

# Interpretation of Movie Posters from the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract**—Given the remarkable development of multimedia and computer technology in the information age, the previous dominant role of language in mass media and communication is challenged by other semiotic resources such as image, sound and action. Accordingly, new grammars must be formulated to give a comprehensive account of the integrative meaning generated by the interaction of different modalities in discourse. The theory of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), which is theoretically based on Systemic-Functional Linguistics, solves the problem to most degree. In the light of the grammar of visual design by Kress and van Leeuwen, this paper intends to formulate a model for MDA of movie posters. A qualitative and interpretative approach is used to hold an in-depth discussion which helps to testify the feasibility of this model and also to point out the key to the application of this model. The present study may not only enlarge the application area of Systemic-Functional Linguistics, but also fill in a gap in discourse analysis of movie posters.

**Index Terms**—movie posters, multimodal discourse analysis, Systemic-Functional Linguistics

## I. INTRODUCTION

Owing to the massive development of technology, discourse displays a great diversity in form. With the cooperation of two or more semiotic modes of communication such as language, image, video, and sound, multimodal discourse creates an integrative meaning making the traditional discourse analysis restricted to language itself far from convincing. Systemic-Functional Linguistics holds the perspective that language is social semiotic system and meaning potential (Halliday 1978) and thus provides an effective theoretical tool for MDA. As the pioneering work in the application of Systemic-Functional Grammar to visual images, *Reading Images* (Kress & van Leeuwen 1990) gives the first systematic and comprehensive account of the grammar of visual design. Movie poster, a form of visual communication, is designed to attract movie goers. To read a movie poster is to decode a complex piece of discourse including multiple semiotic resources. Nowadays, as the aesthetic and collection value are being paid more and more attention to, the study concerning how to give comprehensive analyses of movie

posters is significant. However, up to the present, analyses of movie posters concentrate either on text only, or on aesthetic design, but very little on how all major modalities and semiotic tools work simultaneously to create meaning, let alone on intra-semiotic grammatical relationships.

To enrich the theory of MDA and fill in a gap in poster analysis, we try to set up a model for MDA of movie posters based on the grammar of visual design (Kress and van Leeuwen 1990, 1996). Moreover, eleven movie posters are analyzed for discussion to testify the applicability and feasibility of this model, as well as to highlight the key to application. Finally, we conclude the major findings and give suggestions for further study.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Overview of Systemic-Functional MDA

Systemic-Functional Linguistics treats language as a social semiotic system. As its developer, Michael Halliday, believes that language is a system network and the grammatical or other features of language are described as sets of choices. He maintains that all languages involve three co-operating meta-functions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual function. Although originally conceived for the study of language, Systemic-Functional Grammar is widely used to analyze other semiotic resources. We will review the previous studies in this field as follows:

Since the mid 1980s, Hallidayan discourse analysis has begun to take meaning-making into consideration other than language. More and more semiologists are trying to associate De Saussure with the analyses of film and photography (Metz 1974, 1977; Barthes 1977). Jim Martin makes a breakthrough by putting forward “discourse semantics” (Martin 1992), and discourse analysis begins to move far beyond the original conception of text. Based upon Systemic-Functional framework, meaningful findings are made in the research focusing on the studies of visual art, sculpture and spatial construction. Taking image as a social semiotic mode, Kress and van Leeuwen focus on the structure or “grammar” of visual design including color, perspective, framing and composition. Their work *Reading Images* (Kress & van Leeuwen 1990) becomes the authority in interpreting visual communication. They propose that the semiotic tools in visual communication are delicately represented to realize some particular functions,

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namely, representational meaning, interactive meaning, and compositional meaning which respectively correspond to ideational, interpersonal, and textual function in Systemic-Functional Grammar. Van Leeuwen takes the lead by applying the Systemic-Functional Grammar into sound and music (van Leeuwen 1999). Meanwhile, some scholars begin to study the interrelationship among different meaning-making systems with the purpose to establish shared semiotic principles. Michael O'Toole (1994) makes the running in the study of the grammar within single semiotic resource and the grammatical relations between semiotic resources. His work *The Language of Displayed Art* gives definition to the functions of visual images as representational, modal and compositional. Lim (2004) puts forward an integrated multi-semiotic model as a "meta-model" for analyzing the use of language and image as semiotic resources. However, much work remains to be done to further improve the model to explain some dynamic semiotic resources like video.

In contrast, the study of MDA in china is still in its initial stage. Li Zhanzi (2003) firstly brings in the grammar of visual design proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen. Zhu Yongsheng (2007) articulates the definition of multimodality, the theoretical basis, methodology, and significance of MDA. Hu Zhuanglin points out the significance of enhancing people's general comprehension and identification on multimodal discourse. Zhang Delu (2009) deploys Systemic-Functional Linguistics to propose a synthetic theoretical framework for MDA. Based on their introductory work, the theory of MDA is beginning to be applied to different genres by Chinese scholars.

#### B. Overview of discourse analysis of movie posters

So far, very few researches have been done in the discourse analysis of movie posters. However, since movie posters are a type of print advertisement, it is necessary to summarize the major achievement in the study of advertising discourse. In the past few decades, the linguistic characteristics of advertising discourse have been studied in social context. Cook (2004) makes introductory efforts by emphasizing the social indication of advertising language. He analyzes advertising discourses in complex interaction with the context around it and with the people who create and use it. Huang Guowen (2001) accounts for the advertising discourse in all-round way covering the following aspects: its logic-semantic relationship, the three meta-functions, cohesion and coherence characteristics, situational and cultural context, its narration features, as well as the comparison between Chinese and English advertising. Cheong Yinyuen (2004) proposes a systemic-functional model for meaning-making in print advertisement through developing lexicogrammatical strategies for ideational, textual and interpersonal meaning and the generic structure potential of advertisement.

### III. METHODS

#### A. Methods

Taking Systemic-Function Linguistics as theoretical basis, we borrow from the grammar of visual design by Kress and

van Leeuwen and intend to develop a systemic and comprehensive model for MDA of movie posters. In discussion, a qualitative and interpretative approach is adopted. Such an approach foregrounds depth over breadth and enables insightful analyses of chosen movie posters. Only based on that detailed discussion, can the application of the proposed model be clearly illustrated and its feasibility and applicability be validated.

