

Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Posters

Bowen Yu

Macau University of Science and Technology
Macau, China 999078

Abstract—Multimodality contains a variety of modal symbols in different communication environments. As a brand-new language analysis method, it enriches and expands the traditional ways of language expression and social communication to a certain extent. In this research, film posters are taken as the research object to study the reproductive, interactive and compositional meaning of visual grammar by combining the multi-modal discourse analysis theory. Through the comparative research on the posters about three western films, including "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo", "Once Upon a Time in the West" and "High Noon", it is hoped to help people improve their ability to read the multimodal discourse of film posters and provide a more comprehensive perspective for the appreciation of film posters.

Keywords—Multimodality; movie poster; western films

I. INTRODUCTION

Multimodal language refers to the communicative form in which text (words), font, sound, pictures, and other symbols are used together to make a successful communication.

When people watch posters, there are two semiotic systems presented on posters, pictures and words. People can see both words and pictures at the same time.

In An Introduction to Functional Grammar, Halliday¹ has put forward three major functions of language: the conceptual function — to express conceptual meaning; the interpersonal function — to reflect the relationship between the speaker and the hearer and the attitude of the speaker to the speaking content, and the textual function — to express textual meaning.

On the basis of the study of Halliday, Kress and Leeuwen² put forward the conception of multimodal language. In Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, Kress and Leeuwen thinks that the multimodal discourse is a significant feature of people's various communicative disclosure in the world: Multimodal language is a phenomenon that uses various senses, such as hearing, vision, touch and also takes advantage of some methods and semiotic resources, such as language, image, sound, motion to make a communication. In the model of

multimodal language, language coexists with other semiotic resources and they have the same constructive meaning.

II. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POSTER ABOUT "IL BUONO, IL BRUTTO, IL CATTIVO"

A. Reproductive Meaning

According to Kress and Leeuwen, image is also a social symbol with the two kinds of meanings of reproductive narration and reproductive conception. The difference between narrative reproduction and conceptual reproduction is that the development of actions and events is represented by narrative reproduction. In terms of conceptual reproduction, it does not take time into account, so it is more common in terms of type, structure and meaning.

In addition, narrative reproduction contains the vector that conceptual reproduction isn't endowed with. Vector is a symbol of narrative images as well as an oblique line formed by the elements of images. In the poster about a film called "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo", the three protagonists at the top of the picture stood out against the background of the war.

They all pursued distant goals, which showed that the goals of the three people were same. However, there was a confrontation among them at the lower right corner of the poster, which showed that they had the same goal but were competitors. It was also showed by the battlefield of the background that it was a story that happened in the war years.

B. Interactive Meaning

According to Visual Social Semiotics, interpersonal meaning is just interactive meaning which includes the social relationship among communicators. The interactive meaning of an image refers to the relationship among the producer of the image, the people/things in the image and the audience of the image. Interactive meaning can be expressed in four ways: connection, social distance, angle and modality.

Connection is a relationship about the imagination of the actors presented in posters and in front of the audience. Connection can be classified into two types: request and offer. When the participants and audience of the image look at each other directly, the characters in the image are claimants. It is required to establish a "demand" image relationship between the audience and participants of the image. On the contrary, the participants of the image did not

¹ Halliday, M. A. K. An Introduction to Functional Grammar (2nd edition) [M]. London: Edward and Arnold, 1994.

² Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen. Reading images: The grammar of visual design. London: Routledge, 1996.

make eye contact with the audience, which was just "offer" image to convey information.

The actors in the poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" did not make eye contact with the audience, so the audience did not establish relationships with them. Therefore, this poster is mainly used to provide film information: on the one hand, the relationship among the three protagonists was described, which was the main plot of the film; on the other hand, they confronted each other, which was the background of the film.

Social distance refers to the distance between the participants and audience of an image. According to the size of the picture frame as well as the social relationship between actors and audience and among actors, social distance can be divided into three types: close-up, long-view shot and middle-view shot. The closer the shot is, the closer the social distance is.

According to Chris and Van Levin, close-up is used to show the head and shoulders of the characters in the image, which represents the close interpersonal distance; The middle-view shot is used to show the body outline above the knee, which indicates the middle interpersonal distance; In the long-view shot, the actors are only half as high as the frame, which brings a sense of distance to people. It refers to the distance among unfamiliar people.

In the poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo", close-up and long-view shot were adopted to show two different social relationships. The facial expression of the three protagonists was showed clearly through close-up. They all pursued the same distant goal. The audience couldn't help feeling the actors' emotions and becoming curious. As a result, they wanted to understand the story as soon as possible. The confrontation among the protagonists was a long shot, which showed that the relationship among them was not simple.

Angle is another tool to establish the objective relationship between actors and audience. It is divided into horizontal angle and vertical angle. Horizontal angle is divided into front angle and side angle. Front angle integrates the audience into the image naturally, and side angle endows the audience with onlooking feeling.

Longitudinal angle is divided into three angles: angle of depression, flat angle and angle of elevation. Angle of depression indicates that the audience is in a strong position, angle of elevation indicates that the participants of the image are in a strong position, and flat angle indicates that the audience and participants of the image are in an equal relationship. The three protagonists of "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" were at an angle of elevation, which indicated that there was a wonderful rival play among them, which was exciting for the audience.

