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VISUAL LITERACY THROUGH FILM POSTERS: A MULTIMODAL READING OF CHRISTOPHER NOLAN'S SELECTED FILM POSTERS

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Abstract

This study explores visual literacy through a multimodal analysis of selected Christopher Nolan film posters. Film posters are visual texts that combine images, colors, typography, composition, and written language to communicate meaning. Understanding these elements requires viewers to move beyond simply observing images and develop the ability to critically interpret visual messages. This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach and applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) Visual Grammar as the analytical framework. Three selected film posters, *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *Interstellar* (2014), are analyzed based on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. The findings show that each poster constructs distinctive meanings through the representation of participants and settings, the relationship established between the visual text and its viewers, and the arrangement of visual elements. *The Dark Knight* emphasizes heroism and conflict, *Inception* highlights collaboration and instability, while *Interstellar* emphasizes isolation and exploration. The analysis demonstrates that film posters are not merely promotional materials but multimodal visual texts that require active interpretation. The study concludes that Multimodal Discourse Analysis can support the practice of visual literacy by providing a systematic approach to observing, analyzing, and interpreting how visual and verbal elements work together to construct meaning.

Keywords: Visual Literacy; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Visual Grammar; Film Posters; Christopher Nolan.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary society, visual texts have become an important part of everyday communication. People encounter visual information through various forms of media, including advertisements, social media, photographs, websites, and film posters. However, understanding visual texts requires more than simply recognizing the images presented. Viewers need to understand how visual elements communicate ideas, create relationships, and influence the way a message is interpreted. This ability is related to visual literacy, which refers to the ability to understand, interpret, and critically engage with visual information. As visual

communication continues to develop, visual literacy becomes increasingly important for enabling individuals to interpret visual messages effectively.

One of the visual texts that can be examined through visual literacy is the film poster. Film posters are commonly used as promotional materials to attract audiences and provide an initial representation of a film. Although posters are primarily promotional, they contain various visual and verbal elements that contribute to the construction of meaning. Images, colors, typography, characters, spatial arrangements, and written language can work together to communicate information about a film. Therefore, film posters can be understood as multimodal texts because they combine different semiotic modes to convey meaning. Examining these elements can help viewers move beyond simply looking at a poster and develop a deeper understanding of how its visual message is constructed.

To systematically examine how visual elements construct meaning, Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) provides an appropriate analytical approach. MDA examines how different semiotic resources work together to create meaning across modes. In particular, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar provides a framework for analyzing visual communication through three metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Representational meaning concerns what is represented in an image, interactive meaning examines the relationship between the represented participants and the viewer, while compositional meaning focuses on how visual elements are arranged within the image. Through these categories, visual texts can be examined in a systematic way.

Christopher Nolan's film posters provide an interesting context for applying this approach. Nolan's films are known for their distinctive visual styles and complex themes, which can also be reflected in their promotional materials. The posters of *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *Interstellar* (2014), for example, contain various visual and verbal elements that can be interpreted through visual grammar. Their characters, settings, colors, typography, and compositions provide different ways of communicating ideas about the films and directing viewers' attention toward particular meanings.

Previous studies have examined film posters and other visual texts through multimodal analysis. These studies demonstrate that visual and verbal elements can work together to construct meanings related to characters, themes, identities, and audience interpretation. However, the connection between multimodal analysis and visual literacy in the interpretation of Christopher Nolan's film posters remains less explored. Rather than viewing film posters only as promotional materials, this study considers them as visual texts that can be critically read and interpreted through a multimodal perspective.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the construction of visual and verbal meanings in selected Christopher Nolan film posters using Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar. The analysis focuses on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings found in the selected posters. By examining these visual elements systematically, the study also demonstrates how multimodal analysis can support the practice of visual literacy, particularly in understanding how visual texts communicate and construct meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Visual Literacy

Visual literacy has become an important form of literacy as visual communication increasingly becomes part of everyday life. Avgerinou and Ericson (1997) explain that visual literacy has been defined

from various disciplinary perspectives and involves the ability to understand and interpret visual information. Although there is no single universally accepted definition of visual literacy, the concept generally emphasizes the active interpretation of visual messages rather than simply viewing images. Visual literacy therefore involves the ability to recognize visual elements, understand their relationships, and interpret the meanings communicated through them.

