

A Multi-modal Discourse Analysis of the Movie Poster Under the Light

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Abstract: This study selects the all-cast poster of the movie Under the light as the research object. From the perspective of multi-modal discourse analysis, it explores the functions of text, color, composition, and costumes in shaping characters and constructing the overall meaning of the poster. The study finds that the all-cast poster, through metaphorical text, color contrast, narrative structure, composition design, and costume imagery, exhibits a mysterious visual style.

Keywords: Under the light, poster, multi-modal discourse analysis

The movie Under the Light, directed by Zhang Yimou and starring Lei Jiayin, Zhang Guoli, Yu Hewei, and others, is a crime thriller film. The film tells the story of police officer Su Jianming, played by Lei Jiayin, teaming up with police officer Li Huilin (played by Zhou Dongyu) to investigate a criminal case involving a large profit group. Since its release in mainland China on September 28, 2023, the film has achieved good box office results. According to data from Beacon Professional Edition, the film has accumulated a box office revenue of over 1.3 billion yuan so far. Additionally, the film has won several championships, including the 2023 National Day box office champion and the box office champion for suspense and crime films in National Day film history.

With a runtime of two and a half hours, the film, known for its cyberpunk visual style, gripping plot, and fitting soundtrack, leaves a lasting impression on viewers. Furthermore, the pre-release all-cast poster, which consists of 13 individual posters, with the expressions of the people intertwined, depicting the characters' complexity, exuding the colors of desire, is a succinct representation of the film. This study, from a multi-modal perspective, explores how images, colors, and text are used to construct the overall meaning of the poster and the role different costumes play in shaping the characters.





Text

The Chinese characters of the movie title Under the Light are generally positioned in the middle of each poster, within the small portrait of the character. However, there are differences in color, which can be broadly categorized into two types: in the posters of the antagonistic characters, these four characters are typically in cool tones of blue, green, and purple, conveying a sense of strangeness, illusion, and coldness; whereas in the posters of the protagonist characters, these four characters are usually in warm tones of yellow-green, gold, and pink, evoking feelings of warmth and hope.

Color

The blending of black and white, and various colors is the visual focus of the entire poster. Black and white represent the eternal struggle between good and evil, while color represents the complexity and contradictions of human nature. This contrast and blending of colors symbolize the eternal struggle between light and darkness, and it also creates a strong visual impact, making the audience feel a tense and conflicting atmosphere. The high saturation of the foreground colors makes everything appear distorted, making it difficult to distinguish between reality and illusion, like a dream. The black and white background images appear dull and lifeless, evoking a sense of pale memories and fading recollections. Therefore, the authenticity of the story atmosphere seems questionable, yet it is like a metaphor, providing viewers with endless space for reflection.

Narrative

The background images of most characters are achieved by the extension of their gaze, which represents the process of reflection in narrative reproduction. For instance, in Zheng Gang's poster, he is smoking a cigar, and the smoke obscures his vision. Firstly, the cigar represents a taste and an elegant lifestyle, symbolizing dignity, quality, and taste, implying that Zheng Gang is a person of status. At the same time, the smoke from the cigar fills his eyebrows and eyes, making it difficult to see his eyes, suggesting that he is either indulging in the world of materialism or deliberately hiding his true intentions from others. David's melancholy profile contrasts with He Xiuli's sorrowful profile, while Liu Feng's deep and inscrutable smile and Yang Xiaowei's meaningful smile, as well as Lisha's innocent smile, form a sharp contrast.

As for the foreground images, Su Jianming, Zheng Gang, David, Liu Feng, and Yang Xiaowei are all half-turned, looking into the distance, with their gaze as the vector, their eyes full of emotions, lost in thought, which is called the process of reflection. The foreground images of the remaining eight characters are all in the process of action: Li Huilin faces the camera, holding the evidence phone in her hand, her expression seems to be telling the truth to the audience; Liu Bo salutes, Wen Hui holds the walkie-talkie, showing his identity and position as the people's police; Tang Danian holds a knife in his hand, lowers his head, and raises his eyes, showing his ruthless and gloomy personality traits; Li Sha touches her pregnant belly, her eyes innocent and pure; He Xiuli wears a gold watch and earrings, and her arms are crossed in front of her chest, showing a proud and guarded posture; Kong Sanshun pulls the grenade ring, and the scene of the explosion is restored under the illumination of fire and light.

Composition

In terms of overall composition, the 13 individual posters are arranged from top to bottom and left to right according to the importance of the characters in the film, with the three main actors in the first row and the important supporting roles in the last row. Each poster is divided into two levels: foreground and background. The foreground image is a half-body portrait of the character, while the background image showcases the facial features of the character. Although the foreground image only occupies a quarter of the entire poster, its hazy and ethereal colors stand out against the black and white background. The background image shows a close-up portrait of the characters, allowing the audience to perceive the joys and sorrows of different characters up close. The partial coverage of the background image by the foreground image adds a sense of mystery and suspense.

