

# A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Movie Poster Parasite

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**Abstract:** Movie posters are a form of multimodal discourse that integrates image, text, color, and other semiotic resources. As a medium for film promotion, they not only serve commercial and aesthetic purposes but also convey ideologies and social meanings. Based on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar, this study examines the Korean movie poster *Parasite*, with a focus on its representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning. The aim is to explore how multimodal resources are strategically deployed to resonate with the audience and reflect the underlying social realities. This study contributes to multimodal discourse analysis by highlighting the effectiveness of visual grammar in analyzing visual communication.

**Keywords:** movie poster; multimodal discourse; visual grammar; *Parasite*

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## 1.Introduction

With the development of multimedia technology, information dissemination increasingly relies on non-verbal modes like images, colors, and spatial layout. Film posters, as key to film marketing, function as multimodal texts that convey complex ideological meanings through interactions of visual and linguistic elements (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) offers a systematic approach to unpacking these layered meanings.

Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* (2019), a South Korean black comedy thriller, critiques class division and economic inequality. Its narrative follows a lower-class family infiltrating a wealthy household, unraveling into violence. Acclaimed globally—winning the Palme d'Or (2019) and Best Picture at the Oscars (2020) (Lee, 2020)—its nuanced portrayal of class dynamics makes it ideal for studying how film posters encode ideologies.

Given these considerations, this study applies the theoretical framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar to analyze the official *Parasite* movie poster. The aim is to investigate how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings are constructed, and how these multimodal strategies contribute to the poster's overall ideological and aesthetic effect.

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) has attracted considerable attention in both domestic and international academia. Scholars such as Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (2006) have provided the theoretical foundation for MDA through their work *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, which draws on Halliday's systemic functional linguistics (1978). In China, researchers like Hu Zhuanglin (2007) and Li Zhanzi (2003) have localized and expanded upon these theories, applying them to various contexts such as advertisements, film posters, and educational materials.

Although multimodal analysis of movie posters has gained traction, there remains a lack of in-depth studies focusing on the application of visual grammar to individual, culturally significant film posters, particularly in relation to their ideological implications. Moreover, few studies have explored how visual semiotics in posters resonate with audiences and reflect social divisions such as class disparity.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by analyzing the poster of the Korean film *Parasite* through the lens of visual grammar. The purpose is to answer the following research questions:

- (1) How are representational, interactive, and compositional meanings constructed in the poster of *Parasite*?
- (2) How do these multimodal resources reflect social inequality and contribute to the audience's interpretation of the film?

## 2.Theoretical Foundation

Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) conceptualizes language as a meaning-making resource realized through three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Building on this foundation, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2006) extend the metafunctional approach to visual communication, proposing the framework of visual grammar. This framework identifies three corresponding dimensions of meaning in images. Representational meaning concerns how people, places, and objects are depicted, either through narrative structures that show action and interaction or through conceptual structures that depict more abstract relations. Interactive meaning refers to the relationship between images and viewers, realized through elements such as gaze, social distance, and perspective, which together shape involvement and power relations (Machin & Mayr, 2012). Compositional meaning integrates these dimensions into a coherent whole by arranging visual elements according to principles of information value (e.g., Given/New, Ideal/Real), salience (visual prominence), and framing (connection or separation of elements) (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). As one of the most widely applied models in multimodal discourse analysis, visual grammar provides a systematic tool for examining how semiotic resources operate in combination to produce meaning. This study adopts the framework to analyze the *Parasite* poster, focusing on how representational, interactive, and compositional meanings encode social inequality and ideological implications.

## 3.Methods of Analysis

This study adopts a qualitative multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) approach to examine the movie poster of *Parasite*. MDA is particularly suited for analyzing texts in which multiple semiotic modes—such as images, typography, and color—interact to construct meaning (O'Halloran, 2008). The analysis is guided by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar framework, which integrates Halliday's systemic functional linguistics with principles of visual communication.

