

# *A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the Film Poster Soul*

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**Abstract:** Film posters constitute an important form of multimodal discourse in the visual culture. By integrating linguistic, visual and graphic resources, they convey key information about a film and shape audience expectations. Drawing on the framework of multimodal stylistics and visual grammar, this study conducts a case analysis of the promotional poster of the animated film *Soul*. The analysis focuses on five semiotic modes: verbal, image, layout, typography and color. The findings reveal that these modes interact systematically to construct the thematic meaning of the film and guide viewers' interpretation. Specifically, the verbal mode provides concise narrative cues, the image mode constructs narrative and interactive meanings, while layout, typography and color enhance visual salience and emotional atmosphere. Through the collaborative functioning of these modes, the poster effectively communicates the philosophical theme of exploring the meaning of life. This study enriches empirical research in multimodal stylistics and offers insights for film poster design and visual communication.

## 1. Introduction

In the era of digitization and visual culture, information dissemination is no longer restricted to traditional linguistic forms. Non-verbal semiotic resources, including images, typography, layout, and color, play an increasingly crucial role in the joint construction of meaning. Film posters serve as quintessential multimodal discourses in this context. They are designed not merely as promotional channels, but as complex meaning-making systems that intuitively convey narrative depth and thematic essence. To systematically decode such complex visual texts, the theoretical frameworks of multimodal stylistics and visual grammar offer indispensable analytical tools. Visual grammar provides a structured approach to interpreting how spatial composition, visual vectors, and interactive elements construct specific representational and interpersonal meanings. Meanwhile, multimodal stylistics expands this analytical scope by examining the synergistic effects across various semiotic modes, revealing how they collaboratively shape the overall stylistic and thematic expression of a discourse.

The critically acclaimed animated film *Soul*, co-produced by Disney and Pixar, explores profound philosophical themes regarding human existence and the true meaning of life. As an animated feature dealing with abstract spiritual concepts, its promotional materials rely heavily on the careful integration of vibrant colors, artistic typography, and spatial composition to visually represent intangible ideas for the audience. While the film's conceptual depth has attracted considerable academic attention, a review of existing literature reveals that previous research has

predominantly focused on its narrative structure, subtitle translation, and thematic analysis. The complex multimodal construction of its promotional poster remains relatively underexplored. Therefore, this study adopts the theoretical perspectives of multimodal functional stylistics and visual grammar to systematically analyze the promotional poster of *Soul*. By thoroughly examining five distinct semiotic modes, namely verbal, image, layout, typography, and color, this paper attempts to explore the deep collaborative relationships among them. Ultimately, this research seeks to uncover how these multimodal elements synergize to visually communicate the film's philosophical core, aiming to provide solid theoretical references and practical insights for future film poster designs and visual communication strategies.

## 2. Literature Review

Multimodal stylistics is an emerging branch of modern stylistics that focuses on the characteristics of mode application in multimodal literary discourse. Multimodal discourse analysis, initially conceptualized by Norgaard(2010)<sup>[1]</sup>, investigates the joint construction of meaning through the synergistic interaction of verbal and non-verbal semiotic modes. A foundational analytical tool within this field is the visual grammar framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen(1996)<sup>[2]</sup>. By extending Halliday's systemic functional linguistics into the visual domain, they established a comprehensive visual grammar based on the three linguistic metafunctions. This framework systematically decodes how visual elements generate meaning through specific sub-systems, such as color, layout, and typography. Over time, scholars such as Zhang Delu, Jia Xiaoqing and Lei Qian(2015)<sup>[3]</sup> have continuously enriched and localized this framework, applying it to diverse multimodal discourses like advertisements and books.

