

# The Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Film Poster for Better Days

Li Chengyu

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, Shaanxi Province 710000;

**Abstract:** The film *Better Days* has gained significant attention since its release. Its success not only lies in the captivating story, but also on the unique design of its poster. On the theoretical basis of Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar framework of visual image analysis, this paper conducts a multimodal discourse analysis of the film poster of *Better Days*. The result demonstrates that the film poster constructs characters' identities through representational, interactive and compositional meanings.

**Keywords:** multimodal discourse analysis; visual grammar; film poster; *Better Days*;

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## 1 Introduction

With the development of technology and media, the language as a single modality can no longer comply with the requirements of the times. The combination of images, music, colors, typography, layouts and other symbols are becoming increasingly prominent in discourse analysis and interpersonal communication. Therefore, multimodal discourse analysis has emerged to provide a new perspective for people to understand various symbol systems.

*Better Days* is a film focusing on campus bullying and youth growth. It tells a story that the fate of two teenagers changed because of an accident on the eve of the college entrance examination. Chen Nian is an introverted, excellent student who aims to get into a good university. However, the accidental fall of a fellow classmate involves her in a series of complicated situations. In the process, she meets Xiao Bei, a streetwise teenager. Xiao Bei becomes Chen Nian's guardian, and they support each other in the face of adversity. By showing the story of these two teenagers, the movie explores the pain and beauty of youth, as well as the challenges and hopes of growth. A famous saying goes in the movie, "we live in the gutter, but there's always someone looking up at the stars".

As a promotional advertisement for movies, a poster is a multimodal discourse that integrates images, text, fonts, colors, sizes, etc. Considering the design of movie posters from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis is a brand-new angle. Zhao (2008) and others have attempted to analyze movie posters using multimodal theory, but they did not conduct in-depth research on the role of meaning co-construction between text and images in poster design.

This paper uses Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory to explore how does the film poster of *Better Days* construct the themes of youth and adversity through representational, interactive, and compositional meanings?

## 2 Literature review

Multimodal discourse analysis, as the new trend of discourse analysis, rises in 1990s in western countries. The earliest theoretical model was proposed by O'Toole, M. and Kress & van Leeuwen. O'Toole, M. formulated the multimodal analysis framework, whereas Kress, G. & van Leeuwen established the visual grammar for image interpretation.

The theoretical foundation of multimodal discourse analysis is mainly provided by social semiotics, especially the visual grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. This framework emphasizes image symbols as part of human social symbols and analyzes how images, graphics and things realize complex visual logic. Foreign research covers a variety of fields, including advertising, political propaganda, education, and media., including Baldry & Thibault (2006), Kress & van Leeuwen (1996,2006), van Leeuwen (2005), Norris (2004) and Halloran (2004). Researchers focus on how to construct and convey meanings through multimodal resources (e.g. images, texts, sounds, etc.). In recent years, multimodal research methods have been developing, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis methods for a more comprehensive understanding of multimodal discourse.

Many scholars have conducted various studies and applications of the multimodal discourse analysis theory. Although the analysis of multimodal discourse in China is still in its infancy, there have been many attempts to apply this theory, such as multimodal discourse analysis of advertising discourse, textbook discourse, hypertext discourse, etc. In fact, the research objects of multimodal analysis have expanded from language and text to various social semiotic systems such as sound, pictures, videos, web design, and architectural styles. (Zhu, 2007)

A movie poster is an important form of promotion that conveys film information and attracts audience attention. Different from other forms of painting, it requires conciseness and clarity, enabling people to quickly form a deep impression of the film information to be publicized. In the 1990s, the widespread application of computer synthesis technology enabled movie poster design to have diversified expression techniques, such as abstraction, symbolism, realism, etc. However, research on posters has mostly remained at the levels of function (Zhang, 2003), design style (Zhang, 2011), and aesthetic perspective (Zhao, 2007). These studies mostly focus on visual images, while lacking in-depth research on the linguistic phenomena in posters.

## 3 The visual grammar theory of multimodal discourse analysis

The theoretical basis of multimodal discourse analysis is Halliday's theory of systematic functional linguistics. According to Halliday's views, language has three meta-functions, i.e. ideational function, interpersonal functional and textual function.

In accordance with the three meta-functions of language proposed by Halliday in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Kress & van Leeuwen propose three levels of meaning in visual grammar, which are representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the Halliday's three meta-functions of language and the three meaning levels of visual grammar.

