

## MARVEL'S CAPTAIN AMERICA CIVIL WAR POSTER: AN ANALYSIS BASED ON THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN

*Pôster de Capitão América Guerra Civil da Marvel:  
Uma Análise Baseada na Gramática Visual*

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**ABSTRACT:** Movie posters, a multimodal genre used to attract viewers, are a complex form of communication that contains verbal and visual semiotic resources. The entertainment company Marvel has created a cinematic universe where movie posters play an essential role in marketing. Despite Marvel's global influence in sociocultural practices, few studies investigate its movie posters. Hence, this study analyzes the visual structures used in the *Captain America: Civil War* theatrical movie poster, drawing on the Grammar of Visual Design, specifically the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. Regarding the representational metafunction, results show a bidirectional transaction, highlighting the faceoff between the two teams of heroes. Their symmetry also hints at classificational processes. Concerning interactional meanings, the heroes gaze at each other, inviting viewers to observe the image from a social distance while keeping some detachment. Moreover, the camera angle creates an equal power relation between the main heroes and viewers. Finally, compositional meanings strengthen the separation between the two teams through different elements, but they simultaneously indicate the teams will reunite. Thus, these three kinds of visual meanings together provide an adequate summary of the movie plot and aptly contribute to the construal of a future conflict between the two teams.

**KEYWORDS:** Movie Posters; Marvel Cinematic Universe; Captain



America: Civil War; Grammar of Visual Design.

**RESUMO:** Pôsteres de filmes, um gênero multimodal usado para atrair espectadores, são uma forma complexa de comunicação que contém recursos semióticos verbais e visuais. A empresa de entretenimento Marvel criou um universo cinematográfico onde os pôsteres desempenham um papel essencial no marketing. Apesar da influência global da Marvel em práticas socioculturais, poucos estudos investigam seus pôsteres. Assim, baseado na Gramática Visual e suas três funções: representação, interação e composição, este estudo analisa as estruturas visuais utilizadas no pôster do filme *Capitão América: Guerra Civil*. Em relação à função de representação, os resultados indicam uma transação bidirecional, destacando o confronto entre as duas equipes de heróis. Sua simetria também sugere processos classificatórios. Quanto à função de interação, os heróis se olham, convidando os espectadores a observar a imagem de uma distância social, mantendo certo desprendimento. Ademais, o ângulo da câmera cria uma relação de poder igual entre os heróis principais e espectadores. Finalmente, os significados composicionais fortalecem a separação das duas equipes através de diferentes elementos; simultaneamente, indicam que se reunirão novamente. Portanto, esses três tipos de significados visuais juntos fornecem um resumo eficiente da trama do filme e contribuem adequadamente para a construção de um conflito futuro entre as duas equipes. **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Pôsteres de filmes; Universo Cinematográfico da Marvel; Capitão América: Guerra Civil; Gramática Visual.

## INTRODUCTION

Movie posters are a form of visual communication that requires complex decoding of several semiotic resources (CHEN; GAO, 2013). According to Freyler (2012), movie posters are good examples of translational processes and social semiotics. In other words, they exemplify the affordances of each mode and how meanings conveyed through videos can be transduced<sup>1</sup> into an image. Freyler (2012) has examined darkness representations in movie posters following Frank Miller's approach to graphic novels. Among the selected materials, he analyzes the poster of *Captain America: The First Avenger*, the first movie in the *Captain America* trilogy released in 2011. The author explores a few aspects of

<sup>1</sup> Transduction "...names the process of moving meaning from one mode to another such as from speech to image or from writing to film. This shifting of meaning from one sign system to another, each with its distinctive affordances, inevitably entails a reconfiguration of meaning with certain gains and losses characterizing the different realizations" (TRANSDUCTION... [20--]). Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 39) refer to transduction as a continuous process of transformation between semiotic codes, which constitutes communication.

visual representation, such as perspective, color, lighting, and gaze. However, Freyler's (2012) study does not provide an in-depth analysis of the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings following the Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006).

Inspired by Systemic Functional Linguistics (HALLIDAY, 1985), Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework to analyze multimodal texts allows researchers to examine visual images and their meanings through three metafunctions: representational, interactive, and compositional. The objective of the present study is to investigate how these three metafunctions realize meaning in the *Captain America: Civil War* (CACW<sup>2</sup>) movie poster, which is the third movie in the *Captain America* trilogy<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, we aim to answer the following research question: how do the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings portrayed in the CACW movie poster contribute to summarizing its plot? First, we present the theoretical background regarding the Grammar of Visual Design. Then, we move on to the investigation of movie posters, and we provide an overview of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Subsequently, we introduce the method used to examine the CACW poster, develop the analysis and discussion, and present some final remarks.

## THE GRAMMAR OF VISUAL DESIGN (GVD)

When Kress and van Leeuwen (2006)<sup>4</sup> wrote their manuscript on how to read images, they decided with some hesitation to refer to their proposal as the Grammar of Visual Design (GVD). They explain that their use of the word 'grammar' is to imply that elements from images are combined to make meaningful wholes; the illustrated people, places, and things integrate to convey a message. The authors proposed a theoretical framework following Halliday's (1985) social semiotic approach to the study of verbal language (known as Systemic Functional Linguistics – SFL), which allows for the investigation of language in use, text in context, meaning, and function. In SFL, language is seen as a semiotic system, as a resource to produce and interpret meanings. From this perspective, text - such as the movie poster analyzed here - is seen as an “instance of the

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<sup>2</sup>In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it is common practice to refer to the movies using acronyms. We decided to employ the same acronyms in the present study to facilitate further reference by other researchers.

