

The Cognitive Construction of Multimodal Metaphor

A Case Study of Movie Posters in *Blood Diamond*

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Abstract—With movie posters from *Blood Diamond* as a case study, this thesis probes into the mechanism on how movie posters create multimodal metaphors to convey connotations of culture and value through a combination of image and text, which aims at providing the cognitive motivation for movie posters in constructing semiotic significance.

Keywords—movie posters; multimodal metaphor; social semiotics

I. INTRODUCTION

“Mode” is such a complicated concept that it involves a complex of factors and needs a further clarification. Since living organisms have gradually acquired five sensory channels in the process of evolution, which correspond to five different modes, Forcecille & Urios-Aprarisi divide them into the following five categories: (1) the pictorial or visual mode; (2) the aural or sonic mode; (3) the olfactory mode; (4) the gustatory mode; and (5) the tactile mode [1]. Therefore, apart from text information, a “multimodal” discourse also includes images, sounds, actions and other multimodal symbols which can be used to construct meaning, while the prefix “multi” can be interpreted as follows: firstly, as the main body of exchange, the audience have “multiple” perception channels as senses of sight or sound; secondly, the audience can exchange information through such “multiple” material and logical media as printed paper or electronic pictures; finally, the audience get such “multiple” social symbols as text or image from various media and channels.

With the attention almost exclusively paid to the linguistic system and its relationship with society, culture, psychology, cognition, etc., discourse analysis has long been confined to the language itself, while other forms of meaning expressions, such as image, sound, color, animation, and so on, have been totally ignored. However, the rise of multimodal discourse analysis from the 1990s has helped overcome these limitations to a great extent. With movie posters as the research object, this thesis probes into the mechanism on how movie posters create multimodal metaphors to convey connotations of culture and value through a combination of image and text, which aims at providing the cognitive motivation for movie

posters in constructing semiotic significance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The application of linguistic theories to visual arts research began very early. For example, the Prague School applied the concept of “foregrounding” to the study of drawing, drama, film and costume; the Paris School applied Saussure’s theories of “langue” and “parole”, “signifier” and “signified”, “arbitrariness” and “motivation” to the painting, photography, movies and music research; the school of Systematic Functional Grammar applied Halliday’s theory to the field of journalism, literature and music research, etc..

In recent years, multimodal discourse analysis has received more and more attention from the academic circle, for instance, Kress & Leeuwen’s book “Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design” studies the meaning construction mechanism of multimodal discourses, such as visual images or layout design, from the social semiotic perspective. They hold that “the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message, connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it – and similarly the other way around” [2]. while in the “Handbook of Visual Analysis” edited by Leeuwen & Jewitt, visual analysis methods adopted in the domains of film, television, anthropology, etc. are discussed explicitly, which are also applicable to the analysis of images such as movie posters and print advertisements [3].

Definition of Multimodal Metaphor

In today’s linguistic world, it has been widely accepted that “metaphor is primarily a matter of thought and action and only derivatively a matter of language” [4]. Mark Johnson further argues that an exclusive focus on language is the prejudice that meaning is only to be found in words. He emphasizes that “the processes of embodied meaning in the arts are the very same ones that make linguistic meaning possible” [5]. That is to say, since metaphor is conceptual in nature, its externalization shouldn’t be limited exclusively to linguistic symbols; other media such as sound, color, lines, spatial layout, etc., can also be adopted to construct and construe metaphors. Then, based on the definition of “mode”, as discussed previously in the first section of this paper, Forcecille & Urios-Aprarisi further distinguishes “multimodal” metaphor from “monomodal” metaphor, and define multimodal metaphor as “metaphors whose target and

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source are each represented exclusively or predominantly in different modes” [1].

