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A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Print Advertisements: A Case Study of The Film Like a Rolling Stone

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Abstract

As multimodal texts integrating diverse semiotic resources including images, text, color and layout, film posters undertake the vital functions of promoting motion pictures and attract-ing audiences. Adopting Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar as its theoretical framework, this paper conducts a comparative multimodal analysis of the promotional poster and the final official poster for the film Like a Rolling Stone. From the three dimensions of representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, it explores how the two posters con-struct and coordinate integrated meanings through differentiated deployments of multimodal resources. Across all three meaning dimensions, the two posters demonstrate a narrative shift from "predicament" to "a way out", jointly forming a complete narrative loop. This study veri-fies the applicability of visual grammar to analyzing multiple poster versions of the same film, and also offers a fresh perspective for understanding the multimodal persuasive mechanisms embedded in film posters.

Keywords

Multi-modal discourse analysis; Visual grammar; film posters; Like a Rolling Stone.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Objectives

In the era of digital media, the visual design of film posters has grown increasingly sophisticated, evolving into a typical practice of multimodal discourse. As one of the core visual texts for film promotion, a film poster not only carries information about a motion picture but also delivers the first impression of the film to potential audiences. Through the coordinated operation of diverse semiotic resources including imagery, text, color and layout, a single poster conveys the film's themes, emotional tones and genre, thereby arousing viewers' desire to watch the movie.

Multimodal discourse analysis offers a systematic theoretical toolkit for interpreting such complex visual texts. In their book *Reading Images*, Kress and van Leeuwen systematically established the theory of visual grammar. Extending the three meta functions from Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to image analysis, they proposed that images embody three layers of meaning: representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. In recent years, domestic scholars have applied this theory to analyze posters of numerous films, verifying its applicability in unpacking the multimodal characteristics of film posters. Nevertheless, most existing studies only focus on the analysis of individual posters, with scant attention paid to the multimodal disparities and complementary relationships among different poster versions of the same film.

Released during the Mid-Autumn Festival of 2024, *Like A Rolling Stone* was directed by Yin Lichuan and stars Yong Mei, Jiang Wu, Wu Qian, Zhang Benyu and other actors. Adapted from the true story of a "50-year-old aunt embarking on a solo road trip", the film centers on a middle-aged woman who resolutely walks away amid overwhelming marital and

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familial pressures to set off on a self-driving journey. Upon its release, the film garnered widespread public attention and sparked extensive social discussions over women's self-awareness and familial roles.

Multiple stylistically distinct print posters were released throughout the film's promotional campaign. The early promotional poster and the final official poster exhibit striking discrepancies in scene selection, character depiction, color grading and information arrangement. Set against a cluttered balcony backdrop, the early poster features the female protagonist standing with hands on hips, gazing toward sunlight in the distance; its muted, somber color palette conveys a sense of repression and entrapment. By contrast, the final poster takes a car cockpit as its setting, capturing the heroine gripping the steering wheel and looking straight ahead. Her vivid red top paired with blurred scenery outside the window jointly creates an atmosphere of momentum and hope. These two posters correspond to the two polarities of the film's narrative: predicament and deliverance.

Taking Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the theoretical framework, this paper selects the early promotional poster and the final official poster of *Like a Rolling Stone* as research subjects. It conducts a comparative multimodal analysis of the two posters across the three dimensions of representational, interactive and compositional meaning, aiming to explore how divergent configurations of multimodal resources across different poster iterations of a single film collaboratively construct holistic narrative meaning.

1.2. Research Methods and Significance

This study adopts qualitative analysis, utilizing Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory as the analytical instrument. A comparative analysis of the two official print posters released by the film crew is carried out along the three dimensions of representational, interactive and compositional meaning.

