

Analysing the Poster of *The Reader*: A Multimodal Perspective

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Abstract

Publicizing a film through posters is a crucial strategy used for advertising and for apprising the general public of a film. Film posters express their communicative purpose by using not only words but also images. The present research aims to decode the semiotic meanings contained in the poster of the well acclaimed film *The Reader* released in 2008. Three strands of meaning in the visual of the film poster are studied through the notions given by Kress and Van Leeuwen in their framework of Visual Grammar (1996). The study reveals that the interplay of various semiotic tools is responsible for the creation of intended meanings at different levels.

Keywords: Film posters, Visual Grammar, Multimodality, The Reader

Introduction

With the proliferation of multi-media, communication has attained multi-faceted dimensions; it is no longer confined merely to the spoken or written word, rather, it has become an amalgam of multiple semiotic resources. A fine specimen of this interplay are film posters as they are a befitting example of visual communication that advertise, publicize and communicate by means of a composite interaction between multiple elements like colour, image, language, etc., thus requiring a more specialized approach for interpretation.

Multimodal discourse analysis is a descriptive framework used for analyzing visual texts which thrive on making meaning through different semiotic modes. It is an essential tool that helps in exploring the question of how elements within texts work in unison to create a single act of meaning-making. Multimodal discourse analysis considers three strands of meaning occurring simultaneously in a visual text- *Representational*, *Interactional*, and *Compositional*.

This research aims to investigate the film poster of the 2008 award winning film *The Reader* using the framework of Visual Grammar introduced by Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) with the aim of discerning how the poster executes its communicative goals through the realization of the three metafunctions.

