

How Does She Look? Women Displayed on Movie Posters : A Multimodal Analysis of Posters of King Kong

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Abstract: In modern times, movie posters, as a form of visual art, are essential in human communication. Employing images, texts, colors, and other symbols, meanings are realized to convey information about the movies and gain publicity. Taking Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar theory as the theoretical framework, this paper analyses the posters of horror movie *King Kong* from three dimensions: representational, interactive and compositional meanings. A movie poster is more than just a visual stimulation with aesthetic values to intrigue the audience. When examined from a sociological perspective, it also creates a public discourse sphere in which women are gazed upon, and the balance of power is constantly dynamic.

Keywords: Visual grammar; Multimodal discourse; Movie poster; Horror movie; *King Kong*

1. Introduction

Movie posters play an essential role in promoting movies across the genre spectrum. The purpose of them is to gain publicity and drive up excitement, which might be an influential factor for the box office, especially when the production crew and cast are non-famous. Over the years, movie posters have developed into a unique type of art deeply rooted in people's daily lives.

Today, thanks to multimedia technology, a discourse may comprise various kinds of symbols that integrate with each other and convey particular messages. Multimodal discourse analysis, originating in the 1990s, has evolved into an academic field of great importance. Many scholars have made remarkable achievements. One of the earliest researchers was O'Toole (1994), who conducted research on the Sydney Opera House.

A movie poster is a typical multimodal discourse designed in a complicated way, thus providing some insights into the realization of meaning. There are many case studies analyzing the functions of visual signs in movie posters. Nevertheless, it is rare to see any regarding how women are displayed in the same context.

2. Visual Grammar

According to Halliday (1985), grammar "enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality and to make sense of their experience of what goes on around them and inside them." Based on his Systemic Functional Grammar, there are three meta-functions of language: conceptual function, interpersonal function, and discourse function. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) extended this theory to the level of visual modality, proposing a grammar of visual designs. Generally speaking, grammar determines how a word of a specific lexical category can be used to form sentences and express meanings. Even though verbal and visual grammars differ greatly, they derive from similar concerns and orientations (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). In Halliday's view, language is a system of "meaning potential". Similarly, visual grammar takes advantage of spatial configuration to form a potential, which represents and communicates three major meanings: representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. Representational meaning can be divided into two kinds: narrative representation and conceptual representation. Interactive meaning aims to explore the relationship between the image producer, the world presented by the image and the viewer. And compositional meaning, simply put, refers to how all three major meanings are combined together to make sense.

This essay aims to examine the posters of *King Kong* based on the theoretical framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen to reveal the how the visual symbols coordinate and the social significance behind.

3. Multimodal Analysis of Posters of King Kong

As a form of visual communication, movie posters have already gone beyond the sphere of art, carrying culturally and historically

constructed meaning through the composition of text, color, and images.

The movie *King Kong*, released initially in the United States on 7 March 1933, was an action-packed horror movie. It tells the story of a colossal ape who is captured by a film crew and brought back to New York City for a public exhibition, where he goes on a rampage in pursuit of the blonde actress he loves. The fascinating plot and the revolutionary “beauty and the beast” complex have made it one of the most stunning representations of horror movies in the history. For a relatively new genre at that time, *King Kong* needed to attract as many audiences as possible. Two of its most famous posters are selected to be analyzed from the perspective of three major meanings in visual grammar.

3.1 Representational Meaning

Representational meaning is classified into two modes: narrative and conceptual representation. Narrative images represent a process in which the participant is doing something, or a certain situation is occurring.

Poster 1 and 2 are mainly narrative images, with the giant monster King Kong as the most prominent participant. He is looking at the humans who dare to challenge him, including the girl he adores. Likewise, in both posters, the horrified female protagonist is gazing at King Kong, her glance forming vectors in the images. Therefore, King Kong and Ann are both Reacters and Phenomena at the same time. In Poster 1, the pilot is looking at his plane that is breaking apart, which makes him the Reacter and his plane the Phenomenon. In Poster 2, many people are holding torches and looking up at King Kong, so they are the Reacters, and King Kong, again, is the Phenomenon. All these processes are transactional reaction processes.



Figure 1: Poster 1



Figure 2: Poster 2

For action process, only Poster 1 stands out. King Kong is enraged by the pilot, so he looks at the plane and smashes it with his hand. He is then the Actor, and the plane is the Goal.

Conceptual representation reveals the essence of the participant or the hidden meaning behind the visual elements. In Poster 1, the fighter plane, as a product of advanced technology, represents human power. The destruction of it intimidates not only the protagonist to be rescued but also the viewer. Similarly, in Poster 2, the clusters of blurred shadows on the sides represent humans as a classified community different from the mysterious creature King Kong. They are demonstrated in a decontextualized way, acting as a group rather than an individual. The producer may try to align the viewer by implying a confrontation between two sides.

3.2 Interactive Meaning

There are four dimensions of the interactive meaning of an image, namely contact, social distance, attitude, and modality.

Contact is an imaginary relationship between the participant and the viewer that can be split into “demand” and “offer.” “Demand” occurs when the participant asks for something from the viewer through eye contact. While “offer” means the participant is trying to provide information and direct the viewer’s eyeline to a certain target. In both Poster 1 and 2, no direct eye contact between the participant and the viewer is established. Instead, both of them offer information about the movie plot through the glances sent by Ann, King Kong, and the pilot. However, according to Zhang and Jia (2012), demand and offer are not either-or categories but a unity of opposites. Offer serves as the basis for demand, and demand is the purpose of offer. In this sense, the information can be said to demand curiosity or fear

from the viewer.