Since the theoretical framework of multimodal functional stylistics has taken shape, a large number of scholars have applied this theory to practical discourse analysis. The current research mainly explores the stylistic features and effects of different genres of discourse, such as commercial advertisements, website homepages, and novel covers. In terms of commercial advertisements, Mu Junfang and Zhang Qingqing(2022)<sup>[4]</sup> conducted a multimodal analysis of Audi's new energy vehicle advertising in 2020 based on visual grammar, and created an ecological research framework for new energy vehicle advertising from the perspective of visual grammar. Using Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar as a theoretical framework, Zhao Wencai(2025)<sup>[5]</sup> analyzed the multimodal discourse of the Nanjing Tourism English website and explored the synergistic promotional effect of its images and text. By incorporating typography, layout, and color into the multimodal functional stylistic framework, Lei Qian and Zhang Delu(2015)<sup>[6]</sup> conducted a comparative analysis of the two covers of the novel *Woman's World* to reveal how inter-semiotic synergies effectively construct and convey deep thematic meanings.

However, despite the broad scope of multimodal discourse analysis, systematic multimodal analysis specifically targeting movie posters remains relatively insufficient. Therefore, this study draws upon visual grammar and multimodal stylistics frameworks to conduct an in-depth analysis of the promotional posters for the animated film *Soul*, aiming to explore their potential thematic meanings and provide valuable references for future film poster design.

## 3. Analysis of the Multimodal Stylistic Features of the Poster

This research takes the publicity poster of the famous film *Soul* (Figure 1: The poster of the film *Soul*) as the analytical object. The film follows Joe Gardner, a protagonist who dreams of becoming a jazz pianist, and a cynical soul named 22. Through a series of shared spiritual experiences, they gradually comprehend the true meaning of life and reignite their passion for living. Accordingly, this research examines the multimodal stylistic features of the selected poster from five distinct

dimensions: verbal, image, layout, typography and color.

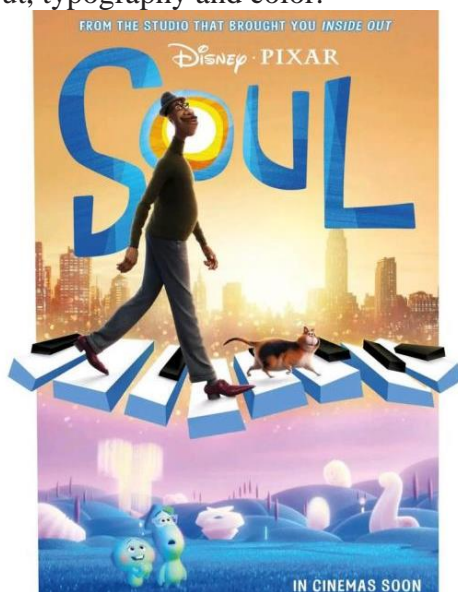


Figure 1: The poster of the film *Soul*

### 3.1 Verbal Mode

According to Halliday’s systemic functional grammar, language serves three metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal and textual function. The verbal mode of the poster is thus analyzed through these three lenses.

Firstly, the ideational function conveys the speaker’s experience of the real world and the consciousness of the inner world, realized primarily through the transitivity system, which includes material, mental, relational, behavioural, verbal, and existential processes. The top text, “FROM THE STUDIO THAT BROUGHT YOU *INSIDE OUT*”, encompasses a material process (“BROUGHT”) and a relational process (“FROM”), indicating an affiliative origin between the new film and the studio to effectively raise audience expectations. The co-producer names (“Disney” and “PIXAR”) leverage industry reputation to assure quality, while the prominent title *SOUL* creates a powerful visual impact. Additionally, “IN CINEMAS SOON” at the lower right corner implies an existential process declaring the imminent theatrical release.

Secondly, the interpersonal function reflects the participatory role of the speaker and the social relationship between communicators. A film poster acts as an interactive event between the producer and the audience. Among Halliday’s four basic speech functions (statement, question, offer, and command), the poster’s text predominantly adopts a declarative mood. It serves to present key information in an approachable and attractive manner, successfully drawing the audience’s attention to the upcoming release.

