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## VISUAL METAPHOR IN FILM POSTER DESIGN: A TWO-LEVEL ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

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*The paper proposes a two-level analytical framework for visual metaphors in film posters, distinguishing primary integration (efficient information delivery) from advanced sublimation (autonomous meaning generation). Using purposive sampling and qualitative visual analysis grounded in cognitive semantics and semiotics, the study demonstrates that the two levels differ not in degree but in cognitive operation and communicative orientation: primary metaphors rely on form substitution and perceptual resemblance, while advanced metaphors use symbolic recombination and *trompe l'œil* to invite hermeneutic participation. The framework offers a formalized tool for design critique and practice.*

**Key words:** visual metaphor; film poster; poster design, morphological grafting; conceptual blending; design semantics, graphic design.

### INTRODUCTION

Visual metaphor is a cornerstone of poster rhetoric. By fusing disparate visual elements into a single gestalt, it condenses narrative information and evokes emotional resonance [1]. Among the various types, morphological grafting of heterogeneous objects – where the contour of one entity is filled with the texture or pattern of another – offers particular efficiency in film posters. However, existing literature often treats such devices as homogeneous creative techniques [2]. The paper argues that morphological grafting operates on two distinct cognitive levels that can be differentiated according to semantic transparency, perceptual stability, and viewer interpretative engagement. The proposed framework moves beyond intuitive description and supplies a replicable analytical model.

### PURPOSE

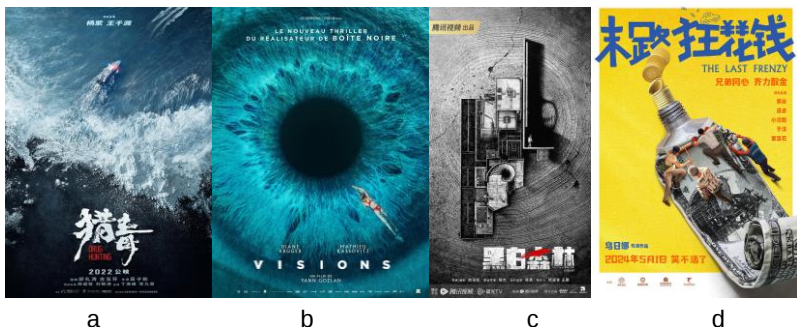
The aim is to construct a two-level analytical framework for visual metaphors in film posters. It seeks to operationalise the distinction between primary and advanced applications of morphological grafting – a distinction previously addressed only intuitively. By formalising the criteria based on cognitive operation and viewer participation, the framework aims to provide a replicable model for both design analysis and creative practice.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Primary morphological grafting replaces the interior of a familiar contour with a thematically relevant object. The contour serves as a ready-made cognitive frame,

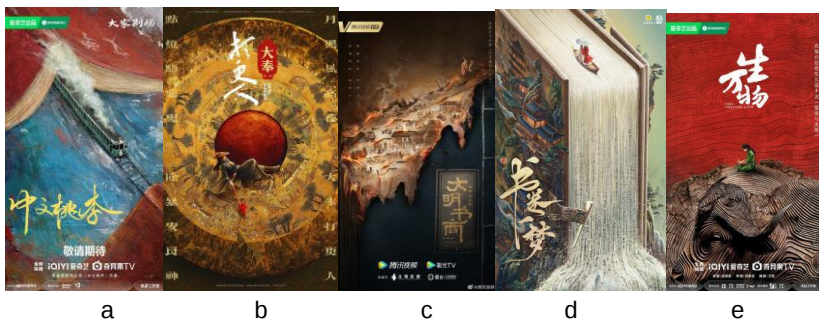


and the substituted content directly denotes the film's setting, character or genre. In "Drug Hunting" and "The Last Frenzy" (Fig. 1), semantic ambiguity is minimal, and the intended referential meaning is immediately accessible to the viewer. The design is instrumental, serving as a transparent conduit for promotional information.



**Fig.1.** Examples of poster: a-Drug Hunting, 2026; b-Visions, 2023; c-Black and White Forest, 2024; d-The Last Frenzy, 2024

Similarly, popular Chinese TV series posters (Fig. 2) use a similar grafting model but emphasize Sinicization and visual aesthetics. The result conveys the narrative setting while highlighting traditional Chinese cultural aesthetics.

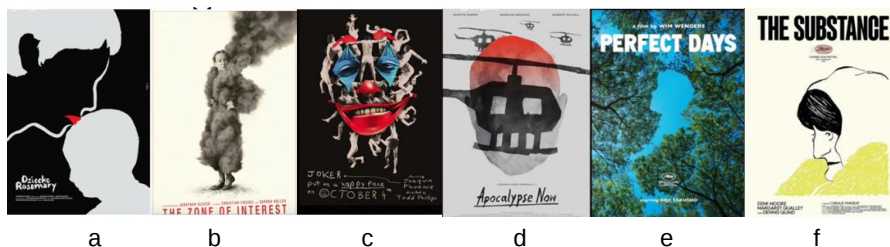


**Fig.2.** Examples of poster: a-Chinese Peach and Plum, 2026; b-The Guardians Of The Da Feng (season1), 2024; c-The Ming Dynasty Bookseller, 2026; d-A Dream Within A Dream, 2025; e-All Things Born, 2025

Advanced metaphors resist immediate recognition by presenting perceptually unstable figures that oscillate between readings, compelling viewers to resolve ambiguity and generate surplus meaning beyond the plot. In "The Substance" (Fig. 3), the trompe- l'œil effect embodies identity fission under the anxiety of ageing.



Unlike primary metaphors, these images do not denote literal objects but configure the film's core conflict as a visual syllogism, requiring viewers to synthesize components – making the poster as a semi-autonomous paratext that extends the film's conceptual discourse beyond mere promotion. The key difference lies in signification direction: primary metaphor moves from form to predetermined content, while advanced metaphor moves from form to open-ended concept. This shift suggests a transformation in the communicative role of the film poster – from a predominantly marketing device toward a more interpretatively active paratext. A common technique involves utilizing the characteristics of shapes or other images to create visual illusions [3].



**Fig.3.** Examples of poster: a-Rosemary's Baby, 1968; b-The Zone of The Interest, 2023; c-The Joker, 2019; d-Apocalypse Now, 1979; e-Perfect Days, 2023; f-The Substance, 2024

## CONCLUSIONS

The study formalizes the intuitive distinction between “simple” and “complex” visual metaphors in film posters. By grounding the analysis in cognitive operations and viewer participation, we provide designers and scholars with a replicable typology. The proposed two-level framework conceptualizes that morphological grafting as a spectrum of cognitive operations rather than a uniform stylistic device, thereby clarifying its differentiated communicative functions. Future research may extend the framework to interactive and AI-generated posters, where the metaphor may become dynamic rather than static.

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