#### B. Data selection

Eleven movie posters are chosen as the data for discussion for the following reasons: firstly, the movies introduced by these posters are with good popularity in public and each poster is successful in visually interpreting the theme and synopsis of the movie concerned. Secondly, the first two movie posters we discuss touch upon almost every dimension of the proposed model so that the all-round analyses of them are no other than detailed explanations of the model. Thirdly, to further testify the applicability and practicality of the model, another nine movie posters with distinctive characteristics are chosen for a case study. The interpretation with focuses on their unique visual designs and modes of expression is vital for illustrating the key to the application of the model.

### IV. RESULTS

Firstly, a systemic and comprehensive model for MDA of movie posters is proposed (see Fig.1). Secondly, the model may prove to be applicable and effective through detailed discussion. Thirdly, suggestions for the application of the model are given in conclusion.

### V. DISCUSSION

Above all, the poster of *Maid in Manhattan* (see Fig.A1 in Appendix) and of *The Flowers of War* (see Fig.A2 in Appendix) will be interpreted in detail respectively to explain the application of the model.

#### A. Analysis of the poster of *Maid in Manhattan*

##### 1) Representational meaning

According to Kress & van Leeuwen (1996:45), the representational meaning refers to how semiotic systems exhibit objects and relations between them outside the representational system or in the context of a culture. Representational meaning can be achieved by both narrative process and conceptual process. The former where exists a vector shows the unfolding of actions and events, processes of changes and instantaneous spatial arrangement, while the latter where no vector exists is more stable, more general in structure and meaning regardless of the time factor. The process of probing into the representational meaning unveils the relationship between the represented participants. By the way, participants mentioned in the following discussion are divided into two kinds, namely, represented participants (people, things and places depicted in an image) and interactive participants (people who communicate with each other through images including image producers and viewers). For the poster of *Maid in Manhattan*, there are three major

represented participants—a couple and a woman, and the representational meaning involves two reaction processes, a mental process and the function of circumstances. From the color differentiation, it is evidential that the lower and the upper sections are a fascinating woman and her fantasy about a man and herself respectively. Nevertheless, for the convenience of discussion, the couple and the woman will be analyzed separately.

Above all, the couple looking forward out of the frame is undoubtedly the locus of attention. Their eye lines towards viewers form two similar reaction processes, where the reactors are the couple and no phenomenon is presented. Their direct gazes at viewers serve as a visual demand to call for involvement and identification from viewers.

Moreover, in terms of mental process, there is necessarily a sensor and a thought balloon (sensor's inner mental process). However, in this poster, no conventional thought balloon is presented. Instead, a mental process is indicated by where the upper section serves as the content of the thought balloon and the woman in the lower section as the sensor. This hidden mental process is significant for it integrates two separate sections vertically and also accounts for the relationship of the three major represented participants.

As far as circumstance is concerned, the distinctive scenery of the high-rise concrete buildings in distance as circumstance of setting shows that the scene of the story is a metropolis; and stuff both on and inside of the workbench such as the broom, the brush, the bottles of cleanser and towels act as circumstance of accompaniment to show the identity of the woman as a maid. At last, as far as conceptual process is concerned, an analytical process, which relates represented participants within a part-whole structure, is embedded in the circumstance of accompaniment: the workbench and the stuff on and inside of it are integrated into a whole as a carrier which refers to the outfit for cleaning; while each item of the whole can be regarded as attributes for their identical characteristic of cleaning use.

2) *Interactive meaning*

The interactive meaning is associated with both the social relations between participants and the evaluative orientations that participants deploy towards each other and towards the represented world in an image. Four dimensions will be involved in the following analysis: visual contact, size of frame, perspective and modality.

In terms of visual contact, image act of Demand is formed as the couple in the upper section is looking directly at viewers. This imaginary eye contact is a visual form of direct address as if the couple is demanding the viewers to identify with them and call on the viewers to enter their world and share their love story.

Concerning size of frame, the couple is shot above the shoulders and the strands of their hair can be figured out clearly. This close personal distance suggests the imaginary relationship of intimacy between the couple and viewers as if they are friends, so that viewers cannot help becoming sympathized with the couple and convinced of their love and

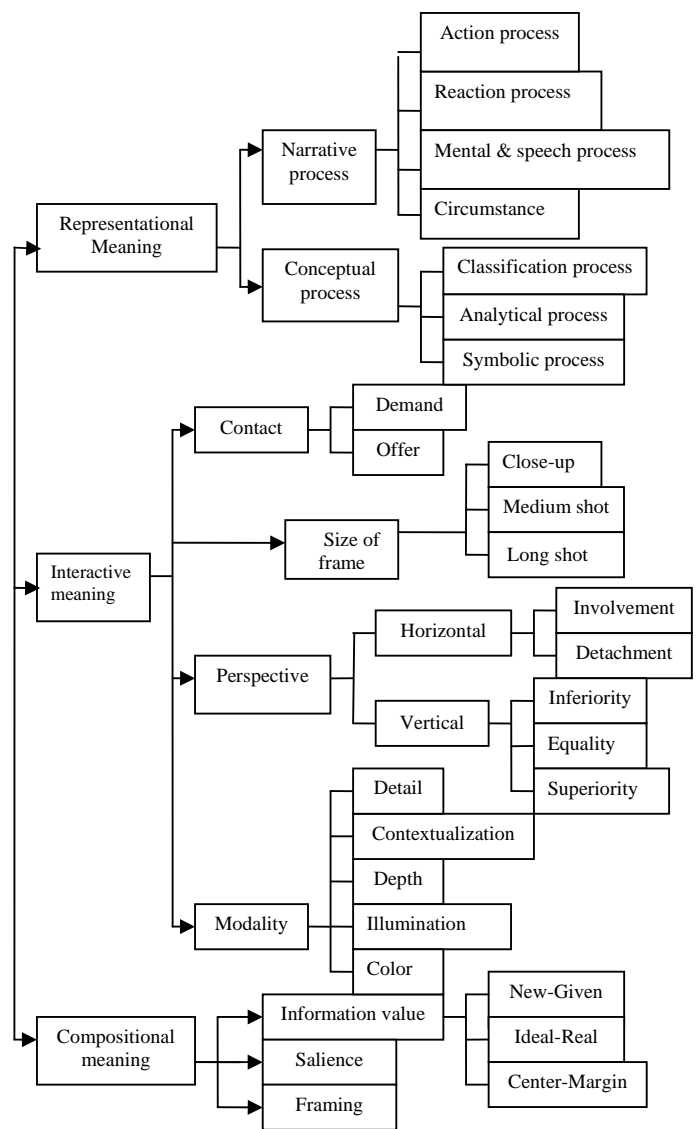


Figure1. A model for multimodal discourse analysis of movie posters

welfare. In contrast, in the lower section the woman and the workbench she is sitting on are taken in a medium shot which indicates a distance of public business interactions between her and viewers. That is to say, for viewers, the woman is an ordinary person they may meet everyday, and she works as a maid.