<sup>3</sup>The movies in the *Captain America* trilogy are: *The First Avenger*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Civil War*.

<sup>4</sup>The first edition of *Reading Images* by Kress and van Leeuwen was published by Deakin University Press in 1990. The first edition published by Routledge, with the title *Reading Images: The grammar of visual design*, is from 1996. The third edition of *Reading images: The Grammar of Visual Design* was published in 2021. In our work we refer to the second edition (2006).

system of a language operating in a context of situation” (HALLIDAY; MATTHIESSEN, 2014, p. 47).

In SFL, this interdependence between text and context can be observed from the different strata, namely: context of situation, semantics, and lexicogrammar. The context of situation has three dimensions, namely: field, tenor, and mode, which correspond respectively to “the ongoing social activity, the role relationships involved and the symbolic or rhetorical channel” (HALLIDAY, 1978, p. 110). In the stratum of semantics, the functional components correspond to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunctions. Thompson (2004, p. 30) explains:

We use language to talk about our experience of the world, including the worlds in our own minds, to describe events and states and the entities involved in them. [the ideational metafunction]

We also use language to interact with other people, to establish and maintain social relations with them, to influence their behaviour, to express our own viewpoint on things in the world, and to elicit or change theirs. [the interpersonal metafunction]

In using language, we organize our messages in ways which indicate how they fit in with the other messages around them and with the wider context in which we are talking or writing. [the textual metafunction]

In GVD, these metafunctions, adopted from SFL, are called respectively: representational, interactive, and compositional, which are present simultaneously in any image. Next, we present a summary of each metafunction with relevant information for the subsequent analysis.

Representational meanings can be analyzed in terms of processes and circumstances. They manifest material reality, what is going on in the image, that is, the event (the scene portrayed), the participants (people, animals, or other entities), their actions, places, things, and the surroundings (circumstances). Processes can be narrative or conceptual. In a narrative image at least one participant acts upon another or others. Also, we can identify the action through vectors, which are lines indicating the direction of movement. These lines can be formed by participants’ gazes, bodies, limbs, objects, or other elements in the composition. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 64) explain, “[w]hen a narrative visual proposition has two participants, one is the Actor, the other the Goal”. In this kind of action, called a transactional structure, participants who act are the Actors, and those who receive the action are the Goal; in other words, the vector departs from the Actor to the Goal. Narrative images can also have a non-transactional structure

where there is no Goal or a bi-directional structure, in which participants are both Actors and Goals (or Interactors). In our study, we refer to circumstances as the surroundings, the landscape, and the visual elements (including minor participants), which allow viewers to identify the context in a narrative image.

Images can also have a conceptual representation, focused on participants' attributes and identities (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006; NASCIMENTO; BEZERRA; HEBERLE, 2011; UNSWORTH, 2001). Conceptual representations can be classificatory, analytical, and symbolic. In this study, we focus on the former and the latter. Classificatory meanings reveal categories or taxonomies, with the participants placed in specific orders. Besides, we refer to symmetry (not a technical term in GVD): when visual elements are “arranged symmetrically”, they are “represented as equal in size, placed at equal distance from each other and oriented in the same way towards the horizontal and vertical axes”, suggesting “a relation of similarity” between the elements (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 45). According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 79), “classificational processes relate participants to each other in terms of a ‘kind’ of relation, a taxonomy”. In turn, symbolic meanings represent a concept, a cultural symbol, with the image revealing pictorial qualities or characteristics of the represented participants (attributes), while those who carry the meanings are called the Carriers. They can be made more salient, for instance, by being positioned in the foreground, with a more detailed focus or color, usually suggesting sociocultural values.

Interactive meanings reveal the relationships between two types of participants: represented participants (those depicted in the images) and interactive participants (those who interact through the images, the producers of the image, and viewers). Interactive meanings are analyzed through the broad categories of contact, social distance, and attitude. The visual resources that realize this metafunction are basically gaze, frame size, perspective, angles, and modality. When the represented participants are looking at the viewer, eye contact occurs, and there is a demand for the viewer's attention, suggesting a relationship between the participant and the viewer. When the depicted participants avert the viewer, there is an offer for contemplation. Frame size determines the social distance between represented and interactive participants. Long shots create an impersonal relationship, while medium shots establish a social relationship, and close-ups reveal an intimate connection. Perspective or point of view concerns the positioning of the camera (for photographs or movies) on the vertical axis. A frontal perspective implies the highest involvement, while oblique angles suggest detachment from the viewer. In turn, the horizontal angles relate to power relations. When viewers see the represented participants

from above, they have the power to observe the scene. In the opposite configuration, when viewers are positioned lower than the image, they seem to have less power than the represented participants. Eye-level positions, on the other hand, suggest an equal relation.

Regarding modality, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) see it as interpersonal, as degrees of reliability concerning the message/proposition conveyed. It “...produces shared truths aligning readers or listeners with some statements and distancing them from others” and that it “...serves to create an imaginary we” (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006, p. 155). For instance, images can go from abstraction to a detailed pictorial representation of the participants, and they can have a full depiction of the background to complete absence. Concerning the use of colors, they can vary on scales of saturation (full color to black and white), differentiation (various ranges of colors to monochrome), and modulation (different shades of one color as opposed to only one).