This research broadens the practical applications of multimodal discourse analysis. Specifically, it expands the scope of analytical objects from single film posters to comparative examinations of multiple poster versions for one film, supplying a fresh perspective for multimodal research. Additionally, it provides a linguistic lens to interpret the visual design of film posters, facilitating a clearer understanding of the distinct promotional functions served by different poster iterations throughout a film's marketing cycle.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Development of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Traditional discourse analysis focuses predominantly on linguistic signs while overlooking the roles of non-linguistic semiotic resources such as images, sounds and colors in meaning construction. Distinct from its traditional counterpart, multimodal discourse analysis examines multiple semiotic modes including language, images and colors simultaneously.

Multimodal discourse analysis emerged in the 1990s. As early as 1977, R. Barthes explored the interaction between images and language in his essay *The Rhetoric of the Image*. In their monograph *Reading Images*, Kress and van Leeuwen systematically established visual grammar theory by extending Halliday's systemic functional linguistics to image analysis. Forceville pioneered the research on multimodal metaphor in *Pictorial Metaphor in Advertising*. From a systemic functional perspective, K. L. O'Halloran conducted in-depth research on multimodal discourse and investigated multimodal phenomena within mathematical texts. T. Royce explored the complementarity of diverse semiotic signs in multimodal discourse and the synergy of multimodal resources in second language

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classroom teaching. In recent years, multimodal discourse analysis has been widely adopted to examine various text types such as textbooks, advertisements, films and web pages.

Domestically, Li Zhanzi's paper Social Semiotic Analysis of Multimodal Discourse stands as one of the earliest systematic introductions of this theory in China. Since then, scholars including Zhang Delu, Tian Hailong, Pan Yanyan and Zhu Yongsheng have made significant contributions to the theoretical introduction and practical application of this field. Domestic research on multimodal discourse has been systematically reviewed from multiple dimensions: the quantity and distribution of academic outputs, developmental trends, research methodologies, research themes and theoretical foundations. Overall, multimodal discourse analysis in China has evolved from theoretical introduction to expanded practical applications with continuously broadening research scopes, yet further in-depth exploration remains necessary.

2.2. Studies on Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Film Posters

As multimodal texts integrating verbal and non-verbal semiotic resources such as text, images, color and composition, film posters have long constituted a key research subject within multimodal discourse analysis. Film posters convey core film information, thematic ideas and emotional attitudes to audiences directly and effectively, delivering visual pleasure while achieving optimal promotional outcomes.

In terms of theoretical application, numerous existing studies adopt Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the analytical framework to dissect film posters along three dimensions: representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. Nevertheless, most extant research carries out isolated interpretations of single posters, with scarce attention paid to multimodal disparities and complementary relations among different poster editions for the same film. Film marketing usually releases a series of posters at different promotional stages, including teaser posters, character posters, final official posters and theatrical release posters. Each edition undertakes distinct promotional functions and adopts corresponding differentiated multimodal strategies. Addressing this research gap, the present paper selects the promotional poster and the final official poster of *Like A Rolling Stone* for comparative analysis, so as to enrich the research perspectives of multimodal discourse analysis on film posters.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1. Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) was founded by Halliday the 1960s. The core argument of this theory regards language as a social semiotic: rather than an abstract set of rules, language constitutes a semiotic system that generates meaning in social interactions. Halliday posits that language fulfills three core meanings, or meta functions: the ideational meta function, the interpersonal meta function and the textual meta function. The ideational meta function enables people to articulate events and states in the objective world; the interpersonal meta function serves to establish and sustain interpersonal relationships; the textual meta function integrates the former two into coherent, logically organized passages or texts. These three meta functions are held to be indispensable to all human communication systems.

Kress and van Leeuwen extended Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics to the field of image analysis, proposing three layers of meaning embedded in images—representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning—which correspond respectively to the ideational, interpersonal and textual meta functions of language.

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3.2. Visual Grammar

Kress and van Leeuwen formally put forward the theory of Visual Grammar in their 1996 monograph *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. This book offers a systematic and comprehensive account of the elements and structures of visual design, exploring how components such as color, perspective, framing and composition convey meaning. Drawing on the three meta functions of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics, Visual Grammar establishes three analytical dimensions of meaning for decoding images.