Considering perspective, all represented participants have a frontal angle with an indication of the interactive participants' involvement with the represented world. In other words, viewers are willing to enter into the urban life in the poster and to find out the romantic love story of the couple. As for the vertical angle, the perspective is more complex: On one hand, the couple is presented at viewers' eye level to indicate a

relationship of equality. This angle and the couple's facial expression also show their amiability and willingness to take viewers as their good friend. On the other hand, the woman in the lower part is represented from below to suggest viewers' inferior position. The low angle forces viewers to look up to the woman, by which the image producer may try to suggest that the woman should have marvelous experiences which are like a fairy tale and may never happen in the real life.

The last dimension of interactive meaning is modality which refers to the interpretation of the degrees to which a visual image is considered to be truthful or unauthentic based on its visual coding orientation. For this poster of a feature, the image producer deploys the commonsense naturalistic coding orientation. In realizing the mental process, modality plays a significant role. On one hand, the lower section which possesses a high modality in the perspective of naturalism presents a scene with a sense of reality: firstly, the image is the sharpest and most finely grained; secondly, it is appropriately contextualized since the cityscape of a metropolis is adopted as the background which functions as circumstance of setting; thirdly, the high-rises and skyscrapers in distance create depth; fourthly, the color is duly saturated, maximally diversified and modulated. At last, the shadow of the woman's right hand can be seen on her body. On the other hand, the upper part to reflect the woman's fantasy possesses low modality: firstly, the image is not naturally contextualized by taking the sky as background; secondly, the image is made black and white and at the same time, colorized to blue tones to create an atmosphere of illusion; thirdly, no depth is shown; fourthly, although shadows can be seen on the couple's faces, there is no clear contrast between light and shade due to the tone of dusty blue. To sum up, all the modality markers cooperate harmoniously in constructing the scene of reality and of fantasy which contributes greatly to the visual composition of the whole poster.

### 3) *Compositional meaning*

Compositional meaning, which realized through the arrangement of various visual elements, relates the represented and interactive participants to each other and makes all elements of an image into a meaningful integration. There are three interrelated systems to realize compositional meaning: information values, salience and framing. Information value means the placements of the elements endow them with specific information values relative to each other (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:181). For the convenience of a clear explanation, we may term horizontal placement, vertical placement and center-margin placement as New-Given structure, Ideal-Real structure and Center-Margin structure respectively.

As far as this movie poster is concerned, since the whole image is divided into two sections vertically, it is obvious that the ideological structure of Ideal-Real is adopted. The specific information value of the Ideal-Real structure is in accord with the analysis above, especially in modality: just as the Real part shows, the woman is maid in real life; while her fantasy is shown in the Ideal part that she would fall in love with a

gentleman and hence change her life. Besides, in the upper section, the woman is placed on the left as Given for reason that since in a movie named "Maid in Manhattan", the woman is surely taken as the center of the story and much information about her is given by the poster itself. While the man is placed on the right as New because he is a stranger taking up in the story and also the one who enters the woman's world and changes the woman's life. As an unknown part, the man is a great attraction of the movie and thus arouses viewer's desire to see the movie.

Speaking of salience, despite the low modality, the upper section of the poster is the most salient part: firstly, the close-up of the couple of large size is most appealing to viewers' eyes; secondly, the personal distance, the frontal angle at eye level as well as their eye lines towards viewers combine to offer an intercourse with viewers and demand viewers' involvement, so that viewers cannot help paying attention to; thirdly, in the Ideal-Real structure, the Ideal part is supposed to be more salient. What's specially, the movie title is placed at a less salient position instead of being visually stressed. This could be justified in that the poster gives sufficient visual explanation to the title. When viewers read the poster, the movie title is formed naturally in their mind.

Considering framing, no clear dividing line is shown in the image and the gradual transition of the color from multicolor to the color of black and white naturally divides the image into two sections vertically. The framing plays a vitally important role in the visual composition of this poster. Without it, the mental process cannot be realized and the Ideal-Real structure cannot be made best use of to present the fascinating story in the movie.

## B. *Analysis of the poster of The Flowers of War*

### 1) *Representational meaning*

As far as this poster is concerned, the narrative meaning is embedded in an action process in which a dead branch in the top left corner forms an obvious vector. This dead branch extending towards the center of the image somehow serves as a stress and guide in visual communication in that it evidently draws viewers' attention to the bloody butterfly which is not only the goal of this vector, but also the most significant visual element in this poster.

Moreover, the highlights of this poster lie in the conceptual process, especially the symbolic suggestive process. For one thing, from the choices of colors, all the important visual elements are presented in the color of blood-red which symbolizes death and killing and thus conveys the impression of an extremely bloody and brutal story to viewers. The connotation of blood red accords with the emotional tone of the movie background, a famous historical event --- Nanking Massacre. For another, from the choices of visual elements, the blood spots splashed on the dead branch are designed just like blooming red plum blossoms and thus endowed with multiple symbolic meanings: firstly, the English title "The Flowers of War" employs a figure of speech called metonymy. The vehicle is "flowers" and the tenor is women. The poster designers choose to illustrate the word "flowers"

with the imageries of red plum blossoms which may share the same connotation and essence worldwide. Especially in Chinese culture, the imageries of plum blooms are the symbols of many virtues such as fortitude, bravery, determination, and indifference to fame and wealth. Just as a well-known Chinese poem writes “there are a few plum trees in the corner of garden; they bloom alone in the struggle against severe cold”. Therefore, the choice of the imageries of red plum blossoms is well-grounded, and they just hint the lofty morals and sentiments of the leading characters; secondly, as an old Chinese saying goes, east or west, the plum blossoms in Jinling is best. Here “Jinling” is the former name of Nanking. Hence, the imageries of red plum blossoms related to “Jinling” in the Chinese title are suggesting the place of the story; thirdly, the blooming season of plum trees coincides with the story time (Nanking Massacre took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December in 1937 and last for about 6 weeks), and the bitter cold in severe winter could be regarded as an indication of the violent and ruthless social environment of that day..