The characterization and representation of multimodal metaphor sometimes requires the joint participation of all modes, while at other times only the combination of two or several modes. Whatever it is, the multimodal metaphor directly appeals to the senses rather than the human mind, and only through the analysis of the brain can emotional or rational conclusions be drawn from perception channels. Moreover, abstract concepts or thoughts that are difficult to be perceived in real life are externalized and conceptualized into concrete facts via the aids of multimodal metaphors. And the synthesis and superposition of various modes form a harmony and counterpoint of music, bringing strong attraction and appeal to the audience.

To summarize, based on the interaction between images and texts, multimodal metaphor makes possible the novel creation of metaphors, which arouse multiple sensory channels and evoke sensational aesthetic experiences.

The Development of Multimodal Metaphor Research

The publication of “Metaphor We Live by” marks the leap from rhetoric to conceptualization in metaphoric research, in which Lakoff & Johnson came to a conclusion that “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” [4]. For instance, in the conceptual metaphor “TIME IS MONEY”, people actually conceptualize the target category of “TIME” through the source category of “MONEY”. Thus, Lakoff also claims that “the metaphor is not just a matter of language, but of thought and reason” [6].

As is known to all, language is only one of the symbolic resources in human communication, and people can also express concepts by means of other media such as sound, image or space. Therefore, the theory of conceptual metaphor derived exclusively from linguistic symbols is not comprehensive enough, which suggests that the conceptual metaphor theory itself needs to incorporate other symbolic systems into its theoretical framework. That’s why linguists set about studying the construction and characterization of multimodal symbols on metaphor at the end of twentieth Century, leading to the turning of multimodal metaphor research.

In the past twenty years, the research in multimodal discourse has followed Pierce’s semiotic theory closely, extending the research domain from linguistics to philosophy, media science, film science and so on. Scholars like Forceville, Urios-Aparisi, Refaie, Cienki, Muller, etc., have expanded the scope of research to such spheres as commercials, cartoons, nonverbal communication, movies, and so on and so forth. To summarize, multimodal metaphor research has gradually become an interdisciplinary hotspot in the past decade, and is

developing from descriptive study to interpretive study and theoretical construction.

III. THE COGNITIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MULTIMODAL METAPHOR

Lakoff maintains that the essence of metaphor is to understand one conceptual structure in a certain domain by another conceptual structure in a different domain, and metaphor is the way of thought and action, which doesn’t necessarily rely on the externalization of language. As a cognitive model, metaphor can be realized by language as well as social symbols such as images, body language, architecture, etc.. What’s more, since metaphor has the body and vehicles in the structure, namely, the source domain and target domain, and constitute a mapping from the source domain to the target domain, as long as the source domain and target domain are located in different semiotic resources or represented through different modes in the mapping relationship, it can be defined as a multimodal metaphor.

Compared with the linguistic metaphor, multimodal metaphor relies more on symbols of visual perception. With less degree of abstraction and more dependence on unique combinations of various perceptual symbols, multimodal metaphor could improvise an imaginary metaphor scenario, in which the mechanism of metaphor construction is not only confined to a unidirectional mapping from the source domain to the target domain, but also involves multiple interactive performances. Especially in discourses like advertising, comics, movies, etc., driven by the aesthetic purport, multimodal metaphor is more reliant on artistic innovation and conveys more novel implications, which demands that artists should create original combinations of entities or imaginary scenarios, so as to convey the new meaning absent from the source and target domains.

In multimodal discourse, under the impact of different sensory symbols, the dominance of text in the construction of symbolic meaning is replaced by other means of communication. Take the images in movie posters as an example: they could deliver plot, background, characters as well as other relevant information to the audience via lines, colors, texture, space and so on, which is quite beyond what pure text symbols could accomplish. Panther points out that metaphor is based on the iconic relation between the source domain and the target domain, and the key to understanding a multimodal metaphor is how to discriminate the source domain from the target domain and indentify the iconic relation between them from characterization of different modes. The difference between multimodal metaphor and linguistic metaphor is that it is difficult for us to distinguish between the source domain and the target domain in the multimodal metaphor. “Fig. 1” is the operation mechanism of multimodal metaphor adapted from Panther [7].