3.2.1. Representational Meaning

Corresponding to Halliday's ideational meta function, representational meaning addresses the question of "what the image depicts". Kress and van Leeuwen divide it into two broad structural categories, that are narrative representation and conceptual representation.

First, narrative representation illustrates dynamic unfolding events. A narrative structure comprises four core elements, participants, vectors, actions and setting. Vectors can be formed by bodily gestures, props, characters' line of sight, speech bubbles or thought clouds. Narrative structures include action processes, reaction processes, as well as verbal and mental processes. Action processes can be either transitive or intransitive. The same classification applies to reaction processes: when a vector is formed solely by a gaze, the image features a "reactor" and a "phenomenon".

Second, conceptual representation conveys timeless essences and inherent attributes. Lacking vectors, such images display the states, categories or intrinsic qualities of participants. Conceptual structures are more stable and generalizable than narrative structures, falling into three types: classificational, analytical and symbolic structures. Symbolic structures are particularly relevant to the analysis in this paper, as they focus on the identity or implied connotations of participants. They are subdivided into symbolic attributive structures featuring a marker and symbolic suggestive structures without a marker.

3.2.2. Interactive Meaning

Corresponding to Halliday's interpersonal meta function, interactive meaning centers on the relationship constructed between the image and its viewer. Kress and van Leeuwen identify four analytical dimensions. First, contact, it refers to whether figures in the image make direct eye contact with the viewer. Direct eye contact creates a "demand" image, which seeks recognition, consumption or other responses from the audience. By contrast, figures avoiding eye contact form an "offer" image, which presents information for the audience to observe objectively.

Second, social distance, realized through shot framing. Close-ups signal intimate or personal distance; medium shots indicate social distance; long shots represent public distance. The degree of distance implies the social proximity between the viewer and depicted figures.

Third, perspective, consisting of horizontal and vertical angles. Horizontal angles include front and side views: a frontal shot fosters a sense of viewer involvement, while a side view creates detachment. Vertical angles include high-angle, low-angle and eye-level shots. High-angle shots grant power to the viewer or carry idealizing implications; low-angle shots confer dominance upon the figures within the image; eye-level shots suggest equality and mutual respect.

Forth, modality, the degree of visual realism of an image, judged by its color palette, brightness, darkness and saturation. Modality is categorized as high, medium and low. Highly saturated colors signal high modality, whereas black-and-white visuals embody low modality. Modality is not an objective standard but a rhetorical device to build credibility with viewers.

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3.2.3. Compositional Meaning

Corresponding to Halliday's textual meta function, compositional meaning concerns the layout of visual elements and the organization of information within an image. Kress and van Leeuwen propose three analytical dimensions.

First, Information value. Visual elements positioned in different areas of the frame carry distinct informational weight. In vertical layout, upper space stands for the "Ideal" and lower space for the "Real". In horizontal layout, the left side holds "Given" information and the right side presents "New" information. In center-margin layout, the center contains core information while peripheral areas carry supplementary details.

Second, Salience. The extent to which elements attract viewers' visual attention is determined by visual weight rather than position. Visual weight is shaped by size, color contrast, sharpness and overlapping relationships.

Third, framing. This dimension examines whether visual dividers connect or separate elements within the frame. Strong framing creates clear divisions between components; weak framing integrates elements into a unified whole.

4. A Multimodal Comparative Analysis of the Promotional Poster and Final Poster of Like a Rolling Stone

4.1. Research Design

This paper conducts a systematic multimodal comparative analysis of the promotional poster and the final poster of the film *Like a Rolling Stone* under the theoretical framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar. Two official flat posters of the film released on the film's official Weibo account are selected as research corpora, and a comparative analysis is carried out dimension by dimension from three perspectives: representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning.

4.2. Comparative Analysis of Representational Meaning

4.2.1. Promotional Poster

Set against a cluttered balcony backdrop, the promotional poster features the female protagonist standing with her hands on her hips, gazing into the distance. From the perspective of representational meaning, this visual image embodies multiple narrative representations.

