followed by an exploration of the study's limitations.

4.1 Major Findings of the Present Study

Concerning the construction of visual meaning in the visual mode, this movie poster places a stronger emphasis on narrative concerning the conceptual process. The primary use of the narrative process is to convey the meaning of the image. Regarding interactive meaning, the film places the highest emphasis on the "demand act" during interpersonal contact. The use of close-ups in social distance, frontal angles in posture, and eye-level angles collectively works to deeply engage the audience. In the realm of compositional meaning, the poster relies more frequently on information value to construct its intended meaning. Functioning as a serious work of realism, the movie poster serves a crucial role by conveying positive moral concepts and instilling a sense of social responsibility. It profoundly resonates with the public, prompting contemplation of societal values and ethical norms. The film mirrors a broader trend in media and storytelling where there is a push for authenticity and a reflection of real-world problems. In summary, this paper has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of visual grammar and its application in the analysis of film posters. The overarching goal is to unveil the semiotic richness of visual elements, providing fresh insights for visual culture research and furnishing effective means for conveying film themes and emotions, thereby enriching the overall cinematic experience for viewers. Therefore, as a common multi-modal expression mode in film propaganda, it is important to analyze and study the posters from the visual grammar theory.

4.2 Limitation

Even though the study conducts a comprehensive multi-modal discourse analysis of the film poster, there are still some limitations to the study. Firstly, as far as research material is concerned, the study is a case study and it enables the author to conduct a comprehensive multi-modal discourse analysis of the film poster. Nevertheless, the study's reliance on a specific set of examples may introduce an element of subjectivity, necessitating further validation methods to bolster the credibility and robustness of the findings. While the case study offers in-depth insights, generalizability to a broader context may be a consideration for future research endeavors.

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