Vol.5 Iss.3 2024
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.adr.2024.040
Art & Design Research

Typography as a visual semiotic mode in film-making: a case study on the film *Evacuate from the 21st Century*

Chuyi Wang*
Central Compilation & Translation Press, Beijing, China
***Corresponding author, E-mail: ravennn1202@foxmail.com**

Abstract:
This essay explores the innovative use of typography design in filmmaking within the context of evolving cinematic techniques and the directors' personal quest for aesthetics, the innovative usage of typography design in filmmaking, and how it interact with other modes to co-construct particular cinematic visual systems. This article follows Theo van Leeuwen's perspective, which views that considers typography as a systematic and multimodal semiotic mode [1], as well as the semiotic claims of Ferdinand de Saussure, to analyze how typography constructs cinematic symbols and conveys ideological messages in the film Evacuate from the 21st Century.

Keywords:
Typography; film studies; semiotics; graphic design.

1 Introduction

When the terms typography and film are referenced together in the academic field, scholars frequently focus on film title sequences design or film poster design, and examine the connection between typography and semiotics involved. In 2015, Theo van Leeuwen and Emilia Djonov viewed kinetic typography as a new semiotic mode and analyzed its historical development and current status in the field of filmmaking[2]. Nevertheless, with the advance of technology and the director's pursuit of personal artistic style, the scope of typography's influence in movies is no longer limited to posters and title sequences at the beginning of the film. The greater complexity of typography design resulting from these technological developments and filmmaker's aesthetic pursuit has generated a fresh perspective on semiotic mode from a cinematic typography point of view.

For instance, in the film *Evacuate from the 21st Century*, a Chinese mainland comedy movie released in August 2024, director Yang Li employed various typographic techniques to shape a distinct aesthetic for the movie and offer the audience a semiotic visual experience through the experimental approach. *Evacuate from the 21st Century* is a Chinese mainland comedy movie released in 2024. The story of the movie takes place on a fictional planet called K. The three protagonists coincidentally get the ability to travel through time and space between 1999 and 2019. By utilizing this superpower, they seek to defeat the bad guys and save the

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world.

The typography used in *Evacuate from the 21st Century* has a very distinctive character. Director Yang Li, who is deeply influenced by the pop culture and aesthetic forms of Japanese animation [3], is very fond of using post-production to add typography as a decorative and narrative element to the frame. With different visual emphases, they construct special visual language and semiotic modes. This article will analyse the use of three types of typography in this film, with how they are composed and what effect they achieve. This paper argues that typography design, as a semiotic mode, not only appears in the film title of the opening sequence, but also has a wide range of applications in the main part of the film. Additionally, this study focuses on analysing the signifier and signified of the film title typeface, nostalgic typography design and futuristic typography design, and analyses how the film director of *Evacuate from the 21st Century* uses the typography technology to bring audiences a new type of audiovisual experience.

2 Film Title Typography Design

In 1916, Ferdinand de Saussure proposed that a sign consists of the combination of a concept and an acoustic image. He explains that the 'signifier' is not merely the acoustic image itself, but the mental entity associated with it in our minds, while the 'signified' refers to the concept linked to it. [4] In the case of *Evacuate from the 21st Century*, 90% RED Studio was responsible for the typography design within the film, including the design of the movie title (fig.1). In terms of signifier, the title typography of the movie was designed with a very distinctive aesthetic. It may seem disorganized at a glance, but each of the elements that make up title typography has a specific role to play. In addition to conveying the meaning of the text itself, its design is highly decorative and communicates a special visual experience to the audience. This is where the signified related section is concerned, the typeface design of the title insinuates the plot of the film: the main body consists two sets of identical texts, and the red letters are bigger than the yellow ones, which symbolize the main character's 38 years old and 18 years old respectively; and the dandelion in the middle of the typeface is the mapping of the plot, that is, the dandelion is an important prop in the time-traveling of the three main characters.