### 3.1 Data Collection

The primary data for this research consist of the official Korean promotional poster for *Parasite*, directed by Bong Joon-ho. This poster was selected because it is the main visual material used in the film's international marketing campaign and has been widely circulated both online and in print media. The selection criterion was that the poster should contain a combination of visual and verbal elements that can be systematically analyzed using the visual grammar model. The poster image was obtained from verified film publicity sources to ensure authenticity and quality.

Although the dataset in this study is limited to a single poster, it is approached as a complex multimodal text, in which each element is examined in relation to the others. The focus is not merely on isolated features, but on the interrelationships among representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, which together form the overall communicative effect (Jewitt, 2014).

### 3.2 Analytical Procedures

The analysis proceeds in three stages, corresponding to the three metafunctional dimensions of visual grammar. First, the representational meaning is examined by identifying whether the poster employs narrative or conceptual representation and by analyzing the vectors, participants, and depicted actions or reactions. Second, the interactive meaning is explored by assessing the contact between represented participants and viewers, the social distance implied by camera framing, and the perspectives used to position the viewer in relation to the characters. Finally, the compositional meaning is analyzed by evaluating information value (Given/New, Ideal/Real), salience (visual prominence of elements), and framing (visual boundaries and connections between elements).

Throughout the analysis, attention is given to how the visual and verbal modes interact to produce ideological effects and emotional resonance. All interpretations are supported by detailed observation of semiotic resources in

the poster and are cross-referenced with previous multimodal studies of film posters to ensure analytical rigor (Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala, 2017).

