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VISUAL, DIGITAL, AND CRITICAL LITERACY IN STREAMING FILM POSTERS: A MULTIMODAL PERSPECTIVE ON NETFLIX ORIGINALS

Yohana Afriana Siagian *
Universitas Negeri Medan
yohanaafriana965@gmail.com

Zahwa Adelia Putri Damanik
Universitas Negeri Medan
zahwaadeliaputridamanik23@gmail.com

Rita Hartati
Universitas Negeri Medan
ritahartatiss01@gmail.com

Abstract

Promotional posters on video on demand platforms are often viewed casually, as if they were nothing more than decorative previews of a film. Looking at such posters only at the level of what they literally depict may limit viewer's understanding of how meaning is constructed and how commercial interests are embedded within them. This article examines how three promotional poster variants for the Netflix original film Leave the World Behind (2023) function as multimodal texts that demand visual, digital, and critical literacy. The analysis draws on Kress and van Leeuwen's multimodal social semiotics, focusing on the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions, and connects these categories to research on algorithmic curation and critical media literacy. The findings show that each poster variant constructs a distinct visual argument about the same film text: one foregrounds symbolic environmental anomaly, one foregrounds star power and social division, and one foregrounds literary prestige. These differences are not accidental but correspond to platform strategies of personalization and A/B testing. The study therefore argues that streaming thumbnails should be treated as persuasive semiotic systems rather than neutral illustrations, and that interpreting them requires an integrated literacy that combines visual decoding, digital awareness, and critical reflection.

Keywords: Multimodality, streaming posters, digital literacy, critical literacy, visual literacy

INTRODUCTION

The development of digital media has transformed the ways films are promoted and discovered by audiences. In the past, film promotion mainly relied on printed posters, billboards, and advertisements displayed in cinemas or public spaces. Today, the growth of video-on-demand (VOD) services allows audiences to explore films through digital platforms

without visiting a cinema. In this environment, promotional images have become important because they often provide the first impression of a film. Before viewers know its complete story, they may encounter a poster or thumbnail while browsing a streaming platform. The image can introduce the film's atmosphere, characters, and possible genre through a combination of visual elements.

Netflix provides a relevant context for examining this development because its interface presents films through promotional images, titles, descriptions, and recommendations. Unlike traditional posters that may be displayed separately, streaming posters appear alongside many other titles competing for viewers' attention. Consequently, the use of colour, composition, character placement, and setting can influence which elements become noticeable. These visual choices may encourage viewers to develop certain expectations about a film before watching it. However, promotional images should not be understood as complete representations of a film because they present only selected aspects of a much larger narrative.

To understand how promotional posters communicate meaning, researchers need to examine more than the people, objects, and settings depicted in the images. The arrangement of these elements also contributes to interpretation. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explain this process through multimodal social semiotics, which identifies three dimensions of visual meaning: representational, interactive, and compositional. Representational meaning concerns the people, objects, and situations depicted in an image. Interactive meaning examines the relationship between the represented elements and the viewers, including gaze, viewing angle, and distance. Compositional meaning focuses on how elements are arranged through placement, salience, and framing. Together, these dimensions provide a systematic approach to understanding how visual choices contribute to the meaning of film posters.

The interpretation of streaming posters is also connected to digital literacy and critical literacy. Lankshear and Knobel (2008) discuss literacy in relation to changing social and technological practices, highlighting the importance of understanding how people engage with texts in digital environments. Streaming audiences encounter images through interfaces that organize content and provide different ways to discover films. Meanwhile, critical literacy encourages viewers to question how media texts construct meaning, which representations receive attention, and what assumptions may influence their interpretation. Janks (2010), through the concepts of power, access, diversity, and design, offers a framework for considering how texts are produced, presented, and interpreted within social contexts. These perspectives allow promotional posters to be examined not only as visual designs but also as media texts with communicative and commercial purposes.

The present study focuses on three promotional poster variants for Sam Esmail's *Leave the World Behind* (2023), a Netflix film adapted from Rumaan Alam's novel. The film provides

an opportunity to investigate how different promotional images introduce the same cinematic work through visual representation. Although the posters promote one film, they may emphasize different characters, settings, objects, or visual relationships. Comparing these variations can reveal how visual elements are organized to create particular impressions and possible narrative expectations. The analysis does not assume that these differences necessarily influence actual audience behaviour or result from Netflix's recommendation algorithms. Instead, it concentrates on the visible features of the posters and the meanings that can reasonably be interpreted from them.

