

The Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Movie Poster The Great Gatsby from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

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Abstract: In recent years, with the continuous expansion of the field of discourse analysis, the concept of multi-modal discourse analysis came into being. According to the multi-modal discourse analysis, Kress and Van Leeuwen proposed the novel theory—visual grammar. It includes three perspectives: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Based on the the multi-modal discourse analysis, the movie poster is a typical application object, demonstrating the close connection between linguistic symbols and non-linguistic symbols. Based on the theory of visual grammar, this paper conducts a multi-modal discourse analysis of the movie poster of The Great Gatsby. By deeply analyzing the movie poster, it can reveal the profound social phenomena and atmosphere hidden behind the movie, capturing the stories behind it and helping the audience better understand the meaning that the movie intends to convey. At the same time, it can also enhance the promotional effect and influence of the movie.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of science and technology, the ways of communication in the human world have become increasingly diverse. The human world is no longer limited to spreading information through forms such as black-and-white newspapers or radio. Instead, information is disseminated by integrating text, sound, or images. As a result, multi-modal discourse analysis has emerged. Multi-modal discourse analysis mainly focuses on how texts and other non-linguistic semiotic systems (such as visual images, gestures, spatial layouts, sounds, etc.) collaborate to produce specific stylistic effects. Traditional discourse analysis mainly concentrates on the style of language, for example, analyzing the text style through vocabulary selection, grammatical structures, rhetorical devices, etc., while multi-modal discourse analysis has broadened this scope and incorporated various modalities into the analytical perspective.

Multi-modal discourse analysis can be initially traced back to the 1970s. In 1977, Roland Barthes attempted to design an analytical framework applicable to all sign modes and summarized the relationship between images and texts in multi-modal discourses. However, the theory of multi-modal discourse analysis didn't thrive until the 1990s. It was enriched and developed in the book

Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design by Kress and Van Leeuwen. The visual grammar theory applied in this article was proposed in that book.

As a carrier for movie publicity, the movie poster is very essential. Taking the movie poster of *The Great Gatsby* as the research object, this article analyzes it from a multi-modal perspective to better interpret the movie and provide references for poster design and movie publicity. Based on the visual grammar analysis framework of Kress and Van Leeuwen, this article focuses on analyzing the movie poster from the aspects of representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning, also analyzing the publicity effect of the poster.

2. Literature Review

Multi-modal discourse analysis has broken through the limitations of traditional stylistics. Kress and Van Leeuwen have put forward many theories related to multi-modal stylistics. They pointed out that communication seldom occurs through a single mode of expression, such as language and words, but rather multiple modes work together to create meaning. Modalities like images, colors, layouts, gestures, and spatial arrangements are all involved, breaking the traditional language-centered discourse analysis model. After that, they created the visual grammar framework. Analogous to language grammar, this framework analyzes how visual elements such as images generate meaning from aspects like composition, color, perspective, and salience. For instance, when analyzing an advertisement picture, visual grammar can be used to interpret how the layout of picture elements, color combinations, etc. attract the audience's attention, convey product information and emotional appeals, providing a systematic analytical tool for multi-modal discourse analysis.

Although multi-modal stylistics research has not been developing for a long time, so far, a lot of studies have focused on multi-modal discourse analysis, mainly concentrating on the following aspects: game and the translation method etc. In terms of games, Song Jinting and Chen Youjun (2025)^[2] conducted discourse analysis of the game *Black Myth: Wukong* from a multi-modal perspective, aiming to establish a new banner in the field of game innovation and further provide research perspective for the development of games and other fields. In the aspect of the translation method, Zhao Anxin, Wu Yuanning and Liu Fen (2025)^[3] studied the translation method of publicity short video subtitles from the perspective of multi-modal discourse analysis, providing experience and reference for improving the translation quality of publicity short video subtitles in the new era and telling Chinese stories well.

Multi-modal poster research mainly focuses on the following aspects: for example, the overseas dissemination of movies from the perspective of multi-modal translation, and movie poster research from the perspective of ecolinguistics. In terms of overseas dissemination, Lai Mengqi (2024)^[4] analyzed the multi-modal features of the promotional posters of the movie *The Battle at Lake Changjin* released in China, the United States, and Japan from the perspective of multi-modal translation, and thereby explored how Chinese film culture can be better disseminated overseas. Wang Yihan (2023)^[5] attempted to analyze the multi-modal meaning of environmental protection public service posters from the perspective of ecolinguistics, aiming to enhance their ecological protection awareness. Through research, it is necessary to study movie posters from the point of view of visual grammar.