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1 Results

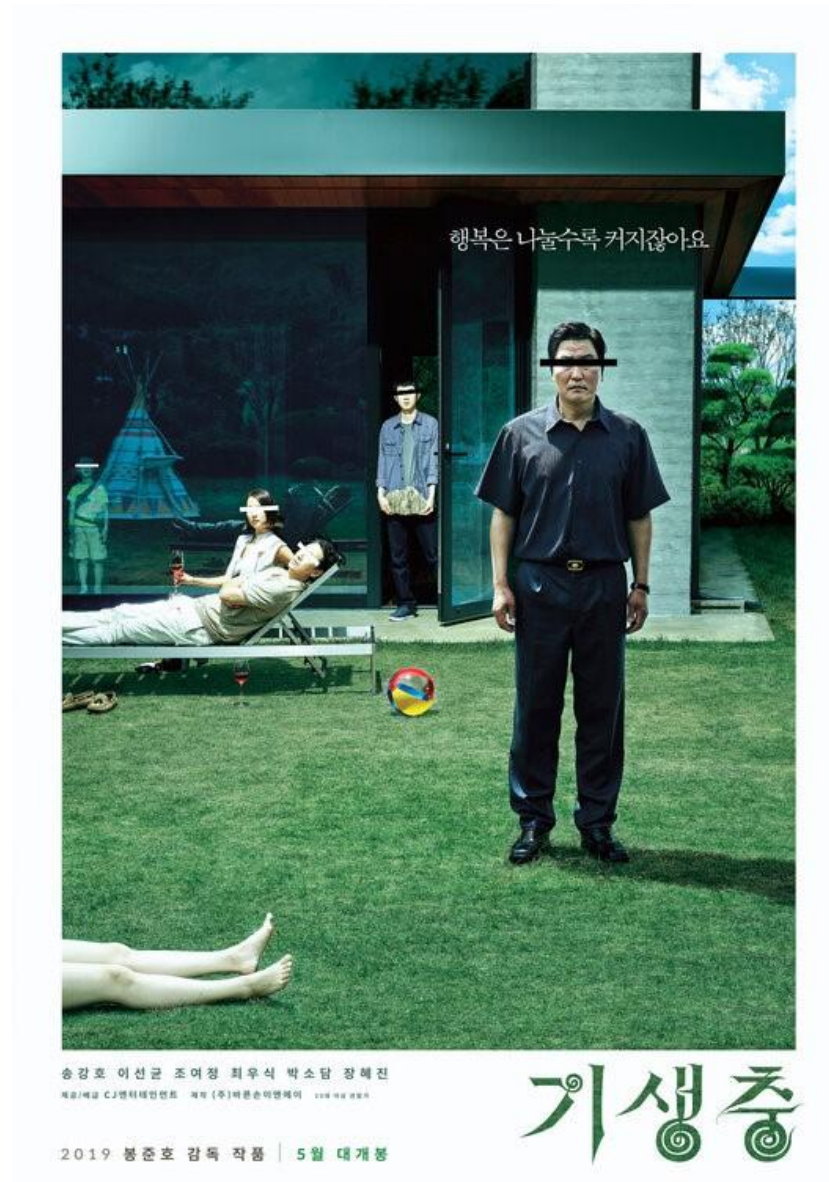


Figure 1

The analysis of the *Parasite* poster identifies several salient visual features that construct representational, interactive, and compositional meanings.

From a representational perspective, the poster employs a narrative structure. The characters' body orientations and implied gaze form vectors that guide the viewer's attention, although their eyes are concealed by black or white bars. Each participant occupies a distinct spatial position: the poor father is placed in the center foreground, the rich couple appear further in the background, and the younger son of the rich family is visible only through a reflection. Symbolic props are also prominent. The poor son is shown holding a large stone, while the lower-left corner includes a pair of disembodied legs that disrupt the spatial arrangement.

Regarding interactive meaning, the characters do not establish direct eye contact with the viewer, constructing an "offer" structure. The framing distances vary: the poor father is shown in larger scale and closer to the viewer,

while the wealthy family members are positioned farther away. Perspective is largely level, though slight variations occur in the angle of characters' bodies and gaze.

In terms of compositional meaning, the layout follows a vertical structure. The upper section contains the film's awards and accolades, while the lower section includes the title, credits, and release information. The central placement of the poor father makes him the most visually prominent figure. Color distribution is dominated by muted green and neutral tones, with occasional high-saturation details such as the red wine glass. Framing is achieved through spatial distance, body orientation, and the layering of foreground, middle ground, and background.

Overall, the results highlight the visual arrangement of participants, props, and color choices, which together form the structural basis for interpretation.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The detailed multimodal analysis of the *Parasite* movie poster reveals a carefully orchestrated set of semiotic strategies that extend beyond simple promotional objectives to engage in ideological meaning-making. Each mode—visual composition, color, spatial arrangement, and symbolic elements—works in concert to reinforce the film's central critique of social inequality, echoing Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) assertion that multimodal texts encode meaning through the integration of multiple semiotic resources.

From a representational perspective, the use of black and white eye bars serves as a salient visual code distinguishing social classes. This binary color scheme, applied to a core bodily feature (the eyes), directly references perception, perspective, and the (in)visibility of social realities. In line with Machin and Mayr's (2012) framework on visual semiotics, this choice functions ideologically by constructing two distinct modes of seeing: the black bars of the poor imply constrained vision and lack of social mobility, while the white bars of the wealthy connote clarity, privilege, and access to opportunities. The inclusion of the disembodied legs in the foreground operates as a visual synecdoche for violence and disruption, foreshadowing hidden narrative conflicts and unsettling the viewer's expectations of a static, balanced composition.

In terms of interactive meaning, the poster's "offer" structure positions viewers as detached observers rather than direct participants. This aligns with the film's thematic emphasis on the invisibility of systemic inequality: the audience, much like society at large, is invited to "watch" the dynamics unfold without immediate moral intervention. Social distance is manipulated to reflect relational hierarchies—proximity to the poor father suggests narrative urgency and emotional engagement, while the rich couple's physical and emotional distance embodies aloofness and inaccessibility. Perspective further encodes power relations: the level angle suggests a shared space between viewer and most characters, but the wealthy father's oblique gaze subtly asserts dominance, echoing the film's depiction of his elevated social status and authority.