Modality is a key part of creating interactive meaning. It can be divided into three categories, including high modality, medium modality and low modality. It is involved in the color saturation, discrimination, brightness and coordination of images.

The color of the poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" is divided into the upper part and the lower part. The color saturation of protagonists in the first half is high. The yellow background is bright and the brown flames of war are slightly dark. The two colors set off each other. Yellow represents the land and wealth of Western America. Brown represents war, passion and desire. This kind of color difference endows the audience with the greatest visual impact, resulting in a kind of high modality.

C. Constitutive Meaning

Constitutive Meaning is the third level of the multimodal social semiotics. It consists of three parts: information value, saliency and frame structure. The three parts connect the reproductive and interactive meanings of images.

Information Value: The position of each element of the image greatly determined the value of the information conveyed by the element. The top-down layout indicated the "virtual and real" information, and the left-to-right layout indicated the "known and unknown" information.

The confrontation among the three protagonists was at the bottom of the poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo". This scene was the climax of the film. The heads of the three people are at the top of the poster, which shows their elusive relationship. The names of actors were at the bottom of the poster. They were familiar and popular actors for the audience. They were well known at that time.

Saliency refers to the extent to which image elements attract the attention of the audience. Elements can be placed in the foreground or in the background, the relative size can be changed, and the image can be clear or dim. In the poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo", the three protagonists occupy almost half of the poster. They are not only in the foreground, but also in the background, so they are quite noticeable.

The bright color of the flames of war as the background of the head clearly showed that the story took place in the war years. Although a story about cowboys was told in the film, it also took a lot of time to show the consequences of the war.

Frame structure is a kind of means to connect or separate visual elements. The poster about "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" was clearly divided into two frameworks. There was a confrontation among the three cowboys in the second half, which implied that there was a game among them, which was nervous and exciting. The heads of the three men in the first half were bright against the smoke of gunpowder, which suggested that they were all related to war.

As Professor Li Zhanzi said, "Multimodality is an inevitable trend of social development, and the multimodal symbol research is an academic field with great potential and social value." With the progress of society and the development of science and technology, symbolic resources appeared more and more frequently in human communication activities, such as images, sounds and colors.

Film poster is a kind of commercial poster and graphic design with images, colors and texts. Therefore, it belongs to the category of multimodal discourse. In this paper, the poster about an American classic film called "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo" is taken as the research object, and the systemic functional multimodal discourse analysis theory is taken as the framework to explore how to realize the reproductive, interactive and constitutive meanings through various symbols in the poster so as to achieve the purpose of propaganda film ultimately.

In fact, the multimodal discourse analysis theory is endowed with great practical and theoretical value in the discourse analysis of the poster about the film. (See "Fig. 1")



Fig. 1. A film called "Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo".

III. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POSTER ABOUT A FILM CALLED "ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST"

A. Reproductive Meaning

The four protagonists of the film were showed in the poster about a film called "Once Upon A Time in the West". The background of the post was a passing train. The white clothes and trousers of the man on the left contrasted sharply with the dark clothes of the man on the right, which suggested a fierce conflict between the two men in the film.

The man in grey clothes in the middle squatted on the ground with a cynical look, making it impossible to know which side he would stand on.

A woman below them was dressed in formal clothes, but she was lying on the muddy wasteland. In the poster, she was below the three men, which represented the low status of women in films about Western America. However, she raised her head with an unyielding look, which represented her resistance. The traveling train in the background represented that there was a great connection between the story told in the film and the train.

B. Interactive Meaning

In the poster of "Once Upon a Time in the West", the actors did not make eye contact with the audience, so the audience failed to establish a relationship with the actors. Therefore, this poster was mainly aimed to provide film information: firstly, the relationship among characters was described, which was the main plot of the film as well as the background of the film.

In the poster of a film called "Once Upon a Time in the West", the two ways of panorama and lens were adopted to show the relationship among characters. The facial expression and movements of the characters were showed clearly. Although the man on the left and the man on the right looked in different directions, it was possible to feel that they confronted each other. However, for the crouching men and the lying woman confronting each other, the audience couldn't help feeling the emotions of actors and becoming curious. They wanted to know the story as soon as possible.

C. Constitutive Meaning

Constitutive Meaning is the third level of Multimodal Social Semiotics. It consists of three parts: information value, saliency and frame structure. The three parts connect the reproductive and interactive meanings of images.

Information value: The position of each element of the image greatly determined the value of the information conveyed by the element. The top-down layout indicated the "virtual and real" information, and the left-to-right layout indicated the "known and unknown" information.

The protagonists of a film called "Once Upon a Time in the West" were at the bottom of the poster about the film, which was the "real" information available to the audience. The name of the film was at the top of the poster, but it was impossible to know the progress of the story just from the name, which was "uncertain" for the audience.

Saliency refers to the extent to which image elements attract the attention of the audience. Elements can be placed in the foreground or in the background, the relative size can be changed, and the image can be clear or dim. In the poster about "Once Upon a Time in the West" (see "Fig. 2"), four protagonists occupied the middle of the poster, which showed that the story happened around the four people. As a background, the train could remind the audience of the time when the story happened.