Fig.1 Design of the movie title

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DIMOVSKI and PUŠKAREVIĆ suggest that typography blurs the lines between letter forms and images invites a discussion on the connection between typography and rhetoric. [5] While the decoration in the design of the movie title in this case diminishes the readability, the blurring of the image and text boundaries strengthens the role of the title typography as a semiotic symbol. It enables the audiences to concentrate more on the unique narrative style of the movie and to communicate with the audience in a direct way.

Bachfischer and Robertson argue that when moving type entered the realm of popular culture, audiences made a shift toward viewing type, not necessarily reading it in a conventional sense. [6] The kinetic design of the title typography is simple but effective: the designer created a trailing smear effect to the title typography, which is commonly used when the protagonists are traveling through space and time in the film, providing a unique visual semiotic mode.

3 Vintage Typography Design (past)

In addition to the typography for the film title, 90% RED Studio also designed a series of customized typography for the film, which are primarily typefaces. After observing and analyzing the typography that occurs in the main film, this article argues that it is possible to roughly split the typography into two categories based on their design compositions and production ideas: the first is the typography that appears within the 1999 timeline of the film's plot, and the second is the typography that appears within the 2019 timeline of the film's plot.

In the first place, when looking at the first category based on the 1999 timeline, two of the typography that deserve special attention (fig.2 & fig.3) in this sequence appear in the first fifteen minutes of the film, which both appear in the 1999 timeline. They have similar visual characteristics: both are accomplished by special purposeful producing methods.



Fig.2 Design of 'Wig'



Fig.3 Design of 'Glittertracs'

In the two typography of this case, their signifiers have similar production concepts and rendering characteristics. *Evacuate from the 21st Century* is a movie that combines the characteristics of surrealist cinema, teen film, and comedy film; the movie contains a large amount of nostalgia since it is set on Planet K, a planet with a similar cultural landscape to Earth, with the story set in 1999 and 2019. The aim of creating a sense of nostalgia for the audience was taken into full consideration when designing the typography within the film.

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Leeuwen argues that typography as a structured and multimodal semiotic mode, capable of conveying textual, ideational, and interpersonal meanings. [7] According to the studio's blurb on social media platforms, when designing the typography within the film, in order to pursue the texture of 19-th century Chinese mainland blackboard drawing and advertising lettering, the designer purposely reduced the involvement of digital software and the use of ready-made fonts, opting to use hand-drawing for most of the characters as well. [8] The hand-drawn characters are highly detailed, with an obvious sense of nostalgia and generational characteristics, bringing the audience a sense of nostalgia that is highly effective in terms of visual effects. When looking at these two typography, one can indeed feel that the designer has referred to a very strong style of 19th-century advertising lettering as well as added some thematic decorations according to the content of the text and the storyline: for example, in the ‘Wig’ (fig.2), numerous repetitive vertical lines are added to represent the lines of the hair; and in the typeface ‘Glittertracs' (fig.3) contains two love heart symbols, suggesting that it has a hallucinogenic effect and the death of the heroine in the subsequent story. But the typography in this film doesn't completely replicate the 19th-century style of lettering: the colour palette of both of the typographies set in 1999 is quite bold and out-of-the-box, and the film uses a colour palette much closer to the digital computer's RGB format than the 19th-century style of printing billboard, this would hardly ever have happened in reality, cementing the surrealistic style of the film.

