

Advertising Horror: A Multimodal Discourse Analysis of Horror Film Posters

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Abstract

This study examines horror film posters, an essential tool in a film promotional campaign, to investigate how the genre's central appeal of horror is constructed within the constraints of a single static page to "sell" the film. A metafunctional analysis is conducted on 20 top-grossing American horror film posters, using Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) visual grammar for visual images and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) systemic functional linguistics for taglines. Focusing on visual character depiction, image-viewer relations, and tagline analysis, the article indicates that although visual images and taglines appear independent with limited correlation between the two transitivity systems, these two components employ similar strategies to construct horror, which are: provocation, viewer involvement, and heightened realism. These common strategies suggest a special way of interaction between the two modes: they convey a unified concept without explicitly repeating information. These strategies also reflect a subtler approach to horror that shifts the focus from external horror to internal psychological disturbance, making the posters more interactive, aesthetically appealing, and suitable for public display.

Keywords: multimodal discourse analysis, movie posters, horror, visual grammar, systemic functional linguistics

1. Introduction

In the world of cinema, horror films have long captivated audiences, gradually evolving from a niche genre into one of the most commercially successful categories. They currently rank as the sixth most popular film genre (Statista, 2025). In North America, the genre's market share has risen significantly from approximately 4% a decade ago to 11% in 2024 and 17% in 2025 (South China Morning Post, 2025). This consistent growth in both market share and box-office performance reflects the strong appeal of horror cinema, which lies primarily in its ability in evoking fear, dread, and fascination, as horror films are mainly designed to terrify, shock, and disgust audiences using visual and auditory techniques (Cherry, 2009).

The growing popularity of horror films has stimulated scholarly interest in the study of horror in cinematic and media discourse. Horror in movies has been approached from different perspectives, from cultural impact and psychology, to themes across media. Different studies have addressed various aspects of horror including the philosophy of horror (Carroll, 2003), the audience reception and psychological responses to horror films (Martin, 2019), the employment of sound and music in horror (Hayward, 2009), and the marketing of horror cinema (Hantke, 2004), among others. Aligning with this trend, the present study examines horror from the perspective of multimodal discourse analysis, investigating how horror is multimodally constructed for advertising purposes through the interaction of language and visual images in horror film posters.

Horror is generally defined as a "spontaneous response to shocking visual stimulus" (Ceirus, 2015, as cited in Martin, 2019, p. 3) and as "a compound of terror and revulsion" (Kawin, 2012, p. 3). Distinguished from real-life horror, horror in films and media is called "art horror" (Carroll, 1987), which is imagined and brings viewers to the made-up world where fears are intensified but controllable. Previous studies have also identified core elements that create horrors in films, which generically include characters marked by physical, psychological, or spiritual deformities; narratives structured around suspense, surprise, and shock; and visual strategies that oscillate between the dread of not seeing and the horror of seeing (Corrigan & White, 2015).

Despite extensive studies on horror films themselves, the construction of horror in movie posters remains comparatively underexplored. As a central component of a film's marketing campaign, posters are designed to arouse interest and

persuade viewers by highlighting the genre's primary appeal of creating horror. In this sense, the construction of horror is the main content of horror film posters. However, unlike other promotional materials such as synopses, trailers, or the films themselves, posters must "sell" a movie within the constraints of a single static page, thus relying mainly on the strategic interplay of language and visual images. These constraints give rise to distinctive practices in advertising horror in movie posters that warrant further investigation.

Against this backdrop, this study aims to examine how horror is constructed and communicated through horror film posters despite these semiotic and spatial limitations. Given that box-office revenue can, to some extent, reflect the effectiveness of posters within a broader promotional campaign, the study focuses on posters of top-grossing horror films to investigate how their semiotic design successfully evokes and advertises horror. Specifically, the study addresses the following research question: "How do top-grossing horror film posters employ language and visual images to construct and advertise horror?"

The article begins with a brief review of previous multimodal studies of movie posters to establish a relevant analytical framework, which is subsequently elaborated in the methodology section. It then presents an in-depth metafunctional analysis of visual images and taglines, focusing on the visual representation of characters, image-viewer relations, and the use of taglines to reinforce and integrate these two dimensions.

2. Multimodal Studies on Movie Posters

As movie posters convey messages through a combination of imagery, text, color and spatial arrangement, they have been widely recognized as suitable objects of multimodal discourse analysis, which "attends to the full repertoire of resources that people use to communicate and represent phenomena and experiences" (Jewitt, 2014, p. 127). Despite this suitability, movie posters have received comparatively less attention than other forms of advertising and promotional material, with only a limited body of research examining this type of multimodal discourse.

One of the earliest studies in this area is Maiorani (2007, 2014), which analyzed slogans and images across three series of poster campaigns for *The Matrix* film trilogy in order to identify their advertising strategies. The study adopted Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) systemic functional linguistics (SFL) to examine the slogans, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar (VG) to analyze visual images. Another prominent study is Chen and Gao (2013), who proposed a model for the multimodal analysis of movie posters adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG. Although some terms were renamed and some categories simplified, their model still closely followed the original VG framework. The practicality of the proposed model was demonstrated through its application to eleven posters of popular films in Chen and Gao (2013).