In the context of higher education, visual literacy includes several skills related to visual reading, such as interpretation, analysis, understanding, evaluation, and knowledge of visual grammar and syntax (Avgerinou, 2018). These skills allow viewers to engage with visual texts more critically. Visual literacy also involves understanding how visual elements can communicate meaning and how visual messages can be connected to verbal information. Therefore, visual literacy is not limited to identifying what appears in an image but also involves examining how and why visual elements are used to communicate particular meanings.

Visual literacy is particularly relevant to the study of film posters because posters are designed to communicate information and create particular impressions through visual and verbal resources. A viewer may initially perceive a poster as a promotional image, but a closer reading can reveal how characters, colors, typography, spatial arrangements, and other visual elements contribute to the representation of a film. Consequently, analyzing film posters can provide an opportunity to practice visual reading and interpretation. In this study, visual literacy is understood as the ability to critically observe, analyze, interpret, and understand the meanings constructed through visual texts.

Multimodal Discourse Analysis

Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) provides an approach for examining how meaning is constructed through the combination of different semiotic modes. Unlike approaches that focus primarily on language, MDA recognizes that communication can involve multiple modes, including images, written language, color, layout, and other visual resources. A multimodal perspective is therefore useful for examining texts in which meaning cannot be fully understood through verbal language alone.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* provides an influential framework for analyzing visual communication. Their approach extends the metafunctional perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics to visual design and proposes three major dimensions of visual meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. These dimensions provide systematic categories for examining how elements within an image participate in meaning-making.

Visual Grammar: Kress and Van Leeuwen's Framework

The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) consists of three metafunctions. Representational meaning concerns how people, places, objects, and actions are represented in a visual text. It examines participants, processes, and circumstances to identify what is being represented and what is happening within the image.

Interactive meaning concerns the relationship established between the represented participants and the viewer. It includes elements such as gaze, social distance, perspective, and modality. These elements

can influence how viewers are positioned in relation to the represented subjects and can contribute to particular interpretations of the visual text.

Compositional meaning concerns how different elements are arranged within a visual text. It includes information value, salience, and framing. Information value considers the placement of elements, salience concerns the degree to which certain elements attract the viewer's attention, and framing concerns the visual connection or separation between elements. Together, these resources show how the organization of a visual text contributes to its overall meaning.

The three dimensions are useful for visual literacy because they provide viewers with systematic ways of reading visual texts. Instead of interpreting an image only based on personal impressions, viewers can examine what is represented, how the image establishes a relationship with its audience, and how its elements are organized. In this sense, visual grammar can function as an analytical framework that supports the critical reading of visual texts.

Film Posters as Multimodal Visual Texts

Film posters are promotional visual texts that combine multiple semiotic resources to communicate information about a film. Their meaning can be constructed through the interaction of images, written language, color, typography, composition, and the positioning of visual elements. Because these resources operate together, a film poster can be understood as a multimodal text rather than merely a decorative representation of a film.

The multimodal nature of film posters makes them suitable objects for visual literacy analysis. Viewers can examine the characters and objects represented in a poster, consider the relationship established between the visual text and its audience, and observe how elements such as size, position, color, and framing guide attention. Such analysis allows viewers to understand that visual meaning is constructed through deliberate choices rather than existing only at the surface level.

Previous multimodal studies have demonstrated the usefulness of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar for analyzing static visual texts. For example, a study of COVID-19 posters found that representational, interactive, and compositional meanings work together to communicate information, with both visual and verbal elements contributing to the message presented to viewers. Similarly, multimodal research on film-related promotional texts has shown that visual features can work together with verbal elements to construct meanings and achieve particular communicative purposes.

Based on these perspectives, the present study treats Christopher Nolan's selected film posters as multimodal visual texts that can be critically read through visual literacy. Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar is used to provide a systematic framework for identifying and interpreting the visual resources within the posters. The analysis focuses on representational, interactive, and compositional meanings to examine how the posters communicate and construct meaning through the interaction of their visual and verbal elements.