In terms of the two typography signifiers exemplified, based on the design studio's description of the motivation for the design and the analysis of the specific typography in this paper, the conclusion can be drawn that some of the representative typography signifiers of this film bring a strong nostalgic style by the design of the typography, and at the same time a powerful surrealistic colour due to the colour palette; whereas one point of their signified is the film's chaotic, teenage and nostalgic atmosphere, which brings freshness to the audience from traditional nostalgia, and helps set the tone of the magical reality of the film. Another signified aspect is the intimacy and intentional graciousness shown to the audience. Throughout the plot of the film, it can tell that the director wanted to express the intimacy of 1999 and the pain of 2019 to the main characters, which is manifested in the lines of the film that have repeatedly appeared several times when the main characters express that ‘my future is so bad, I want to go back to 1999’. It echoes the title of the film which is that the protagonists want to escape from 2019 back to 1999. The typographies of the 1999 timeline as semiotic mode, their signified carry a great sense of intimacy and familiarity, and the method of designing nostalgic typography that the audience has seen before and have a sense of highly related provides a feeling of returning to a safe zone, as well as serves the content of the film plot.

4 K-dialect Design (future)

Moreover, the second categorisation, which is the typography from 2019, is also worth of concern. In contrast to the design concept of the typography in 1999, the typography that appears in 2019 in the film has a significantly modern and futuristic characteristic. Under this category can be found fonts that appeared in 2019 typography often using typefaces, which are usually serifs as well as some calligraphic fonts. The choice of these fonts creates a specific future style semiotic mode, which contrasts sharply with the hand-drawn typography of 1999, with font choices that are more aesthetically pleasing to a modern audience and more in keeping with the creative conventions and visual expression of digital art.

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Fig.4 Fig.4 Example of the k-language

Nevertheless, of all typographies in 2019, the most attention-grabbing sequence is the k-language design of this film (fig.4). Planet K is the fictional planet on which the story takes place, and although it is almost indistinguishable from Earth in terms of setting, the director has added some special elements to make the story more convincing, such as the indigenous language of planet K. According to the design studio's posts on social media platform, the design of the k-language went through a number of proposals, and ultimately the designers, together with the director, opted for a more recognisable dotted-line solution. [9] The elements that make up the point and line scheme itself are not complex, but are very memorable as all the lines are connected sequentially in a clockwise direction. In terms of composition, the designer not only devised the expression of typography, but also assumed the logic of k-star people's writing. The design studio hypothesised that the order in which the k-planet ancients wrote differed greatly from that of the humans of Earth; for example, the Earth people wrote one word by one at a time, but the k-planet people chiselled all the dots first, and then underlined them with a tree branch. [9] And despite the fact that the pronunciation patterns of the k-dialect in the film have nothing to do with the characters, the k-dialect characters all derive their words from Chinese hanyu pinyin (fig.5). Although on the one hand, hanyu pinyin facilitates the audience's puzzle solving and comprehension, and deepens the sense of belonging of Chinese-speaking viewers to the film, suggesting a connection between Planet K and Earth or China; however, the use of hanyu pinyin as the compositional logic of words makes it closer to cryptography than linguistic design, and it is certainly unfortunate that it can't be counted as an independently existent semiotic system.

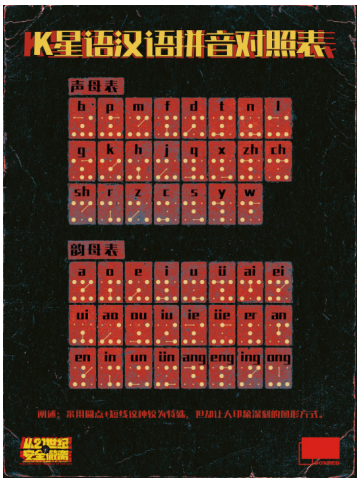


Fig.5 Fig.5 The Chinese pinyin comparison table of k-language.

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In terms of the usage of k-dialect in this film, audio-visual combination takes over as the main approach, with the special kinetic effect format helping to construct the special semiotic mode. Kress suggested in 2003 that both written language and visual image modes are governed by the logic of time or chronological order, whereas visual images are governed by the logic of spatiality, organized arrangement, and simultaneity. [10] In the film, the director employs a large number of k-dialect typography as cue words in the film, they are governed by a special visually organised arrangement, that creates a distinct visual language.The use of k-dialect makes particular kinetic format of digital post-production, which occurs and disappears in a very short period of time from the frame as a set of digital decorative semiotic modes.