Finally, compositional meanings concern the organization of the elements in the image, that is, how the arrangement of information connects the representational and interactive elements into a coherent whole. This metafunction is realized through three main aspects: information value, framing, and salience. Information value regards the several image zones. As Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain, in Western societies, what viewers already know usually appears on the left side of the page; on the other hand, novelties seem to appear on the right. Thus, the left-right dichotomy implies the depiction of given-new information. Another division concerns the top and bottom of the page, which usually realize ideal and real values, respectively. In center-margin layouts, elements in the nucleus are more relevant than those in the surroundings. A combination of Given-New and Center-Margin can be seen in triptychs, which is also interesting for our analysis. As pointed out by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p. 198), “[t]riptychs... are generally polarized, with a Given left, a New right, and a center which bridges the two and acts as Mediator”. Framing relates to the degree of connectedness in an image (UNSWORTH, 2001). A strongly connected layout has elements that create frame lines and other devices, such as color discontinuity. At last, salience reflects the designers’ intention to attract viewers’ attention to some elements more than others. Elements can become salient depending on their relative size in the layout, sharpness of focus, color contrasts, and location in the image, among other features.

In this study, we focus on two types of representational processes: narrative and conceptual. Specifically, we analyze classificational and symbolic conceptual processes. Besides, we refer to locative circumstances or settings. Regarding the interactive metafunction, we explore contact (gaze), social distance (frame size), attitude (perspective

and camera angle), and modality. Finally, we examine information value, framing, and salience (size, color, and location), which realize compositional meanings.

## MOVIE POSTERS

Promotional materials for movie marketing campaigns include posters, teaser trailers, payoff trailers, featurettes, and clips (YUAN, 2021). Movie posters can be considered a multimodal genre, as they function as a modern type of communication and a specific kind of advertisement. They can be seen as exemplars of (or instances of) visual and verbal meanings interconnected with sociocultural practices related to the entertainment world. The association of visual and lexicogrammatical features intends to attract potential readers, especially moviegoers, and inform them of a specific upcoming movie. Thus, movie posters form an integrated representation where the combination of semiotic resources conveys ideas and emotions primarily to influence viewers' opinions and is used to promote movies to specific audiences. Multimodal genres (such as the movie poster analyzed in this paper) need to be studied, not only in terms of lexicogrammatical and visual features but also concerning the sociocultural practices involved in producing this genre.

Production companies may create more than one kind of movie poster depending on their budget and marketing campaign. Theatrical or payoff posters summarize the plot, and their function is to sell the film. They contain elements indicating the story, such as the lead female and male actors, and they are the last to be released in the marketing campaign. Production companies can also release teaser posters during the filming process to create hype among the fans and attract attention in general (YUAN, 2021). Character posters are another type designed to create awareness about the movies without revealing much of the plot. Despite the success of this industry on a global scale and its impact on society and the market, it seems that there is still a need for more research on the visual representations of movie posters. To confirm this necessity, we looked for articles using the terms 'movie posters' and 'Grammar of Visual Design' as keywords on *Periódicos da Capes*, Scielo Citation Index (Web of Science), and Researchgate. Our search returned twenty results in total, most of which were not directly related to the present study. Thus, to facilitate further research on this topic, we decided to include the theoretical framework we used to analyze data in the title of this article. In this section, we review four studies we found using the search criteria explained above that analyze movie posters using the Grammar of Visual Design. Our objective here is to see how these studies use GVD and if they acknowledge the various poster types previously described.

The movie posters from *The Matrix* trilogy (*The Matrix*, *The Matrix Reloaded*, and *The Matrix Revolutions*) from a multimodal perspective are analyzed by Maiorani (2007), based on GVD (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006) and SFL (HALLIDAY, 1985; HALLIDAY; MATTHIESSEN, 2014). Maiorani (2007), who focuses mainly on representational meanings and the contexts of situation and culture, departs from the idea that the changes made from the first poster to the ones in the sequel were due to its high social impact. Her results show a transition from visual and verbal semiotics that mix narrative and conceptual processes to a promotional campaign that essentially relies on conceptual processes. The author explains that the characters' gadgets and clothes that create *The Matrix* look, such as sunglasses, have become marketable items for an ever-growing legion of fans. She concludes that the posters created for *The Matrix* trilogy publicity developed from the social phenomenon of a *Matrix* community that has impacted the global market<sup>5</sup>. One difference Maiorani (2007) overlooked regards the type of posters analyzed. From her description, it is possible to deduce that the images related to the first movie compose a theatrical poster, and the other materials are teasers and character posters (YUAN, 2021). These observations align with the characteristic of movie posters being linked to social-cultural practices of the entertainment world and the movie industry; that is, the budget provided for any movie will consequently produce different kinds of movie posters in terms of quality.

Chen and Gao (2013) aim at developing a Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) theory based on SFL and GVD. They analyze eleven movie posters chosen because of their popularity. The authors claim two of them scrutinize all the aspects of their model (*Maid in Manhattan* and *The Flowers of War*), and the other nine are case studies (*The Queen*, *Se7en*, *The Reader*, *July Rhapsody*, *Titanic*, *Pearl Harbor*, *City of Angels*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Australia*). They thoroughly examine the representational, interactional, and compositional meanings in the first two movie posters. Besides, they present some relevant aspects of the following five. However, the authors only briefly mention the remaining four posters as further examples of the Ideal/Real structure, like most movies in their selection. Their results show that it is possible to forecast the story

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<sup>5</sup> Maiorani's (2007) results illustrate what Jenkins (2006) refers to as "convergence culture", which is the intersection of old and new media, the power of consumers to both consume and produce new media. Jenkins (2006, p. 2) tells us: "Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways". Jenkins' (2006) groundbreaking book also discusses transmedia storytelling, which may include, for instance, toys, books, and other semiotic artifacts based on a movie, as exemplified in Maiorani's (2007) study.



by analyzing the meaning dimensions expressed in its poster. Furthermore, Chen and Gao (2013) highlight that, to conduct a thorough analysis following MDA, researchers need to have a solid knowledge of the movie's plot, cultural, and historical background. However, what they call a model proposal basically amounts to a summary of GVD, which indicates that Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework is sufficient to analyze the visual meanings in movie posters. Moreover, the authors do not categorize the posters according to their type (theatrical, teaser, or character), a relevant characteristic of movie posters as a multimodal genre.

