

The Multimodal Meaning Making of a Malaysian Chinese Film Poster

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ABSTRACT

Multimodal communication is prevalent in contemporary society. Film posters are multimodal discourses that combine both visual images and verbal texts to promote and advertise films. Drawing on social semiotics, the article conducts a multimodal discourse analysis of a Malaysian Chinese film poster titled *The Journey* (Yilu Youni). It first analyzes the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of the images on the poster based on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar; and then examines the meanings of the verbal texts on the poster linguistically and typographically. The study shows both visual and verbal semiotic resources contribute to the meaning making of the film poster and designers should be aware of the specific context when employing different semiotic elements to make their film posters more attractive and effective.

Keywords: *multimodality, film poster, visual grammar, meaning making*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, as digital technology advances, multimodality has become a distinguishing feature of our communication. Multimodality means the combination of different semiotic modes—for example, language and music—in a communicative artifact or event [1]. Multimodal discourse refers to the new form of text in which words, typography, sound, pictures and other semiotic resources are woven together to making meaning [2]. A film poster is a multimodal discourse intended to promote a film, which typically consists of both images and verbal texts. Film posters have long been researched from the aesthetic perspective. The meaning making system of the semiotic resources of film posters has received little attention until recently. This article, drawing on social semiotics, investigates how visual and verbal resources collaborate to construct a meaningful whole of a film poster in a specific context to achieve its communicative goal of promotion.

Figure 1 is the poster to be studied here. This poster is created for a Malaysian Chinese film titled *The Journey* (Yilu Youni), presented by Malaysian Chinese filmmaker Chiu Keng Guan (Zhou Qingyuan) in 2014. This film is recognized as one of the best Chinese films produced in Malaysia. Most actors and actresses are also ethnic Chinese. According to Raju's research, the film

can be regarded as a “Mahua cinema”, a new transnational Chinese cinema [3].



Figure 1 The Film Poster of *The Journey*

The film is set in a small village in Malaysia where local ethnic Chinese live together. Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural country. Each ethnic group has its own cultural heritage and characteristics. *The Journey* depicts the traditional Chinese culture and tradition, especially the Chinese family value. It tells a story of Uncle Chuan's family. Uncle Chuan sends his daughter Bee to study art in the UK. Years later, Bee returns to Malaysia and brings back

her Caucasian fiancé, Benji. Due to cultural differences and language barriers, Uncle Chuan couldn't get along with Benji and strongly opposes Bee's marrying Benji. Finally, Uncle Chuan reluctantly gives his consent to Bee and Benji's wedding and demands that the wedding should be done in the Chinese tradition. Bee and Benji agree. Riding Benji's motorbike, Benji and Uncle Chuan begin their journey to deliver wedding invitations to Uncle Chuan's former primary classmates. Along the way, they learn valuable lessons about love and they start to reconcile their differences to get along. The story ends with a happy Chinese wedding for Bee and Benji.

2. VISUAL RESOURCES ANALYSIS

Adopting Halliday's theoretical notion of metafunctions [4], Kress and van Leeuwen holds that the metafunctions can be applied to all semiotic modes in communication, and they create their own terms to refer to the three metafunctions as representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. They propose a framework of visual grammar to analyze each meaning system, and they point out that images not only have aesthetic meaning and expressive function, but also reflect the structural dimensions of society, politics, and communication [5].

2.1. Representation

Based on the visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen [5], image is classified into two categories: narrative and conceptual. Vector is the feature distinguishing the two types of images. Arrows, gestures, eyelines or other things that can indicate directions are vectors. An image with a vector is a narrative image. When participants are connected by a vector, they are represented as doing something to or for each other. Kress and van Leeuwen identify the following four processes in narrative images: action process, reaction process, speech and mental process, and conversion process. Speech and mental process is considered as one process.

For most people who look at the film poster of *The Journey*, as shown in Figure 1, the most eye-catching image is the close-up shot of a young woman's face. The woman is holding a marker, drawing on the car window. Then people may notice two men riding a motorbike and a huge balloon up in the sky. These images are narrative images, because there exist vectors, such as the eyeline of the woman, the marker in the woman's hand, and the light from the motorbike.

