

The Interpretation of Feminism in Feminist Movie Poster from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis--Taking Barbie as an Example

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Abstract: Posters belong to multimodal discourse and are an important means of film promotion, with images and text. This study takes Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar as theoretical frameworks to conduct a multimodal discourse analysis of movie posters based on the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings of visual grammar theory. The aim is to explore how various modalities such as images, text, and color in the poster jointly construct feminism and promote movie. Through analysis, it can be concluded that multimodal discourse analysis based on visual grammar can help readers explore the deep meanings in images, while also allowing readers to better appreciate the beauty of movie posters and gain a deeper understanding of the theme of the movie.

Keywords: Multimodal discourse analysis, Movie poster, Barbie.

1. Introduction

With the progress of society and the increasing development of technology, people's communication methods have shifted from being limited to a single mode of text to combining multiple modes such as images, sounds, and words. Therefore, it is necessary to study the discourse analysis of images, sounds, colors, and other social contexts that are not in line with the text. The analysis and research of multimodal discourse is not limited to text, but also includes various social symbol systems such as sound and image, aiming to guide the audience to understand the meaning of discourse and context more comprehensively [7].

Therefore, conducting multimodal discourse analysis on movie posters can explore the process of meaning construction in multimodal forms, which has strong theoretical value and

practical significance. Kress & Van Leeuwen believed that images are social symbols and proposed "visual grammar" [1]. Taking Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar as the theoretical

framework, this paper attempts to carry out multimodal discourse analysis Barbie's movie poster based on the representational meaning, interactional meaning and compositional meaning of the visual grammar theory, with the purpose of exploring how the image, text, color and other modes in the posters work together to construct meaning. Analysis shows that interpreting multimodal discourse can help readers deeply understand the theme and connotation of movies, stimulate viewers' interest in movies, and thus achieve the goal of movie promotion.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Systemic Functional Grammar

Systemic functional grammar regards language as a social symbol. Halliday [5] proposed three metafunctions of language in his systemic functional grammar: ideational function, interpersonal function, and textual function. Ideational function refers to the expressive function of language in expressing various experiences of people in the real world (including the inner world), as well as the logical relationship between two or more meaning units. Interpersonal function refers to the ability of language to express the speaker's identity, judgment, attitude, and motivation, as well as their inference, judgment, and evaluation of things. Textual function refers to the function of organizing language components into discourse.

2.2 Visual Social Semiotics

Based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar theory, Kress & Van Leeuwen [2] proposed the theory of visual grammar. They extended Halliday's three metafunctions of language in systemic functional grammar to visual patterns, proposing to analyze images from three aspects: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. There is a one-to-one correspondence between the three pure logical functions of language and the three semantic levels of visual grammar.

Correspondingly to the purely rational function of concepts is the representational meaning, which is a way of representing the relationship between people, things, and places described by images, divided into two categories: narrative and conceptual.

Corresponding to the interpersonal function is the interactive meaning. Interactive meaning is about the relationship between the creator of the image, the things represented by the image, and the viewer of the image, while also indicating the viewer's attitude towards the represented things.

Correspondingly to the textual function is the compositional

meaning, which refers to the overall composition of an image, that is, the way expressive and interactive elements are related to each other, and the way they are combined into a meaningful whole.

3. Multimodal Discourse Analysis of *Barbie's* Poster

Barbie is released in China in 21th July in 2023, and it was hotly discussed and disputed because of its feminism subject. This paper uses Halliday's Systemic functional linguistics and Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar to analyze the poster from the perspective of multimodal discourse, and reveal what are the hidden contents conveyed in the posters of this film that claim to be feminist theme, and how does it reflect feminism in its poster design.



Figure 1 Poster of Movie *Barbie*

3.1 Representational Meaning

Kress & Van Leeuwen[1] emphasized that elements such as participants and environment in images have a significant impact on the meaning of image representation. They believe that there are two modes of image representation, namely narrative representation and conceptual representation. In visual grammar, the difference between narrative representation and scene representation is whether there are vectors in the picture to represent actions[1].