Posters from children's Hollywoodian animated cartoons have also been investigated (TZIAMTZI *et al.*, 2015). Tziamtzi and colleagues (2015) focus on the highest-grossing movies in the United States of America from 1937 to 2012. They conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses. Regarding the first analysis, they investigated several aspects: the movies' distribution per decade, production company, poster type, linguistic content, and objects portrayed. They also noted the number of hand-drawn posters, three-dimensional digital images, tag lines, mention of actors, and the portrayal of animals with human features per production company, among others. For the present study, it seems relevant to refer to the results of their qualitative analysis, which focuses on semiotic resources, including seven codes that operate as communication conventions: "the people (human figures and imaginary beings), animals code, spatial code, buildings code, war code, machines and engines code, and modes of transport code" (TZIAMTZI *et al.*, 2015, p. 307). These codes refer to the represented participants (including protagonists and other minor actors), their actions, the objects used, the social context, and the background. However, Tziamtzi and colleagues (2015) do not refer to GVD or present an analysis of any meaning-making dimensions; they only hint at the terms offer and demand from GVD, which realize interactive meanings. For those interested in studying movie posters as a genre, their study may help to distinguish posters in animated movies from other kinds.

In a more recent study, Iftikhar, Shahnaz, and Masroor (2019) analyze posters of three animated movies: *Toy Story 3*, *Frozen*, and *Zootopia*, all of which have won an Oscar Academy Award. Iftikhar and colleagues followed the MDA model proposed by Chen and Gao (2013), which draws heavily on GVD. They provide a comprehensive examination of the structures that realize representational, interactive, and compositional meanings in the three posters. Notwithstanding, their analysis concentrated on the features explained by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and contributions from Cortes (2003, apud IFTIKHAR; SHAHNAZ; MASROOR, 2019) regarding the use of colors. Their results

suggest that these posters “aptly represent the subject matter of the respective movies” (IFTIKHAR; SHAHNAZ; MASROOR, 2019, p. 74). There is no mention of Chen and Gao’s (2013) model in the analysis, only in the concluding section. Again, this indicates that GVD, as proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), is enough to analyze movie posters as a form of visual communication.

Theatrical or payoff posters tell the movie story; studios release them when “it is presumed that most people are aware of the movie” and there are no plot twists left to spoil (YUAN, 2021, n. p.). Considering the studies reviewed in this section, we can conclude that theatrical movie posters must be a reliable indication of the movie plot for animated (IFTIKHAR; SHAHNAZ; MASROOR, 2019) and non-animated movies (CHEN; GAO, 2013). Only one study analyzes different poster types (MAIORANI, 2007), but it does not distinguish between them. Theatrical, teaser, and character posters differ in terms of objectives and marketing goals. In the present study, we concentrate on the analysis of the theatrical poster of *Captain America: Civil War*. Next, we present an overview of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the method, and our analysis.

## AN OVERVIEW OF THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

Superhero movies have seen a hype in popularity in recent years, especially after Marvel created its cinematic universe based on stories from the comics. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) includes twenty-eight movies<sup>6</sup> with interrelated stories that have achieved remarkable box offices beyond comparison (LIST... [20--])<sup>7</sup>, not to mention the several TV series inspired by the original stories. The highly anticipated *Avengers: Endgame* movie alone has grossed almost 2,8 billion dollars worldwide (AVENGERS:... [202?]), becoming the second-highest grossing film of all time (AVATAR... 2021). Most recently, the last installment of the *Spider-man* franchise, *No Way Home*, has become Sony’s highest-grossing movie ever (LOVETT, 2022), an impressive achievement notably because of its release during the Covid-19 pandemic. Considering its impact on society and culture, the MCU has received little attention from academia. Some studies focus on transmedia (ANJIRBAG, 2019; MENARD, 2015; MOON, 2016) and gender (HALL, 2020; RAY, 2020). In our search using *Periódicos da Capes*, Scielo Citation Index (Web of Science), and Researchgate, we found no studies using a combination

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<sup>6</sup> Until the publication of this article.

<sup>7</sup> In this section, most of the sources we refer to are internet websites, which usually do not have a clear author and publication date. We used the citation format following ABNT for such cases using <http://more.ufsc.br>.

of the keywords ‘movie posters’, ‘Grammar of Visual Design’, and ‘Marvel’. Thus, there is a need to investigate the visual representations in MCU movie posters from the perspective of visual grammar.

There are four phases inside the MCU (TRUMBORE, 2021). The first phase consists of six movies<sup>8</sup> introducing the first *Avengers*, or the original six: *Iron Man*, *The Hulk*, *Black Widow*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, and *Hawkeye*. We can also see two *Infinity Stones*: the *Space* and *Mind Stones*. The last movie in this phase is *Marvel’s The Avengers*, where the heroes assemble for the first time and where *Thanos*, the greatest villain so far, is introduced. In the second phase, six movies<sup>9</sup> present different heroes and two other *Infinity Stones*: the *Reality* and the *Power Stones*. In this phase, we can see the second movie of the *Avengers*, *Age of Ultron*, in which the heroes face an enemy that threatens to destroy the Earth.