Representational meaning deals with how images represent events, participants and circumstances in the real world. It is concerned with what is depicted in an image and its interrelationships. Representational meaning consists of narrative meaning and conceptual meaning. Narrative meaning demonstrates the dynamic process of events and interactions between participants through vectors in the image (e.g., a character's eyes, gestures, etc.). Conceptual meaning emphasizes the static relationship between participants in terms of category, structure, or meaning. It is often used to express more general and stable concepts. Most movie posters belong to narrative images, which can highlight the promotional theme through objective forms such as film scenes and main characters. The vectors formed by characters' different postures, movements, and expressions demonstrate their personalities, social status, life experiences, and attitudes towards life.

Interactive Meaning focuses on the relationship between the image and the viewer and how the image guides the viewer's response and participation. It can be analyzed from four dimensions, i.e. contact, social distance, attitude and modality. Contact means that the direct or indirect way of contact between the image and the viewer, such as whether the character looks directly at the viewer. Social distance refers to the degree of intimacy between the image and the viewer, e.g., the use of close-shot or long-shot to convey intimacy or objectivity. Attitude refers to the emotional attitude conveyed by the image, such as a sense of involvement, detachment, or power relations. Different perspectives express different attitudes. A frontal perspective indicates "involvement", a vertical perspective implies "detachment", and a parallel perspective signifies equality. As an important component of interactive meaning, modality refers to the degree of truth or credibility of statements people make about the world they are concerned with. Consistent with its treatment in Systemic Functional Linguistics, modality is categorized into three levels: high, medium, and low. Based on eight visual markers, Kress & van Leeuwen investigated the degree of realistic value of modality in images, namely color saturation, color differentiation, color modulation, contextualization, representation, depth, illumination, and brightness.

Compositional meaning involves the layout and organization of an image and how these layouts affect the transmission of information and the viewer's understanding. It is made up of three dimensions, i.e. information value, salience, and framing. Information value refers to the organization of the page in terms of three different patterns which are seen as meaning-making in themselves: i.e. the placement of visual material on the page in terms of respectively a left/right, top/bottom or center/margin principle of organization. Left represents with "given" information; right with "new"; top with "ideal"; bottom with "real". Salience concerns elements stand out in a visual composition and that which make these elements stand out. Visual elements may be salient because of their relative size(whether big or small), colour, focus, tone and because they are foregrounded or overlapping other elements in the composition. Framing refers to the ways in which elements in a spatial design may be connected and disconnected by means of frames and a couple of other features such as visual rhyme and contrast.

#### 4 The multimodal discourse analysis of the film poster for Better Days

The paper selects the film poster which was designed by Huanghai, who was called "genius designer". He owned numerous famous works, including the poster of The Grandmaster , Big Fish & Begonia and Dying to survive. The posters designed by Huang Hai not only have distinctive styles, but also can use artistic expression to perfectly interpret the unique mood of each movie, which made the poster works infused with soul.



Figure1. The film poster

##### 4.1 The representational meaning in the poster

In the poster( Figure1), two characters holding each other's hands, running to the place which is shone by sunlight. The relationship between two actors and sunlight is the vector. The interaction between the two shows the theme of the movie, that is , although they are stuck in the middle now, they can still see the hope in the narrow cracks where the sun shines in. Meanwhile, the two characters is running, which shows their nervous mood, and they want to escape the place. This is the action process, which belongs to narrative representation. Besides, at the metaphorical level, this image is also a conceptual image representing a symbolic process. The poster selects the shabby alley as the background. It not only symbolizes the environment which the characters are living in, but also symbolizes the psychological states they have, such as depression, struggle and despair. It belongs to conceptual representation.