3. The Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Movie Poster *The Great Gatsby* from the Perspective of Visual Grammar

The Great Gatsby is a movie adapted from the classic novel of the same name by Francis Scott Fitzgerald. In 2013, it was remade into a movie by director Baz Luhrmann, with the famous

Hollywood actor Leonardo DiCaprio playing the leading role of Gatsby. The film mainly tells a story about the disillusionment of wealth, love, and dreams. The story is set in the United States in the 1920s, a period known as the “Jazz Age”, when the economy was prosperous. Although the story of the movie takes place in a specific historical period, the issues such as human weaknesses and social contradictions involved in it are universal and eternal.

There are many classic posters for the movie *The Great Gatsby*. Different posters have different presentations of characters, colors and styles. This article will analyze the most famous promotional poster of the movie (Figure 1: The poster of *The Great Gatsby*). The poster will be analyzed from one aspect-----the image mode(visual grammar), so as to figure out how the poster constructs and conveys meaning.

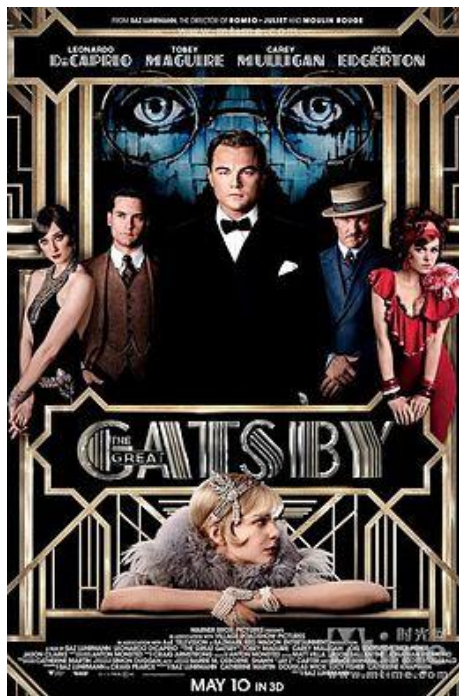


Figure 1: The poster of *The Great Gatsby*

3.1 Image Mode

This article will focus on analyzing the image mode of the poster, and another name for image mode is visual grammar, which is a concept involving the rules for the combination and arrangement of visual elements. It is similar to grammar in language. Visual grammar theory regards images as social symbols and emphasizes analyzing the image framework from the perspectives of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006)^[1]. These rules and principles help designers effectively convey ideas, emotions and information.

3.1.1 Representational Meaning

Firstly, from the perspective of representational meaning, which mainly involves elements such as participants, processes and circumstances, etc. It can be divided into the narrative representational process and the conceptual representational process.

The narrative representational process involves participants, that is, the participants are embodied by “what they do” or “what happens”. It also involves the element of “vector”, whether things or information are presented diagonally or with a strong sense of direction.

From the analysis of the narrative representational process, through the picture, the distribution of the characters can be shown. In the very center of the picture is the protagonist of the film, Gatsby. Arranged symmetrically from the center are the other characters in the movie. A vector is formed here, with Gatsby as the center, constantly shooting out diagonals towards the oblique corners, thus highlighting Gatsby's prominent position. Below the several actors is the heroine, Daisy. She alone occupies a position and forms a vector, and this process belongs to the action process, involving the specific vector process emitted by the participants in the image.

Meanwhile, the directions of the characters' heads that are tilted vary to different extents, which also form vectors. Daisy, who is below several characters, is the only one whose head is tilted to a large extent. She turns to the right as a whole, which implies Daisy's indifferent attitude in the movie. Then, specifically analyzing the eyes of each character, the eyes of the protagonist Gatsby are firmly looking forward, showing Gatsby's unremitting pursuit of his ideals and love in his heart, and perhaps his infinite longing for the American Dream. Nick, beside the protagonist, has his eyes tilted towards the upper left which implies he is an onlooker. The above eye contacts all form some exchanges with the audience and belong to the vectors in the reaction process.

The analysis of the conceptual representational process can start from three aspects: the classificational process, the analytical process, and the symbolic process.

Classificational processes relate participants to each other in terms of a kind of relation, a taxonomy: at least one set of participants will play the role of Subordinates concerning at least one other participant, the Superordinate (Kress G, Leeuwen VT, 2006)^[1]. From the classificational process, in terms of the character's clothing styles in the poster, the characters belong to the upper class in the 1920s. This classification of clothing distinguishes them from the ordinary class. It implies that the story unfolds around the wealthy class, and the characters who live in a world rich in material but perhaps empty in spirit.

Analytical processes are similar to the part-whole structure. It involves two kinds of participants: one Carrier (the whole) and any number of Possessive Attributes (the parts)^[1]. From the analytical process, the relationship between the characters and the background is the most important part-whole structure. The characters are surrounded by the golden frame and the eye pattern, which may imply that the characters are restricted by social rules (the golden frame symbolizes the gorgeous appearance and norms of society) and moral scrutiny (the eye pattern symbolizes surveillance).