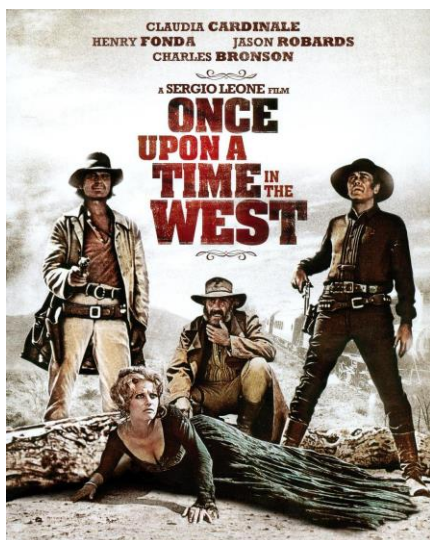


Fig. 2. A film called "Once Upon a Time in the West".

IV. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POSTER ABOUT A FILM CALLED "HIGH NOON"

A. Reproductive Meaning

The protagonist of a film called "High Noon" was on the upper left corner of the post about the film. His body was close to the wall. However, there were four people with guns on the other side, which showed a strong aggression. It was seemed that they were looking for something. To sum up, it was showed in this post that the protagonist fought against four bullies by himself in a small town.

B. Interactive Meaning

The protagonist of the poster looked back at the audience, so the audience established a connection with the protagonist. Then, the protagonist of the poster was a "claimant" in need of the "help" of the audience, as if the audience fought, and planned to eliminate villains with the protagonist. However, it also made the audience think about why they were the peers of the protagonist. The protagonist's solitary struggle was emphasized in this way in the poster.

Social distance refers to the distance between the participants and audience of an image. According to the size of the picture frame as well as the social relationship between actors and audience and among actors, social distance can be divided into three types: close-up, long-view shot and middle-view shot. The closer the shot is, the closer the social distance is.

In "High Noon", close-up and long-view shot were adopted to show the relationship between two kinds of characters. The image of the protagonist was shown through close-up, and the protagonist and the audience were at a flat angle, which showed that the relationship between the audience and the protagonist was equal. There was also an eye contact between the protagonist and the audience. As a result, the audience would subconsciously think that the protagonist was on their side. The four people on the right

side were described through long-view shot, which would make the audience feel the "sense of distance" with them, resulting in no resonance.

The color of the poster about "High Noon" was divided into the left part and the right part. The color saturation of the protagonist was high and the background wall shadow was relatively dark on the left part. It contrasted sharply with the yellow land on the right side. The left brick wall represented human civilization, and the right wilderness represented "barbarism" and "uncivilization". This color difference provided information for the audience by creating visual impact.

C. Constitutive Meaning

The position of each element of the image greatly determined the value of the information conveyed by the element. The left-to-right layout indicated the "known and unknown" information. In the poster, the protagonist represented the "known" information. The four people on the right were "unknown". The top-down layout showed the "virtual and real" and "ideal and practical" information.

It was possible to see the most information about the poster that a brave man from a town fought against robbers, which was ideal for the audience. At the bottom of the poster (see "Fig. 3"), there was a scene that the protagonist stayed with a woman, which was "realistic" for the audience.

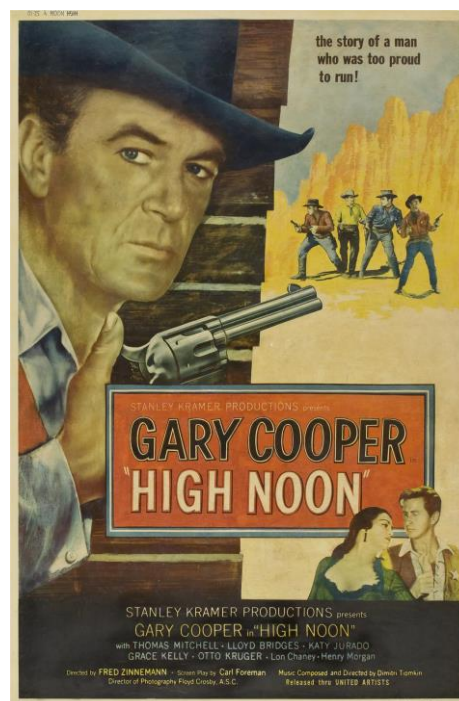


Fig. 3. A film called "High Noon".

V. CONCLUSION

With the progress of society and the development of science and technology, symbolic resources appear more and more frequently in human communication activities, such as images, sounds and colors. Film poster is a kind of

commercial poster and graphic design with images, colors and texts. Therefore, it belongs to the category of multimodal discourse.

In this paper, the posters about some classic films about Western America are taken as the research object, and the multimodal discourse analysis theory of systemic function is taken as the framework to explore how to realize the reproductive, interactive and constitutive meanings through various symbols in the posters so as to achieve the purpose of propaganda films finally. In fact, the multimodal discourse analysis theory is endowed with great practical and theoretical value in the discourse analysis of film posters.

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