The third phase of the MCU has eleven movies<sup>10</sup> with new characters and the last two *Infinity Stones*: the *Time* and *Soul Stones*. It starts with *Captain America: Civil War*, where the heroes disagree on the *Avengers’* operations. *Iron Man* and his allies believe the *Avengers* should work under the rule of the United Nations. On the other hand, *Captain America* and his team think that the heroes should not follow any governmental agenda (CAPTAIN... [2016]). The fissure between the *Avengers* generates a situation in which they are not ready to face *Thanos*, who successfully collects all six *Infinity Stones* and uses them to wipe out half the living creatures in the universe. The heroes manage to reverse the process using complex time travel, but it costs the lives of *Black Widow* and *Iron Man*.

The fourth phase<sup>11</sup> of the MCU began in 2021. Marvel had planned to start this phase with the *Black Widow* solo movie, originally scheduled to hit the theaters on May 1, 2020. However, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, the company decided to wait for a

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<sup>8</sup> The first phase of the MCU includes six movies: *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and *Marvel’s The Avengers* (2012) (see TRUMBORE, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> The movies of the second phase of the MCU are: *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Ant-Man* (2015) (see TRUMBORE, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> The third phase of the MCU comprises the following movies: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) (see TRUMBORE, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Until the publication of this article, Marvel had released five movies in the fourth phase: *Black Widow* (2021), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *The Eternals* (2021), *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) (see TRUMBORE, 2021).

hybrid movie release in theaters and on Disney Plus, their streaming platform (BARNES, 2021). Because of this change, Marvel started the fourth phase with the release of the *WandaVision* TV series in January 2021, which became the most-watched TV series on streaming platforms (TODISCO, 2021). In 2021 alone, Marvel released five TV series and four movies, totalizing nine interconnected stories in the same year (MARVEL... [202-]). The entire MCU production now includes twenty-eight movies and six TV series.

One of the factors that have contributed to the success of the MCU is its advertising campaigns. For instance, Marvel has spent over 200 million dollars promoting materials for the *Avengers: Endgame* movie alone (DESHPANDE, 2021). Such materials can include teaser posters, theatrical or payoff posters, character posters, teaser and payoff trailers, featurettes, and clips (YUAN, 2021). As previously explained, in this paper, we examine the visual representations in one of the theatrical posters from the *Captain America: Civil War* movie, the first movie from the third phase of the MCU.

## METHOD

For our analysis of the theatrical poster from the publishing campaign of the *Captain America: Civil War* movie, released in 2016, we analyze the representational, interactive, and compositional meanings expressed in the poster following the framework of visual grammar proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). Before presenting the analysis, we provide a summary of the movie plot. Then, we describe the poster. After that, we analyze the visual characteristics associated with the three metafunctions. Regarding the representational metafunction, we examine processes and circumstances. Then, concerning interactive meanings, we explore contact, social distance, attitude, and modality. Finally, we refer to information value, framing, and salience to analyze compositional meanings.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Regarding the plot of *Captain America: Civil War* movie, it marks the separation between the *Avengers* due to political circumstances. After the heroes cause an explosion that kills several people in the fictional city of *Sokovia*, the United Nations implements the hero registration act: the *Sokovian Accords*. *Iron Man* feels the *Avengers* must follow orders, but *Captain America* believes they cannot trust any government to protect the world. The latter hero and his supporters are declared civilians, which means they cannot

use their powers and gadgets anymore. Eventually, *Captain America* and *Iron Man* lead their teams against each other.

The *CACW* poster shows ten of the *Avengers*, five on each side (see Figure 1 below). On the left, *Captain America* can be seen in the foreground, followed by *Falcon*, *Scarlet Witch*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Hawkeye*. They are standing, forming a straight line, shoulder to shoulder, looking at the opposite side. On the right, *Iron Man* is in the foreground, followed by *Black Widow*, *War Machine*, *Vision*, and *Black Panther*. They are also standing upright, lined up shoulder to shoulder, facing the heroes on the other side. *Captain America* and *Iron Man* are in opposite symmetry, looking at each other, similar to *Falcon* and *Black Widow*, *Scarlet Witch* and *War Machine*, *Winter Soldier* and *Vision*, and *Hawkeye* and *Black Panther*. Also, only the heroes' upper bodies can be seen in the poster. In the middle of the image, we can see a closeup of *Captain America's* shield with the five-pointed star in the middle. The circle around the star has two colors: blue on the left and red on the right. Across the star, we can see the movie title written in bolded capital letters. At the top of the poster, we can find the names of the lead actors and actresses in the movie, corresponding to the heroes portrayed except for one of them. Chadwick Boseman, who played *Black Panther*, is not there. Instead, we can see the name of the actor who plays the villain in the movie. The following two sentences are written across the bottom of the poster: 'United we stand. Divided we fall.'; the first is in the blue half of the shield, whereas the second one is in the red half. Under that caption, there is information regarding the production and direction. Finally, we can see the release date in the middle and the type of exhibition available.

