

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of One Film Poster under the Framework of Visual Grammar

Hong-ling XIAO^{1,a} and Yan LI^{2,b}

^{1,2}College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Xiamen University, Xiamen, China.

^axhling@xmu.edu.cn, ^bliyan_386@163.com

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, visual grammar, film poster

Abstract: Nowadays, owing a lot to the technology of digitalization, discourse takes on a multimodal look. So is discourse analysis. Under the framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar, this article makes a qualitative study of a film poster *Captain America: the Winter Soldier*, intending to see how different social semiotics cooperate and coordinate to express the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning of the poster and to prove the applicability of visual grammar to multimodal discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Traditional discourse has a distinct character of monomodality, which comes entirely without illustrations and has dense pages of print. Even in some texts containing other social semiotics such as graphics and pictures, they are all too often neglected or regarded as subservient to language. But in the age of digitalization and information, with modern technology in full play, not only the mass media but also varieties of documents have acquired illustrations and sophisticated layout and typography. Discourse analysis that once focused only on language or text can no longer fully interpret the integrated meaning generated by various modes of meaning making resources, and therefore, calls for new ways and theories of discourse analysis. Kress and Van Leeuwen pioneered this approach in 1996 to set up the theory of Visual Grammar (*VG for short hereafter*) in their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*.

Posters, whatever style or subject, represent a typical genre with striking features of multimodality. The present article takes one poster of the film *Captain America—the Winter Soldier* for a case study under the framework of VG which is transformed from the semiotic theories and systemic functional linguistics of Halliday(1978,1985)^[1,2], and intends to prove its applicability to multimodal discourse analysis (*MDA for short hereafter*) and to indicate how the selection and coordination of visual modes such as language, paralinguistic features, color and layout, etc. in the design of a film poster contribute to interpreting the content and theme of the film.

2. Overview of MDA Studies

Multimodality emphasizes the integrated use of both the verbal and nonverbal semiotic resources in communication. After O'Toole's *The Language of Displayed Art*(1994)^[3] and Kress and Van Leeuwen's *Reading Images: the Grammar of Visual Design*(1996)^[4], the field of multimodal research rapidly expanded. O'Toole studied the architecture and space; Van Leeuwen(1999)^[5] studied music and sound and held that “Multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes---for example, language and music---in a communicative artifact or event”(2005:281)^[6]; Baldry and Thibault(2006)^[7] examined multimodal transcription and text analysis of different kinds

including webpage, film, advertisements, and map. All the above studies have provided great insight into the analysis of the selected film poster which conforms to the declare of Iedema (2003:33)^[8] that "The increased ubiquity of sound, image, film and so on through TV, computer and Internet is undoubtedly behind this new emphasis on and interest in the multi-semiotic complexity of the representations we produce and see around us".

3. Case study of the Film Poster *Captain America: The Winter Soldier under VG*

Based on SFL's view of language as social semiotic and the hypothesis of three metafunctions, Kress and Van Leeuwen pioneered to set up the framework of VG, a multimodal approach to visual communication, according to which there are three kinds of meaning of images: the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning which respectively correspond to the experiential function, interpersonal function and textual function proposed by Halliday. Before detailed analysis from the three aspects, let's briefly introduce the film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and the poster selected.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier, a sequel to 2011's *Captain America: the First Avenger*, is a 2014 American superhero film featuring the Marvel Comics character Captain America. Typical of American films, this one also has a striking feature of exalting personal heroism and great American nationalism. Captain America, enhanced to the peak of human physicality by an experimental serum, undertakes the great mission of saving his country, his people, and even the world. The poster chosen for analysis was issued together with the film trailer for about two months before the formal release of the film on 4th April, one of the most popular official posters on the internet.



Figure 1. Poster under analysis: *Captain America--The winter Soldier*

3.1 Analysis from the Representational Meaning

The representational meaning is concerned with the structuring of the internal relations between the depicted participants, things, the action they perform and the setting of the circumstance. It is divided into two patterns--Narrative and Conceptual (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996:60)^[9]. An essential signal for distinguishing the two processes lies in the fact that whether there exists the vector. The narrative process contains the vector whereas the conceptual process not.