Following Chen and Gao (2013), a group of studies has been conducted to analyze individual film posters from different genres, including the action film *Captain America: Civil War* (Rondon & Heberle, 2022), the Chinese action comedy *Little Big Soldier* (Yin & Hassan, 2021), the romantic drama *The Reader* (2008) (Bedi, 2019), the Chinese comedy *Hi, Mom* (2021) (Peng, 2022), and the three Academy Award-winning animated films *Toy Story 3* (2010), *Frozen* (2013), and *Zootopia* (2016) (Iftikhar et al., 2019). Notably, all of these studies employed the original framework of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG or its adapted version. Other studies adopting a similar approach but employing larger datasets include Nguyen (2021), who examined 15 top-grossing romantic comedy posters; and Dewi and Khristianto (2022), who analyzed nine posters from the *Spider-Man* superhero film series.

The review of previous studies on movie posters identifies three major research gaps. First, although they examine posters from a range of film genres - including action, romance, and animation - horror movie posters have received little or no attention. Second, these studies, with relatively small samples, mainly serve as exploratory inquiries into the application of multimodality to the analysis of movie posters. Although a case-study design enables detailed descriptions of multimodal phenomena, it is not enough for a holistic theoretical development and patterns of meaning-making across posters remain underexplored. A few studies employ larger datasets, such as Nguyen (2021) and Dewi and Khristianto (2022); however, these studies focused on romantic comedy and action posters, thus the patterns of semiotic choices in horror movie posters have not been revealed.

The third major gap concerns the limited attention to linguistic components in movie posters and, consequently, the insufficient examination of the interaction between language and visual images. As the review indicates, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG or its adaptation is employed in almost all previously mentioned research. While VG excels in examining meaning-making in visual images and their capacity to reflect the content of the movie, there is concern about the incorporation of verbal elements into the framework. In fact, taglines were mentioned in several studies, e.g., Bedi (2019), and Rondon and Heberle (2022), but mainly as clues for cross-checking interpretations of visual images. For this purpose, the analysis mainly focused on the semantic meaning of taglines without a systematic analysis of linguistic features.

In addition to identifying three major research gaps, the review also indicates the potential of employing SFL to compensate for the drawbacks of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG in analyzing verbal components in movie posters. Specifically, Maiorani (2014) employed Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004) SFL to analyze the verbal semiotics realized by the slogans, and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG to analyze the visual semiotics and discuss the interplay between these two components. With a similar approach, Dewi and Khristianto (2022) examined the use of visual and verbal resources in nine posters from the superhero movie *Spider-Man*, using Royce's (2007) framework of Intersemiotic complementarity, which combines Halliday's (1994) SFL with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) VG. However, this study only focused on interpersonal meanings, analyzing mood and residue of movie titles and taglines and interactive meanings of visual signs. These studies demonstrate the feasibility and practicality of integrating these two frameworks for a more comprehensive and systematic analysis of movie posters. The present study, accordingly, employs this approach to analyze horror movie posters.

3. Method

The data for analysis include the official theatrical release posters of 20 top-grossing American horror films between 2000 and 2022. These films were released globally and achieved great success at both domestic and international box offices. Such box office revenue may be considered an indicator of the overall success of the whole promotional campaign, and to a certain extent, of the posters as one of the promotional materials. Additionally, the choice of one specific country (i.e., the United States) ensures that the selected posters share substantial similarities in terms of context, including target audience, purpose, and nature of information. The United States was chosen due to the leading role of Hollywood in the world of cinema. Furthermore, the period of 2000–2022 was selected to minimize the impact of technological changes, such as advances in computer generated imagery, on the recurring patterns of poster design. Finally, among different types of posters, e.g. teaser posters, character posters or review posters, the study concentrated on theatrical release posters to maintain consistency in their context and purposes. As a main or final poster designed for a movie, this type of poster often includes the fullest information about the movie. The list of 20 selected samples, coded from H1 to H20, can be found in the Appendix.

In order to examine the construction of horror in movie posters, the analysis focused on the meaning-making in the visual images and the taglines. Although a theatrical release poster may include other components such as actors/actresses, titles, and billing blocks, these components are not directly related to the horror content, thus outside the scope of analysis. Visual image is the dominant semiotic mode in a movie poster that not only attracts attention and leaves a lasting impression on viewers but also captures the film's essence by conveying genre, tone, and story. Meanwhile, taglines are considered a film's slogans (Mahlknecht, 2015), and thus condense an advertising message into a brief, repeatable, and memorable statement (Arens & Weigold, 2020). These two components work together to advertise the films' key selling points - in this case, the evocation of horror. Therefore, the analysis aims to identify the meaning-making of these components through metafunctional analysis to explore how they are designed to construct horror for advertising purposes. Specifically, Kress and van Leeuwen's (2021) VG was used for the interpretation of visual images, while Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL was applied to the taglines, allowing a detailed account of ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings across modes. Each mode was analyzed separately but the results were compared to examine their interplay and reach a fuller understanding of the construction of horror in both modes. The analytical framework with specific aspects of analysis in each metafunction is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Analytical framework for the present study

VISUAL IMAGE		TAGLINE
Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) Visual grammar		Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL
Representational meaning		Experiential meaning
Narrative structure	Conceptual structure	Transitivity
Participants, processes & circumstances		Participants, processes & circumstances
Interactive meaning		Interpersonal meaning
Contact, social distance, attitude & validity		Mood & residue
Compositional meaning		Textual meaning
Salience, framing & information value		Theme & rheme