Overall, the design style and color tone of the poster remain consistent, without overly highlighting any single character, implying that while there may be differences in different roles, each character is portrayed in a full and complete manner. Besides, the foreground and background images alternate on the left and right sides of the poster, constantly shifting between known and unknown information, hinting at the complexity of human nature and the intricate twists and turns of the story.

In the ensemble poster, except for Li Huilin, David, and Yang Xiaowei who are looking directly at the camera in the foreground image, displaying behaviors such as calmness, sympathy, and compassion towards the observer, the other 11 characters avoid making eye contact with the camera, seemingly ignoring the viewer and focusing on their own interpretations, which in a way provides information to the audience.

All the background images are close-up shots of the characters' faces, indicating that the photographer intentionally wants the audience to observe, speculate, and feel the different character traits and complexities of human nature from an intimate perspective. Only Li Huilin's foreground image is taken from a frontal view, indicating that the photographer is trying to use this character to lead the audience to glimpse the truth. The slightly downward angle of the foreground images of He Xiuli and Kong Sanshun implies a sense of "compassion". However, for these two characters, each has their own sorrowful aspects - He Xiuli is unable to obtain love and harbors resentment due to love, while Kong Sanshun is treated as a pawn by the so-called "big shots" and is seen as a disposable pawn. The framing angles of the other 12 character posters are mostly "oblique" and "level," indicating that the photographer, in most cases, tries to present the characters objectively and impartially without making any judgments, allowing the audience to interpret and perceive the characters in their own way.

Costume

The costumes are designed to showcase the characterization and story background. Specific colors, styles, and accessories in the costumes can help differentiate the characters and provide visual clues about their roles in the story. Additionally, costumes may be designed to evoke specific emotions or symbolize key elements of the story.

In the foreground images, different characters have distinct costume styles, ranging from traditional Chinese attire to suits. Starting from the left in the first row, the first character, Su Jianming, is dressed in a dark red traditional Chinese outfit, resembling a jacket. The detailed collar and shiny, textured fabric convey his simple and understated demeanor. His facial expression appears calm and his gaze is determined. The second individual poster shows Zheng Gang wearing a dark jacket without a tie. The sleek and simple jacket creates a mature and dignified "establishment" image. The top buttons of his shirt are undone, giving a casual yet formal impression, fitting his character as

someone in a high position but caught up in luxury and excess. He holds a lit cigarette in his mouth, with the smoke contrasting with his serious expression. In the poster on the right, Li Zhitian is dressed in a blue suit jacket, paired with a white shirt and a light-colored tie, exuding a professional and competent aura. The suit serves as Li Zhitian's most common "business card," with the understated color choice and smooth, three-dimensional cut enhancing his natural elegance and composure. He is smiling, appearing approachable, but in reality, he is ruthless. The contrast between his outward appearance and inner nature presents a complex impression to the audience.

In the second row, starting from the left, the first character is Chen Huilin. She sports short hair and wears black-framed glasses, exuding an intellectual, serious, and competent vibe. She is dressed in a dark denim shirt with a dark suit-style jacket, the collar hanging down. This outfit conceals her feminine traits, emphasizing professionalism, fitting her role as a policewoman. In the middle is David, dressed in a deep blue suit paired with a matching shirt. His suit collar is slightly open along the center-line, without a tie, giving off a casual yet fashionable and somewhat decadent feel. On the right is Liu Feng, wearing a dark suit jacket with the shirt collar exposed, also without a tie. He appears more traditionally easygoing in a classic notch lapel suit, with a subtle texture that feels gentle and harmonious. The well-balanced fit is both aesthetically pleasing and comfortable, much like his character—unassuming yet intriguing, leading viewers to explore the Pandora's box of his inner self with the smooth three-dimensional cut, simple tailored silhouette, and the natural sheen of high-quality fabric, conveying a sense of unity, confidence, relaxation, mystery, composure, and effortless strength.

The first character in the third row is Liu Bo, wearing a green jacket-style coat with a darker, slightly glossy hue. The jacket collar stands up, and his serious, deep expression gives off a stern and mysterious vibe. The salute gesture adds a touch of righteousness. Positioned in the middle of the poster is Tang Danian, dressed in a striking purple Chinese-style top. The unique collar design forms a downward sloping V-shape. Holding a knife, he exudes a fierce and cunning impression. On the right side of the poster is Wen Hui, dressed in a simple dark tailored jacket. There is no visible shirt or tie at the collar of the suit, emitting a composed and restrained aura. Holding a walkie-talkie, his expression appears somewhat tense or anxious. The attire of Liu Bo and Wen Hui, with their simple, tailored jacket shirts, similar to Zheng Gang's outfit, suggests their "system insider" identity.