The last but not the least, it seems farfetched outwardly to design a bloody butterfly in symbolic suggestive process; however, it actually places an irreplaceable role in delivering the subject of this poster and also in stressing the theme of self-redemption in the movie. The metamorphosis from an ugly and awkward larva into a chrysalis and then into a beautiful and graceful butterfly symbolizes the transformation of the leading characters’ human nature, or instance, from a greedy drunkard to a courageous and beneficent hero, from a gang of vulgar and selfish prostitutes to a group of honorable women volunteering to give up their lives to save the girl students, and from a lackey willing to sell the country for his own selfish ends to a valiant risking his own life to help the girl students to run for their lives. All those are true portraits of the Chinese people’s self-redemption from the suffering and sorrow at the time of national disaster. In addition, these is a household Chinese legend of a tragic love story named *Butterfly Lovers*, so the image of butterfly could also be taken as the emblem of the love between the hero and heroin which is beautiful but short-lived and ends abruptly with death.

### 2) *Interactive meaning*

For this poster, the interactive meaning is mainly demonstrated by size of frame and perspective. In terms of size of frame, the foreground and the background are respectively shown in long shots which both create a sense of alienation between viewers and the represented environment temporally and spatially. The impersonal distances indicate that the movie is not about a recent event but a great while ago. Speaking of perspective, the whole image has a frontal angle horizontally suggesting impartiality and objectivity of the narration of the movie story; while in the vertical direction, the gloomy sky in the upper section takes up 3/4 of the whole image which decides somewhat a low angle so that viewers are actually looking up at those symbolic visual elements. This angle of elevation shows the poster designers’ praise for all the leading

characters’ noble qualities and also endows viewers with respect and admiration for those honorable people.

### 3) *Compositional meaning*

Considering information value, the sky in the upper section and the ground in the lower section form an Ideal-Real structure. In the Real part, the sight of a war-worn area unfolds the sad reality in the war years; while in the Ideal part, all those blood-red visual elements against the glooming sky are the symbols of people’s faith and belief in the merciless social reality.

In terms of framing, though there is no clear framing line, the gradual transition from the ground to the sky serves as the framing device to separate the whole image into two parts along the vertical axis. In this poster, framing plays a vitally important role in realizing information value, because it does not only point up the Ideal-Real structure, but also realizes the natural transition between the two parts.

Speaking of salience, color is the dominant element. The poster designers use the color of blood red to stress all the important visual elements so as to break the mood of depression and sorrow created by the background of the gloomy sky and war-worn city. With the central position and the bright color, the bloody butterfly is undoubtedly the most salient visual element in the whole image, and the imageries of red plum blossoms in the upper left corner come second. Their great salience agrees with the core position of their symbolic meanings in the subject of the movie. Moreover, the titles as well as the director and the producer’s names are also made salient by being shown in blood red so as to catch viewers’ attention and ultimately boost the bill-office receipts of the movie by making use of viewers’ expectation for the golden pair of Zhang Yimou and Zhang Weiping.

It is to be observed that the Chinese title is printed with a unique style of calligraphy---Zhuanli style which once flourished in Qing Dynasty and the Western Han Dynasty. Combining the characteristics of Zhuan style and Li style, Zhuanli style seems vigorous and solemn but smooth and gentle, which coheres with the keynote of the movie. More particularly, the Chinese title employs a figure of speech called synecdoche. The word “钗” which means a hairpin worn by women for adornment is used here to stand for women. In this sense, it is the counterpart of the word “flowers” in the English title. To visualize this word, the poster designers purposely have the last stroke shaped like a hairpin. This combination of word and drawing in meaning-making enriches the expression and may communicate more information than mono-modal use of word, which is just the reflection of the superiority of multimodality over mono-modality.

By the way, the Hollywood superstar Christian Bale’s name is printed in top right corner for his acting undoubtedly is a big selling point of this movie. However, it is clear that Mr. Bale is not so popular with Chinese audience that his acting could determine whether people will buy tickets to see the movie in cinema, so his name is printed in the color of black which belongs to the same color system with the background

and thus made less salient compared with the other words in blood red.

### C. Further discussion about eight distinctive movie posters

In view of the discussion above, we could believe that the proposed model is applicable and effective in making a systemic and comprehensive MDA of movie posters. Nevertheless, MDA of movie posters should not be stereotyped. We believe that MDA of a movie poster should have a focus in discussion which is supposed to be decided by the distinctive characteristics of the visual composition. To elaborate on this point, nine movie posters will be analyzed with a focus on their distinct features respectively in the following discussion.

#### 1) Analysis of the poster of *The Queen*

In the poster of *The Queen* (see Fig.A3 in Appendix), the image of the Queen in the foreground is surely supposed to be the main participant and the framed photo in the background be the secondary participant. It is extraordinary that the main participant only takes up a bit more than 1/4 of the poster while the secondary participant takes up almost 1/2 of the poster. To choose a right angle of justifying this unusual design, the knowledge of the movie is required. As a matter of fact, this movie is not a biography to recall the whole life of Queen Elizabeth II up to the present but an imagery story about the Queen based on a series of real happenings in a given period and more importantly, the background of the story is the unexpected death of Princess Diana. Therefore, even though the face is just shown partly, we could deduce that the young lady in the framed photo must be the Princess Diana for the black-and-white photo indicates her passing away. Based on the analysis above, we could believe that the explanation should be done from the angle of circumstance: the framed photo serves as circumstance of setting to provide viewers important information about the background of the movie so it is presented in large size to be visually stressed.

Moreover, the angle of perspective plays a significant role in analyzing the image of the Queen. On one hand, her body is angled away from the plane of viewers which encodes detachment and shows that viewers are excluded from the world of the Queen. However, not keeping the same oblique angle with her body, the Queen turns her head frontward and her gaze forms eye contact with viewers to show her willingness to make communication. This posture is giving the message that although I do not belong to your world; I am still willing to communicate with you from my world (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996:144). On the other hand, in term of the vertical angle, the Queen is photographed from a low angle giving viewers an impression of superiority. As the symbol of the British sovereignty, the Queen demonstrates the power and the authority of the British royalty, so the low angle is preferred here. To sum it up, from the angle of perspective, much information can be read: the Queen, as the symbol of British sovereignty, demonstrates the power and the authority of British royalty. She lives a life which is alien and unknown to us and keeps her own way of behaving in public which is elegant and conservative. Yet at the very time of Princess Diana's death, with deep concern, the Queen is willing to

show her amiable side to the public and to accept the opportunities to communicate with the mass.