The relation between taglines and visual images was examined through metafunctional correlation and the rhetorical functions of the two components. The analysis of metafunctional correlation focused primarily on representational meaning, with a comparison of the transitivity systems in the two modes. As shown in Table 1, these transitivity systems

are highly compatible, revealing how the two components construe experience through their choices of participants, processes, and circumstances. The comparison of these choices is therefore feasible and useful for revealing how taglines and visual images present aspects of the movie's content. Building on this analysis of representational meaning, the study also drew on concepts from Mann and Thompson's (1988) Rhetorical Structure Theory (RST) to examine the relationship between the two components in terms of the rhetorical relations they establish with each other and with the poster as a whole. While SFL addresses functional principles of the internal organization of semantics and lexicogrammar, RST conceptualizes relations between the components in terms of their communicative functions rather than their formal properties, thus providing a discourse-level perspective that complements SFL's micro-level analysis (Mann & Matthiessen, 1991). The complementarity of these two approaches enables a more comprehensive analysis of how taglines and visual images work together to construct meaning and promote the movie.

Although an element of subjectivity is unavoidable in discourse interpretation, several measures were taken to increase the validity and reliability of the research. Validity was enhanced through intertextuality. As movie posters are often accompanied by other promotional materials, such as movie introductions, or trailers, these discourses may provide useful information for interpreting the posters. Reliability was enhanced through intercoder agreement, or cross-checking (Guest et al., 2012). Other researchers were trained in the analytical framework and randomly checked selected parts of the analysis to review the coding and interpretation. As the analytical framework is relatively straightforward, the intercoder agreement was above 90 percent and disagreements were resolved through discussion with the author.

4. Results

Although the analysis followed all categories in the above analytical framework across the three metafunctions, the findings show that horror is primarily constructed through three main aspects: the visual representation of the characters, the image-viewer relations and the use of taglines to support these two aspects. These three issues, therefore, will be presented in detail in this section.

4.1 Visual Representation of the Characters

4.1.1 Strong Emphasis on the "Evil"

Horror films typically involve an evil presence, channeled via a human, a creature, or a supernatural force, that disrupts normality and must be opposed and overcome (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2016). As the main source of horror, the evils are often highlighted in the posters through both the minimal selected represented participants and the poster composition.

Horror posters predominantly depict a limited number of participants, with one or two being the most common configuration observed in 15 out of 20 samples. Notably, when a single participant is presented, they consistently represent the antagonist or the "evil." In contrast, posters with two participants often portray both the antagonist and their victim. In the remaining five posters, the number of participants increases to include additional victims, thereby featuring more supporting characters. These patterns suggest that foregrounding evil entities, the primary sources of horror, is a central strategy in horror posters.

The evils are represented in three different ways. First, they are depicted in their true, physical form in eight posters. In these portrayals, their appearance often highlights their distinctive features, offering visual cues about key details and themes of the film. Another way of depiction is through symbolic rather than direct representation, as observed in seven posters. For example, objects associated with the evil entities, such as red balloons in *It* (H1, H2), a crucifix in *The Conjuring 2* (H7), or a ring in *The Ring* (H14), become iconic symbols to suggest their presence. Finally, when the antagonist is intangible or challenging to depict visually, the focus shifts to the victims, whose facial expressions and gestures imply the existence of the evil entities. For example, in the series of *A Quiet Place* (H5, H9), the deadly alien creatures that hunt humans by sound are not explicitly shown in the posters. Instead, the victims' terrified expressions and gestures, such as covering their mouths to maintain silence, suggest the creatures' presence and trigger a sense of danger.

The emphasis on the characters, mainly the evils, is further highlighted through the posters' composition. The evils, when presented, are consistently the most salient element with big size, foreground placement and contrasts in color and tonal value. Moreover, the limited number of participants also leads to the frequent use of single framing and center-margin structure, which further highlights the unity and dominance of the participants. Primary figures - typically the protagonist or antagonist - are centrally positioned to enhance their visual prominence, while secondary characters or background elements are relegated to the margins, creating a clear visual hierarchy.

Other compositional structures are employed to reveal the characters' features without disrupting this visual unity. For example, two-framing structures are only used in three posters (H3, H4, H12) to intensify the sense of division within a single evil entity. The explicit use of framing lines highlights the contrast between the surface appearance and the underlying demonic forms of the antagonist. Similarly, top-bottom and left-right structures are combined with center-margin to present the distinctive features of the characters. While the former is commonly used to express power

differences, which is in line with the choice of vertical camera angles, the latter is typically employed to highlight binary oppositions or conflict without implying a power imbalance. For example, in H1 and H3, evil entities are shown occupying the upper part of the frame, suggesting their dominance over victims placed below. Meanwhile, the left-right structure is used to create a light-dark dichotomy, enhancing the "half-seen" effect observed in posters such as H4, H11, and H18. This visual contrast between the known (light) and the unknown (dark) stimulates viewers' imagination, thereby evoking their sense of fear and uncertainty.

4.1.2 Symbolic Representation of Characters

The symbolic depiction of characters is evident in the predominance of symbolic processes, as other types of representational processes are used far less frequently and are often combined with symbolic meanings.

Action processes appear in only half of the posters and primarily depict the actions of victims rather than antagonists. Evils' actions occur in only four posters (H1, H2, H13, H15) and are often presented with non-threatening imagery, for example, offering a balloon (H1, H2) or hugging (H13). These actions aim to evoke symbolic meanings rather than to directly frighten viewers. In contrast, victims' actions are frequently used to heighten fear of the evil through conventional gestures such as hanging from a tree (H6), jumping from a window (H7), or maintaining silence (H5). Notably, these actions are often presented symbolically rather than literally. For example, in H6, the action of hanging is implied only through an image of a noose and its shadow on the ground rather than being depicted directly. Similarly, in H7, the victim's suicide is represented indirectly through a levitating figure near a window, suggesting the influence of supernatural forces. In general, horror posters rely on symbolic conventions to trigger prediction and imagination in viewers rather than directly depicting actual scenes of horror or violence.