Previous Studies on Multimodal Analysis of Visual Media and Film Posters

Many previous studies have applied multimodal discourse analysis in different contexts of visual communication. Muganda (2024), for example, analyzed COVID-19 posters and found that representational

and compositional meanings played important roles in constructing persuasive public health messages. Similarly, Zhang and Gao (2022) examined tourism advertisements and concluded that visual salience and modality significantly influenced audience engagement and interpretation.

In media and advertising studies, researchers have also used visual grammar theory to examine persuasive and ideological meanings. Machin (2013) explored how visual elements in advertisements shape ideological representation, while Chen (2021) analyzed digital advertising posters and highlighted the importance of color symbolism and gaze interaction in attracting viewers' attention. These studies demonstrate that visual grammar is effective in uncovering hidden meanings within multimodal texts.

Studies related to film posters have also been conducted by several researchers. Maier (2011) found that layout and imagery contribute significantly to genre representation in movie posters. Likewise, Cavanagh (2020) showed that horror film posters rely heavily on symbolic imagery and compositional salience to create emotional effects. Although these studies provide useful insights into film poster analysis, they mostly focus on genre-based comparisons rather than posters created for films by specific directors. Another limitation found in previous studies is that some researchers analyze only certain aspects of visual grammar instead of applying representational, interactive, and compositional meanings together. This limitation reduces the depth of analysis because the three meta functions are interconnected in constructing meaning. Therefore, a more comprehensive multimodal analysis is still needed, especially in the context of cinematic promotional discourse.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach. It focuses on interpreting how meaning is constructed through visual and verbal elements in film posters rather than measuring or quantifying data. A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth exploration of semiotic resources and the ways different modes interact in meaning-making. Through this approach, representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in the selected posters can be examined in detail.

The data consist of film posters from three films directed by Christopher Nolan: *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *Interstellar* (2014). These posters are treated as multimodal texts combining visual and verbal elements. As such, they provide relevant material for analyzing how meaning is visually constructed and communicated to audiences.

The data were selected using purposive sampling. The three films were chosen based on their ranking as top Christopher Nolan films on IMDb, reflecting their popularity and global recognition. Highly rated films are assumed to have well-designed promotional materials, including posters that represent the films' themes and identities. Focusing on these films enables the analysis of multimodal meaning-making in widely recognized cinematic works.

Data were collected using a documentation method. The official posters were obtained from reliable online sources and then compiled for analysis.

The analysis applies the visual grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). It focuses on three aspects: representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. Representational meaning identifies participants and processes depicted in the posters. Interactive meaning examines the relationship between the image and viewers through gaze, distance, perspective, and modality.

Compositional meaning analyses the arrangement of visual elements, including information value, salience, and framing. This framework enables a systematic analysis of how semiotic resources are combined to construct meaning in the selected film posters.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1. Film posters selected for analysis: *The Dark Knight* (2008), *Inception* (2010), and *Interstellar* (2014). Source: IMDb

Representational Meaning

The representational meaning of the selected film posters shows how characters, objects, and settings are used to communicate particular ideas and themes. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman is presented as the dominant participant. He is positioned in the foreground and appears as the main focus of the poster, while the burning bat-shaped symbol in the background reinforces his identity. The static presentation of Batman, without visible action or vectors, indicates a conceptual process. The character functions not only as a person but also as a symbolic representation of heroism, power, and conflict.

In *Inception*, several participants are presented as a group. They are positioned across an urban environment and visually connected through their arrangement. The participants do not perform visible actions, indicating a conceptual process. Their grouping can be interpreted as a classificational structure that emphasizes their relationship as a team. This representation suggests collaboration and reflects the collective nature of the film's narrative.

Meanwhile, *Interstellar* presents a single astronaut standing alone within a vast environment. The participant is static and surrounded by a wide landscape, which indicates a symbolic conceptual process. Rather than emphasizing an action, the poster represents ideas related to isolation and exploration. Across the three posters, the differences in participant representation allow viewers to identify distinct thematic meanings: heroism in *The Dark Knight*, collaboration in *Inception*, and isolation and exploration in *Interstellar*.

These findings demonstrate an important aspect of visual literacy: viewers need to look beyond the literal presence of characters and identify what those characters represent. By examining participants and processes, a viewer can interpret how a visual text communicates ideas that are not directly stated through written language. Thus, representational analysis can encourage viewers to become more critical readers of visual texts.