Finally, Symbolic processes are about what a participant means. Either there are two participants the participant whose meaning or identity is established in the relation, the Carrier, and the participant which represents the meaning or identity itself, the Symbolic Attribute or there is only one participant, the Carrier (Kress G, Leeuwen VT, 2006)^[1]. From the symbolic process, which is also the most important part of the whole poster: the eye. The eye in the background of the poster is very likely to symbolize the eyes of "Doctor T.J. Eckleburg" as mentioned in the novel. In the novel, these eyes are regarded as the eyes of God, symbolizing an omniscient and omnipotent surveillance force.

3.1.2 Interactive Meaning

In visual grammar, interactive meaning mainly involves the mutual relationship and interaction between the viewer and visual texts. Just like a conversation in language, it is a form of communication at the visual level. Interactive meaning is usually reflected through several elements such as gaze, social distance, perspective, and modality.

In terms of gaze, it can be divided into three parts: "direct contact", "squint" and "ignore". It can be found that the eyes of some characters in the poster seem to have direct contact with the audience, as if they are communicating with the audience. For example, the woman in red on the right side of the picture has a rather direct gaze at the audience. This direct eye contact can attract the audience's

attention. While the eyes of other characters are squinting, which leaves the audience room to explore their inner thoughts and story clues. In the process of representational narration in 3.1.1, the eyes of several other characters, such as Gatsby's, were also analyzed and they also had direct eye contact with the audience.

From the perspective of social distance, it can also be reflected by the position of the characters. It can be seen that the distance arrangement between Gatsby and the surrounding characters is quite elaborate. If the surrounding characters closely gather around the central character, it may imply an intimate social relationship, and vice versa.

In terms of perspective, it can be analyzed from "subject" and "object". According to the subject perspective, it can be divided into horizontal dimension and vertical dimension. From the audience's perspective, the eye contact with the characters in the poster is presented from the horizontal perspective, which is more likely to create a sense of closeness and immersion, as if the audience is a member of the scene and can equally observe the interaction among the characters and the development of the plot.

Finally, modality is used to balance the reality, which involves the color, the depth, the brightness, etc. The colors and light and shadow of the poster are important factors in conveying modality. For example, there are many golden elements in the poster, and the light and shadow reflects elements of luxury and magnificence. On the contrary, black, dark blue and other cool colors are also used in the background, which form a fusion with the overall golden border, and may convey a mysterious and repressive emotion while expressing luxury.

3.1.3 Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning is the meaning that combines representational meaning and interactive meaning. It mainly reflects the internal logic and order of posters, texts or the combination of pictures and texts, and is mainly divided into three aspects: information value, salience, and framing.

Firstly, in terms of information value, the magnitude of information value depends on the position of the compositional elements in the entire image. Generally speaking, from left to right, it means from known information to unknown information; from top to bottom, it means from ideal information to real information. The important information is in the center, and the value decreases as it gets closer to the edge.

Analyzing this poster from the aspect of information value, it is not difficult to find that the most prominent in the entire poster are the information values between the center and the edge. The center of the poster is occupied by the main character Gatsby, and other characters are arranged one after another around Gatsby, with the proportion of the characters becoming smaller and smaller. This can prove that the important information is in the middle position of the image, that is, Gatsby is the key and central figure of the film. Although Daisy is also in the central position, her proportion is smaller than that of Gatsby. Therefore, Daisy is also a central figure in the image, implying that the story also unfolds around Daisy.

In terms of salience, the elements are made to attract the viewer's attention to different degrees^[6]. THE GREAT GASTBY as the title, uses a huge font and is placed right in the middle of the poster to attract the audience. Secondly, there is an obvious difference between the foreground and the background of the composition. The characters in the foreground form a contrast with those in the background. The characters in the foreground are dressed gorgeously, looking resplendent and luxurious, while the background is a pair of gloomy blue eyes. The contrast between the front and the back is significant, which shows the theme of the film.

Finally, in terms of framing, framing divides the image through means such as border lines or dividing lines to express the correlation between information. It involves the framing line, the

limitation and the space. The poster uses a large number of geometric figures, especially golden lines and frames. These frames not only decorate the poster but also orderly separate the character and background elements, forming a visual sense of layering.

4. Conclusions

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar analysis framework, this paper analyzes movie posters from this aspect. Different modal dimensions enable the audience to have a profound understanding of the movie itself. The image mode analyzes the inherent meaning of the poster from three levels, giving the audience a realistic color. This paper further verifies the effectiveness of multi-modal discourse analysis in poster interpretation and is also an exploration of movie poster design. It is hoped to give useful inspiration to poster designers.

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