##### 4.2 The interactive meaning in the poster

In the poster, the two characters turn their back to the viewers instead of staring at the audiences. This belongs to “offer” in the contact. The poster provides a situation where two characters are in terrible environment. But they don’t force viewers to react or communicate directly. It just offers an image, and the audiences imagine or explore by themselves. It can also arouse audiences’ interests. This design may be intended to make the audience feel that they are bystanders, so that they can observe and think about the development of the story more objectively. In the poster, the boy holds the girl’s hand. Their distance is close, which shows their intimate relationship. And the girl is dependent on the boy. But the scene is a long-shot picture, which shows the long distance between the characters and audiences. However, the long-shot picture also demonstrates the objectivity. However, two characters stride towards sunlight, turning their back to the audiences, which shows the detachment with the audiences. The overall saturation of the poster is low, dominated by desaturated tones such as earthy yellow, grayish brown, and dark green, which recreate the aged and dilapidated texture of the abandoned factory. Only the title text is rendered in highly saturated bright yellow, creating a strong visual contrast that firmly anchors the audience’s attention to the theme. While color differentiation is moderate among the background tones, the stark contrast in brightness between the dark environment and the luminous title and light beam creates clear visual hierarchies. This contrast does not disrupt color modulation, however, as the warm yellow of the text echoes the natural light, integrating seamlessly with the earthy color scheme. Contextually, the poster exhibits a high level of contextualization, as the detailed, decaying factory setting with peeling walls, scattered debris, and overgrown plants serves as a narrative-rich space that immediately evokes the marginalized, shelter-like world of the two protagonists. The image also features a strong sense of depth, achieved through linear perspective of the factory structure, layered foreground debris and background walls, as well as the spatial definition provided by the dramatic light beam. The illumination relies on a single, directional side-backlight piercing through the factory’s broken roof, casting the running figures in partial silhouette and creating high contrast between light and shadow. Additionally, the poster adopts a generally low brightness and a dark tonal style. The dim background enhances the oppressive and heavy tone of the story. Collectively, these visual elements create a high-modality image that realistically represents the characters’ setting while using stylized light and color to emphasize the film’s themes of hardship and mutual protection.

### 4.3 The compositional meaning in the poster

The characters are located in the bottom right corner of the picture, which don’t excessively emphasize their importance, but audiences’ attention will unconsciously focus on the two characters. And the title of movie is on the left side of the poster, which is the “given” information, while, there are several words “Wo Men Hen Hao (We Are Fine)”, which is new information. It means that the characters’ life is differentiated from the words. Their life is struggled, which coincides with their real life experience. Furthermore, the sunlight is on the top which represents “ideal”, the characters is at the bottom which shows “real”. The designer have integrated the four words “Shao Nian De Ni (Better Days)” into one by using splash-ink calligraphy design. The words “Shao Nian (teenager)” is written with shared strokes, and “De Ni (you)” is placed at the bottom, which protected by “Shao Nian (teenager)”. The contrast between thick and thin strokes is very strong. And the vertical layout of the font and the elongated strokes demonstrates characters’ bold and unconstrained style, which also express the characters’ adolescent rebellion. The use of dynamic poses and vivid colors, such as the yellow words, not only attracts the audiences’ attention, but also strengthens the visual impact of the poster. And the reason why the designer uses the yellow font lies in the fact that yellow matches the color of sunshine, which shows the development of the story. The two characters will escape the darkness, gaining happiness. Besides, other words except for yellow font also indicate leading actors and the production team. It not only provides the basic information about the movie, but also helps to build up the audience’s anticipation and interest in the movie. The layout of this poster features the protagonists in the bottom right corner. They occupy a small image in the poster, and the surrounding dilapidated image takes up most of the picture, with the sunlight pouring down from above, showing the characters’ desire for a better life. Additionally, through the running direction of the characters and the narrow perspective of the alley, the poster creates a dynamic visual effect that guides the viewers’ eyes to follow the movement of the characters and enhances the urgency of the story.

## 5 Conclusion

In conclusion, as for the representational meaning, the poster presents the plot through narrative and conceptual representation. Although, the main characters are in “darkness”, they hold each other’s hands and depend on each other. Ultimately, they will see the dawn of hope. It also reveals evil can never prevail over good. When it comes to interactive meaning, the image is presented by a long shot, so the audiences are able to look at the story from an objective point of view. But the relationship between characters and audiences is detached. With regard to the compositional meaning, the font size and color, the layout of the image are all trying to be unique, which successfully conveys the theme and emotional atmosphere of the movie and inspires curiosity and emotional resonance in the audience. This study analyzes the use of multimodal discourse analysis on movie posters, but due to the different perspectives of each person, the interpretation may be subjective. Traditional discourse analysis focuses more on language, but with the development of technology and media, we should pay more attention to the analysis and interpretation of images, music or videos. However, we still should attach great importance to the language when analyze other modalities, combining language and other modalities, only in this way, the multimodal discourse analysis can step forward.

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