Similarly, reactional processes only appear in 14 out of 20 horror posters, despite the frequent inclusion of human participants. This is due to distinctive forms of participant representation in the horror genre, including figures shown from behind (H1, H7), silhouettes (H6), partial depictions (H2 – with only a hand), sleeping figures (H19) or symbolic representation through objects (H14 – a ring). These special ways of depiction do not present both eyelines and facial expressions of characters. In the posters that do reveal faces, the facial expressions display distinctive patterns: evils are often depicted with emotionless or blank expressions (e.g., H3, H10, H12), while victims often display typical looks of panic or terror (e.g., H5, H9, H13, H16, H20).

Analytical processes are also used to portray characters, but in ways that are typical of the horror genre. First, these processes do not primarily focus on characters' physical appearance, such as their clothing or hairstyles, but instead foreground iconic objects associated with the evils, reminding the audience of their presence even without their direct visual depiction. Examples include the red balloons from the *It* series (H1, H2), a crucifix (H3, H7), or the doll from the *Annabelle* series (H8, H11, H16). Another noteworthy trend is the deliberate use of shadows to create the "half-seen" effect commonly found in horror posters. The antagonists are often obscured by darkness, mist, or intervening objects, which results in only partial visibility, such as half of a face (H4, H11, H12), a hand (H1, H2, H7), or a silhouette (H6, H7, H10). These partial representations can activate the viewer's imagination, increasing the sense of mystery, unease, and fear of the unknown, thus intensifying the psychological horror.

In addition to their combination with other processes, symbolic processes also occur in the form of symbolic suggestive attributes, employing elements such as color and lighting to evoke the "mood" or "vibe" of the genre. Specifically, horror posters frequently rely on dark, muted color palettes, such as black, dark red, and grey, to create a sense of fear and curiosity. In this way, color further reinforces the horror atmosphere of the poster.

In short, action, reactional, and analytical processes in horror posters are frequently combined with symbolic processes to present the evils either through symbolic icons or through victims' panicked facial expressions and gestures. When the evils do appear in their real form, they are often depicted with blank, emotionless faces in portrait styles or through a half-seen effect. These types of representation, combined with color and lighting, evoke viewers' imagination and anticipation of the evils rather than depicting the real scary and violent scenes.

4.1.3 Provocation as a Key Strategy for Constructing Horror

The analysis of the visual representation of characters highlights provocation as a key strategy for constructing and communicating horror.

First, the visual images aim at presenting the main characters, particularly the antagonists, as a key selling point of the film, without disclosing full plot details. This approach not only avoids revealing spoilers but also serves as a rhetorical strategy that prioritizes intriguing over informing. This strategy is supported by psychological principles that emphasize emotional engagement and curiosity as more effective drivers of audience interest than mere plot disclosure. Specifically, according to the psychological theory of "information gap" by Loewenstein (1994), curiosity is triggered when there is a gap between what people know and what they want to know. By presenting suggestive but incomplete information through

evocative images or partial character representation, the posters motivate viewers to seek additional information, such as trailers or reviews, or ultimately to watch the movie. In other words, rather than functioning as comprehensive narrative summaries, posters serve as psychological hooks, activating the viewer's desire to fill in the missing details.

Second, fear is evoked through symbolic imagery rather than explicit brutality. Evils and disturbing scenes are often represented using symbolic processes, either through related symbolic objects or through victims' expressions of terror, rather than direct portrayals of violence. This use of symbolism not only enhances the aesthetic quality of the posters, making them suitable for public display, but also contributes to the visual branding of antagonists through recurring symbolic icons. Moreover, the emphasis on fearful expressions, especially through the eyes and faces of victims, shifts the focus from external horror to internal psychological disturbance.

Finally, psychological fear is further intensified through the use of mystery, achieved by the employment of darkness, mist, and the "half-seen" effect. By creating a moody and atmospheric vibe, the posters stimulate the viewer's imagination and anticipation, thereby effectively evoking a fear of the unknown. This approach also aligns with the visual strategies commonly found in horror films that oscillate between the dread of not seeing and the horror of seeing (Corrigan & White, 2015).

In summary, these posters are not intended to shock audiences with brutal images; instead, with a reliance on symbolism and mystery, they can effectively evoke fear and unease in viewers while remaining suitable for public display and more broadly accessible to diverse moviegoers, including children and adolescents.

4.2 Image-viewer Relations

The analysis of interactive meanings reveals distinct trends in depicting the characters and their social relations with viewers. The choice of interactive resources largely depends on the types of participants represented in the posters, including those with only the evils, only the victims and both types of characters. These three major trends and their ways of involving the audience are summarized in Figure 1.