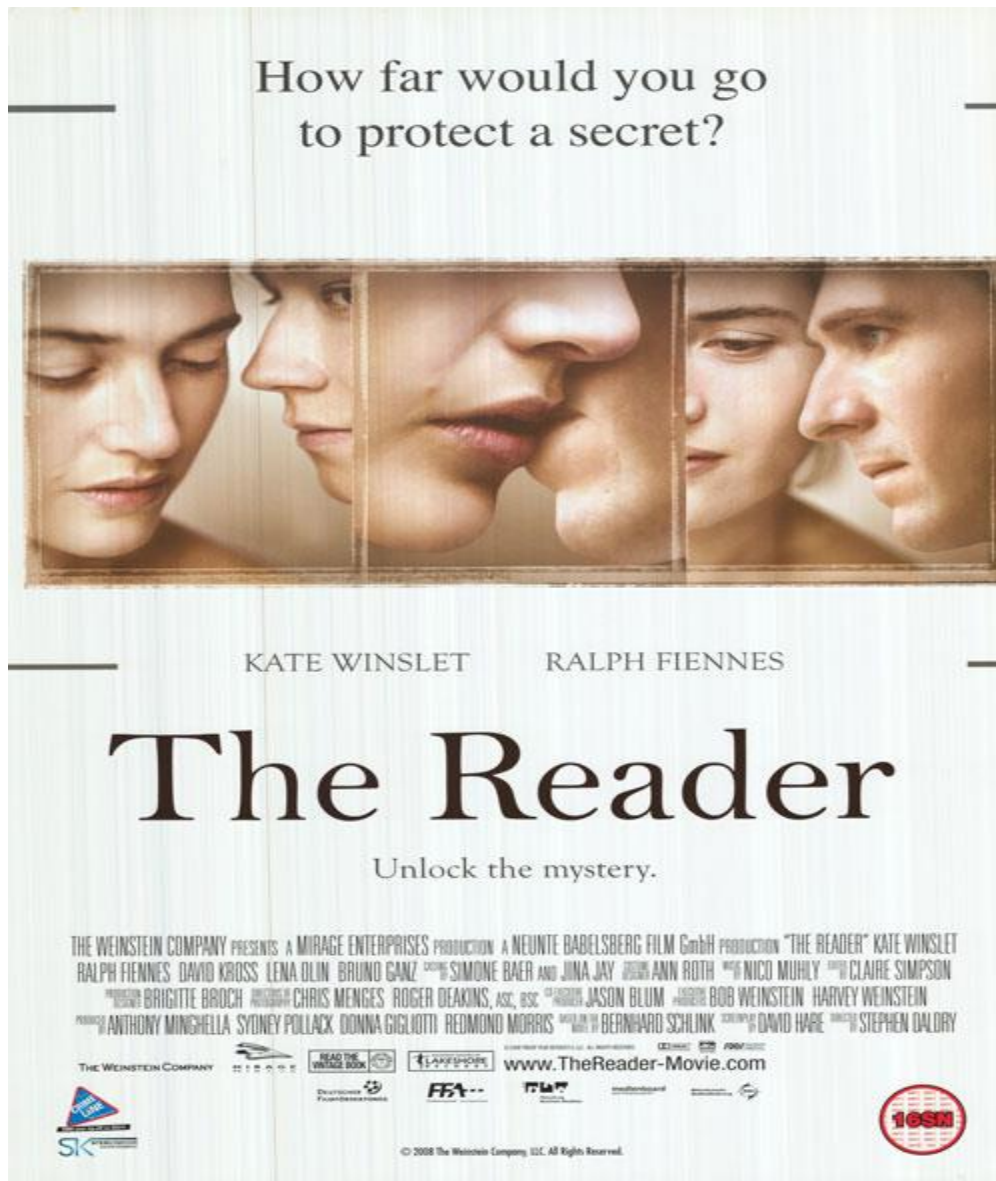
1. Literature Review

The framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics (1978, 1994) by Michael Halliday serves as a model for understanding various semiotic modes. O' Toole (1994) applied it to art, sculpture, painting and architecture. Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), drawing from Halliday's work, constructed a *Visual Grammar* for analysing images. Since its inception, the framework of visual grammar has been applied by researchers to various communicative texts. Hu and Dong (2006) used the framework to analyse twenty three powerpoint presentation texts. Kalia (2009) studied the interplay of verbal and visual strategies in personality grooming advertisements. Guo and Feng (2017) applied the grammar of visual design to advertisements from the 2014 Brazil World Cup. Bedi (2018) applied the framework to hair care advertisements in the Indian print media. Pratiwy and Wulan (2018) attempted a multimodal analysis of the Dettol TV. advertisement. Xu (2018) carried out a multimodal discourse analysis of selected shots from the movie *Argo*. Chen and Gao (2014) studied representational meanings in movie posters.

2. Research Method

The poster of the well acclaimed movie *The Reader* is the data for the study. The poster has been taken from www.imdb.com, an online database of records pertaining to films, television etc. Analysis is carried out at all three levels of meaning. With regards to the text, only the title and tagline is considered for analysis. The results and discussion are interpretive in nature focusing on the choices that designers of the film poster make and the impact those choices have in the communication of meanings.

3. Analysis



3.1 Representational Meanings

According to Kress and Leeuwen (1996:45) “Representations are used to represent objects and their relations in a world outside the representational system.” Representations show a relationship between the participants, the actions they perform or don’t perform and the setting in which they are placed.

The poster of *The Reader* consists of three linear images with two participants in each image. The complete image is a temporal analytic process where the entire frame is the whole and the individual images are parts that come together to tell a story. According to Kress and Leeuwen (1996:95) “the essential characteristic of a temporal analytic processes is that they are realized by

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time lines: the participants (sometimes whole structures, ‘scenes’) are arranged on an actual or imaginary line, usually horizontal, sometimes vertical.” The presence of three parts in this image also indicates that the film is classified into three parts or stages.

For clarity of research each image has been analyzed separately for representational meanings:



In the first image there are two participants, a man and a woman, both engaged in a non-transactional reaction. A non-transactional reaction is one where a vector is formed by the eye line of the participant and the phenomenon of the reaction is not known. The woman is a reactor, her eyes are downcast, and the phenomenon is unknown. The man also forms a vector with his eye-line and is a reactor to an unknown phenomenon. Two- thirds of the total image space is taken up by the woman’s face and one- thirds of the total image space is occupied by the man’s face.