The first character in the fourth row is Yang Xiaowei. She is wearing a dark blue shirt with a simple style and loose collar, paired with jeans. Her long hair is tied up, with natural makeup highlighting her feminine charm. Her hands hang naturally by her sides, and her gaze is deep and meaningful. The second character is Lisa, wearing a soft white sweater on top and a light pink or lavender fluffy dress on the bottom, giving off a dreamy and innocent vibe. The slight wrinkles on her collar, high ponytail, and necklace all showcase her youthful and lively temperament. With her hand on her pregnant belly, her expression appears contemplative. The third character is Zheng Gang's wife, He Xiuli, dressed in a dark purple or deep red formal shirt, wearing a watch, with her hands crossed and hair neatly styled in a simple manner. Although she seems reserved, her mature and composed demeanor is evident. The fourth character is Kong Sanshun, dressed in a dark black top, with a deep and serious expression in the glow of the fire, his eyes deep and his facial expression complex, appearing tense and even somewhat despondent.

Each character is set against a background with different colors and gradient designs, accompanied by the character's name and the movie title. Their outfits are neat and clean, with dark tones hinting at the serious tone of the film. The serious facial expressions of each character indicate their important and tense roles in the story. Overall, the diverse clothing styles of the characters, combined with the background colors and text design, create a visually striking and story-rich effect.

Conclusion

Overall, the poster for the movie *Under the Light* is a manifestation of multi-modal discourse, cleverly showcasing the film's themes, storyline, and visual style through metaphorical text, color contrast, narrative structure, composition design, and clothing imagery. The poster employs realism to depict a world filled with darkness and corruption, where colors and elements carry metaphorical and symbolic meanings. Firstly, from a textual perspective, for the antagonistic characters, cool tones (blue, green, purple) are typically used to convey a sense of surrealism, ambiguity, and coldness. These colors create a mysterious and elusive atmosphere, evoking the characters' darkness and cunning. The cool-toned poster backgrounds often complement the clothing and expressions of the antagonistic characters, deepening the audience's

impression of them. While for the protagonist characters, warm tones (yellow-green, gold, yellow-red-pink) are usually used to convey feelings of warmth and hope. These colors create a friendly, positive, and uplifting atmosphere, allowing viewers to feel the characters' kindness and integrity. The warm-toned poster backgrounds complement the clothing and expressions of the protagonist characters, showcasing their determination and sense of justice, evoking resonance and trust from the audience. Overall, the use of color tones plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' images and conveying the emotional aspects of the story.

Regarding colors, the poster overall contrasts black and white tones with color tones, hinting at the moral conflict and complexity of the black-and-white confusion in the movie, while also foreshadowing the suspense and dramatic conflicts of the film's plot.

From a narrative perspective, the background images are largely achieved through the extension of the characters' gazes, a process known as reactive representation in narrative reenactment. Through this design technique, a connection and interaction are established between the characters' gazes and postures with the background images, conveying deeper emotions and story connotations. When the characters' gazes correspond with the background images, the audience feels a visual guidance and connection, enhancing the overall unity and dramatic effect of the poster. This reactive process makes it easier for the audience to understand the characters' inner world and emotional states, while also providing more clues and hints for the development of the storyline.

As for the composition, most characters choose to avoid direct eye contact with the camera, displaying a self-absorbed attitude. This allows the audience to perceive the independence and individual characteristics of the different characters, increasing the mystery and depth of the character images. Additionally, the background images of each individual poster are close-ups of the characters' faces, creating a design that makes the audience feel as if they are standing in close proximity to the characters, closely observing each character's expressions and demeanor, thereby speculating and feeling their respective personality traits and emotional states. This design immerses the audience further into the characters' world, experiencing the complexity and diversity of human nature, enhancing the artistic and aesthetic appeal of the entire poster.

Furthermore, each character's clothing, expression, actions, and background environment in the ensemble poster are full of significance. Through the clever combination of clothing materials, colors, textures, and styles, unique character images are created. Some characters are dressed in formal attire, exuding solemnity and dignity; others wear casual clothing, showcasing a carefree and relaxed demeanor; some characters may present a sly and cunning image, or a serious and just expression, or an innocent look, as well as a profound or composed and calm temperament, even an inscrutable sense of mystery. This diverse design of clothing, expressions, and actions enhances each character's unique personality and characteristics, presenting a diverse array of appearances. Audiences can perceive and understand each character's personality, background, and emotional state through these details, thereby gaining a deeper insight into the underlying connotations and themes of the story.

In conclusion, the multi-modal discourse analysis of the movie poster provides viewers with an effective way to gain a deeper understanding and offer a new perspective for appreciating the movie of *Under the Light*.

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