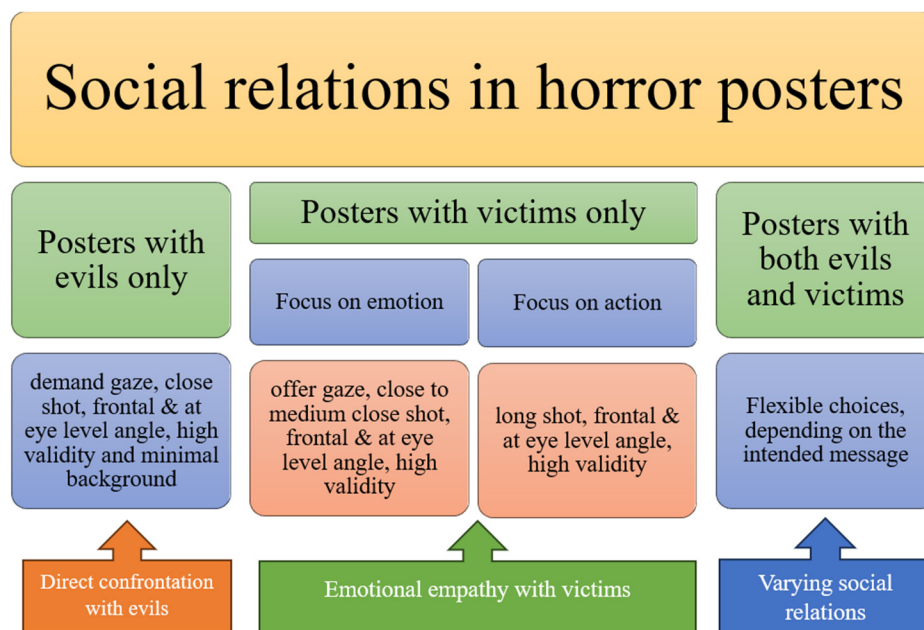


Figure 1. Trends in presenting social relations in horror posters

4.2.1 The Sense of Direct Confrontation in Posters Featuring Only "Evils"

Among the 20 horror posters analyzed, eight exclusively depict demonic figures. Of these, six adopt a portrait-style composition that highlights conceptual representations (H3, H4, H10, H11, H12, H14), while two employ a narrative structure with implied actions (H2, H17). Despite variations in structure, these posters share several key interactive visual features: demand gaze, close shot, frontal and at eye level angles, high validity, and minimal or no background, which collectively create a sense of direct confrontation between the viewers and the evils.

First, intense confrontation is directly reflected through the choice of demand gaze and frontal angle in depicting the evils. As suggested in Kress and van Leeuwen (2021, p. 117), these choices explicitly address the viewers with a visual 'you' and do something to them with an 'image act'. In these cases, rather than positioning viewers as passive observers, these visual choices draw them into the scene and force them to face the demonic figure. Even where the participant's eyes are

not visible, e.g., H2, the hand gesture of giving the balloons implies that viewers are targeted by the demon, which evokes discomfort and suspense in the audience.

Second, the fear of facing the demon is intensified through the choice of close shots. Normally, close shots simulate intimate distance (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021); however, in horror, such intimacy becomes threatening. When a demon enters the viewer's personal space, its presence becomes intrusive, leaving no room for viewers to emotionally distance themselves from what they see, thus heightening their fear and claustrophobia. Moreover, a closer look at the demon may exaggerate disturbing details, making the evil presence more vivid and menacing. For example, close-up shots foreground cracked skin and blackened eyes in H3 and H12, making the devils fiercer and more dangerous.

Third, the represented participant is depicted from an eye-level angle, placing viewers on equal footing with the character. However, rather than creating a sense of comfort with no power difference (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021), the eye-level angle in horror brings threat: viewers cannot look down on the figure, nor can they look up to it for salvation. Combined with close shots, this choice creates a sense that viewers are trapped with the demon and placed in direct confrontation with it.

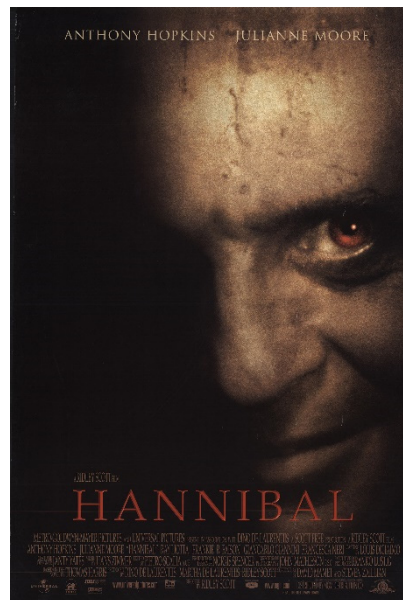


Figure 2. H4 – An example of posters showing direct confrontation through interactive visual features

Finally, the posters use high validity cues, including sharp focus, naturalistic facial lighting, and fine-grained detail, to create a sense of realism, making the evils appear more credible and disturbing. The higher the validity, the more believable the horror feels. Notably, the demons are often depicted in a dark, decontextualized background, which may slightly reduce the level of validity. However, the darkness may instead increase the sense of mystery and evoke primal fears of the unknown, inviting the viewer's imagination to fill in unsettling gaps.

Overall, these horror posters strategically employ interactive visual resources to draw viewers into the world of the evils and bring them a heightened sense of proximity and confrontation. In this way, the posters collapse the boundary between the evil and the viewer, immersing the audience in a heightened and simulated state of fear and vulnerability.

4.2.2 Emotional Empathy in Posters Featuring Only the Victims

In another eight horror posters that depict only victims, interactive visual resources are employed to emphasize either the victims' emotions or their actions. In both approaches, the posters aim to capture a moment of heightened intensity that emotionally implicates the viewer.

