

Multimodal Visual Grammar Analysis of Chinese Martial Arts Movie Posters

Wenbo Zhao

Jilin Engineering Normal University, Changchun 130052, Jilin Province, China

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Abstract: As a major way of publicity of cinema, film poster is like a window showing core content of film story to attract potential audiences by using words, images and role styles in a single picture space. Poster of Chinese martial arts film, as one of typical Chinese cultural semiotics, is worth to be explored so as to find out how it creates visual meaning to express the theme of movie story and how it catches the attention of potential audiences. This paper applies visual grammar theoretical framework to analyze the poster of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* which is one of most famous Chinese martial arts films in order to find out how do film posters construct their visual meanings and represent core information of Chinese martial arts films.

1. Introduction

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a Chinese-language film in the wuxia martial arts style, released in 2000. A China-Hong Kong-Taiwan-United States co-production, the film was directed by Ang Lee and featured an international cast of ethnic Chinese actors, including Chow Yun-fat, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi and Chang Chen. The movie was based on the fourth novel in a pentalogy, known in China as the Crane-Iron Pentalogy, by wuxia novelist Wang Dulu. The martial arts and action sequences were choreographed by Yuen WO Ping, well known for his work in *The Matrix* and other films.

Crouching Tiger's Buddhist and Taoist roots represent the mainstay of its philosophical content. Buddhist doctrine begins with the diagnosis and cure of humanity's suffering via the Four Noble Truths. The First truth holds that life is suffering, or dukkha. The Second Truth indicates that the cause of that suffering is egoistic desire, or tanha. This being the case, then the Third and Fourth Noble Truths prescribe a solution: desire creates suffering, and following the Eightfold Path means the elimination of both desire and suffering. The Eightfold Path extends the Buddhist teachings into a way of life whereby a person may separate him/herself from the suffering of life and attain an enlightened state, or nirvana. These principles guide the movie in all elements, but especially in terms of its

dialogue and character development.

The purpose of this study is to explore and deconstruct the three linguistic functional meanings of the poster of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, namely, representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, using the visual grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996). Based on the research, the article intends to conclude the features of the posters of Chinese martial arts film.



Figure 1: *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* (<https://image.baidu.com/search/detail?ct=503316480>)

2. Results and Discussion

Representational meaning. The four characters in the poster are directly displayed, who are both the protagonists and famous movie stars. The purposes is not only to attract potential audience fans, but also to imply that the fate conflict of the four characters will dominate the plot development of the whole film, that is, the characters represent the core story content of the film. In addition, the four characters have their own shape, action and order, which respectively represent the importance and power of their roles in the film. Among them, there are three characters, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi and Zhang Zhen, who put on a fighting posture, which can be interpreted as the action process. Then three actional processes appear in this poster. Moreover, Michelle Yeoh, Zhang Ziyi and Zhang Zhen all hold swords. The shape of the objects presented by these swords and the characters holding swords form a certain vector, which reproduces the characters in the poster, that is, the behavior of the represented participants. As Zhou Yunfa is a swordsman of WuDang in the film, his modeling style shows a state of calm and detachment, which symbolizes a Taoist philosophy of inaction and detachment from the secular world.

Interactive meaning. The eye contact of Zhao Yufa, Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi in the poster is not gaze, that is, they have no interaction with the viewer, so they belong to the offer category of

interactive meaning. Zhang Zhen's role is the only gaze viewer, which shows that he has a demand interaction with interactive participants. Therefore, in interactive meaning, the poster has three offer classes and one demand class. At the level of social distance, Zhou Yunfa used the close shot angle to express the personal distance relationship between him and the viewers, followed by Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi, who used medium shot for social distance, and Zhang Zhen used long shot for impersonal distance. Shooting, the distance between these characters and the viewer shows a gradually away arrangement. From the perspective of power relations, it is obvious that Zhou Yunfa, as a master of swordsmanship in the film, has a very high position in the main characters of the story, so he was given a high angle to show the temperament of his generation of masters. However, Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi are given eye level angle, which indicates that their power relationship is equal in the film story, and also implies that their relationship with interactive participants is equal. But Zhang Zhen's character is given a low angle, which conveys a rebellious character to the audience.

Compositional meaning. According to the framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's (1996), the central area in the picture is the most important place to convey the visual information value. Therefore, the four main characters and titles of the film are placed in the central position of the poster, that is, to highlight their salience, while the producer list and explanatory text information of the film are placed in the inconspicuous "marginal information giving zone" in the upper left corner. The real scene of the film story is placed in the lower right corner, which is called "the ideal new information giving zone", in order to attract the audience. Finally, at the bottom of the poster are placed the information of the film company and the distributor, which shows that these text messages are not the mainstream information that the visual producers want to convey to the viewers, but they are indispensable information.

3. Conclusion

In this study, the poster of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* is selected as cases, and the visual grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) is applied to analyze the representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning in poster images, as well as the secondary elements that constitute the three basic meanings. Through specific analysis, we can draw the following conclusions for the research object in this case: first, in the representational meaning, the characters play an important role in the martial arts movie poster, and they are the important symbol image to transmit the movie story information and marketing the movie; the main characters or images are usually classified or highlighted separately to highlight the theme of the film. Second, through the construction of interactive meaning, the static visual product, in this case, the martial arts movie poster forms an interactive behavior with the viewer, and the viewer is resonated intentionally or unintentionally in the interaction with visual resources. Thirdly, through the observation of the compositional meaning in the case, the characters or main images are placed in the central position of the visual space, in order to attract the attention of the audience to the greatest extent, so as to achieve its specific visual communication and marketing purposes.

However, this study also has some shortcomings. There are three main points: first, the analysis of image data is less, it is difficult to explain the overall characteristics of multimodal discourse of Chinese martial arts movie poster. Secondly, it is subjective to analyze the multi-modal visual resources of posters through the visual grammar framework. Thirdly, in the analysis of interactive

meaning, it is difficult to quantify the degree of the audience's interpretation of specific visual resources. In the future research, we can make up for the shortcomings of the above research according to the specific research object and research purpose, such as expanding the image data, establishing the multimodal resource corpus, introducing the statistical analysis model and carrying out the experimental project with the participation of the audience. It is true that there are shortcomings in this study, but through the analysis of specific cases, combining theory with examples, we successfully applied the visual grammar theory framework to analyze Chinese martial arts movie posters

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