From the standpoint of compositional meaning, the Ideal–Real structure operates on both promotional and interpretive levels. The placement of awards and accolades in the upper section (Ideal) constructs a discourse of prestige, which serves to legitimize the film in the eyes of potential audiences (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001). The lower section (Real) anchors this prestige in concrete details—title, credits, and release date—thereby guiding the viewer from abstract value to actionable engagement. Salience is carefully distributed: the poor father's prominent placement and darker clothing not only draw visual attention but also symbolically mark his position as the narrative's focal point. The subdued green and grey palette (low modality) reflects the film's social-realist tone, while the red wine glass—a rare high-saturation element—epitomizes Marxist critiques of luxury as a site of class antagonism. This juxtaposition aestheticizes inequality, inviting viewers to decode the politics of visual pleasure.

As a Korean production, *Parasite*'s poster employs visual metaphors rooted in East Asian contexts. The stone held by the poor son, for instance, resonates with Confucian ideals of perseverance, while its eventual narrative futility critiques the myth of meritocracy. Contrasted with Western class narratives (e.g., *Joker*'s poster, which emphasizes individual psychosis over systemic critique), this poster's emphasis on collective family units reflects

cultural differences in portraying social struggle (Shin, 2020). Such nuances highlight how multimodal strategies are culturally inflected.

These semiotic strategies function synergistically to prepare the audience for the film's complex moral terrain. The viewer is visually positioned to recognize class contrasts before any dialogue is spoken, effectively priming their interpretive framework. By embedding ideological cues in the poster's multimodal design, the producers leverage the promotional medium to participate in broader discourses on inequality, mobility, and the permeability of social boundaries.

In sum, the discussion highlights how the *Parasite* poster exemplifies the potential of multimodal texts to act simultaneously as commercial products and cultural commentaries. Through the interplay of representational, interactive, and compositional meanings, the poster encapsulates the film's thematic core and manipulates viewer positioning in ways that are consistent with established theories of visual grammar. This reinforces the argument that multimodal discourse analysis is not only a tool for describing visual artifacts but also a means of uncovering the ideological underpinnings embedded in media communication.

## 5. Conclusion

This study examined the official Korean movie poster of *Parasite* through the lens of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar, integrating the principles of systemic functional linguistics. The analysis focused on three metafunctional dimensions—representational, interactive, and compositional meanings—to explore how multimodal resources are strategically deployed to convey both narrative intrigue and social commentary.

The findings indicate that the poster constructs representational meaning primarily through narrative vectors, such as gaze direction and body orientation, which engage the viewer while simultaneously preserving ambiguity. Interactive meaning is realized through an “offer” structure, long social distance, and a predominantly level perspective, positioning the audience as an informed observer of the depicted social dynamics. Compositional meaning is achieved via an Ideal–Real information structure, selective salience of key elements, and low-modality color choices, which together contribute to the thematic portrayal of class disparity and social tension.

This study contributes to multimodal discourse analysis by demonstrating how visual grammar can be effectively applied to the study of film posters, revealing how visual and verbal modes collaborate to encode ideological meanings. It also illustrates the potential of MDA to uncover the semiotic strategies that underlie media texts, particularly in the context of film marketing and cultural representation.

However, the research is limited in scope, as it analyzes only a single poster from *Parasite*. While the in-depth qualitative approach allows for detailed interpretation, the generalizability of findings is restricted. Future research could extend this work by incorporating a comparative analysis of multiple posters from different cultural contexts or genres, as well as by combining multimodal analysis with audience reception studies to assess how viewers interpret these semiotic resources in practice.

In sum, the multimodal analysis of the *Parasite* poster underscores the importance of integrating visual and linguistic perspectives in discourse analysis. By unpacking the semiotic mechanisms embedded in visual media, researchers can better understand how such texts not only promote films but also participate in broader social and ideological discourses.

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