The first group focuses on the victims' emotional states and is typically characterized by close to medium close shots, offer gaze, and frontal, eye-level angles (H5, H9, H13, H18, H20). The close to medium close shots allow full depiction of the victims' feelings through facial expressions, gestures and some contextual details. This choice creates a balance between allowing viewers to share the victims' experience and maintaining their position as external observers. On the one hand, this size of frames helps to create a personal social relationship with viewers, placing them in close emotional proximity to the victims. This intimacy is reinforced by the frontal and eye-level angle, which places viewers on equal footing with the victims. With these choices, viewers can relate to the victims' experiences and face the danger alongside them. On the other hand, while viewers can sympathize with the victims' feelings, they remain passive observers who cannot disturb the story. The offer gazes present the victims' immersion in their fearful world, threatened by the evils.

Their look to the side implies the presence of the evils and increases mystery and fear of the unknown. In short, although viewers do not interact directly with the participants, as in posters featuring evil entities, they can place themselves in the position of the victims through their intimate relationship and experience their fear and horror.

In the second group that emphasizes the victims' actions, the background is further highlighted with long shots, frontal and at-eye-level angles (H6, H8, H19). Similar to the first group, the choice of frontal camera angles suggests direct involvement, turning viewers into witnesses of the frightening scenes. The long shot is then used as a distinctive strategy to create horror in these posters. First, this size of frame not only shows the characters but also extends the viewers' vision to include the surrounding environment, using the background to represent the horror in a symbolic and cinematic way. For example, H6 depicts a hanging victim but the death is not represented in a realistic way with brutal and bloody details. Instead, it is suggested by the noose on the tree and the shadow on the ground. This presentation reduces the violence of the poster but inspires more dreadful imagination and heightens the sense of mystery. Second, the long shot also highlights the contrast between the small victim and the expansive, threatening environment, emphasizing the weakness and vulnerability of the victim while exaggerating the power of the supernatural entity. The panorama view of the scene also makes viewers feel overwhelmed by the scale of the scene and the pressure experienced by the victims. Finally, this long shot places the viewers far away from the victims. This greater distance creates a sense of unease and helplessness in viewers when they can witness the whole scene but cannot intervene. Overall, in this group of posters, interaction is created not between viewers and characters but between viewers and the overwhelming and frightening scenes mainly depicted in the background.



H9



H8

Figure 3. Examples of posters featuring only victims focusing on victim's emotional states (H9) and focusing on victim's actions (H8)

Despite the differences in the depiction of horror, both groups of posters use high validity to construct scenes that appear to unfold directly before the viewer. The first group focuses on the realistic portrayal of victims with naturalistic color, lighting, depth, high detail and contextualization, which helps viewers feel the authenticity of their feelings. Meanwhile, in the second group, although the characters appear less detailed due to long distance, the scene still maintains a high degree of visual realism. From the realistic representation of spatial relationships to the detailed depiction of individual elements, such as clouds in the sky or leaves on the ground, the posters bring viewers to the real scenes, exaggerating their feelings. In both groups, high validity is used not merely to make the images look real, but also to make the depicted horror feel real. It heightens the viewer's immersion by creating a world that feels tense and highly believable: the closer the world resembles ours, the more effective the fear becomes. In this way, validity functions as a rhetorical strategy to bridge the gap between fiction and the viewer's own sense of the real world.

4.2.3 Varying Social Relations in Posters Featuring Both “Evils” and Victims

When the posters include both evils and victims (H1, H7, H15 and H16), their intended promotional message determines the representation of social relations.



Figure 4. Horror posters featuring both evils and victims

Despite the presence of both the evil, Annabelle, and the victims, H16 actually focuses on the conceptual representation of the evil. Annabelle is placed at front, suggesting dominance and control over the victims, who are represented through narrative processes in the background. The main purpose of the poster is, thus, to foreground the conceptual representation of Annabelle; therefore, it adopts the portrait style with a demand gaze, medium close shot, frontal and at eye level angle. Although the evil is realistically depicted with a high level of detail, overall, the poster uses low naturalistic validity with high saturation of the reds, stylized lighting, and no background. These choices align with those seen in posters depicting only evil entities and create a similar effect.

H1 and H7, despite being from different series, follow a similar trend which is in line with posters focusing on victims' actions. A sense of being overwhelmed by the expansive scenes and of helplessly witnessing them is also created through the use of long shots, eye level angles and high validity. However, one striking feature of these two posters is the use of the back view. The victims are walking away from the viewers toward danger or even death and the viewers are subtly positioned behind them, watching the moment unfold. This creates a witness perspective that evokes helplessness: we know what is coming, but we cannot warn or stop it. More importantly, we can be the next person in line, which puts the viewers into the position of the victims, followed by the evils and experience their horror. The back view thus functions as a distinctive visual strategy for constructing horror in these posters.

H15 similarly follows the visual conventions of depicting victims' actions, using an offer gaze, long shot, frontal and eye level angles. However, unlike the other posters, H15 uses low validity, making the poster reminiscent of Renaissance relief sculpture. The use of color and lighting does not mimic reality, instead reinforcing the cinematic, stylized horror aesthetic. Rather than depicting a real event, the poster refers to an eternal struggle or mythic conflict, presenting horror not as a specific scene but as an enduring, conceptual truth. Here, the validity is not just about realness or truth but about conceptual truth, turning horror into an idea, not just a scene.