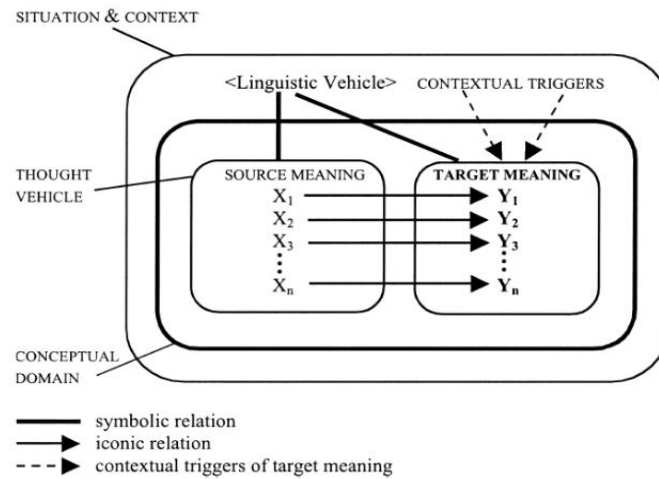


Fig. 1. The basic metaphoric relation.

As a new trend in cognitive metaphor theory, the construction category and working mechanism of multimodal metaphor need to be further explored. According to Systematic-Functional Grammar, language representation of human experience can be abstracted as material process, mental process and relational process [8]. Kress & Leeuwen adapted the categorization into visual image and put forward a framework of visual process called representational meaning. Specifically speaking, as in movie posters, visual images build interactive meaning and compositional meaning simultaneously, wherein camera positioning is the main contributor. For instance, the shot distance in a movie poster symbolizes social distance between the image and audience; the vertical angle stands for power relation while the horizontal angle represents involvement. Furthermore, spatial position in a movie poster also possesses metaphoric potential. Such spatial positions as up, down, left, or right are endowed with symbolic meanings by our life experiences. From the cognitive perspective, the shot distance and spatial position, as mentioned above, can function as the source domain, while the audience-image relationship plays the part of target domain.

In design of a movie poster, information of the image like shape, color, space are considered as the source domain, while such messages as delivered through plot, background and personal relations are taken to be the target domain. With the mapping between the source and target domain accomplished, the movie poster constitutes a typical multimodal metaphor. As a unique form of visual symbol in film art, the movie poster is the "language" for the movie, whose thematic meaning can be expressed more clearly and directly through the metaphoric meaning embedded in the movie poster than the lines of the movie itself.

IV. CASE STUDY OF MOVIE POSTERS IN *BLOOD DIAMOND*

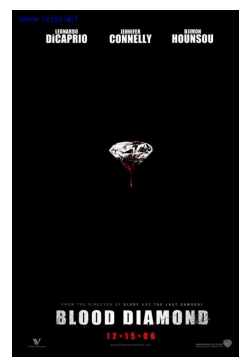
Multimodal metaphor usually presents mapping between the source and the target domain via two or more modes. With the source and target domain located in multiple modes, subtle cognitive clues will be provided for the interaction between

graphic images and text. Therefore, a case study on movie posters from *Blood Diamond* will be performed below to explore how multimodal metaphors are utilized to fulfill the meaning construction.

Movie Background

Blood Diamond was a 2006 political war thriller, with its theme taken from the civil war in the famous diamond producing area of Sierra Leone in 1991, which lasted for 11 years and resulted in more than 200,000 deaths. The name of the movie *Blood Diamond*, also called conflict diamond or war diamond, is a phrase which has long existed in English, referring to the diamonds mined in the war area of Africa, and sold to finance an insurgency army against the internationally recognized legitimate government. Therefore, the giant pink diamond in the movie is in correspondence with the bloodstream infiltrated in the ground of war-stricken Africa, which also functions as the logical thread that runs through the plots and fates of the movie characters.