The circumstances in each poster further support these representations. *The Dark Knight* uses a burning urban background as a setting that reinforces chaos and destruction. *Inception* presents a distorted urban environment that reflects complexity and instability, while *Interstellar* uses a vast landscape to emphasize isolation and the unknown. These contextual elements demonstrate that the meaning of a participant is also influenced by the environment in which the participant is presented.

Interactive Meaning

Interactive meaning concerns the relationship established between the represented participants and the viewer. In the selected posters, this relationship is constructed through visual contact, social distance, perspective, and modality.

All three posters function primarily as offer images because the represented participants do not establish direct eye contact with the viewer. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman's averted gaze distances him emotionally from the audience and strengthens his symbolic representation as a mysterious and heroic figure. Similarly, the astronaut in *Interstellar* does not look directly at the viewer, directing attention toward the surrounding environment and reinforcing the ideas of isolation and discovery. The absence of direct eye contact therefore encourages viewers to observe and interpret the participants rather than experience direct interpersonal interaction with them.

Social distance also contributes to the way viewers perceive the represented participants. *The Dark Knight* uses a long shot to present Batman together with the surrounding cityscape, creating distance between the character and the viewer and emphasizing his larger-than-life heroic status. *Inception* uses a medium-long shot that allows viewers to recognize the characters while maintaining a certain distance, supporting their representation as a group. In *Interstellar*, the astronaut appears relatively small within the expansive environment, emphasizing loneliness, human vulnerability, and isolation.

Perspective further shapes the relationship between the viewer and the represented participants. *The Dark Knight* uses a frontal viewpoint with a relatively low vertical angle, which gives Batman a sense of dominance and authority. In contrast, *Inception* and *Interstellar* use more neutral eye-level perspectives, creating a sense of equality and allowing viewers to connect more closely with the represented situations. These differences demonstrate that perspective is not simply a visual choice but also contributes to how viewers interpret the status and position of participants within a visual text.

The posters also demonstrate relatively high visual modality through realistic lighting, settings, colors, and visual effects. In *The Dark Knight*, realistic smoke, flames, shadows, and textures create a convincing and dramatic environment. In *Inception*, realistic architecture and clothing are combined with a distorted urban setting, producing a visual balance between realism and surrealism. These choices contribute to the atmosphere and thematic interpretation of the posters.

From a visual literacy perspective, interactive meaning demonstrates how viewers can be encouraged to consider their own relationship with an image. Instead of simply noticing whether a character is looking at the audience or how large the character appears, visually literate viewers can ask how gaze, distance, and perspective influence their interpretation of the represented subject. In this way, interactive analysis supports a more conscious and critical engagement with visual texts.

Compositional Meaning

Compositional meaning concerns how visual elements are organized within the posters. The analysis focuses on information value, salience, and framing, which work together to guide viewers' attention and emphasize particular meanings.

In *The Dark Knight*, Batman is positioned at the center and lower-middle area of the poster, making him an important source of information. The burning bat symbol occupies the upper section and functions as a significant symbolic element. In *Inception*, the central participant is positioned slightly forward from the other characters, while the surrounding characters and distorted buildings distribute information across the composition. In *Interstellar*, the astronaut is placed at the center while the surrounding empty landscape occupies a large portion of the visual space. This arrangement emphasizes the relationship between the individual and the surrounding environment.

Salience is created through size, color contrast, lighting, and positioning. In *The Dark Knight*, the bright orange fire contrasts strongly with the dark background, making both the burning bat symbol and Batman visually prominent. In *Inception*, the central participant and distorted buildings attract attention through their positioning and unusual visual structure. In *Interstellar*, the astronaut becomes salient through the contrast between the white space suit and the darker environment, while the large empty space reduces visual distraction.

The three posters also demonstrate relatively weak framing because their visual elements are largely integrated into unified compositions. In *The Dark Knight*, Batman, the burning symbol, and the cityscape are connected through similar lighting and color tones. In *Inception*, the participants and distorted buildings exist within the same visual environment, while in *Interstellar*, the astronaut and surrounding landscape are integrated into one open visual space. This weak framing creates visual continuity and supports the overall themes represented in each poster.