#### 2) Analysis of the poster of *Se7en*

In the poster of *Se7en* (see Fig.A4 in Appendix), the most conspicuously represented participant is the figure "7", which takes up almost the whole of the frame. To decide a right angle of interpreting the "7" is the sticking point. Above all, a careful observation is needed. Firstly, it can be easily found that the image of "7" is made up of seven pictures which seem to be unrelated. However, in scrutinizing these pictures, viewers can discover some words including "Envy", "Pride", "Gluttony" and "Greed". Secondly, a tagline "LET HE WHO IS WITHOUT SIN TRY TO SURVIVE" is placed above the "7". In the tagline, all letters are capitalized for emphasis and all the letters "T" are transformed into the form of cross with an indication of Catholicism. All those clues sufficiently show that "7", a mysterious figure in western culture, is used here to stand for the Seven Deadly Sins-Greed, Pride, Sloth, Gluttony, Envy, Lust and Wrath.

Since the seven pictures and the "7" are presented within a part-whole structure, it is not difficult to recognize the spatial analytical process, within which the "7" is the carrier referring to the Seven Deadly Sins, while the seven pictures are the possessive attributes of the "7", referring to the content of the Seven Deadly Sins. Therefore, it is rational to stress the representative meaning in the MDA of this poster from the angle of spatial analytical process so that viewers could know better the synopsis and keynote of the movie.

#### 3) Analysis of the poster of *The Reader*

Although a movie poster serves as introduction to its movie, the lack of knowledge of the movie often leads to misunderstandings. So a good interpretation demands a careful study of the movie and even its historical background. The most salient part of the poster of *The Reader* (see Fig.A5 in Appendix) is a rectangular frame. From these close-ups showing intimacy, viewers may easily figure out the theme of love. However, without the reference to the story, the poster may probably be misread. At the first glance, viewers are likely to make an assumption that the woman has three lovers: one is younger than her, another that she is reluctant to let others know (the face in the middle picture is shown partly so that the person cannot be recognized), and another again is in her age. However, the story is quite another thing. In fact, it is a brief tale about sex, love, reading, and shame in postwar Germany and could be segmented into three stages as follows: At the beginning of the story, 15-year-old Michael Berg meets with an older woman Hanna by chance. Before long they embark on a passionate, clandestine love affair which leaves Michael both euphoric and confused. One day, Hanna abruptly moves without a word. Years later, the story goes to the second stage. As a law student observing a trial in Germany, Michael is shocked to recognize Hanna in the dock who ever concealed from him a past that reaches back to Auschwitz. Unfortunately, Hanna is found guilty of a horrible crime. In fact, she gives up defending herself in the court to conceal an even deeper secret: she is illiterate and has made many of her life choices to protect the secret. In the end, Hanna receives a

life sentence for her role in the church deaths. When it comes to the third stage, Michael begins to read books which he ever read to Hanna into a tape recorder and sends the cassettes to Hanna in prison. With the recording, Hanna learns to read by herself. In 1988, the night before her sentence ends, Hanna hangs herself and leaves a note to Michael and a tea tin with cash in it.

In reference to the story, we believe that the three pictures, from the left side to the right side, form a temporal analytical process. These pictures are respectively the reflections of the three successive stages of the subtle relationship between the hero and heroine. Hence, to avoid misreading, the MDA of this poster should lay special stress on the representative meaning of those pictures from the angle of temporal analytical process.

Moreover, attention is also paid to the explanation of the taglines from the perspective of information value. Since the rectangular frame divides the whole poster into two sections, an Ideal-Real structure is obviously formed. On one hand, the tagline “How far would you go to protect a secret?” is the only visual element in the Ideal part. It is conspicuous and thought-provoking to viewers and the word “secret” may probably arouse viewers’ interest in the movie. Moreover, it also expresses important message that everyone may desperately struggle to keep some secret, however, in no circumstances a secret can be kept for a whole life. On the other hand, the tagline “Unlock the mystery” in the Real part indicates that in reality, people are supposed to discover truths and that a secret may be an important clue to the course of storyline in this movie.

4) *Analysis of the poster of July Rhapsody*

Movie is both the carrier and the product of culture, so a movie poster is inevitably linked with its cultural background and social environment. Chances are that the cultural identity will become the highlights of a movie poster. Nevertheless, poster designers usually prefer to select the visual elements sharing the same connotation worldwide so as to enlarge the scope of audience. To elaborate on this point, the poster of *July Rhapsody* (see Fig.A6 in Appendix) will be analyzed in the following part.

Above all, this poster is a close-up of a hand and thighs of two persons sitting side by side. Since no vector is formed by eye line to connect viewers and represented world, the whole image could be considered as Offer in terms of interactive meaning. That is to say, this poster only presents itself as items of information, or objects of contemplation for viewers. Therefore, the key to analyzing this poster is careful observation of its details and reasonable inference of related connotations. Firstly, instead of showing the leading characters’ faces, this close-up only shows parts of their bodies to stress that fact that the two persons are sitting together with their thighs side by side at a close distance which somehow indicates a kind of subtle and hidden relationship; Secondly, the grid skirt, part of the red bag, as well as the smooth white skin reveal that the represented participant above must be a teenage girl, probably a student; while the fuscous trousers, the men’s watch with black leather

band, as well as the swelled veins show that the other represented participant must be a well-disciplined middle-aged man; Thirdly, the hand and the naked leg are the most salient part because of their central position in the whole image and the conspicuousness of the yellow skin against the dark background. Accordingly, viewers’ attention is guided to find more implications: on one hand, the girl’s naked leg showing her youth, openness, and vitality is undoubtedly a great temptation to the man; on the other hand, the man’s hand laid on his thigh adjoining the naked leg seems to reveal his appetency and restraint; Fourthly, at the core of the image is a ring worn on the ring finger of the man’s left hand. It is an important clue that he is a married man. Based on all the details above (see Table I), viewers, regardless of their various cultural backgrounds, all have reasons to assume that this movie may be probably about a middle-aged man’s affair with a teenage female student. As a matter of fact, this film just centers on Lam Yiu-Kwok, a Hong Kong secondary school teacher ,who is stuck in mid-life crisis and struggling with financial stagnancy, marital troubles and seduction by a female adolescent student. To this extent, this poster with carefully chosen visual elements can be regarded as a faithful illustration of the movie story.