The Chinese name of this movie is located directly above the entire poster, with a pink font placed horizontally, making it particularly eye-catching against a blue background. The remaining part consists of the two protagonists of the play, who occupy two-thirds of the entire poster and are the most prominent information presented in the poster. In the poster, Barbie sat on Ken's right shoulder in a pink dress, her left hand covering half of Ken's face, and her right hand raised

high above her head, with a generous smile and a calm and confident expression. The lower part of the poster features the male protagonist Ken, holding Barbie on his right shoulder and wearing a Hawaiian resort style pink green shirt with his abs exposed and his left arm displaying his muscles.

The central line at the top of the poster reads "Barbie can do anything, but he is just Ken." The statement that Ken is only Ken is a pun. One is that Ken's inner weakness requires him to rely on his beautiful girlfriend, boastful fur-coat, and big house to decorate himself, symbolizing the male's external strength and existential crisis under patriarchy. The second meaning is that after watching the movie, it will be discovered that Ken is actually a "woman" in the social sense of the Barbie world. This sentence can also refer to Ken being only himself, and even in Barbie Park, he does not have to rely on anyone.

In this poster, Barbie and Ken's gaze towards the viewer forms two similar reaction processes, which are undoubtedly the focus of attention. During these two processes, the reactors were for women and men respectively, and no phenomenon occurred. Their direct gaze on the audience not only endows them with visual needs, but also engages the audience and interacts with them.

3.2 Interactive Meaning

3.2.1 Contact

Contact refers to whether the person in the image has eye contact, thereby establishing a relationship between the image and the interactive person, but this relationship can also be said to be imagined by people. When the participants in the image look directly at the audience, they are in a state of "requester", and their facial expressions and gestures can show what they are requesting. But when there is no eye contact between the participant and the audience, the audience observes and appreciates the image in a detached state. At this time, the image is equivalent to an object providing information, and the participant is then a "provider".

In terms of visual contact, Barbie and Ken in the upper part of the poster directly look at the viewer, establishing a fictional contact through the vector formed by their line of sight, creating the image behavior of demand. Barbie and Ken appear in the poster as "requesters", demanding the audience to know, calling for the audience to enter their world and share their stories.

It is not difficult to see that the characters in the picture demand from the audience the right of women to independence and freedom, as well as the equal social status of men and women. This design effectively brings the audience closer to the characters in the poster, resonates with the characters in the image and the emotional attitudes conveyed, and fully stimulates the viewer's interest in watching the film.

3.2.2 Social Distance

Distance can be divided into many kinds, here mainly refers to social distance. It refers to the degree of intimacy between the participants and the audience in the image. Social distance can

be divided into three types - long shot, medium shot and close-up. The closer the camera is, the closer the Social distance is. The size of the picture frame and the social relationship between the actors and the audience can be clearly expressed.

In the poster, Barbie's entire person and the surrounding space can be seen, so her distance from the audience is a social distance; In the poster, Ken can be seen from above his waist, so there is a personal distance between Ken and the viewer. This sense of distance makes the audience realize that in real society, whether in Barbie Park or in the real world, there are deviations in the rights of men and women, and the problem of inequality between men and women still exists. The release of this film aims to raise the audience's attention to these issues, while also calling for people to pay attention to women's rights and status, as well as the issue of women's liberation. This has a positive promoting effect on the improvement of gender inequality, which coexists globally.

3.2.3 Viewpoint

The viewpoint chosen for a poster or any visual representation significantly influences how the audience interprets the content. A subjective viewpoint, where the viewer seems to be peering into or experiencing the scene from a personal angle, often creates a sense of intimacy and engagement. In contrast, an objective viewpoint, where the scene is presented as if viewed from afar or from a neutral stance, promotes a more analytical or distanced approach. Viewpoint is the angle from which the viewer observes an image, implying the subjective and objective attitudes that the viewer may have. The viewer has power when looking down at the image; When looking up, the image has power; When viewed horizontally, the two are equal and there is no power difference. From a vertical perspective, the characters in this poster have a level view angle with the audience, which is beneficial for bringing them closer to the audience.