Vector plays an essential role in the representation of the narrative process, and it is usually

established in the form of diagonal between the relative participants in pictures. When the represented participants are connected by the vector, they are presented as doing something to or for each other. In this poster, Captain America's left hand holding the shield is a vector, Captain being the actor and the shield the target, and the arm of Captain forms a diagonal between the two represented participants indicating their inseparable relationship. Captain's gazing outside the frame, the target remaining unknown to the viewer, forms a non-transactive process. While the sole leading hero of the film, Captain America's intense gaze outside the frame of the poster has built up eye contact with the viewer, as if communicating with the audience, arousing the audience's interest in and passion for the coming new sequel.

Conceptual process mainly refers to existential process and symbolic process. The symbolic process being divided into symbolic attributive process and symbolic suggestive process (ibid:63)^[10] is about what the participants are or what they mean. Captain America, as the only character featured in this poster, is the carrier whose meaning and identity are already established, that is, he is the mere hero of the film and stands for America. The shield at his left hand is the symbol. Firstly, it is very outstanding in the poster, occupying half of the central part of the poster and is placed in the foreground. Secondly, the color and elements of the shield, star and stripes, are exactly the same as the American national flag. This is apparently symbolizing the power and authority of America.

3.2 Analysis from the Interactive Meaning

The interactive meaning, which is achieved by four major systems: contact, social distance, perspective and modality, is associated with the social relations between interactants and the evaluative orientations that participants adopt towards each other and to the represented world of the text (ibid:110)^[11].

3.2.1 Social distance

The social distance is determined by the size of frame, that is, the choice between close-up, medium shot and long shot. The closer the close-up, the closer their relation will be. The image of Captain America is cut off at the knees, which is the medium close shot, accordingly showing a medium close relationship between Captain America and the viewer. But as he is placed in the foreground in the picture which is within very easy reach, it gives a feeling of intimate attachment to the viewer and so the viewer is inspired by him and can't help being involved.

3.2.2 Perspective

Perspective provides another way for the interactive relations between the represented participant and the viewer, which implies the possibility of indicating the subjective attitude towards the represented participant, human or otherwise. Seen from the horizontal perspective, Captain America, together with his shield, and the viewer are paralleled or aligned with each other, which is the frontal perspective. Captain America is situated just in front of the viewer who therefore get involved with each other. The facial expression of Captain America is closely and clearly identified by the viewer, which is an effective way to achieve interactive meaning. Vertical perspectives are achieved mainly by two dimensions, namely, the high angle and the low angle. Captain America is photographed from a low angle and gives the viewer an impression of superiority, authority and triumph, which satisfies the viewer's expectation for the character as a superhero who owns the peak of human physicality.

3.2.3 Modality

The modality in visual communication refers to the degree of truth or untruth to the values and

beliefs of other groups. Let us focus on the two modality markers—color and contextualization.

Color plays a very important role in presenting information in multimodal discourses, especially the information that can't be conveyed by verbal language. In this poster, the color is modulated to correspond to those of American national flag: white, red and blue, which is absolutely of high modality to symbolize America and American spirit, exalting a superhero from America who undertakes the mission of fighting against terrorism.

According to Baldry and Thibault (2006:21)^[12], "Multimodality refers to the diverse ways in which a number of distinct semiotic resource systems are both co-deployed and co-contextualized in the making of a text-specific meaning". Contextualization serves as another modality marker to realize the interactive meaning. The poster possesses a modest modality of contextualization. Firstly, Captain wears serious facial expression, in a suit of armor and weapon at hand. He is ready for a fight. Secondly, the background of the poster with scattered bright white being depicted sharply against grey-blue color can make an imaginary picture of a battlefield with gun fire, bomb explosion and exploded debris. Though not very directly, it still helps to create a warlike atmosphere.

3.3 Analysis from the Compositional Meaning

The compositional meaning is realized through the layout of various elements in the image, the way in which the representational and interactive elements are made to relate to each other into a meaningful integration (Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996:140)^[13]. Information value, salience and framing are the three compositional resources.