Nevertheless, for a poster of Chinese movie, none can afford to neglect its cultural characteristics. For further interpretation, it is best to study the meanings and the presentation of the titles. To begin with, the Chinese and the English title are not literally translations to each other, and even seem irrelevant. On one hand, the Chinese title “男人四十(Man in His Forties)” is informative for it may probably remind Chinese viewers of a well-known old Chinese saying, one at forty no longer suffers from perplexities, which means that for those who are in their forties, no mistake will be made because they know what they would do, why they should do it and how to do it. So just from the literal meaning of this title, Chinese viewers can get a general impression of the hero’s qualities and also the value orientation of the movie; On the other hand, owing to the different cultural background, western viewers are unlikely to get the same information if the literal translation of the Chinese title were adopted and the movie were named as “Man in His Forties” in English. For that reason mainly, “July Rhapsody” is chosen for a replacement. Therein, “July” shows the story time and “Rhapsody”, as a kind of classical western music, is very familiar to western viewers. Literally referring to a piece of music which is full of passion but has an irregular form, “Rhapsody” fully conveys the warmth of the characters’ pent

TABLE I  
CONNOTATIONS OF VISUAL ELEMENTS

visual elements	possible connotation
grid skirt, smooth white skin	teenage girl student
red bag, naked leg	vitality, openness, temptation
a man’s watch, swelled vein	middle-aged man
wedding ring	married state
gesture of hand	appetency ,restraint
watch with black leather band, fuscous trousers	self-controlled well-disciplined
neat Chinese characters	integrity, primness, correctitude

oblique English letters	irrational deeds
position of English title	deeds from the subconscious

-up passion. More importantly, with abnormality as its major feature, “rhapsody” conforms to the fact that the teachers and students love transgresses the moral rules of the social conduct and is absolutely unacceptable and even illegal in western countries. Forasmuch “rhapsody” is surely more accurate compared with “waltz”, “concerto” or “symphony” to facilitate western viewers’ imagination about the movie story. The last but not the least, some unique visual designs of the titles are also worth observing carefully. The Chinese characters are printed neat and orderly, which is just in accord with the Chinese traditional notion of men in forties. The style of calligraphy seems to show middle-aged men’s qualities such as integrity, primness, and correctitude. In contrast, the English letters are designed to be oblique and placed under the character “人 (man)”, which may indicate that the hero may do something irrational from the subconscious. To sum up, the titles are deliberately chosen based on full considering viewers’ different cultural backgrounds. Although separate on the surface, they are mutually complementary in both form and meaning, and jointly contribute to the communication of the theme.

##### 5) Analysis of the poster of *Titanic*

In applying the proposed model to MDA of movie posters, we intend to explore possible laws. Therefore, the results of analysis based on the proposed model should not be viewed in isolation. Contrastive study and summative study can benefit the future study. In present study, we are glad to have some findings in the discussion of compositional meaning of the poster of *Titanic* (see Fig.A7 in Appendix) from the angle of information value.

In the poster of *Titanic*, vertical axis is adopted in the layout of the represented participants, namely, a sea craft, a couple and the sea. This kind of top-bottom structure is termed as Ideal-Real. The hull of *Titanic* divides the picture into two parts of almost same size, the upper section as Ideal and the lower section as Real. As its placement at the center of the layout suggests, *Titanic* is the nucleus of the movie. Meanwhile, it is of significant importance in associating the upper section and the lower section, in that the dancing couple, Jack and Rose, falls in love with each other in *Titanic*, a luxury sea craft marching on the sea. In the upper section above *Titanic*, Rose and Jack are presented together though a close-up showing they are having ballroom dancing. Instead of exchanging eye sight passionately, they both look downwards yet with the eye lines directed at each other. Between the couple and viewers, no eye contact is formed as well. Thus an atmosphere peaceful and mysterious is constructed which indicates Rose and Jack are both indulged in love with each other regardless of outside world. What’s more, the chopping sea in the lower part below *Titanic* is Real which reminds the viewers of the cruel reality and indicates the distress at hand and the tragic end of the couple as well as their love.

Based on the discussion about the poster of *Maid in Manhattan* and that of *Titanic*, we may find some similarities among the movie posters with the theme of love from the perspective of information value. For further study, we go on

to analyze the poster of *Pearl Harbor* (see Fig.A8 in Appendix), that of *City of Angels* (see Fig.A9 in Appendix), that of *Gone with the Wind* (see Fig.A10 in Appendix) and that of *Australia* (see Fig.A11 in Appendix). We find that these posters with Ideal-Real structure may share many aspects in common: Above all, in the upper section, a close shot shows the intimate relationship of a couple which tend to make emotive appeal to viewers. Since no eye contact is formed between viewers and represented participants, this section is an Offer showing that the couple is immersed in love passionately and viewers as onlookers are ignored by the couple. What’s more, the image of the couple is shown in high modality to create a truthful environment and takes up over 1/2 of the frame, so this section is usually the most salient part in the whole poster. In contrast, the lower section, which is presented in long shot with low modality such as blurred background, low brightness, and flat color, is much less salient. As Real, the lower section indicates the hardship and distress that the couple experienced. In addition, the title is also placed in this section to avoid weakening the salience of Ideal. Considering the framing, there is always a dividing line to make the Ideal-Real structure evidential such as the shipboard in the poster of *Titanic*, the silhouette of the brae together with the afterglow in that of *Gone with the Wind* and the lights on the horizon in that of *City of Angels*.

##### D. Conclusion

Through discussion, we believe that the proposed model proves to be applicable and effective in conducting MDA of movie posters. Moreover, since both originality and distinctiveness are essential characteristics of movie posters, particular emphasis should be put on analyzing the unique visual designs of movie posters. Furthermore, the key to the application of the model is to choose a right angle of analyzing the focus of meaning expression related to the theme; Last but not least, a reliable MDA of a movie poster demands a sound knowledge of the movie, its cultural background and historical circumstances.

However, due to the limited personal academic capacity, our study is merely a tentative step in MDA of movie posters. Further study can be done in the following aspects: Firstly, more movie posters should be collected and analyzed for a more comprehensive qualitative study. The findings in present study should be backed up by a quantitative statistical research; secondly, since our analysis of text primarily focuses on movie titles and taglines, much work remains to be done in studying other verbal parts introducing the cast, awards and directors; thirdly, in-depth study should be done to explore the inter-semiotic relations between visual and verbal mode