The interactive meaning corresponds to interpersonal function, with a greater emphasis on creating imaginary interactive relationships between images and viewers. Interactive meaning refers to the interaction between the object represented by the image and the viewer, and prompts the viewer to adopt an attitude towards the reproduced object. There are four elements to achieve this interactive meaning, namely contact, social distance, viewpoint, and modality[6]. Among them, this study focuses on the significance of posters from the perspective of contact, social distance and view point.

3.3 Compositional Meaning

Within the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), image composition, just like linguistic texts, carries significant meaning beyond its immediate visual representation. The analysis of images, especially in the context of posters or other visual media, involves understanding the interplay of various visual elements that contribute to the overall message. Three key concepts in this regard are information value, salience, and framing, each of which plays a crucial role in shaping the meaning of the image.

3.3.1 Information value

In Kress & Van Leeuwen's [2] view, the information placed on the left is known, while the information placed on the right is new; The image placed in the middle serves as a core information provider, while the information placed on the edge serves as an auxiliary core information provider; The top and bottom also have different information values.

The information in the middle position is the core information, with the highest information value, generally referring to the protagonist in the image, highlighting its position as the protagonist. The core message in this poster is Barbie, who was expelled for being "not perfect enough" and embarked on an adventure in the real world. After awakening her female consciousness, she did not choose to return to the illusory bubble world, but instead faced the cruelty of the real world. Ken, located below Barbie, also implies that in Barbie Park, Ken's position is below Barbie, and in another sense, Ken is the "woman" in the Barbie world. The information at the bottom left in this image shows the time the movie was broadcasted.

3.3.2 Saliency

Saliency refers to the ability of viewers to pay different attention to elements in an image through color depth, line thickness, and prominence in the image [6]. In this poster, the two main actors Barbie and Ken are the focus of the entire poster, occupying most of the space. The faces of the two leading actors are clearly visible, and the clothes they wear are brightly colored, showcasing their enthusiasm and confidence. The two leading actors were placed under the azure sky, creating a harmonious scene with the actors' expressions, movements, and clothing colors. The actors are placed in the foregrounding and the background is blurred.

The movie name, with its prominent font and size, as well as creative layout, has become the most prominent symbol in the poster besides the characters, which effectively serves the purpose of promoting the movie. In addition to the above content, traditional belief is that blue represents men, while pink represents women. In this poster, blue becomes the background color, while the large font of the movie title is pink, indicating that the movie is related to gender equality and highlights feminism, as blue (male) becomes the background and pink (foreground) is the foreground. The use of pink and blue effectively reflects the size of different information values. In this poster, the modes of text and picture color are complementary, while other modes strengthen the mode of film name, thus highlighting the theme of the film.

3.3.3 Framing

Framing refers to the use of lines, boundaries, or other visual cues to separate or connect elements within the image. It helps to create a sense of unity or separation between different parts of the composition, guiding the viewer's interpretation. In a poster, framing can be achieved through the use of borders, lines, or even the arrangement of objects and figures. For instance, placing two characters facing each other across a frame might suggest a confrontation or tension between them.

Conversely, framing them together within a shared space can convey a sense of unity or collaboration. By carefully framing the elements in the image, the creator can shape the narrative and emotional response of the viewer.

4. Conclusion

This article is based on Halliday's systemic functional grammar and Kress & Van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory, and conducts a multimodal analysis of the *Barbie* movie poster from three levels: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning in visual grammar. Through analysis, it can be concluded that a movie poster is a multimodal discourse composed of the interaction of different social symbols such as text, images, and colors. Each symbol undertakes its own task. Multimodal discourse analysis based on visual grammar can help readers explore the deep meanings in images, while also allowing readers to better appreciate the beauty of movie posters and gain a deeper understanding of the theme of the movie. In order to improve the promotional effect of the poster, designers can choose more modes and design works that are more attractive to the audience.

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