Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Movie Poster *Little Big Soldier*

Li Yin and Hanita Hassan

Abstract—**Movie Posters are visual media used to transmit cultural and commercial information through social semiotics such as image, text, font and color. One of the important techniques of poster design is to convey movie topics or focused information. Movie poster design has gone through two major periods in China. Between 1980s and 1990s, posters were apparently designed simple and color-vivid; entering the 21st century, with computer technology, Chinese movie posters have shown diversified expressions and propagandas, which seem more fresh and unique in artistic charm. Multimodality usually expresses meanings through the combination of text and other elements, and movie poster is one of the multimodal means. This paper discusses the findings of multimodal discourse analysis by Kress &Van Leeuwen carried out on a movie poster *Little Big Soldier*, of which the aims are, among others, to reveal how verbal and visual signs work together as social signs to interpret the representational, interactional and compositional meanings, thus viewers better understand how the movie poster realizes meaning co-construction and how it conveys the movie information. The main goal of poster message is to play a propaganda role and attract more audience to the movie.**

Index Terms—**Little Big Soldier, movie poster, multimodal discourse, meaning co-construction.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Since ancient times, human communication has been multimodal. During recent years, multimodal discourse analysis has attracted many scholars' attention. Movie Posters are visual media used to transmit cultural and commercial information through graphic design such as image, text, font and color. One of the important techniques of poster design is to convey multimodal meanings. Movie poster design has gone through two major periods in China. Between 1980s and 1990s, posters were apparently designed simple and color-vivid; entering the 21st century, with computer technology, Chinese movie posters have shown diversified expressions and propagandas, which seem more fresh and unique in artistic charm.

Modern multimedia technology has transferred the traditional single text mode to combination of linguistic and symbolic modes. Similarly, mono-modal linguistic discourse is also shifted to multi-modal characteristic with image, color, sound and layout. In recent years, multimodal discourse analysis has gradually attracted many scholars. Kress &Van Leeuwen established the Visual Grammar

theory [1] based on Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, paving for the interpretation of image meanings. O'Toole uses the meta-function theory to analyze art works [2]. Royce puts forward the theory of Inter-semiotic Complementarity [3]. O'Hallor analyzes the linguistic features of visual images in movies and mathematics [4], [5]. Delu Zhang constructs the theoretical framework of discourse analysis [6]. Now experts in this field are committed to explore the meaning conveys and relationship between language and other modes. This paper attempts to use multimodality to deep reveal the meanings contained in a movie poster *Little Gig Soldier* from the angle of Visual Grammar.

II. THEORETIC FRAMEWORK

Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar proposed three meta-functions of language: conceptual function, interpersonal function and discourse function [7]. Kress &Van Leeuwen extend the meta-functions to the visual level and put forward multimodality theory, including "representational meaning", "interactional meaning" and "compositional meaning" [8], they also discuss the informational value of font syntax. "Modality" is the social semiotic approach to the question of truth [1]. it relates both to the issues of representation—fact versus fiction, reality versus fantasy, real versus artificial, authentic versus fake—and to questions of social interaction, because the question of truth is also a social question--- what is regarded as true in one social context is not necessarily regarded as true in others, with all the consequences that brings. Therefore semiotics is not concerned with the absolute truth but with the truth as speakers and writers and other sign producers see it, and with the semiotic resources they use to express it [9]. Movie poster adopts all kinds of semiotic resources such as text, image, color, and frame to represent a certain truth that actualizes in the film, not in the reality. Audiences can enter into the truth or facts in the movie, to interpret the meanings conveyed by the movie, this is the movie poster's propaganda role.