Figure 1 - CACW theatrical poster



Source: (PREMIUMPRINTS... [201-])

In the *CACW* poster in Figure 1, in terms of representational meanings, viewers can see ten represented participants who are the heroes in the movie. On the left, *Captain America* is in the foreground, followed by *Falcon*, *Scarlet Witch*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Hawkeye*. Because they are lined up shoulder to shoulder, it seems the heroes form a unified team. Opposite them, on the right side, the heroes are *Iron Man* in the front, *Black Widow*, *War Machine*, *Vision*, and *Black Panther* in the back. Again, their lined-up positioning creates a unifying effect. Also, participants on the left look at participants on the right and vice-versa, constituting a bidirectional transactional action. Their gazes create vectors, which indicate narrative action processes. In this case, they are simultaneously the Actors and the Goals of the transaction, or Interactors. Besides, in narrative representations, the background suggests time and space, which are locative circumstances or settings. In the *CACW* poster, the illustration on the background constitutes a close-up of *Captain America*'s shield, with the movie title written across the star. The reference to time and space is made through the movie's subtitle, *Civil War*, which suggests *Captain America* loses his status as captain of the United States Army and becomes a civilian. Thus, the background implies the movie takes place during wartime in America.

Besides having characteristics of narrative processes, the *CACW* poster also incorporates conceptual representations. First, the background is less detailed, which is a common trait of classificational representations. The organization of the visual elements is symmetrical, that is, they are proportionally organized in terms of size and position, which contributes to highlighting the heroes' identities and general attributes, hinting at classificational processes with two single-leveled overt taxonomies: team *Captain America* on the left and team *Iron Man* on the right. The positioning of the previously mentioned heroes in the foreground indicates they are the Superordinate participants. The other superheroes in the background are less visible and, consequently, Subordinate. While *Falcon*, *Scarlet Witch*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Hawkeye* are Subordinate in relation to *Captain America*, *Black Widow*, *War Machine*, *Vision*, and *Black Panther* are Subordinate to *Iron Man*. Moreover, the order of the Subordinate participants suggests those closest to the Superordinate ones are more relevant to the story. Thus, the overall organization of participants reveals the alliances made in the war that is about to take place. Viewers can see the heroes on opposite teams, leaders, and strongest allies.

The *CACW* movie poster also has symbolic characteristics. *Captain America* and *Iron Man* are the Carriers of three Symbolic Attributes: size, color, and placement. First, these participants are represented in a relatively bigger size (their heads occupy almost half of the poster in height), which, together with their positioning in the foreground,

reinforces their importance as Superordinate participants. Second, the colors from their uniforms, blue and red, spread into the background, which symbolizes the two teams and their leaders. Furthermore, these colors add symbolism to the poster because they allude to a political division. For instance, in the United States, they represent the Republican and Democratic parties. Thus, the colors may signal a political motivation behind the rupture in the *Avengers*, suggesting the idea of a Civil War symbolically. In the context of the MCU, this could point to a ripple effect in the general population, where some heroes' supporters disagree with each other.

On the whole, the semiotic resources related to the representational metafunction (processes and circumstances) in the *CACW* movie poster provide a consistent plot summary. Participants' gaze, position, size, and color suggest an upcoming conflict between the two teams of heroes and their relative importance in the story. The bidirectional transaction highlights the faceoff between teams *Captain America* and *Iron Man*. Besides, the heroes' symmetry hints at two single-leveled taxonomies, and their size, placement, and color suggest symbolic processes. Table 1 shows a summary of the representational metafunction in the *CACW* poster.

Table 1 – Representational metafunction in the *CACW* poster

Representational Realizations		
Narrative	Conceptual	
	Classification	Symbolic
Eyeline Vector → Bidirectional Transaction  <i>Captain America</i> and his team as Actors and Goals towards <i>Iron Man</i> and his team  (Interactors)  Circumstance → Setting: Confrontation/Preparing for battle	Two single-leveled overt taxonomies → Superordinate ( <i>Captain America/ Iron Man</i> ) and Subordinate (the other heroes)	Symbolic Attribute → Size (larger than the others)  Color (blue and red), and placement (foreground)  Carrier ( <i>Captain America/Iron Man</i> )

Source: Developed by the authors for the present study.

Concerning interactive meanings, we analyze the relations between the represented participants and viewers regarding five types of semiotic resources: gaze, frame size, perspective, angle, and modality. In the *CACW* poster, in terms of contact, participants are looking at each other and away from the viewers, which creates an offer to observe the scene. In other words, the type of contact established by participants' gaze invites all



viewers to impersonal contemplation. Thus, there is an imaginary barrier between the *Avengers* depicted in the poster and the audience. This detachment creates the impression that viewers are watching the scene from a safe distance, without the heroes' awareness. Considering the proportions of the epic battle that is about to unravel in front of viewers, the type of contact established is appropriate because it enhances their feeling of safety and comfort. Also, if the represented participants were looking directly at viewers, this could signal a demand to support either one of the teams or make them feel threatened.

Regarding social distance, the frame size in the *CACW* poster uses an overall medium shot, which allows viewers to see participants from the waist up. It seems there is a subtle gradation regarding the type of shot, going from a more personal to a more social medium shot. Because medium shots bring a communal perspective to the relationship between viewers and represented participants, neither too intimate nor too distant, the image of *Captain America* and *Iron Man* from the chest up suggests a closer relationship between them and the viewers. This kind of shot reinforces the centrality of the roles of the two team leaders in the movie plot. The same occurs with the participants nearer the main heroes: *Falcon* (*Captain America*) and *Black Widow* (*Iron Man*). We can see only their heads and chests (although much smaller in size), which suggests a closer personal relationship regarding the heroes lined up further in the background. Besides, the participants farthest from the viewer are those whose relationships are more social than personal, aligned with their roles in the story, which are more modest. In team *Captain America*, *Hawkeye* returns to action after being retired, and *Black Panther*, in team *Iron Man*, is one of the new heroes introduced in this movie. Thus, analysis of social distance may help establish the heroes' degree of relevance to the movie plot.