APPENDIX A



Figure A1. Poster of *Maid in Manhattan*

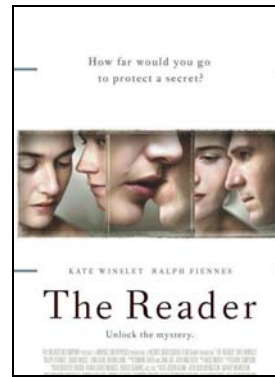


Figure A5. Poster of *The Reader*



Figure A2. Poster of *The Flowers of War*



Figure A6. Poster of *July Rhapsody*



Figure A3. Poster of *The Queen*



Figure A7. Poster of *Titanic*



Figure A4. Poster of *Se7en*



Figure A8. Poster of *Pearl Harbor*

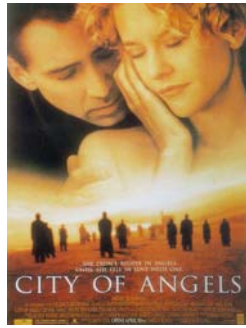


Figure A9. Poster of *City of Angels*



Figure A10. Poster of *Gone with the Wind*



Figure A11. Poster of *Australia*

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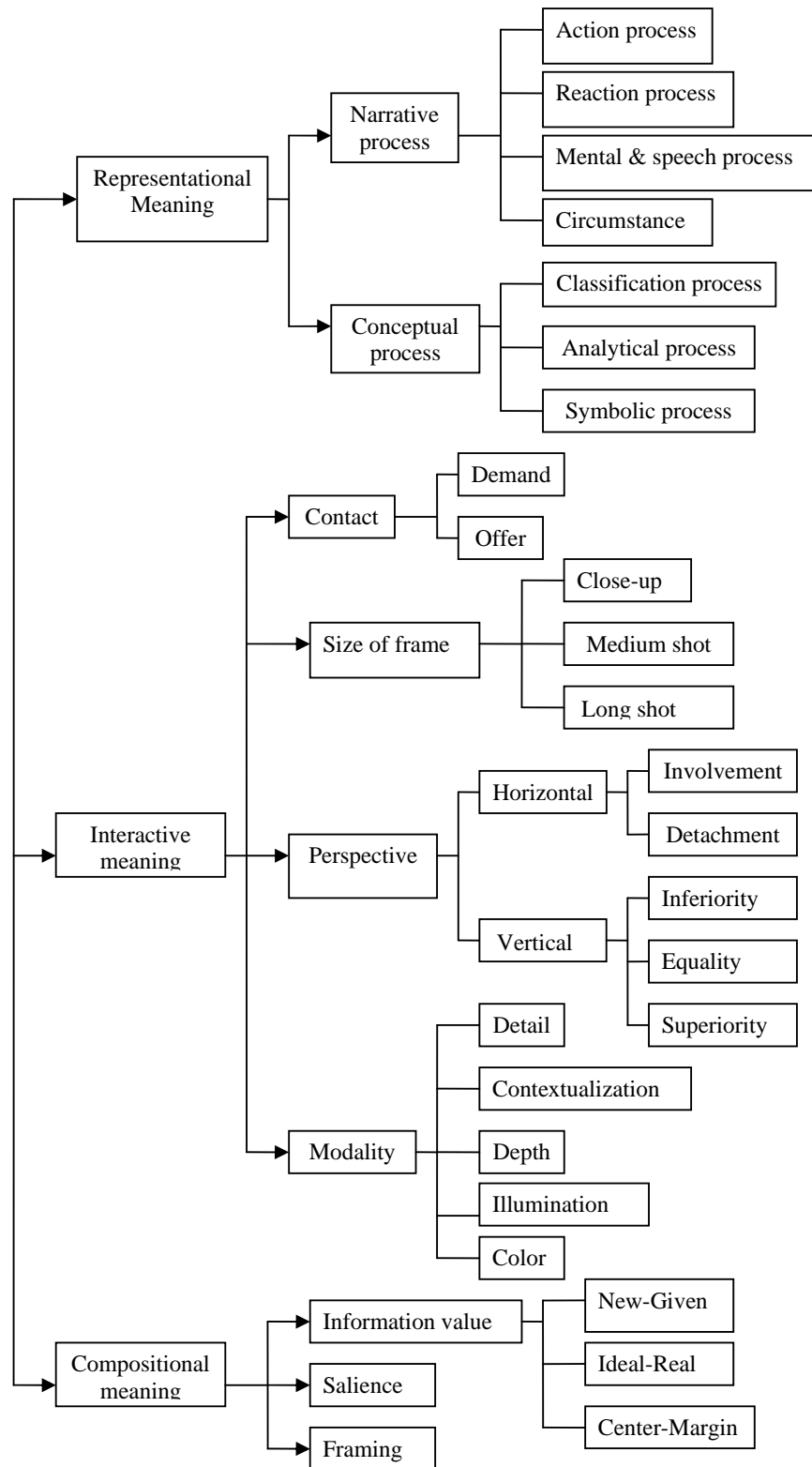


Figure1. A model for multimodal discourse analysis of movie posters

**TABLE I**  
**CONNOTATIONS OF VISUAL ELEMENTS**

<b>visual elements</b>	<b>possible connotation</b>
grid skirt, smooth white skin	teenage girl student
red bag, naked leg	vitality, openness, temptation
a man's watch, swelled vein	middle-aged man
wedding ring	married state
gesture of hand	appetency ,restraint
watch with black leather band, fuscous trousers	self-controlled well-disciplined
neat Chinese characters	integrity, primness, correctitude
oblique English letters	irrational deeds
position of English title	deeds from the subconscious