4.2.4 Viewer Involvement and High Realism as Strategies to Create Horror

The analysis of interactive meanings reveals two major strategies to create horror, including viewer involvement and high realism. Viewer involvement is employed in all types of posters to heighten the emotional impact of fear. In posters with only the evils, viewers are targeted by the demon and directly experience the fear of confrontation; conversely, in posters with only victims, viewers become witnesses, either empathizing with the victims' terror or helplessly observing their impending doom. In all cases, horror posters frequently employ high validity as a deliberate strategy to heighten realism and immerse the audience in the fearful world. In this way, these visual images bridge the gap between the film's world and the viewer's lived experience, thereby creating a heightened sense of dread, anxiety, and anticipation. Low validity, by contrast, is reserved for rare cases in which horror is presented not as an immediate threat but as a symbolic or mythic concept, evoking a more abstract, conceptual form of fear.

4.3 Taglines Analysis

4.3.1 Three Types of Taglines and Their Functions in the Posters

Horror posters make significant use of taglines, with the employment of 16 taglines in 20 posters, comprising a total of

21 clause simplexes. Of these, five are elliptical structures, including noun phrases (e.g., “The next true story from the case files of Ed and Lorraine Warren” – H7) and elliptical clauses (e.g., “Based on a true story” – H20). In such cases, the full clause was reconstructed from contextual clues for metafunctional analysis. For instance, H7 can be interpreted as “(The *Conjuring 2* is) the next true story from the case files of Ed and Lorraine Warren”, while H20 can be understood as “(The *Conjuring* is) based on a true story.”

Based on the metafunctional analysis, the taglines are categorized into three main groups, each emphasizing a different element: (1) the characters, (2) the film itself, and (3) the viewers. These three categories are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Three types of taglines

Type of tagline	Example	Frequency	Typical features	RST function
Character-based tagline	“Sooner or later they will find you.” (H18)	5/16	Material, relational and mental processes; declarative mood	Elaboration
Movie-based tagline	“Based on the true case files of the Warrens” (H6)	5/16	Elliptical structures, relational processes, no circumstance	Summary or evaluation
Viewer-based tagline	“You’ll float too.” (H1)	6/16	Material, relational and mental processes; declarative & imperative mood	Motivation

The first group of taglines centers on the characters, who serve as participants in the transitivity system. These taglines mainly function as elaborative extensions to the visual narrative by providing additional information about characters in the images, especially aspects that cannot be easily visualized. Additional information includes character actions through material processes, features or identities through relational processes, internal attributes through mental processes and circumstances related to location, time and place. Their linguistic structures reinforce this purpose through the frequent use of declarative mood, which is consistent with their informative function.

While the first group of taglines centers on the characters, the second group focuses on the film as a whole, either by offering an evaluation, describing the film as “true” (H6, H7, H20), or by summarizing its narrative content (H9). As these taglines often appear in elliptical forms, they are typically combined with the movie title to form a complete idea. For example, the tagline “Based on a true story” (H20) is combined with the title to form the full structure: “(The *Conjuring* is) based on a true story.” In this way, the implied verbs are typically forms of “be” or “have,” categorizing the processes as relational and the mood as declarative. These taglines do not contain circumstances, and their elliptical structures usually serve as the themes of the clauses.

The final group of viewer-based taglines explicitly involves viewers through the use of the second-person pronoun “you” as a participant in declarative clauses, or through the use of imperative mood, creating a direct interaction with viewers. Although material and relational processes also occur, representing actions and characteristics respectively, this group is distinguished by the prominent use of mental processes, which refer to internal experiences such as “know”, “see” or “discover”. In this sense, the tagline serves as a promise of what the audience will feel, think, or experience while watching the film. The use of circumstances in this group further specifies this promised experience by adding contextual details such as time, manner, or cause. Therefore, the RST function of this group is motivation that stimulates the viewers’ curiosity and interest in the film.

4.3.2 Strategies to Create Horror in Taglines

While all three types of taglines appear in horror posters, they are consistently used to evoke authentic feelings of horror by either engaging the audience in direct confrontation with the evils or by highlighting the “true” plot.

Direct interaction with viewers is explicitly realized in the frequent use of viewer-based taglines with a motivation function in six out of 16 horror taglines. As previously noted, in viewer-based taglines, the pronoun “you” is mentioned explicitly in declarative clauses or implicitly in the imperative mood, so “you” has become a participant and even the highlighted theme. This positions viewers as participants who are directly involved in the horror scenes. Furthermore, with the popular employment of mental processes, viewer-based taglines function as a promise of what viewers will feel, think, or experience while watching the film. In this way, horror taglines break the boundary between the viewer and the poster, making the audience a part of the poster.

Viewer engagement is also evident in character-based taglines, despite their primary focus on describing characters. In these cases, the characters are often positioned in direct relation to the viewers through the use of the pronoun “you.” For example, in “If they hear you, they hunt you” (H5), “you” functions as the Phenomenon, while in “Sooner or later they will find you” (H18), it serves as the Goal. Both participant roles position the viewers as the target of the evils. In “Possess them all” (H16), although the implied Actor is the character Annabelle, the imperative mood implicitly addresses the viewer, suggesting their involvement in the unfolding events. Thus, even within character-based taglines, a sense of direct interaction is maintained between the evils and the viewers, intensifying the horror by drawing the viewer into the experience.