The second image is an action process where a set of lips form a vector. The lips serve as an actor and goal interchangeably. Like the previous image, the lower half of the woman's face and her parted lips dominate the image spatially.



The third image like the first is a non-transactional reaction where both the man and the woman form a vector with their eye-line and the phenomenon is unknown.

Analyzing the three images in context of the tagline “How far would you go to protect a secret?” adds symbolic meaning to the analysis. In visual grammar, a symbolic processes suggests that a participant or a circumstance stands for something other than its surface representation. In the first image, the woman's eyes are downcast, and her lips are closed which is symbolic of the fact that she is the one protecting the secret. In the second image, lips hold a very prominent position and are a symbol of secrecy. The parting of the woman's lips and their closeness with the man's is a symbol of exchange. In both these images the spatial dominance of the woman is indicative of her dominance in the relationship. In the last image, the man seems to dominate with his bold presence overlapping the woman's face. The closeness between the two and an absence of clothes, indicate a relationship of intimacy. In addition, the presence of the same female in all three images shows that the entire movie revolves around the journey of a woman with a secret and possibly three men depicted in the linear images. The fact that the movie is a mystery is reiterated not only through the phrase “Unlock the mystery” but is also evident through multiple representations created in the poster.

The poster upholds the mysterious character of the film and doesn't reveal too much yet in its own enigmatic way gives the audience a gist of the storyline. The film is a tale about a love affair between two characters, a 15 years old boy Michael Berg and an older woman Hannah. The three stages in the poster are indicative of the three stages of the movie. The first stage tells the story of their brief yet passionate love affair which ends with Hannah abruptly moving away leaving Michael confused. The second stage comes years later when Michael is a law student observing a trial in Germany. He sees Hannah in the dock and learns of the terrible crime she committed in the past.

However, that is not her deepest secret: she is illiterate, and all her life choices are made to hide that fact. The last stage of the movie is when Michael, a man of forty, gets in touch with Hannah in prison by sending her his recordings of the various books he read to Hannah during their clandestine affair. Listening to the audios she slowly learns to read and write. The night before Hannah's release from prison, she hangs herself. The poster becomes comprehensible when seen in relation to the movie. The three images in the temporal analytical process are actually the three stages of the movie depicting the relationship between a man and a woman over the course of several years.

3.2 Interactive Meanings

Interactive meanings are concerned with the social relationship between interactive participants, and interactive and represented participant respectively. Keeping this in view, the image has been analyzed for four major systems of interactive meaning: contact, social distance, perspective and modality.

4.2.1 Contact

The imaginary relationship between the represented participant and the viewer refers to contact. All three images are 'offer' images which means that they do not directly address the audience, rather, they offer "the represented participants to the viewer as items of information, objects of contemplation, impersonally, as though they were specimens in a display cage" (Kress and Leeuwen, 1996:124). This is common in films and television dramas as it helps in disengaging the represented participants and the viewers and establishes the viewers as invisible spectators. An offer image allows the viewers to objectively view and assess the image(s) at hand. The represented participants make no direct contact with the viewers.

On the other hand, the taglines "How far would you go to protect a secret?" and "Unlock the mystery" have direct interpersonal undertones. An interrogative is used and the viewers are directly addressed as "You" and a response is demanded from them. In the second tagline, an imperative statement is used which generally indicates power relations but is here an instrument used for posing a challenge to the viewers. Both these statements point to the image in the poster and the film in a larger context which are both the objects of information and contemplation for the audience.

4.2.2 Social Distance

The distance from which the represented participants are portrayed in relation to the viewers is known as social distance. The shots in all three images are close up shots and indicate a close interpersonal relationship with the viewer. Viewing the characters from such a close distance draws the viewer into the subjects' personal space. The viewer automatically feels an affinity towards the represented characters as their facial expressions are exaggerated to express emotions. As a consequence the viewer immerses himself in their world in an attempt to understand the "mystery" surrounding them.