In many contexts naturalistic modality remains dominant, its view of visual truth is as follows: the more an image resembles the way we saw it in reality, the higher its modality. The theme of the film is expressed through the combined use of serial modes including visual expression [10]. For example, in technological modality, visual truth is based on the practical usefulness of the image, the more an image can be used as a blueprint or aid for action, the higher its modality. in sensory modality, visual truth is based on

the effect of pleasure or displeasure created by visuals, sharpness, color, depth, the play of light and shade, etc. Color, for example, is used for its psychological soothing or stirring effect [11]. Color saturation ranges from the absence of saturation ---black and white--- to intermediate colors mixed with gray--- to colors that maximize saturation. Color modulation ranges from the use of flat, non-modulated colors to color modulation that represents all subtle differences and a given color -- for example, skin tone or grass color. The degree of color differentiation ranges from monochrome to the use of various colors on the palette.

Needless to say, sensory modaility is used in contexts where pleaure matters: for example films. Photography is often thought of as reproducing reality. It is seen as inherently truthful and reliable because its images are formed by nature [12]. In Peirce's terminology, the photographic sign is "indexical", a sign caused by its referent. Digital images look like photographs, yet the people, places and things they show may never have existed before the lens of a camera [13]. In the information age, visual form increasingly uses computer simulation and visual modeling rather than photographic recording, because it is ultimately more interested in deeper, more universal truths than in the particularities of external reality. The modality of sound can be approached along the same lines as the modality of visual communication, the modality of sound is abstract sensory [14]. The same is true for other semiotic modes we use to present ourselves, dress, for instance. In the film we use dress to represent, therefore presentation is the essence of modality.

Movie poster focuses on its presentations, that is, what co-meaning the poster's multimodality represents. It is the essence not only of movie poster but also of multimodal discourse analysis. Nowadays, In China, after Kress and van Leeuwen, many scholars have made remarkable achievements in multimodal discourse analysis. For example, Delu Zhang has also constructed the theoretical framework of multimodal discourse analysis [15]. Some other scholars in this field are dedicated to exploring the expressive ways of language and other modes, even the interrelationship of representation among them.

III. METHODOLOGY

Based on Halliday's three meta-functions, Kress& Van Lueween studied the relationship between modes and media, specifically discussed the phenomenon of regular representations of meaning in multi-modes, and elaborated the multimodality to create a theoretical basis for image analysis, and analyzed the visual grammar framework, namely representational meaning, interactional meaning and compositional meaning. Multimodal theory focuses on the combination of text, image, perspective, color, light and shade, etc. In the analysis of movie posters, several modes jointly construct the theme so that the audience can understand its representations. This paper uses qualitative research by multimodal discourse analysis to understand the representing, interactional and compositional meanings contained in the movie poster *Little Big Soldier.*

IV. MULTIMODAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE POSTER *LITTLE BIG SOLDIER*

A. Brief Introduction of the Movie

In 227 BC, the troops of the state Wei were ambushed by Liang troops in Phoenix Mountain. After the bloody battle, only the seriously wounded general of the state Wei (Leehom Wang) and the Liang soldier who pretended to be dead (Jackie Chan) survived. The general had great ambitions to unify the states, while the soldier just wanted to live his own peaceful life. Big soldier captured the general alive, trying to take him back to Liang in exchange for five acres of fertile land and live a happy life without military service any more. On their way back, big soldier resolved the unexpected risks one after another with the support of his own faith and intelligence, and eventually they became friends. When arriving in the Liang border, big soldier changed mind and released the general. When the soldier stepped onto the land of Liang, he was amazed that Liang had already been conquered by another state Qin. Being reluctant to surrender, he was killed by random arrows.

B. Representational Meaning

According to the characteristics of images, Kress & Van Leeuwen distinguishes two modes of representation: narrative and conceptual. Narrative representation mainly describes social action, while conceptual representation mainly describes social structure design. The distinguishing mark of narrative representation is vector, which indicates the occurrence, change process and instantaneous spatial arrangement of behaviors and events. According to the types of vectors [16], narrative representation embraces process such as action, reaction, psychology and speech. The vector in the action process means the strong diagonals or oblique lines in the image. When the participants in the image are connected by vectors, they will be thought of doing something to each other. In conceptual representation, the relationship among participants is embodied by attributes, categories and features, which consist of the classification process, analysis process and symbolic process.