Kress and Van Leeuwen proposed a view in *Multimodal Discourse* that suggests that more than one semiotic mode is involved in all types of communication [11], they argue that in multimodal communication, various modes—such as language, images, music, and gestures—all contribute to the construction of meaning. These modes do not operate independently but interact with one another, often complementing, reinforcing, or even contradicting each other in a complex process of meaning creation.

In this case, it can be argued that the typography of the k-dialect has entered the realm of the multimodal as the semiotic mode. Regarding the k-dialect's signifier, it consists of a combination of photographic images, kinetic typography design, and the sound of the actors' lines. The main user of k-dialect in this film is the villain Han, who repeats the same dialect over and over again while beating people up, while the word he repeat stands for the device to inflict injuries. During the 41st and 42nd minutes of the film, the villain attacks one of the main characters, using an apple and a knife.This series of oppressive sequences is a very typical use of k-dialect visualization. The first shot is of a worn out word card, with a deep red filter added to the frame, echoing the gory scene that follows in which the villain repeats the word and beats the woman. What follows is a series of violent shots detailing the villain's evil deeds, it is worth noting that in this set of shots, the character's actions (hitting), the lines (repeating the words once in k-dialect, once in Chinese), and the typographies (the typography of k-dialect appear on the screen when the character reads them, and immediately disappear when the character's voice ends) combine with each other to complement one another.

In terms of the signified of k-dialect typography, the multimodal contributes to the construction of building up the depressing atmosphere of this story, emphasising the villain's sense of oppression , as well as the sense of despair in the future timeline. Due to the fact that the k-dialect is pronounced as a fictional syllable similar to the Russian language, combined with the dotted-line typography and the specific format of each appearance of k-dialect (e.g., every time the word 'apple' appears, the typography shows on screen, the villain pronounces the word, and the villain punches the protagonist), these combine to produce an unfamiliar and oppressive sense of k-dialect. Van Leeuwen suggests that a new form of typography has emerged that no longer views itself merely as a supportive craft for the written word, but rather as a driving force in graphic design innovation. This modern typography is no longer regarded as an 'abstract art' but is now recognized as an independent means of communication. [12] Although k-dialect's typography is a series of artistic creations based on pre-existing text and may seem very abstract, k-dialect in the film is usually presented in the form of memorizing words, which are usually simpler nouns, and this arrangement allows for the abstract, unfamiliar visual typography and pronunciation to be combined with the concrete, familiar meaning of the word combine to create a multimodal semiotic pattern. After the audience watches the film, the character of the villain

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comes to mind when they see the k language typeface that combines dots and lines. Together, these contributes to the strangeness and oppressiveness of the future world.

5 Conclusion

Against the backdrop of the maturity of film post-production technology and the director's pursuit of aesthetics, typography in film began to be not only limited to being part of title sequences and film posters, it began to appear as a decorative element in the main part of the film. This new trend appears in director Li Yang's movie *Evacuate from the 21st Century*, in which this paper argues that typography as a semiotic mode helps to enrich the movie's plot, constitutes a visual language, and efficiently conveys the plot information to the audience.

In this paper, the typography appearing in the film is briefly categorized into three categories, namely, film title sequence, typography from 1999, and typography from 2019, which all have distinctive characteristics. The title sequence has a strong decorative effect and uses kinetic effects to help round out the narrative and symbolic effects; the typography of 1999 uses mainly hand-drawn methods to build nostalgic effects, conveying a sense of familiarity and reassurance to the viewer; and the typography of 2019 combines action, sound effects, lines, and fonts through a multimodal approach to convey a sense of futuristic world's sense of oppression and uneasiness. To summarise, such new trends break through the marginal position of typography in traditional cinema and deepen its role as a semiotic mode, connecting with the audience and conveying information more efficiently.

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