Case Study of Two Movie Posters



I



II

Fig. 2. Movie posters I & II from *Blood Diamond*.

With a black background extending infinitely, the movie poster I takes the diamond as the core element in the composition, giving the audience a visual sensation of unbearable depression. Right in the middle of the desperate black background is a dazzling giant pink diamond, the lower part of which is saturated in blood, with a drop dripping down right at the moment, while the giant pink diamond right in the center of the poster seems to be soaked in blood, as well. Due to the real historical background of the movie, the sparkling diamond dripping with blood in the center of the poster not only pushes the plot of the movie forward, determines the fate of the characters, but also sets up the basis for the construction of metaphors.

As shown in "Table I", blood diamond is endowed with the features of Africa: the giant pink diamond is in a mapping relation with Africa's wealth and power; blood maps to the bloody civil war in Sierra Leone; black background maps to Africa's dark diamond trade. The thematic metaphor that the blood-dripping diamond is the epitome of the bloody history of Africa, which has been echoed throughout the movie, is realized by the replacement of the movie plot with the real history. The striking color contrast between the black background and pink diamond dripping with red blood brings a shocking visual impact to the audience.

TABLE I. BLOOD DIAMOND

<i>Source Domain</i>	<i>Mapping</i>	<i>Target Domain</i>
pink diamond	→	wealth and power
blood	→	bloody civil war(in Sierra Leone)
black background	→	dark history of African diamond trade

While movie poster II is distinctive from I in both color and composition, they resemble each other in metaphoric construction. In the upper right corner of the poster is positioned a terrifying pool of blood, occupying as much as a third of the surface area. The shape of that blood pool is that of African continent, and along the lower border, drops of blood seem to burst out and drip downward. Right across the poster, in the lower left corner, the name of the movie, Blood Diamond, is printed in bold, with both initial letters capitalized. Apart from the arrangement of fond, the color setup is also eye-catching, with both initial letters in red in contrast with the rest letters in black, as if the name of the movie has been dyed red by the blood.

Look at "Table II", the metaphoric construction is even more straight-forward: the red shape of the blood pool is in mapping relation with Africa; dripping blood maps to bloody civil war in Sierra Leone, as well; white background maps to the pervasive terror and death. The shocking color contrast between the blood pool, black letters, and white background captures the same artistic effect.

TABLE II. THE METAPHORIC CONSTRUCTION

<i>Source Domain</i>	<i>mapping</i>	<i>Target Domain</i>
red shape	→	Africa
dripping blood	→	bloody civil war (in Sierra Leone)
white background	→	pervasive terror and death

V. CONCLUSION

As discussed above, abstract concepts can not only be externalized into language, but also visually characterized by other symbols, with all symbols being the representation of their concepts. Conceptual metaphor is not exclusively dependent on language, but can be realized by other modes or the coordination of multiple modes. Multimodal metaphor is not a static cognitive product, but rather a complex and dynamic process instead. With the synergy of image and text, together with the deduction from the basic form to the advanced form, the construction process of multimodal metaphor is becoming more and more complex, vivid, and diversified. Judging from another perspective, multimodal metaphors are therefore bestowed with richer aesthetic value and more sentimental emotion.

As a multimodal social semiotic resource and the unique language of film art, the movie poster integrates various symbolic systems, such as words, pictures, colors, etc., and brings more intuitive and vigorous visual experience to audiences. As the unique visual codes of movie posters, images are advantageous over words and dialogues in constructing metaphors and conveying deep thematic meanings in the movie. Therefore, the study of multimodal metaphor in movie posters is of academic value, which can not only provide a more efficient approach and a more diverse perspective to demonstrate the cultural connotation and aesthetic needs of the movie, but also provide a more systematic research platform and a broader humanistic perspective for multimodal discourse research.

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