Social distance points to whether the participant and the viewer are close or not. In Poster 1 and 2, King Kong is shown in full size from a long shot, which alienates it from the viewer.

Attitude, closely related to the “point of view,” shows subjective feelings from the viewer towards the participant. The horizontal angle increases the involvement of the viewers, giving them an immersive experience. They are likely to feel terrified or scared at the sight of the poster. Moreover, in Poster 1, the three participants are seen from a higher point, which indicates an advantage of the viewer in the balance of power. In this case, the viewer is the cinema audience. They are elevated to a high status as patrons of the movie.

The term “modality” here is more complicated than that of linguistics in that there are many modality makers. Color can be encoded sensually and emotively, especially when dealing with art design. As a result, colorfulness usually represents high modality. Poster 1 and 2 use high color saturation and brightness to mark the title of the movie and create a tense atmosphere. For example, the yellow of the title in Poster 1 is mainly RGB 239,217,53, with 85 in saturation and 57 in brightness on the cylindrical coordinate system of HSL, and the red in Poster 2 is mainly RGB 251,5,7, with 97 in saturation and 50 in brightness. In addition, a fully detailed and contextualized background is presented in Poster 1. So the viewer is able to know where this scene will take place or what kind of situation the participants are in.

3.3 Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning corresponds to the discourse function of Functional Grammar. It composes the visual elements, both representational and interactive, into a meaningful whole. In order to realize the compositional meaning, three resources need to be considered.

Information value is given to the elements by their placement. Generally, new information is placed on the right and given information on the left. Moreover, an element of great importance is usually at the center. In Poster 1, one hand of King Kong and Ann, who was grabbed by him, are placed on the right side of the poster, for King Kong was an unknown species at the time and the theme “beauty and the beast” was also new to the audience. Furthermore, in Poster 2, King Kong and Ann stand right in the middle as the most attractive stunts of the movie.

Saliency allows the viewer to distinguish elements of different statuses in a hierarchy. Hence, by taking a larger part of space, King Kong is undoubtedly the most important participant. Meanwhile, the names of the cast and crew are shown at the center of the posters. The immediate access to the text offers the viewer more information about the movie, and even implies a promise of decent quality.

Framing creates lines to unite or isolate the visual elements, stressing group identity or individuality. Poster 1 is weakly framed because it is a fight scene taken from the movie. It is impossible to separate the participants. Otherwise, the scene will not make sense. On the contrary, the framing of Poster 2 is achieved in a subtle way by the geometric shape of the gate and discontinuities of color. In this way, King Kong becomes easy to be spotted as a prominent visual element.

4. Discussion

As a terror movie poster, a relatively easy way to lure the audience into the cinema is utilizing the “beauty” rather than the “beast”. In both posters, the female protagonist Anna is placed in a position that attracts the viewer. In Poster 1, she is on the right side, where intriguing new information is usually given. While in Poster 2, she appears in the center, thus becoming a critical visual element. It is impossible to ignore her images in any of these posters. Her voluptuous curves are shown regardless of the danger and tension she is faced with. Clearly, as a Reactor and Phenomenon in the narrative process, she plays an integral yet powerless role in the posters.

Women are always conspicuous in horror movie posters. In the very beginning, they were portrayed as tender and timid. Under the influence of patriarchy at that time, their misery is sometimes the selling-point. Since the inception of human society, they have been gazed by men. The producer may assume that the target audiences were mainly male, so the posters were designed to meet their needs. Ann is gazed upon by King Kong as well as the male audiences. Consequently, she becomes the object of staring that wields little power. What's worse, women are sometimes asked to be witnesses to their own calamity. The monotony of Ann's behavior proves her inability in front of King Kong. As a damsel in distress, she does not have other options but to stare at the monster helplessly, her body remaining elegantly poised. Following her eyeline, we can pinpoint the movie theme on the poster. Even in a confined situation, she is presenting her biggest threat to the viewer, which is another evidence of her powerlessness. Linda Williams (2015) points out that, based on a patriarchal visual structure, monsters in horror movies are the reflection of women. When Ann looks at King Kong, she violates the norms of looking and will be punished by violence later in the movie.

These methods of representation, interaction, and composition lead to profound impacts on not only women but society as a whole. This image of Ann's selfless offering perpetuates, feeds, and creates biases that imprison women. "Beauty and the beast" became a typical horror movie theme from then on, and after several versions of remaking, the female protagonist in *King Kong* still has too much compassion for the monster and too little strength to control her own fate. Furthermore, as the articulation and understanding of an image rely on the interaction between the image producer and the viewer, the tacit agreement consolidated the stereotype against women by osmosis. Moreover, the sugarcoating of cinematic entertainment and aesthetic pleasure makes the audience, especially males, less sensitive to women's suffering in real life. According to research carried out by Ron et al. (2010), if the audience is exposed to horror movies featuring violence against women for a longer period of time, they are more likely to underestimate the degree of violence and belittlement women are going through both on screen and in reality.

5. Conclusion

The development of technology enables multimedia discourse to play an essential part in communication. Hence, movie posters, as a form of art, established a new public sphere in which visual symbols such as images, text, and colors interact with each other to deliver information. By the analysis of representation, interaction, and composition, the posters of *King Kong* are proved to be efficient in commercial promotion and meaning construction. The theme of the movie is presented vividly, and the audiences are fixated on the inviting portrayal of characters and plot climaxes. However, even though they are successful artworks, a further examination of them shows their possible negative influence on women's image in the real world.

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