Although movie-based taglines do not show direct interaction with viewers, they enhance the horror experience through the frequent use of evaluative language that emphasizes the authenticity of the story. Phrases such as “The next true story from the case files of Ed and Lorraine Warren” (H7), “based on a true story” (H20) or “the story that shocked America” (H20) serve to reinforce the perceived realness of the plot. This appeal to truthfulness heightens the sense of fear by blurring the boundary between fiction and reality.

In conclusion, with a focus on viewer engagement and truthfulness, horror taglines aim to “sell” a first-hand experience of the horror rather than merely describing the narrative content. In this way, the taglines function as a promise of what viewers will feel, think, or experience while watching the movie. These posters thus rely on taglines to collapse the boundary between narrative and audience, making the viewer an active participant in the horror experience.

4.3.3 Relation between Taglines and Visual Images

The metafunctional analysis reveals limited correlation between the transitivity systems of taglines and visual images. Overlaps in participants are only observed in character-based taglines, where both modes depict the same character. The most direct form of this connection is repetition, using third-person pronouns (e.g., they, them) or noun phrases (e.g., “Kevin” – H10) that directly refer to characters in the image. In cases where no explicit participant is mentioned, particularly in elliptical structures, the visual elements support tagline interpretation. For example, in H16, the tagline “Possess them all” lacks an explicit participant, but the image of the Annabelle doll allows viewers to infer the full meaning: “Annabelle possesses them all.” In this way, the interaction between language and image completes the structure of the tagline. However, even in character-based taglines, differences frequently emerge in the choices of processes and circumstances in the two modes. This is largely due to the elaborative function of these taglines, which often convey details that are non-visible in the visual images. In the other two types of taglines – movie-based and viewer-based ones – the differences between the two modes extend across the entire transitivity system, indicating a lack of semantic correlation. This minimal correlation indicates a relative independence between the two components, in a sense that they do not necessarily rely on each other for the interpretation of their meanings.

Despite their independence, the analysis indicates that taglines and visual images employ common strategies of viewer involvement and realism to construct horror. Viewer involvement is realized visually through interactive resources, making viewers directly confront the evils or empathize with the victims, and verbally through the frequent use of second-person pronouns (e.g., “you”) in taglines. Meanwhile, the perception of realism is enhanced through both evaluative language that emphasizes authenticity like “true,” or “real,” and high modality imagery, enabled by CGI and advanced graphic design. In this way, the two modes orchestrate to convey a unified concept and highlight the key selling points of the movie without explicitly repeating the information.

5. Conclusions

This study presents a metafunctional analysis of visual images and taglines in 20 top-grossing American horror movie posters to examine how these two components interact to construct horror for advertising purposes. The findings indicate that although they seem independent with limited correlation between the two transitivity systems, visual images and taglines employ similar strategies to create horror: provocation, viewer involvement, and heightened realism. First, horror is provoked through symbolic imagery and mystery rather than explicit brutality. Second, viewer involvement is realized verbally through the frequent use of second-person pronouns (e.g., “you”) in taglines and visually through interactive visual resources. Viewers are positioned to directly confront the evils or encouraged to empathize with the victims, emotionally experiencing the horror alongside them. In both ways, the posters draw viewers into the narrative world rather than leaving them as external observers. Finally, fear is intensified through realism, which is conveyed verbally through evaluative language such as “true” or “real,” and visually through high validity imagery, enabled by CGI and advanced graphic design.

These three strategies collectively support a subtler approach to horror that shifts the focus from external horror to internal psychological disturbance. Instead of presenting brutal images that are visually shocking to viewers, these posters employ a more sophisticated approach of symbolic representation, which not only enhances the aesthetic quality of the posters but also makes them more suitable for public display. More importantly, the highlighted symbolic details can create a lasting impression on audiences and contribute to the branding of the evils. Furthermore, the use of mystery, through elements such as darkness, mist, and the “half-seen” effect, stimulates the viewer’s imagination and anticipation, effectively evoking a fear of the unknown. Finally, psychological fear is further intensified by providing an immersive and interactive experience for viewers. The posters blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, drawing viewers into the narrative world that is depicted with high realism, making the fear feel immediate and believable.

The findings offer significant value for both media and communication studies and multimodal discourse analysis. In media and communication studies, the findings provide scholars, students, and professional poster designers with insights into the semiotic strategies used in top-grossing posters, which allows for the creation of more effective and visually

compelling posters. Furthermore, the study contributes to multimodal discourse analysis as it demonstrates the applicability and effectiveness of combining Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) VG and Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) SFL to the analysis of horror construction in movie posters. This integrated framework not only examines the meanings of each mode but also sheds light on their interaction in conveying a unified message.

Although this study has identified several patterns in using visual images and taglines to construct horror in these twenty movie posters for advertising purposes, future research could produce more generalizable findings by employing a larger dataset and considering the issue of culture in choosing visual and verbal resources. As movie posters are cultural products, subsequent studies could place them in diverse contexts through cross-cultural comparisons, for example, by analyzing posters from different countries or by examining localized adaptations of franchise posters across markets to explore how semiotic choices vary across cultural settings.

Another limitation concerns the presence of movie series within the dataset. As many top-grossing movies belong to ongoing series (e.g., the *Conjuring* or *A Quiet Place*), their posters often follow repetitive design patterns, which may reduce the variety of semiotic strategies represented in the dataset. As such, the findings are heavily shaped by the design styles of a few dominant studios or franchises. Future research could address this problem by expanding the corpus to improve representativeness or by selecting one poster from each franchise in order to capture a broader range of design practices.

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