Finally, the textual function organizes language components into a discourse, making language coherent and enabling viewers to understand the complete information that the speaker intends to convey in a specific communicative context. According to Halliday, the textual function includes three subsystems: thematic structure, information structure, and cohesive system. From the perspective of thematic structure, the film title serves as the theme and core focus, while subsequent texts elaborate on background details. Regarding information structure, the well-known studio credits represent the given information, logically leading to the new information. Placing “IN CINEMAS SOON” at the end ensures viewers receive this critical new information after grasping the film’s basic premise.

## 3.2 Image Mode

The visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen has laid a theoretical foundation for the interpretation of visual symbols in image and provided a grammatical system for comprehensively interpreting image. Visual grammar includes representational meaning, interactive meaning and compositional meaning, and these three major meanings provide a reliable theory for analyzing the image mode.

### 3.2.1 The Representational Meaning of the Poster

Representational meaning portrays the relationships among characters, events, and circumstances within an image. Based on the presence or absence of vectors, these relations are broadly categorized into narrative and conceptual processes. This poster primarily employs a narrative representation. Depicted in dark top, grey trousers, and dark red leather shoes, the protagonist, Joe Gardner, is walking steadily forward alongside a cat. This dynamic posture situates the characters within an action process. By moving from the left side of the frame toward the right, Joe creates a distinct visual vector that guides the viewers' gaze. This forward momentum symbolically invites the audience to follow him into the film's constructed universe, indicating that the narrative plot will unfold around his personal progress and experiences.

Concurrently, the image includes reactional processes. On one level, Joe and the cat serve as reactors engaging in direct eye contact with the viewers, conveying positivity and breaking the conventional boundaries between the image and the audience. On another level, the two small elves at the bottom gaze upward at Joe; their lines of sight function as internal vectors, highlighting an unusual narrative connection. Furthermore, the poster incorporates conceptual representations. The piano keys dominating the center act as symbolic attributes, explicitly linking the protagonist's journey to music, while the bright sun embedded in the letter "O" of the title *SOUL* serves as a conceptual symbol radiating hope.

### 3.2.2 The Interactive Meaning of the Poster

Interactive meaning is used to express the interpersonal relationships within an image while simultaneously reflecting the viewers' attitudes toward the conveyed information. This meaning is primarily realized through four mechanisms: gaze, social distance, perspective, and modality. Gaze refers to a way in which the participants in the picture and the viewers of the picture create an imagination through eye contact. In visual grammar, direct eye contact constitutes a "demand" image, whereas its absence forms an "offer" image. This poster functions as a typical "demand" image, as the protagonist and the cat actively demand the audience's attention, attempting to establish an engaging connection.

Social distance conveys the degree of intimacy between the viewer and the participants, which is determined by the framing size. While close-up shots imply intimacy, wider frames suggest a more impersonal relationship. According to the different distances of framing, social distance can be divided into personal close distance, personal long distance, social close distance and social long distance. By capturing the protagonist's full body alongside the surrounding environment, this poster employs a social long distance. This specific framing allows the audience to objectively observe the film's broader context while maintaining a comfortable, observational boundary.

Perspective, encompassing both horizontal and vertical angles, reflects the viewer's involvement and power dynamics. In this poster, rather than looking down from a superior position, the protagonist is presented at a frontal, slightly oblique angle, as if walking side-by-side with the audience. This alignment fosters a sense of equality, approachability, and involvement. The vertical

perspective is divided into a level view, an upward view and a downward view. Vertically, the camera angle is strictly eye-level, further enhancing the picture's realism and intimacy. This level perspective bridges the gap between the audience, the protagonist, and the fantasy elements, facilitating a strong psychological resonance.

Finally, modality indicates the visual truthfulness or credibility of the depicted world. Based on the eight visual markers distinguished by Kress and van Leeuwen(1996)<sup>[2]</sup>, modalities can be divided into high modality, medium modality, and low modality. The poster exhibits an overall medium modality, driven by a deliberate stylistic contrast. The warm, highly saturated orange tones and the detailed architectural silhouettes of the urban background closely mimic physical reality, anchoring the audience in a familiar earthly environment. In stark contrast, the lower section constructs the surreal fantasy scene. The pastel blue hues, the simplified abstract shapes of the little soul characters, and the soft, ethereal glow intentionally depart from everyday realism. This compelling combination perfectly visualizes the intersection of the physical and spiritual realms, introducing a profound sense of philosophical mystery.