The movie poster of *Little Big Soldier* shown in Fig. 1 mainly shows two participants, one is the Liang soldier played by Jackie Chan, the other is the Wei general played by Leehom Wang. In the poster, the soldier crouches on the ground and looks up at the general. The general stands behind the soldier with his sword and arms crossed. The eyes of soldiers looking up constitute a vector, which is a reaction process and conveys great difference of status between them. There is a smile on the corner of the soldier's mouth, showing the soldier's complacency and indifference. But the general's expression is serious and his eyes are firm, which is in sharp contrast with the soldier. It shows that the general is a senior commander of the army, proud and conceited. It can be seen from the posters that the soldier's beard is scratched, and this vector shows that he is older than the general. According to life experience, a comparison is drawn between "soldier and general" and "big and small", "big" soldier means "rich" experience in life, while "small" means "conceit and lack" of experience in life shallow. In this poster, the swords in the hands of the soldier and the general are covered with blood. This is a symbolic process because sword and blood are often associated with war. War

is the background of the film and also the basis of plot development. There is an arrow in the soldier's chest, but he doesn't feel painful because it is one of his tricks in the battlefield --- pretending to be dead with a retractable arrow. This symbolizes the soldier's view that "better to live than to die", and shows his pride of escaping from the battlefield.

Fig. 1. Movie poster of *Little Big Soldier*.

C. Interactional Meaning

Interactional meaning (Kress &Van Leeuwen, 1996) refers to the use of language to maintain the relationship between people, while using language to influence other people's attitudes, views and so on. It reflects the relationship between the participants and viewers. Interactional meaning is realized by four carriers: visual contact, social distance, perspective and modality. Each will be discussed in turn.

1) Visual contact

Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) argue visual contact is an imaginary relationship between the participant and the viewer. Depending on whether there is eye contact, the image can be split into two categories: "demand" and "offer". "Demand" means the participants' eyes in the image point to the viewer, so as to establish an imaginary interaction with the viewer. "Offer" means the participants of the image have no eye contact with the viewer and only provide information for the viewer. In this poster, there is no eye contact between the two protagonists, thus no imaginary interactional relationship occur, only providing information. The soldier's expression along with his eyesight upwards the dove on his head reveals his optimistic and open-minded virtues. By contrast, the general is serious, and he keeps eye contact with the viewer, thus establishing imaginary interactional relationship with the viewer. His firm vision shows his status as "very important person", who regards

national honor and personal dignity as the highest priority. He tries to seek attention and recognition from the audience so as to increases the communication and interaction with the audience.

2) Social distance

Kress and Van Leeuwen holds the belief that distance mainly reflects the intimate/ alienated relationship between participants and viewers, and the size of frame restricts the intimate degree. Close-up shot shows intimate social distance; the whole person in the lens represents close social distance; the whole person in the lens and surrounding space represent remote social distance; and the distance of at least four to five people is public distance. In the poster, we can see the whole portraits of the two protagonists and their spatial surroundings -- remote social distance, it shows the participants and the audience are alienated, which is in line with the fact. Behind the protagonists is the battle field, which adopts a further public distance. All this indicates that the war is not the focus of research but only the background of the story.

3) Perspective and modality

Designer's attitude is reflected by perspective and modality. Kress and Van Leeuwen indicates the positive perspective reflects involvement, which means viewer's integration; the slanting perspective regards participants as spectators, meaning detachments; the head up perspective indicates the relatively equal relationship between the viewer and the participants; if the viewer looks at the participants in the image with the angle of looking up, it means the participants are in a strong position; otherwise looking down indicates the viewer has power. The protagonists in the poster are designed from the perspective of heads up, means they have equal relationship with viewers. This horizontally positive perspective reflects the attitude of the poster designer -- to bring the audience a feeling of immersion and integration, thus bridging the distance between the film and the audience. Wording modality in the poster also reflect the designer's attitude, while the director of this film is an unknown young man named Sheng Ding, the actor Jackie Chan is influential at home and abroad, "Jackie Chan" has become a big brand of action comedy and the guarantee of good movies, and thus it plays a good role in publicity.

D. Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning refers to the overall meaning of the image, which is created by the combination of representational and interactional components. Compositional meaning consists of protagonists, information values, significance and framework [17]. Information value is achieved by the element positions in the image. Generally speaking, the most important information is usually placed in the right center. Significance refers to the position, size, color and contrast of visual elements, which will attract the viewers' attention. Framework refers to the holistic analysis of elemental information in the image, either framing lines or segmentations [18].

In the text of the poster, the film title information value and significance is the strongest, so the title font is large,

placed on the left part, implying the film story as known information, "Jackie Chan's works" placed on the right is highlighted in the form of new information, this kind of design enables viewers to feel the presence of big stars. Given the potential Chinese audience, the font of the English title BIG SOLDIER is smaller compared with the Chinese characters. There is a small English word "LITTLE" above the letter "L", whose font size is significantly smaller than "BIG", visually highlighting the contrast between the protagonists "BIG SOLDIER" and "LITTLE General". Under the title of the film is the cast, director and other information, the value of the information is slightly lower than the image and title, the font is smaller, the significance is weak.

Taking a panoramic view of the framework, the image itself is not chaotic, but well structured and organized. The two leading protagonists occupy half of the space on the right side of the poster with strong colors, strong information value and significance, which play a role in attracting the audience's attention and transmitting the film's information. The background color saturation and brightness of the battlefield is poor, and the significance is low, which reflects the background of the film. The opposite of the battlefield is the rape flower, which forms a dividing line, showing totally different value orientations. The general is brave and good at fighting, what occupies his mind is "unifying the world"; as for the soldier, the cardinal task is to return home and plant crops. It is driven by this bright prospect that the soldier decides to bring Wei general back to Liang, which triggers the whole story.

V. CONCLUSION

With the rapid development of science and technology, the single mode can no longer meet people's needs to obtain information. Other modes, such as image, sound and color, are playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of information.

The movie poster of *little big soldier* consist of images, text, colors, fonts and other symbols; each mode has a kind of meaning expression. Through the analysis of representation, interaction and composition, it can be seen that the poster is concise in text and vivid in image. Words and images work together in the construction of meaning, which not only shows the theme of the film, but also stimulates the interest of the audience. As a whole, the poster design is ingenious and it successfully publicizes the movie, therefore the audience's interest in this film is easily aroused.

Because of the author's limited knowledge on multimodality, this paper still needs modification and deep research, it is suggested this type of topic appeals to more scholars and researchers.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Each author has done great contribution to this work; the first author selected the poster and wrote this paper; as a doctoral supervisor, the second author Professor Hanita Hassan, whose expertise is multimodality in academic research, reviewed the paper, both authors had approved the final version.

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Li Yin was born in 1974 in Hebei province. From 1995 to 1999, she majored in English in school of Foreign Languages, Hebei Normal University. From 2005 to 2008, she studied in Education School, Hebei Normal University for a master's degree. From 2019 till now, she is studying as a PhD candidate in Language Academy, University Technology Malaysia. Between 1999 and 2005, she worked as a school English teacher. From 2008 up to now, she has been teaching English in Hebei Geo University. She is interested in topics concerning linguistics and college students' education. Some journal papers have been published, such as "The evolution and evaluation of entrepreneurship education policy for Chinese College Students", Journal of Jilin radio and TV University, 2015, 000(006): pp. 94-95 and "Environmental psychological analysis of College Students' classroom seat selection mode", Journal of Chifeng University (Natural science edition), 2015, pp. 150-151.

Hanita Hassan now is the dean of Language Academy, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, City of Johor Bahru, Malaysia, University Technology Malaysia. Prof. Hanita is very kind, she has been sparing no effort to supervise and guide her PHD student Yin Li for the doctoral dissertation and papers writing.