Another semiotic resource related to interpersonal meanings is perspective, which realizes attitude. In the *CACW* poster, participants' and the viewers' frontal planes form an oblique angle, indicating they are part of different worlds. This detachment also contributes to viewers' sensation of safety and comfort concerning the unfolding war. Furthermore, regarding the movie plot, participants' detached attitude toward viewers may reflect the role of society, which remains unaware of the heroes' disagreement until those in team *Captain America* decide not to sign the *Sokovian Accords*.

Camera height helps create power relations in the horizontal axis. In the analyzed poster, it seems there are two different angles. First, *Captain America* and *Iron Man* - the foregrounded participants - are portrayed at eye level, establishing an equal power relation with viewers. This reinforces the importance of the two heroes to the movie plot. On the other hand, the other heroes seem doubly powerless: they seem fragile in relation

to their leaders and the viewers since they are seen from a high angle. This difference in camera angle creates an artificial depiction of the whole ensemble, which strengthens the poster's compositional value.

The *CACW* poster falls between the naturalistic and the abstract depiction. In terms of modality markers of representation, one aspect that emphasizes natural characteristics is the presence of details: the represented participants appear with several pictorial features, especially the ones in the foreground, including their facial expressions, helmets, and shields. Moreover, the high contextualization of the illustration contributes to a down-to-earth modality. On the other hand, the poster can also be seen as abstract because of the absence of a specific background depicting war, which lowers contextualization. Regarding color saturation, some elements look like they are on a grayscale, especially the star and shield in the middle. Also, even though participants appear in colors, their hues are toned down to bring out the blue and red representing each team. Thus, there is not much color differentiation. We can see some color modulation, with the two colors (blue and red) appearing in slightly different shades. Overall, the modality markers employed in the poster contribute to creating a balance between natural and abstract meanings.

In sum, contact, social distance, perspective, camera angle, and modality help communicate the movie plot in the *CACW* poster. The heroes gaze at each other, inviting viewers to observe the image from a social point of view while keeping some detachment, not engaging in the presumed upcoming conflict. Also, the camera angle creates an equal power relation between the main heroes and viewers while it suggests the other heroes have less power. Regarding the use of markers of modality, representation, contextualization, color saturation, differentiation, and modulation indicate a harmonic ensemble of natural and abstract characteristics. Table 2 presents a summary of the interactive metafunction in the *CACW* poster.

Table 2 – Interactive metafunction in the *CACW* poster

Interactive Realizations				
Gaze (Contact)	Frame Size (Social Distance)	Perspective (Attitude)	Angle (Power)	Modality markers
<p>Represented participants gaze at each other.</p> <p>Gaze at the viewer is absent → Offer.</p>	<p>Graded Medium Shot → Close Personal Relation (<i>Captain America/ Iron Man</i> and viewers)</p> <p>→ Close Social Relation (<i>Falcon/Black Widow</i> and viewers)</p> <p>→ Distant Social Relation (other heroes)</p>	<p>Oblique Angle → Represented participants and viewers are socially distant. Detachment.</p>	<p>Eye-level Angle → Viewer Equality (<i>Captain America/ Iron Man</i>)</p> <p>Viewer Superiority (over other heroes)</p>	<p>Representation Contextualization Color Saturation Differentiation Modulation → All markers indicate a balance between naturalism and abstraction.</p>

Source: Developed by the authors for the present study.

The organization of the elements portrayed in an image reflects its compositional meanings, which include three aspects: information value, framing, and salience, as already pointed out. Regarding information value, the *CACW* poster has a center-margin organization, with the five-pointed star in the central position, representing *Captain America*. Additionally, the movie title is inside the star, surrounded by the heroes. Even though they are in the left and right margins, they appear as important as the star in the middle. Interestingly, the poster could also be seen as a triptych: the left side pertaining to *Captain America* and his team, the star in the middle in the center position, serving as Mediator, and *Iron Man* and his team on the right. In western societies, what is known is usually displayed on the left, whereas information on the right is considered new. This concept applies to the *CACW* poster: the viewers can see the known hero,

*Captain America*, on the left side of the star. The novelty appears on the right: *Iron Man* as an opposing figure. As for the ideal/real contrast, practical information regarding the production, direction, release date, and type of exhibition available is displayed at the bottom, representing the real. Regarding lexicogrammatical features, as usually found in theatrical movie posters, at the top, we can find the names of the main actors and actresses in the movie, information that is seemingly not related to the ideal realm. However, knowing who will be in the movie might appeal to fans' emotions. Thus, this information is strategically positioned at the top to attract viewers' attention.

The framing of the elements simultaneously connects and divides participants. The central spike of the star points to the division created by the blue and red, which represent the two teams, creating a visual barrier between *Captain America* and *Iron Man*. In other words, the graphic elements – color contrast, lines generated by the colors, the spike of the star, and the empty space inside the star – exacerbate the face-off between the heroes, indicating the characters on each side of these elements are separate. At the same time, the right and left spikes of the star connect the characters: the upper spikes join *Captain America* and *Iron Man*, while the lower ones unite their allies. The circle around the star also connects both the Superordinate and Subordinate participants. This may suggest that, despite their conflict, the two groups of heroes will reunite. Moreover, looking at the two upper spikes of the star joining the faces of the main heroes, we can see their chins are angled to follow the lines of the star. It appears as if the words in the title are coming straight from their mouths. Besides, at the bottom, the poster also displays another characteristic of movie posters as a multimodal genre, namely the use of a catchphrase or a slogan, which in the analyzed poster presents the lexicogrammatical/graphic elements in two sentences “*United we stand. Divided we fall*”. Interestingly, these sentences contradictorily reinforce the ideas of separation and union and contribute to setting the tone of the movie.