Figure A1. Poster of *Maid in Manhattan*





Figure A2. Poster of *The Flowers of War*



Figure A3. Poster of *The Queen*



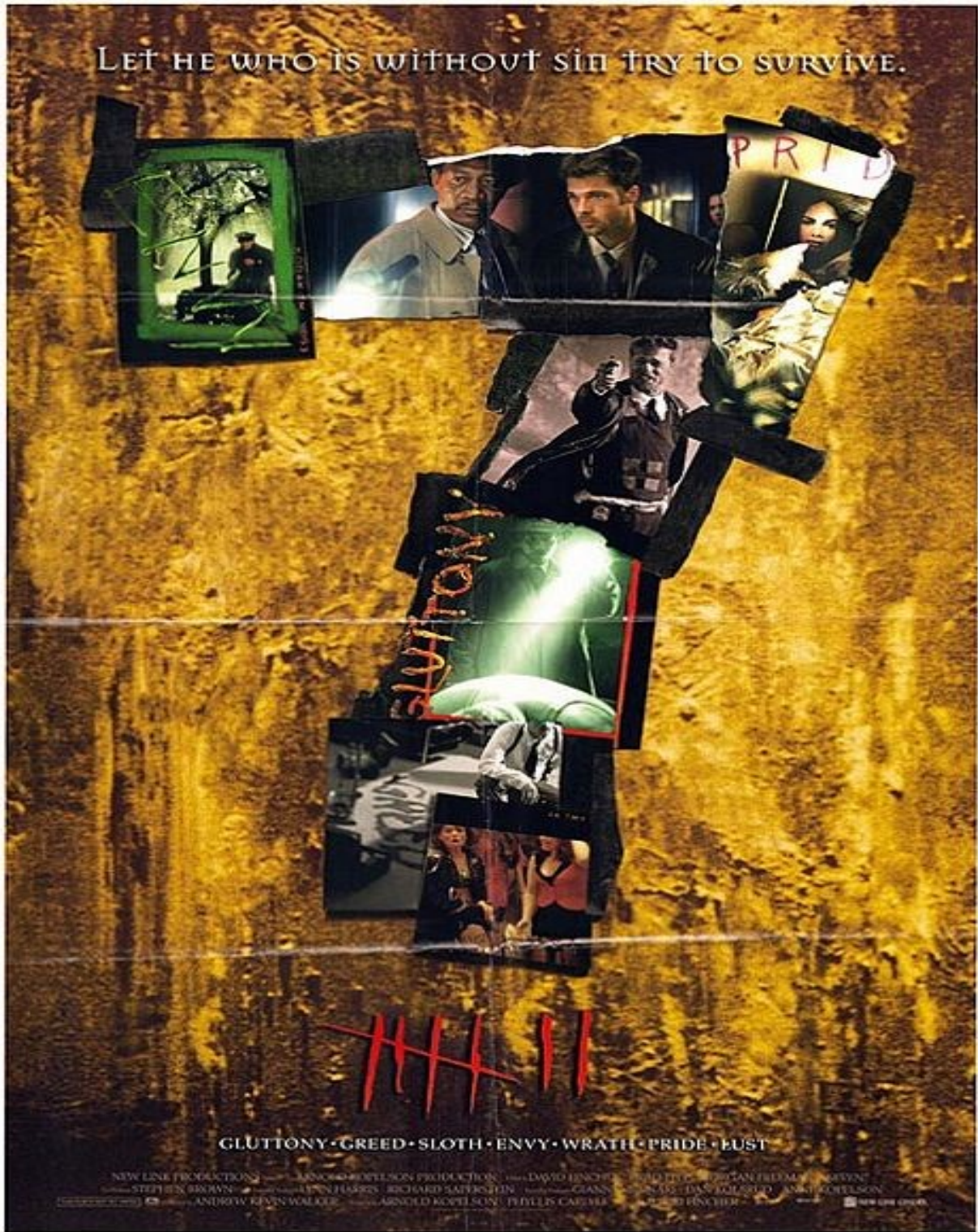


Figure A4. Poster of *Se7en*

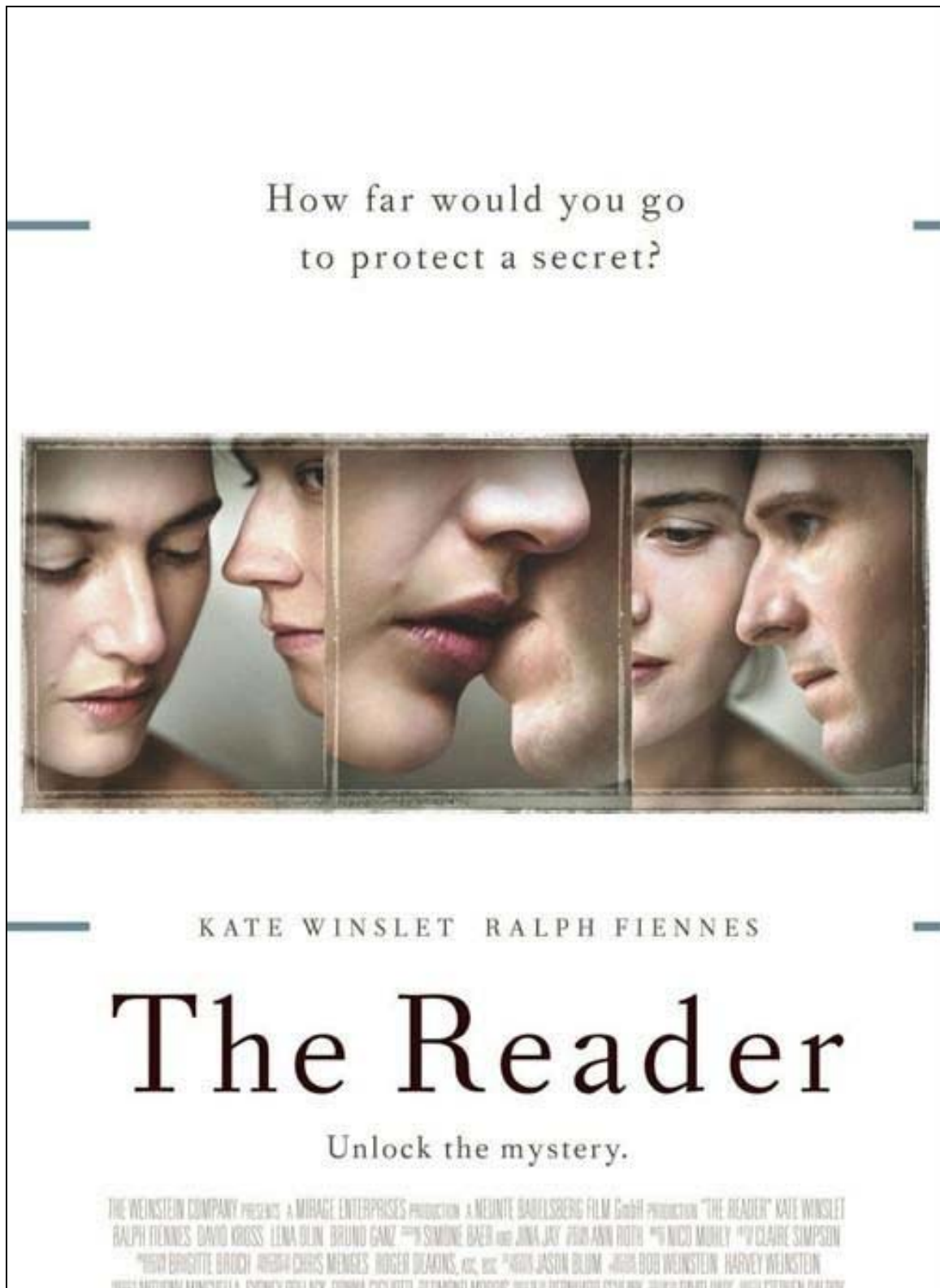


Figure A5. Poster of *The Reader*





Figure A6. Poster of *July Rhapsody*



Figure A7 Poster of Titanic





Figure A8. Poster of Pearl Harbor



Figure A9. Poster of *City of Angels*





Figure A10. Poster of *Gone with the Wind*



Figure A11. Poster of *Australia*