
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Poster of the Movie *Octagonal*

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| ABSTRACT

With the development of multimedia and the Internet, meanings are expressed in diverse forms. A movie poster is a multimodal discourse that integrates text, image, color, composition, and other elements, which not only gives the audience visual aesthetic enjoyment but also conveys the theme of the movie in a highly concise and effective way. Based on the theory of Visual Grammar, this study taking the poster of the recent popular movie *Octagonal* as the research object, conducted a multimodal discourse analysis on the poster in a qualitative way. It studied the expression of the meaning of the poster from three dimensions, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, and explored the role of the design of the poster in conveying the theme of the movie.

| KEYWORDS

Multimodal discourse analysis; visual grammar; representational meaning; interactive meaning; compositional meaning.

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1. Introduction

The emergence of multimedia and the popularization of the Internet have diversified people's way of communication. Language is only one of the forms to express meaning, and in many cases, this single form can't fully express what the speaker means; therefore, multimodal symbols such as images, sounds and actions are needed to coordinately supplement and strengthen what the speaker means.

Octagonal (also called *Never Say Never*) is a realistic movie directed by Wang Baoqiang, released on July 6, 2023. Adapted from true events, the movie was a hit after its release, topping the box office and was highly acclaimed. There is no doubt that a high-quality script, the director's ability and the acting skills of the actors are all important factors for the success of the movie. However, the vigorous publicity before the release of the movie can not be neglected, and the design of the poster is an important part of the publicity. In the Internet era, the forms of movie posters are diversified, so designing posters to more effectively construct meaning, convey information, and attract the audience has become an important issue. Based on the theory of Visual Grammar, taking the poster of the movie *Octagonal* as the research object, this study analyzed the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning constructed in the poster, explored how meanings are constructed through multimodal symbols such as text, image, color and composition, and how they cooperate and complement each other, so as to attract the audience and promote publicity. The writer hopes that this study can be of some help in the multimodal discourse analysis of movie posters.

2. Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Traditional discourse analysis only deals with linguistic texts. Multimodal discourse analysis is a further development of discourse analysis, the research object of which extends from texts to multimodal symbols such as images, sounds, colors and layout, which

overcomes the limitation of discourse analysis. Barthes was one of the earliest scholars to study multimodal discourse. In *Images-Music-Text*, he studied the relationship between images and language text and how the two interact to affect the expression of meaning (Barthes, 1997). After that, Halliday (1985) put forward Systemic Functional Grammar (SFL), pointing out that there are three metafunctions of language, namely ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. This provided the theoretical source for multimodal discourse analysis.

2.2 Visual Grammar

Based on Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) proposed Visual Grammar. They argued that Halliday's three metafunctions are not limited to linguistic symbols but also applicable to non-language symbols such as images, sounds and colors. They proposed three corresponding meanings that images can express, namely representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning.

Representational meaning corresponds to the ideational function in Systemic Functional Grammar, which characterizes both objects and things existing in the real world and things created in people's minds (Zhao Yaoyao, 2023). According to the presence or absence of vectors in images, they can be divided into narrative representation and conceptual representation. If there are vectors, it is a narrative representation, including action processes, reaction processes, speech processes, and mental processes. Action processes and reaction processes can be divided into two types: transitive and non-transitive. In the action process, the vector is mainly constructed by the participants and their body movements; in the reaction process, the vector is mainly constructed by the participants' eye contact. The verbal and psychological processes involve the participants' conversations and inner activities, respectively. If there are no vectors, then it is a conceptual representation which includes relational and existential processes (Yu Xiaohui, 2022).

Interactive meaning corresponds to interpersonal function; it reflects the relationship between the represented participant, the picture maker and the viewer, which is realized through four aspects: contact, distance, perspective and modality. For contact, if the participant has eye interaction with the viewer, then the participant is demanding something from the viewer, and if the participant does not have eye contact with the viewer, then it is offering something to the viewer. Distance is the distance between the participant and the viewer created by frame size and lens. A close lens embodies a close relationship; a distant lens embodies a distant relationship. Perspective is the angle of the lens, which reflects the relationship between the participant and the real world and the relationship between the participant and the viewer. For example, looking upward downward, and horizontally reflects different power relations between the participant and the viewer (Tian Hailong, 2014). Modality is determined by the saturation of the color, which reflects the authenticity and credibility of the information in the picture. According to the saturation of the color, it can be divided into low, middle and high modalities, and the higher the saturation, the higher the modality (Zhou Yao, 2023).