### 3.2.3 The Compositional Meaning of the Poster

Compositional meaning combines representational meaning and interactive meaning to jointly form a complete discourse. It encompasses three aspects: information value, salience and framing.

Information value assigns specific communicative meanings to the spatial placement of elements: left-right corresponds to given-new information, top-bottom represents ideal-real and center-margin distinguishes core from auxiliary information. Observing the poster, the visual focal point is undeniably the oversized, translucent blue word "SOUL" with a bright sun embedded in the letter "O". Occupying the center with the highest visual salience, it establishes the core theme. Positioned around this central anchor, the protagonist and the cat act as crucial margin elements. Horizontally, their placement on the left represents the given information, serving as a known baseline rooted in protagonist's earthly experiences. Their dynamic movement toward the relatively empty right side directs the audience's anticipation toward an unknown future, which precisely embodies the new information.

Vertically, the floating piano keys and a subtle color gradient act as an implicit frame, dividing the canvas into a profound metaphorical contrast. The upper section depicts a glowing, golden-hued cityscape representing the ideal, which embodies the prosperous peak of modern society and the pursuit of career success. Conversely, the lower pastel-blue fantasy scene subverts conventional cognition by functioning as the real. Here, the innocent little soul characters signify a return to the most authentic state of life, devoid of material factors. This grounded reality is further reinforced by the practical text "IN CINEMAS SOON" at the bottom right.

Salience highlights specific components through size, positioning, or color contrast. The title *SOUL* exhibits the highest salience due to its oversized font, unique shape, and highly saturated blue color, instantly establishing the film's core theme. Additionally, the protagonist attains secondary visual weight. His dark gray attire contrasts sharply against the vibrant orange and blue backgrounds, ensuring he remains a focal point within the complex layout.

Framing categorizes visual content through physical boundary lines or visual shifts. Although devoid of rigid physical frames, this poster employs a subtle, implicit framework. The warm urban background seamlessly transitions into the blue fantasy world via a color gradient and the central piano blocks. This soft framing effectively divides the visual space into two major realms reality and soul guiding the audience's cognitive processing and demonstrating profound compositional ingenuity.

### 3.3 Layout Mode

The layout mode is analyzed through two primary dimensions: verbal and verbal-visual. Spatially, the central placement of the word “SOUL” grants it a dual nature, functioning simultaneously as both textual information and a visual image. With its artistic typographical design, it clearly dominates the textual hierarchy. Regarding the verbal-visual layout, this central element acts as the visual anchor. It serves as the primary starting point for the audience’s interpretation, naturally guiding their gaze toward the surrounding details.

Above this focal point, two short lines of symmetrically centered text create a sense of structural harmony. Meanwhile, the text in the lower right corner (“IN CINEMAS SOON”) provides a clear yet unobtrusive visual contrast. This specific placement effectively counterbalances the dense urban background at the top and the intricate fantasy elements at the bottom. By adapting the text’s length and density to the available negative space, the layout prevents visual clutter, ultimately maintaining the balance and structural stability of the entire poster.

### 3.4 Typography Mode

Drawing on van Leeuwen’s (2006)<sup>[7]</sup> typographical grammar, the typography mode is analyzed through seven distinctive features: weight, expansion, slope, curvature, connectivity, orientation, and regularity.