3.3.1 Information value

Information value is achieved by the placement of specific elements in the image. The role of any specific element in the whole depends on where it is put: left and right, top and down, center and margin. If the placement is from left to right, the structure of visual information is constructed as "Given or New". If the placement is formed from top to down, the visual information is expressed as "Ideal or Real"(Li 2003(5):7)^[14].

At the bottom are the cast members, the name and logo of the work studio *MARVEL*, which is the real information about the film and the least highly valued compared with other information. A little above the cast information is the logo *COMING SOON* of a bigger size, which is the information a bit more highly valued to announce in advance the show of the film. At the center is title of the film, the biggest size of all the words, which undoubtedly shows its central role among all the elements. At the top of the poster is head of Captain, which is regarded as the ideal information because he is the hero in the heart of the viewers and the most attractive factor of the poster, and the film as well.

3.3.2 Salience

Salience refers to the different degrees of attraction by the elements in the image for the viewer, which can be made possible by various means such as placement in the foreground or background, contrasts in tonal value, relative size, difference in sharpness etc.

Obviously, in this poster the salience lies in the foreground featuring the image of Captain and the shield at his hand. Firstly, seen from the size of the image, it takes up more than 2/3 of the whole poster, leaving his background seemingly far behind and blurred. The size of the shield at his hand Accounts for half of Captain's image. Secondly, with more than 2/3 of the whole poster being the image of Captain, his dark blue armor forms the main background color, the shield at his hand and the big white words of the film title are quite saturated and indicate a high modality.

3.3.3 Framing

Framing refers to the fact of whether there exists the framing device to disconnect or connect

elements of the image, signifying that they belong or do not belong together in some sense. As far as this poster is concerned, color is the only framing device. The key color tone in this poster is blue and white. The armor and helmet of Captain America is mainly blue, with only a white capital letter *A* on the helmet and a white star in front of Captain America's chest. And the shield is totally a symbol of American national flag, the color, stars and stripes being completely those of the national flag, only that the shape is transformed from a flag into a round shield. So the blue and white of the Captain's armor and shield are connected to show the inseparable relationship between the two images. Taking the background color into consideration, also white and blue, the whole poster is in great harmony in terms of color saturation and modulation to integrate the compositional meaning of the poster.

4. Conclusion

Like most American films, *Captain America: the Winter Soldier* exalts American individual heroism and the America's heroic role of fighting against terrorism and saving the world. Through detailed analysis of the static multimodal discourse of the chosen poster under the three perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, we can see that the theme and spirit of this film are successfully depicted, which justifies the efficient applicability of Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar to MDA. At the same time, this theory also gives designers a clue as for how to effectively select and coordinate different visual modes in creating static multimodal discourses such as posters, print advertisements, web pages, etc.

Acknowledgement:

This research is financially supported by *Discourse Corpus, the Program of Prospering Philosophy and Social Science, Xiamen University (0650-Y07200) and Fujian Social Sciences Planning Program (2013C082)*

References:

- [1] Halliday, M.A.K. *Language as Social Semiotic: The Social Interpretation of Language and Meaning*. London: Edward Arnold, 1978
- [2] Halliday, M.A.K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold, 1985.
- [3] O' Toole, M. *The Language of Displayed Art*. London: Leicester University Press, 1994.
- [4,9,10,11,13] Kress, G. And T. Van Leeuwen. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge Press, 1996, pp:60,63,110,140.
- [5] Van Leeuwen, T. *Speech, Sound and Music*. London: Macmillan, 1999.
- [6] Van Leeuwen, T. *Introducing Social Semiotics*. London: Routledge, 2005:281.
- [7, 12] Baldry, A. and P. J. Thibault. *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis*. London: Equinox, 2006:21.
- [8] Iedema, R. "Multimodality, resemiotization: extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice". *Visual Communication*, 2003:33.
- [14] Zhanzi L. *Social Semiotic Approach to Multimodal Discourse Foreign Languages Research*, Nanjing: 2003 (5):7.