We now turn our attention to salience. As previously mentioned, the two foregrounded heroes are more salient than the others: their heads occupy a larger image area. Again, this feature reinforces the relevance of *Captain America* and *Iron Man* in the movie plot. Furthermore, regarding the use of colors, the blue in *Captain America*'s uniform extends to the back, encapsulating the star in the middle. Likewise, the red in *Iron Man*'s armor spreads to his allies and background. The other salient element is the star in the middle, which guides the reading flow and unites the whole ensemble.

All in all, the compositional meanings expressed in the *CACW* poster through information value, framing, and salience, strengthen the separation between the two teams

through different colors and other graphic elements (lines, spikes of the star, empty space inside it); however, they simultaneously indicate the teams will reunite, through the unity of the star and circle in *Captain America's* shield. Table 3 summarizes the compositional metafunction.

Table 3 – Compositional metafunction in the *CACW* poster

Compositional Realizations		
Information Value	Framing	Saliency
Center → Shield, Star Margin → Grouped Participants. Given → <i>Captain America</i> New → <i>Iron Man</i> . Triptych → Left ( <i>Captain America</i> ), Mediator (Star), Right ( <i>Iron Man</i> ).	Connection Elements → Shield, Circle, Star, Colors. Disconnection Elements → Star, Vectors, Colors, Empty Space.	Participants ( <i>Captain America/Iron Man</i> ) → Size, Color, Placement.

Source: Developed by the authors for the present study.

Taken together, the results of the present study indicate the representational, interactional, and compositional meanings in the *CACW* poster give viewers a clear idea of the plot. In *CACW*, conflict motivated by political forces between the two main heroes creates a separation in the *Avengers*. In the movie poster, there is a faceoff: the heroes appear with the two teams standing on opposite sides awaiting a battle. The *Avengers* interact by looking straight at their opponents; the viewers become mere observers. The lines and colors in the background exacerbate the division between the heroes, with the five-pointed star and circle from *Captain America's* shield simultaneously connecting them. Hence, the representational, interactional, and compositional structures in the *CACW* poster provide an appropriate plot summary.

## FINAL REMARKS

This study aimed to investigate the visual structures in the *Captain America: Civil War* theatrical movie poster following the Grammar of Visual Design (KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2006). We found that the representational, interactive, and compositional structures depicted in the poster successfully introduce the plot to the viewers. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the movie marks the separation between the *Avengers* due to political circumstances. In the poster, there is a clear separation between the teams led

by *Captain America* and *Iron Man*. The faceoff is magnified by various graphic elements, which makes the compositional value of the poster its most striking aspect. Future studies could compare the visual meanings expressed in the analyzed theatrical poster to others created for the movie's marketing campaign in different countries.

As Chen and Gao (2013) emphasize, researchers must have a good idea of the movie's plot to conduct a Multimodal Discourse Analysis. Regarding the *CACW* movie, based on the text *United we stand. Divided we fall*, viewers can understand that there are two possibilities for an outcome. If the *Avengers* stay together, they can defeat their enemy. If they fight among themselves, they will succumb. The analyzed poster suggests separation and unity, which in the movie itself might occur or not. Thus, the theatrical *CACW* movie poster analyzed gives viewers an idea of the plot without giving away the resolution. Future studies could investigate whether there is a relation between the visual meanings expressed in the theatrical posters of the three movies in the *Captain America* trilogy: *The First Avenger*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Civil War* focusing on how effective they are at hinting at the story plot.

Moreover, when analyzing movie posters, researchers ought to understand the objectives of each type from an advertising point of view. Teaser, character, and payoff posters appeal to specific audiences and come out in various moments of the marketing campaign. Thus, studies comparing these materials should acknowledge their distinctness. The present study focused on analyzing the theatrical poster of the *CACW*. Future studies can explore the visual meanings in all the poster types released for the *CACW* marketing campaign (or any other movie) to investigate how the structures that convey representational, interactional, and compositional meanings are used. Furthermore, considering the success of the MCU movies, more research is necessary to examine the visual structures utilized in Marvel's posters and other advertising materials. Future research could compare the posters created for the sequels, trilogies, and different phases of the MCU, under the perspective of the Grammar of Visual Design.

Regarding the representation of different characters in the MCU, future research could compare how the same participants are portrayed in the posters of their solo movies to those where there are other heroes. The present study focused on the analysis of *Captain America* and *Iron Man* as the leading participants in the *CACW* theatrical poster analyzed. New studies could investigate how *Captain America* and *Iron Man* are represented in the *Avengers'* movie posters. Another possibility for further investigation is to analyze the female heroes' visual representation, such as *Black Widow* and *Captain Marvel*, in the MCU movie posters. Finally, further studies could also examine the visual meanings

in the posters made to advertise the TV series in the MCU (or any other) following the Grammar of Visual Design. All in all, posters are multimodal texts that need to be studied further as they are relevant forms of communication.

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**Received:** 18 March 2022.

**Accepted:** 30 May 2022.