In this poster, the most prominent text “SOUL” features thick, full strokes in an oversized, all-uppercase font. This heavy “weight” increases its visual salience, anchoring the core theme within the complex layout and immediately capturing the audience’s attention. In contrast, the peripheral texts adopt lighter weights, thinner lines, and standard font sizes. This deliberate contrast prevents the auxiliary texts from overshadowing the main title, establishing a clear visual hierarchy. Furthermore, the curved lines within the “SOUL” typography evoke a sense of fluidity, reflecting the abstract and wandering nature of a soul. The distinct font of “DISNEY” reinforces brand recognition, while the consistent use of capitalization across all auxiliary texts maintains a cohesive aesthetic throughout the composition.

### 3.5 Color Mode

Based on Kress and van Leeuwen’s color grammar(2002)<sup>[8]</sup>, the poster’s palette predominantly features orange, blue, and purple. By carefully employing varying levels of saturation and brightness, these hues construct distinct narrative spaces and convey complex emotional undertones. The highly saturated orange background evokes warmth and vitality, resembling bright sunlight. This chromatic choice immediately anchors the viewer in a positive, energetic depiction of the real world, establishing a familiar physical environment associated with the protagonist’s everyday life. In contrast, the lower section depicting the fantasy scene employs cool blue tones with reduced brightness. This creates a more introspective and mysterious atmosphere. The deliberate spatial juxtaposition of these warm and cool shades effectively guides the viewer’s gaze, clearly demarcating the visual boundary between the tangible physical reality and the ethereal spiritual realm.

Furthermore, purple acts as a crucial transitional hue where the warm and cool tones intersect. Given its position on the color spectrum, the subtle presence of purple provides a harmonizing effect that softens the sharp contrast between the highly saturated orange and blue, thereby preventing visual fatigue and maintaining overall chromatic balance. Additionally, the moderate saturation of the protagonist’s clothing and the cat’s fur is a deliberate design choice; it allows these central figures to stand out clearly against the vibrant backgrounds without appearing visually

disconnected from their surroundings. Ultimately, the use of complementary colors, specifically the sharp contrast between the blue central title and the warm orange background, ensures that the core thematic message remains the primary visual focus for the audience.

#### 4. The Collaborative Relationship between Modes

In multimodal discourse, meaning is rarely constructed through a single channel. Instead, the integration of various modes generates a combined effect that significantly surpasses their individual functions. Within this promotional poster, the verbal, image, layout, typography, and color modes work cooperatively. They reinforce and complement one another to convey rich thematic information and construct a cohesive visual narrative.

Specifically, the verbal mode explicitly establishes the film's core concept, which the image mode subsequently expands upon. Visual elements, including the glowing soul characters, unique plants, and soft clouds, construct a surreal spatial setting that visually echoes this central theme. Furthermore, the prominent title acts as a starting point for the viewer's reading path. It naturally directs the audience's gaze downward along the protagonist's figure, across the floating piano keys, and ultimately into the spiritual realm at the bottom.

Simultaneously, the color and layout modes jointly create a clear spatial hierarchy, effectively dividing the canvas into two distinct narrative spaces, namely the physical reality and the spiritual domain. Additionally, the artistic typography visually reflects the film's fantasy elements, maintaining overall stylistic consistency. Through this coordinated multimodal interaction, the poster successfully delivers essential narrative details while stimulating the viewers' curiosity and evoking a strong emotional resonance.

#### 5. Conclusion

Grounded in the theoretical framework of multimodal functional stylistics and visual grammar, this research systematically explores the promotional poster of the animated film *Soul*. The analysis reveals that the verbal, image, layout, typography, and color modes do not function in isolation. Instead, they interact cooperatively to construct a cohesive visual discourse.

Specifically, the visual vectors and character depictions in the image mode establish the narrative foundation, while the verbal mode provides clear informational cues through strategic placement and sizing. Furthermore, the typography, layout, and color choices create a distinct spatial hierarchy. This deliberate design effectively contrasts the tangible physical world with the ethereal spiritual realm. Through this coordinated inter-semiotic synergy, the poster successfully translates the film's philosophical theme regarding the meaning of life into an intuitive visual experience. Ultimately, this research enriches empirical studies within multimodal stylistics. It also offers practical references and analytical perspectives for future film poster design and visual communication strategies.

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