When the vector is formed by an eyeline, by the direction of the glance of one or more of the represented participants, the process is a reactional process [5]. Therefore, the vector of the woman's eyeline represents a reactional process, in which the woman is the Reactor, who does the looking, and the drawing on the window is

the Phenomenon. The marker with which the woman is drawing is another vector, and it represents an action process. The woman is the participant from which the vector emanates, so she is the Actor, and the picture she is drawing is the Goal. The meaning expressed here is that the woman is drawing a picture with a smile on her face. Through vectors, the narrative structure endows the static image with dynamic meaning.

The light emitted from the motorbike is another vector. The light is bright, illuminating the road ahead, which is an action process. The light of the motorbike and the eyelines of the riders all direct to the road ahead. Heavy luggage is hung on the motorbike. The meaning this image represents is that the two men are riding a motorbike for somewhere to do something. This may arouse the viewers' curiosity: Where are they going? What are they going to do?

The rope of the air balloon is also a vector. The Actor is the people flying in the air, and the Goal is the big balloon. The representational meaning of this image is that people are flying up to the sky with the help of a huge balloon. Unlike ordinary air balloons, there is no basket underneath the balloon for people to ride in. This may make the viewers feel curious: Why is the balloon different? Anything special about the balloon?

From the analysis above, we can see that all the participants on the poster are on their way to somewhere—a woman is sitting in a car, two men are riding a motorbike, and people are flying up to the sky with the assistance of a big balloon. We can say that the film poster serves as a vivid visual representation of the film's title *The Journey*.

2.2. Interaction

Halliday states that language has four basic speech functions or speech acts: offer information; offer goods-and-services; demand information; demand goods-and-services [4]. Following Halliday, Kress and van Leeuwen state that image also has two functions: "demand" and "offer" [5]. Gaze is an important sign to distinguish whether an image is a "demand" or an "offer". When the represented participant in the image is looking directly at the viewers, he or she is demanding something from the viewers. When the participant in the image does not look directly at the viewers, he or she is offering something to the viewers. On this film poster, neither the woman in the car nor the two men on the motorbike look directly at the viewers, so they do not demand information or goods-and-services from the viewers, but offer information to the viewers that all people on the film poster are on the road.

A second dimension of the interactive meanings of images is the social distance between the represented participants in the image and the viewers of the image, which can indicate what kind of social relations the image

producer wants to establish between the represented participants and the viewers. Kress and van Leeuwen point out that the interactive meanings of images are related to the “size of frame”, to the choice between close-up, medium shot and long shot, and so on [5]. On this poster, the woman’s face is a close-up shot, with the purpose of establishing an intimate and personal rather than a social or impersonal social relation between the heroine and the viewers. The image of the two men is a long shot, expressing an objective and impersonal distance.

A third dimension to the interactive meaning of images is attitude. Different attitudes between the represented participants and the viewers can be realized through different angles or perspectives. Kress and van Leeuwen point out that a frontal angle means emotional involvement, an oblique angle means emotional detachment, a higher angle means viewer power, an eye-level angle means equality, and low angle means represented participant power [5]. On this poster, the woman and the two men are depicted from a frontal angle in order to emotionally involve the viewers more.

Color is related to visual modality. The poster adopts naturalistic coding orientation of colors and the images include contextual background details, for example, the white clouds, the bridge, the green grass, the sunlight on the woman’s face and the shadow on the back seat of the car. Therefore, the visual expression of the poster displays relatively high modality value, and viewers tend to believe the participants and events depicted on the poster to be almost real.

2.3. Composition

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the compositional meaning of images is realized through three systems: information value, salience, and framing [5].

The placement of the various elements in an image endows them with specific information values relative to each other. Generally speaking, the information placed on the left are perceived as Given and the information on the right as New; what is placed on the top is Ideal while what is at the bottom is Real; what is placed in the center is the most important while what is in the margins is ancillary and dependent [5]. The overall structure of this poster can be seen as a top and bottom composition, which indicates Ideal and Real. The image on the top of the poster shows Bee is sitting in a car with a sweet smile, drawing a picture on the car window. This is an ideal state, since it is safe and comfortable to sit in a car, and Bee is in a good mood, because the relation between Benji and Uncle Chuan is getting better. The image at the bottom of the poster shows Uncle Chuan and Benji are riding a motorbike with heavy luggage, bumping all the way. This is the tough reality. It is through this difficult motorbike

journey of delivering wedding invitations that Benji has a better understanding of Chinese culture and Chinese family value, and the two men learn to show respect and care to each other. The image that is placed near the center of the poster is the balloon, because the balloon stands for dream and friendship in the film, which are another two important theme of the film besides “love”.