These compositional features demonstrate another important aspect of visual literacy. A visually literate viewer does not only identify individual objects but also considers where those objects are placed and which elements receive the greatest visual attention. Through information value, salience, and framing, viewers can understand how the organization of an image guides their reading process. Therefore, compositional analysis helps viewers recognize that visual meaning is influenced not only by what is represented but also by how the representation is organized.

Visual Literacy through Multimodal Analysis

The findings demonstrate that the three Christopher Nolan film posters construct meaning through the interaction of representational, interactive, and compositional resources. *The Dark Knight* emphasizes heroism and conflict through the dominant representation of Batman and the chaotic environment. *Inception* emphasizes collaboration and instability through group representation and a distorted urban setting, while *Interstellar* emphasizes isolation and exploration through the representation of a solitary astronaut within a vast environment.

More importantly, the analysis demonstrates how multimodal analysis can be used as a way of practicing visual literacy. Each poster requires viewers to observe visual elements, identify their functions, interpret their relationships, and connect them to the broader meaning of the visual text. Representational analysis encourages viewers to ask what is being represented; interactive analysis allows them to consider how the image positions them as viewers; and compositional analysis encourages them to examine how visual elements are organized to guide attention.

Therefore, reading film posters through Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar can move audiences beyond simply recognizing images toward critically interpreting how visual and verbal resources communicate meaning. The posters are not merely promotional materials but visual texts that require active interpretation. Through this process, MDA provides a systematic analytical framework that can support the development and practice of visual literacy in interpreting contemporary visual media.

Film Poster	Representational Meaning	Interactive Meaning	Compositional Meaning	Overall Meaning
The Dark Knight (2008)	Batman is the dominant participant and is presented through a conceptual process. The burning bat-shaped symbol and urban setting represent heroism, power, conflict, chaos, and destruction.	The poster uses an offer image because Batman does not directly look at the viewer. The long shot creates distance, while the low-angle perspective gives Batman a sense of dominance and authority.	Batman is positioned prominently in the center/lower-middle area, while the burning bat symbol is placed above him. Strong color contrast between the fire and dark background creates high salience. Weak framing connects Batman, the symbol, and the cityscape.	Heroism and conflict are constructed through Batman's dominant representation and the chaotic urban environment.
Inception (2010)	Several participants are presented as a group through a conceptual and classificational structure. The distorted urban environment represents collaboration, complexity, and instability.	The participants do not establish direct eye contact, creating an offer image. A medium-long shot maintains social distance, while an eye-level perspective creates a relatively neutral	The central participant is positioned slightly forward, while other characters and distorted buildings distribute information throughout the composition. Salience is created through positioning and unusual visual structure. Weak framing integrates the	Collaboration and instability are constructed through group representation and the distorted urban setting.

		relationship with viewers.	participants and environment.	
Interstellar (2014)	A single astronaut is represented through a symbolic conceptual process. The vast landscape surrounding the astronaut represents isolation, exploration, loneliness, vulnerability, and the unknown.	The astronaut does not look directly at the viewer, creating an offer image. The relatively distant view emphasizes the astronaut's smallness, while the eye-level perspective creates a more neutral relationship.	The astronaut is positioned centrally and surrounded by a large amount of empty space. The white spacesuit contrasts with the darker environment, creating salience. Weak framing integrates the astronaut with the surrounding landscape.	Isolation and exploration are constructed through the solitary astronaut and the vast surrounding environment.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study has examined the construction of meaning in selected Christopher Nolan film posters through Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar. The findings show that the posters communicate meaning through the interaction of representational, interactive, and compositional resources. Each poster presents distinctive meanings through the representation of participants and settings, the relationship established with viewers, and the arrangement of visual elements.

The study also demonstrates the relevance of multimodal analysis to visual literacy. By examining what is represented, how viewers are positioned, and how visual elements are organized, viewers can develop a more systematic way of reading and interpreting visual texts. The analysis shows that film posters are not merely promotional materials but multimodal visual texts in which images, colors, typography, spatial arrangements, and other elements work together to construct meaning.

Therefore, a multimodal approach can support the practice of visual literacy by encouraging viewers to move beyond simply observing visual texts and engage with them through critical interpretation. Through Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, visual elements can be examined systematically to understand how meaning is communicated. This study consequently highlights the value of combining visual literacy with multimodal analysis in interpreting contemporary visual texts.

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