Compositional meaning corresponds to textual function and is reflected by the position of each element in the overall view. There are three aspects involved: information value, salience and framing. Information value is reflected in the position in which the elements are located, and there are several ways of analyzing it: top and bottom, left and right, center and edge. Horizontally, the known information is located on the left, and the unknown information is located on the right. Vertically, the ideal information is on top, and the realistic information is on the bottom. Important information is in the center, and the less important information is on edge. Salience refers to the degree of prominence of elements in the overall image, determined by position, size, color saturation, etc., which attracts the viewer's attention. Framing refers to the connection and separation of elements in an image, which can be separated according to color, line, shape, etc. If there is a clear demarcation line between different elements, then the elements each represent a different meaning and should be analyzed separately; otherwise, the elements represent a whole and should be analyzed together.

3. Literature Review

After Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) established the theoretical framework of Visual Grammar, multimodal discourse analysis developed rapidly; Li Zhaizi (2003) was the first scholar to introduce multimodal discourse analysis into China, and his *Social Semiotics Analysis of Multimodal Discourse* was the earliest relevant theoretical research on multimodal discourse analysis. After that, Zhu Yongsheng (2007), Hu Zhuanglin (2007), Zhang Delu (2009) and other scholars introduced the theory, which greatly promoted the study of multimodal discourse in China. After the theory gradually gained domestic scholars' recognition, many scholars used it to analyze advertisements, posters, and web pages. For example, Qiao Yuqiao' (2010) multimodal discourse research on the poster of the Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, and Yuan Yanyan & Zhang Delu's (2012) multimodal discourse analysis on the poster of the movie *Aftershock*. Both of them studied how the multimodal discourse of the poster was realized in terms of its representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. As for studies on multimodal discourse on advertisement, a representative one is the multimodal interpretation of a social public service advertisement by Xin Bin & Tang Lijuan in 2014. Many studies in this regard have emerged over the years, but no such study on the recent hot movie Octagonal has been conducted. This poster was designed by the famous designer Huang Hai, and it attracted a lot of attention as

soon as it was released, which contributed to the publicity of the movie. Therefore, this study takes the poster as the object of research and analyzes the multimodal discourse in it, with a view to providing more materials and perspectives for studies on the meaning construction of the poster, as well as for the study of the movie *Octagonal*.

4. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Movie Poster

The movie tells the story of Xiang Tenghui (starred by Wang Baoqiang), a former boxing champion who devotes himself to helping local orphans attended to rewrite their destiny. He wants to train the unattended orphans into professional boxing athletes, which gives the children, who otherwise have no way out of life, a glimpse into the future. However, as videos of past fight performances were released, the "brutal and bloody" images stirred the nerves of the public. Overnight, things went viral. The life of the hero and the future of the orphans are trapped in the big net that people weave in the name of kindness, making it difficult for them to break free and leaving them with no idea about their future. Below is the concept poster of the movie.



4.1 Representational Meaning of the Movie Poster

In the poster, there are seven boys, the protagonist Xiang Tenghui, and two figures fighting on Xiang Tenghui's back. In the picture, the 7 children are running forward while Xiang is stepping forward with firm steps. Their actions form a straight line and constructed a vector, which is an action process. Although there is no eye contact between them, the consistency of their movements reflects their common desire and pursuit. The two fighting figures on Xiang's back are looking at each other and are fighting, which forms a fighting scene. On the one hand, their movement also constitute a vector, and this process is an action process; on the other hand, their eye contact constitutes a vector, which is a reaction process. Both of these processes belong to narrative representation. The seven boys, Xiang Tenghui and the two fighting figures created a passionate and positive feeling.