First, in terms of action processes: the protagonist's hands-on-hips gesture forms a set of vectors, with her arms extending diagonally outward from her torso. This constitutes an intransitive action process, as the movement targets no external object, meaning the protagonist exerts no influence on the outside world. The gesture semantically conveys self-reliance.

Second, in terms of reaction processes: the protagonist's gaze toward the distance creates another set of vectors. However, the "phenomenon" targeted by her line of sight is absent from the frame. Miscellaneous clutter and hanging laundry on the balcony block her view of the distance, visualizing her predicament of longing to escape yet being trapped.

Regarding circumstantial elements: the messy balcony and laundry dangling overhead construct a stifling, trivial domestic space. Far from neutral background details, these elements function as meaning-making signifiers that collaborate with the central figure to craft a narrative of entrapment.

Lastly, in terms of symbolic attributes: the protagonist's dull-toned outfit and slightly disheveled hair carry symbolic connotations, jointly alluding to her dispirited, exhausted existence marked by a loss of selfhood.

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4.2.2. Final Poster

The final poster is situated inside a car cockpit, capturing the female protagonist gripping the steering wheel and staring straight ahead. Its representational meaning bears stark contrasts to that of the promotional poster.

To begin with the action process: the protagonist's hands wrapped around the steering wheel form a clear vector, representing a transitive action process where her movements act upon the vehicle. This signals her shift from a passive recipient of circumstances to an active agent in control of her life.

Next, the reaction process: the protagonist's forward gaze forms a vector. Unlike the promotional poster, while the corresponding "phenomenon" remains out of frame, the blurred, streaking scenery outside the car window insinuates the existence of a distant destination.

Circumstantially, the motion-blurred landscape outside the window establishes a dynamic setting, standing in sharp opposition to the static, cluttered balcony of the promotional poster. The environment transforms from a suffocating trap into a flowing space of forward progress.

Finally, in symbolic terms: the protagonist's vivid red costume delivers a powerful symbolic cue. Red symbolizes vitality and the courage to break free from constraints. The tonal shift from her drab clothing in the promotional poster to the striking red outfit in the final poster operates as a chromatic metaphor that underpins the core thematic tone of the film.

4.3. Comparative Analysis of Interactive Meaning

4.3.1. Contact and Social Distance

In terms of contact, the female protagonist avoids direct eye contact with the camera in both posters, rendering them "offer" images. Instead of demanding anything from the audience, the images present information for audiences to observe objectively. Nevertheless, the information conveyed differs between the two posters. The promotional poster showcases her entrapped state, inviting audiences to examine her predicament; the final poster captures her forward-moving posture, inviting audiences to witness her journey of departure.

In terms of social distance, medium shots are adopted for both posters, corresponding to social distance in visual grammar. Yet the nature of this social distance diverges sharply. The social distance in the promotional poster carries an observational tone: audiences stand outside the balcony and watch her predicament dispassionately, a framing that reinforces the audience's role as onlookers. By contrast, the social distance in the final poster evokes a sense of companionship. Audiences feel as if they are sitting in the car alongside her, traveling forward together, with the distance softened to that of a fellow traveler.

The shift from "observing her predicament" to "accompanying her journey" transforms the audience's position from outsider onlooker to companion, and this shift itself functions as a persuasive strategy.

4.3.2. Perspective

Both posters adopt a horizontal profile perspective, yet they yield entirely distinct narrative effects. The eye-level profile perspective in the promotional poster resembles a calm, objective documentary lens. It delivers an unemotional, observational presentation, prompting audiences to scrutinize the protagonist's living conditions. The eye-level profile perspective in the final poster, however, creates an equal, invitational viewpoint of companionship—one that accompanies the protagonist rather than judging her.

4.3.3. Modality

From the perspective of modality, natural lighting and realistic texture form a high-modality image in the promotional poster, strengthening the immersive authenticity of the domestic scene.

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The final poster also features high modality, achieved through highly saturated hues, delicate light and shadow rendering, and crisp details. Its blended virtual-real visual approach preserves a sense of visual realism while amplifying emotional intensity through color contrast.