Salience means some elements are deliberately arranged to attract the viewer’s attention in an image. Salience can be realized through size, color, overlap, repetition, etc. The most salient image of the poster is the smiling face of the heroine, which occupies nearly 1/2 of the whole poster.

As for framing, 一路有你 (Yilu Youni) can be seen as a frame line, however, the meanings of the images and verbal texts are closely connected to make the poster a meaningful whole. The image of riding a motorbike appears three times in the film poster, located at the upper right on the car widow, middle left on the Chinese character “—”, and lower right on the road. The repetition produces a sense of cohesion and unity, and echoes the film’s title *The Journey*.

3. VERBAL RESOURCES ANALYSIS

A typical film poster is composed of both images and verbal texts. After analyzing the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of the images of the poster based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, we will conduct linguistic and typographical analyses of the verbal texts on the poster.

3.1. Linguistic Analysis

Language plays a key role in communication. Both Chinese and English are employed in this film poster, which is determined by the context. Since it is a Malaysian Chinese movie, using both Chinese and English is a wise choice to promote the movie.

“最高票房纪录的马来西亚电影, Highest Grossing Malaysian Film” shows where the film is produced and how popular it is. “Highest Grossing” demonstrates the positive evaluation for the film, which is useful to attract more people to buy tickets to see the film.

“青元作品, a CHIU film” states who the director is. As Chiu Keng Guan (周青元) is a famous Malaysian Chinese film director, presenting his name on the poster is in line with the promotional purpose of the film poster.

“一路有你, the journey” is the title of the film. A film poster without the title of the film is hard to fulfill its function as an advertisement for the film, so it is necessary to include the title in the poster.

“为爱你是否愿意无条件妥协?” means “For love, are you willing to compromise unconditionally?”

Compromising for love, showing respect for one another is the main theme of the film. From the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, this clause is an interrogative clause. In terms of speech acts, it is “demanding” information from the viewers, making the viewers ponder over the question. It is worth noting that “为爱” (“For love”) is the marked theme of the clause, demonstrating the significance of “love”.

“SNEAKS FROM 7 MARCH, OPENS 20 MARCH” indicates the film’s release dates. If the release dates were not notified on the poster, the viewers wouldn’t know when they could go to see the film.

3.2. *Typographical Analysis*

In the digital age, typography is playing a more important role in design. Typefaces are an essential resource employed by graphic designers, just as glass, stone, steel, and countless other materials are employed by architects [6]. There is a multimodal nature of typography: typography can be integrated with other semiotic means of communication such as color, material texture, three-dimensionality, and movement. Especially on film and television titles, commercials and on the Internet webpages, typography makes increasingly use of movement [7]. On the poster, the Chinese character “—” in “一路有你” is designed as a road, on which two men are riding a motorbike. The road is not straight but crooked. Looking at the image, the viewers may feel that the motorbike is bumping all the way from a distance and now it is heading forward on a much better road. This special typographical design of “—” produces a dynamic visual effect. As Li puts it, the configuration of texts and graphics is not a simple and plain combination; it can demonstrate the active participation of different elements and can be very creative [8].

Since the target viewers of the film are mainly Chinese, so the Chinese title 一路有你 are designed to be the largest in font size, and become the most salient verbal text on the poster. “为爱你是否愿意无条件妥协” is specially designed as well. First, its color is green while the other texts are white; Second, it is vertically arranged while the other texts are horizontally arranged. In this clause, a larger font size is applied to “为爱” (“for love”) to emphasize the significance of love. “SNEAKS FROM 7 MARCH, OPENS 20 MARCH” also has its own typographical feature—it is all capitalized. These special typographical designs make the poster more vivid and attractive.

4. CONCLUSION

As a business card to promote a film to the public, a film poster is functionally different from pure decorative graphics. Instead, it consciously and purposefully constructs a meaningful text of image in a specific

context [9]. The film poster is a multimodal discourse, whose communicative purpose is to advertise the film and attract more viewers to see the film. This article analyzes the multimodal meaning making of a Malaysian Chinese film poster. As Yang points out, various modes complement one another in text and make meanings in context [10]. Our research indicates that in the multimodal discourse of film posters, different modalities express meanings in different ways, and all the various semiotic elements work jointly in a context to construct a meaningful whole. Designers of film posters should fully utilize visual images and verbal texts to create a film poster according to its own context to fulfill its promotional function.

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