4.2 Interactive Meaning of the Movie Poster

4.2.1 Contact

As for contact, in the poster, 7 children and Xiang Tenghui turned their backs to the viewer, and the two fighting figures are looking at each other horizontally. All the figures do not have any eye contact with the audience. Therefore, the represented participants in the picture are not asking for information from the viewer but providing information for them. With their backs to us, we don't know what they're thinking or where they're going, which creates a mysterious and unknown atmosphere.

4.2.2 Distance

As for distance, most of the characters in the poster are fully presented, and we can see their movements. Xiang's character image is larger due to the close range, which reflects that the viewer is closer to Xiang and has a better understanding of him. By contrast, the seven children and the two fighting figures are relatively small due to their far range, which shows that the viewer knows less

about them. This also reflects the uncertainty of those children's lives, filling both unknown and possibilities. This can trigger the curiosity of the audience and leave more room for them to imagine.

4.2.3 Perspective

When it comes to perspective, although all characters turn their eyes to the viewers rather than facing them, we look at them horizontally rather than looking up at or looking down on them. Although the protagonist, Xiang Tenghui, is frustrated and the social status of the seven children is quite low, the designer does not look at them from a top-down perspective. Instead, he guides the audience to look at them head on, which reflects an equal relationship between the participants and the audience.

4.2.4 Modality

Modality is related to the saturation of color. The poster mainly uses black and white. Black symbolizes darkness, depression, the unknown, and the ups and downs in the process of pursuing a brighter future, while white symbolizes a bright future and hope. The two intertwined reflect the uncertainty of the trend of the story, which helps attract the audience.

4.3 Compositional Meaning of the Movie Poster

4.3.1 Information Value

As for the upper and lower parts of the poster, the upper half mainly consists of the character Xiang Tenghui and the background. The background looks like a mountain as well as a sea, spreading out layer by layer, alluding to the twists and turns experienced by and set for the protagonist as well as the children. The image of Xiang in the upper part is relatively big, which weakens the difficulty symbolized by the background; this is ideal information. In the lower half, children placed in the background look relatively small, which amplifies the difficulties; this is true information. The poster is roughly symmetrical, which means the proportion of known information and unknown information is equal. Xiang is in the center of the poster, which means he is the core character, and the fighting figure on his back is also in the center position, reflecting that the theme of the film is fighting. The Chinese name of the film is more central to the picture than other text, which means this is important information.

4.3.2 Saliency

As far as the linguistic text, for highlight, the Chinese name of the film uses a larger font, and the English name uses a red font so that people can catch this important information at once. Xiang Tenghui, the main character, is the largest image, which highlights his power and important role in the film. Although the image of the seven children is small, the color with high saturation also works for highlight. The effect of the above elements in the overall picture being prominent is specially designed by the designer.

4.3.3 Framing

The elements in the poster are well integrated and use a similar color. There is no obvious boundary and isolation, which reflects that the designer emphasizes the integrity of elements. This means that when analyzing the elements in this film, they should be analyzed in this specific context.

5. Conclusion

The present study is a primarily qualitative investigation of the movie poster of *Octagonal* based on the theory of Visual Grammar, and the objective is to examine how a multimodal discourse that combines text, image, color, composition and other elements offers visual aesthetic enjoyment to the audience and convey the theme effectively. The study shows that, in the construction of representational meaning, the poster emphasizes the use of narrative representation, through which it conveys the content of the movie. The construction of interactive meaning creates a sense of mystery and uncertainty through contact, distance and modality, which attracts the audience, arouses the audience's curiosity, and plays an important role in the publicity of the movie. In addition, this poster uses a head-up perspective to guide the audience to look at these children with equal eyes. Although they are not favored by fate, they keep fighting to pursue a better future. In the construction of the compositional meaning, the main and secondary elements of the poster are made clear. They are integrated and coordinated, which helps convey implicit information and the theme of the movie.

This study offers some insights into the multimodal analysis of the movie post *Octagonal*; however, there are some limitations to the study that restrict the generalizability of our findings. First, this study is mainly qualitative; the analysis may be subjective to some extent. Second, it examines only one movie post, and the findings are specific to this multimodal discourse. About these limitations, future studies can resort to some quantitative method to support the analysis, making it more objective; besides, future studies can compare different versions of the same movie post or different movie posts of the same theme to look into the way how multimodal discourse conveys the theme.

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