4.4. Comparative Analysis of Compositional Meaning

4.4.1. Information Value

In terms of information value, the promotional poster follows a classic center-margin structure. The female protagonist occupies the absolute center of the frame as the core information. Small print in the upper "ideal space" reads "根据@50岁阿姨自驾游真实故事改编", authenticating the film and embodying the protagonist's inner spirit. The film title "出走的决心" appears in vertical bold characters along the far left margin, immediately followed by the name of director Yin Lichuan. The promotional slogan and release date—"9月15日 决定了，不等了！"—are horizontally aligned on the lower left within the "real space". As established factual information, the line carries a powerful emotional call to action via its exclamation mark.

The final poster adopts an upper-middle-lower structure in terms of information value. The protagonist on the left constitutes given information, while the release schedule and other text on the right represent new information. Small text in the upper "ideal space" conveys the aspirational spirit of the lead character. The line "中秋档全国上映" is also placed in the upper ideal zone to deliver inspirational messaging and confirm the release window. Production companies and co-distributors are densely listed in the lower-right "real space", constructing a complete persuasive logic: inspirational ideals at the top, industrial backing at the bottom. The cast names including Yong Mei, Jiang Wu, Wu Qian and Zhang Benyu are neatly printed in standard font at the bottom, serving as a mark of the film's quality and star power.

4.4.2. Salience

In the promotional poster, the protagonist forms the most salient element: she takes up the majority of the frame and sits in the sharp foreground. Though her costume is muted, it still forms a distinct visual anchor against the surrounding environment. The slogan " 9月15日 决定了，不等了！" ranks second in salience with its large font and prominent bottom placement. However, the color of her garments nearly merges with the tonal palette of her surroundings. Even at the center of the frame, she blends into her environment, symbolizing her entrapment amid trivial domestic routines.

The final poster leverages contrast between sharp and blurred elements to create salience. The protagonist's vivid red top and her facial features in the foreground carry the highest visual prominence, while the blurred scenery outside the window registers minimal salience. This design sharply centers the audience's attention on the protagonist as the driving agent of the narrative, lending her an active, striking presence. Beyond its visual hue, the red costume symbolizes her liberation from being absorbed by her surroundings.

4.4.3. Framing

In terms of framing, no clear dividing lines or borders separate the protagonist from the balcony backdrop in the promotional poster; the figure and setting fuse together, representing weak framing. This visual treatment implies that the female protagonist cannot detach herself from this stifling, trivial domestic space.

The final poster also employs weak framing without hard-cut boundaries between the protagonist and background. The blurred scenery generates a sense of speed and immersion, making audiences feel as if they are seated in the passenger seat, riding toward the future alongside the protagonist.

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5. Conclusion

This paper adopts Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar as its theoretical framework to conduct a systematic multimodal comparative analysis of the promotional poster and final poster of the film *Like a Rolling Stone* from three dimensions: representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning.

In terms of representational meaning, the two posters respectively correspond to the two poles of the film's narrative: predicament and a way out. With regard to interactive meaning, both posters adopt an "offer" strategy with no direct gaze, yet the audience's positional role shifts from an "onlooker" to a "partner". From the perspective of compositional meaning, the promotional poster depicts a state of stagnant distress, while the final poster portrays an open journey heading toward the distance. Taken as a whole, the two posters demonstrate a consistent shift from "predicament" to "a way out" across all three meaning dimensions. The promotional poster raises the central "problem", whereas the final poster presents its corresponding "solution". The narrative gap created between the two posters constitutes the core story unfolded by the film itself.

This study only examines two posters from a single film, resulting in a limited sample size, which means the generalizability of its findings requires further verification. The analysis largely relies on the researcher's subjective interpretation. Future research may expand the scope of analysis to comparative studies of multiple poster versions from more female-themed films, or incorporate empirical methods such as audience questionnaires to further verify the persuasive effects of multimodal discourse in print advertising.

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