4.2.3 Perspective

The selection of angle is another way of indicating the relationship between the participants and the viewers. The poster of *The Reader* allows the viewer to see the participant from an eye level as the image is taken using the frontal angle. This establishes the viewers and participants as equals and also suggests that the participants are as human as the viewers. The same goal is accomplished linguistically using the tagline “How far can you go to protect a secret?” The tagline urges the audience to draw a comparison between them and the participants hence allowing the viewer to personally assess the participants by entering into their world to explore, understand and answer the question at hand. So, through this technique the poster directly invites the viewer to be a part of the world of the characters.

4.2.4 Modality

Modality refers to the truth or untruth with which the image has been presented. This poster uses the commonsense naturalistic coding orientation which refers to the commonsense way we see the world. The background is decontextualized which makes the represented participants generic rather than particular and connected with a particular location and a specific moment in time. As the movie is a post world war tale set in Germany there is an attempt to relate the audience with the represented participants by their generic representation. Very few colours are used, and each image has the exact same colour scheme which is indicative of continuity. Features of the participants are presented in greater detail to depict reality.

4.3 Compositional Meanings

Compositional meanings refer to the placement of various visual elements in visual space. These are understood through the three systems of information value, salience and framing. The devices of salience and framing have been analysed in relation to the poster.

4.3.1 Salience

Salience refers to the degree by which visual objects attract the audience. This can be achieved by placing the participants or object in the foreground or the background, their relative size and sharpness. In the poster under study, firstly, the title of the movie *The Reader* is very prominent. It is written in font larger than any other text in the poster. The large font helps in drawing attention to the name of the movie and leaving its impression on the audiences’ mind. Secondly, the characters are a very salient part of the poster. In all three images, the natural skin tone of the characters placed against an ambiguous grey background foregrounds them and hints at their significance. In the first image, the woman is more salient as her face occupies maximum visual space. In the second image, her open lips attain salience as they are foregrounded. In the third image both the characters are salient, but the male character is foregrounded so attains more salience as compared to the female.

The amount of salience given to the characters is directly related to their role in the three stages of the movie.

4.3.2 Framing

Framing refers to the existence or absence of framing devices. The presence of frame lines, empty spaces, incoherence in colours, etc. function to separate elements in a visual and the absence of frames, continuity and complementation in colours usually functions as a connector between visual elements. In the context of this poster, we find a frame around the three images which contains them into one. However, there is a dividing frame between each image which has the same tone as the colours in the image. The use of similar colour schemes to create the frame suggests continuity as all three images use the same colour scheme for the foreground and the background respectively. The placement of all three images in one frame divided by complementary frame lines is indicative of continuity and connection.

4.4 Conclusion

The main findings of the study are summarized below:

The poster makes use of multiple representations to accomplish the task of making meanings. The fact that the movie is a mystery is reiterated not only through language but by the use of the non-transactional reaction process where the phenomenon is kept a secret. Secondly, the temporal analytic process is used to indicate that the movie has three parts: the love affair, the revelation of the secret, Michael reconnecting with Hannah in prison. Finally, the symbolic process is used to suggest hidden meanings. Representational meanings in the poster give some information on the characters and the story but portray it all in an indistinct manner to lure the audiences into watching the movie.

The Interactive meanings use contact, social distance, perspective and modality to create a relationship with the audience. Nowhere in the visual is there a direct demand to watch the movie, however, there is an attempt to engage the audience by offering them the participants as an object of intrigue. The represented participants are presented as equals, their facial features are presented in great detail by creating a close personal distance which allows the viewers to enter into their personal lives. This gives them the impetus to explore more and draws them to the film.

Direct coercion is accomplished through the use of language where the viewer is questioned about his/her secret. This again establishes a relationship of equality between the participants and the viewers. An imperative clause demands/challenges the reader to unlock the mystery by watching the movie.

With regards to Compositional meanings, the poster informs the audience about the main characters by placing them in the foreground against an ambiguous background. The presence of a nude frame and similar colours in each visual indicate continuity as opposed to separation.

Thus, the poster of *The Reader* creates meaning and advertises the film through an interplay of both verbal and visual elements. An amalgam the two is responsible for conveying the complete message; the image becomes complete when seen in relation to the text and vice versa.

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