By combining multimodal social semiotics with visual, digital, and critical literacy, this research aims to provide a broader understanding of streaming promotional images. The multimodal approach explains how visual resources construct meaning, while digital literacy situates the posters within the environment in which audiences encounter them. Critical literacy further encourages reflection on the selection and prominence of visual information. This integrated perspective is relevant because promotional posters do not simply display a film; they also present a particular visual introduction to it. Examining their design can help viewers recognize that media images are constructed through choices about what to show, what to emphasize, and how different elements should relate to one another.

This study aims to examine how three promotional poster variants for *Leave the World Behind* (2023) construct visual meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional resources. It also seeks to compare their visual similarities and differences to understand how alternative arrangements may establish different impressions of the same film. Furthermore, the study considers how visual, digital, and critical literacy can support the interpretation of streaming posters as multimodal texts within a digital promotional environment. These objectives are addressed through two research questions. The first question asks: How do the three promotional poster variants for *Leave the World Behind* (2023) construct visual meaning through representational, interactive, and compositional resources? The second asks: What do the visual similarities and differences among the three posters reveal about narrative expectations and the role of visual, digital, and critical literacy in interpreting streaming promotional images? Together, these questions guide the analysis of the poster's visual structures and their possible meanings without making unsupported claims about audience responses or platform algorithms.

This study is expected to contribute to multimodal analysis by demonstrating how Kress and van Leeuwen's framework can be applied to compare promotional images for the same film. By examining representation, viewer positioning, and visual composition, the research identifies how different design choices may guide attention and create possible interpretations. The comparison also highlights that several posters can introduce the same cinematic work through different visual emphases.

The study also contributes to discussions of digital and critical literacy by encouraging a more reflective approach to media encountered on streaming platforms. Promotional posters are familiar to many viewers, but their visual choices are not always examined carefully. Analysing these images can help audiences recognize how colour, framing, character placement, and other elements contribute to meaning. From a critical-literacy perspective, the research encourages viewers to consider why certain details are emphasized and how promotional images present selected aspects of a film rather than its complete narrative.

In educational contexts, the findings may be useful for students and teachers in literature, language, communication, and media studies. Film posters can serve as accessible materials for learning visual analysis and developing evidence-based interpretations. Students can compare different poster versions, identify prominent features, and explain how their arrangements may shape initial expectations. These activities connect theoretical concepts with everyday digital experiences while encouraging critical engagement with media.

The scope of this study is limited to three promotional poster variants for *Leave the World Behind* (2023). It examines their observable visual features and interprets them through multimodal social semiotics, digital literacy, and critical literacy. It does not investigate Netflix's internal recommendation systems, establish whether the posters were tested through A/B testing, or measure their effects on viewers' decisions. Such claims would require additional evidence, including platform documentation or audience research. By maintaining this focus, the study aims to provide a careful analysis of how streaming promotional posters construct visual meaning and how they can be approached as multimodal texts that deserve critical interpretation.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using multimodal visual analysis to examine how three promotional poster variants for *Leave the World Behind* (2023) construct meaning through visual elements and how their similarities and differences can be interpreted within the context of digital promotion. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research focuses on describing and interpreting visual features rather than measuring numerical data or testing statistical relationships. The analysis is guided by Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework of visual social semiotics, which consists of representational, interactive, and compositional meanings. In addition, the study draws on digital literacy and critical literacy perspectives to consider how promotional images function as multimodal texts within contemporary digital environments. These perspectives provide a foundation for interpreting the posters while keeping the analysis focused on evidence that can be observed directly in the selected images.

The data sources consist of three promotional poster variants associated with *Leave the World Behind* (2023), directed by Sam Esmail and adapted from Rumaan Alam's novel. The selected materials include a teaser poster featuring a stag on a highway, an ensemble poster presenting the principal cast, and a novel-related cover displaying the Netflix seal. These materials are selected because they promote the same film while presenting different visual arrangements and emphases. Examining posters connected to one film provides a consistent basis for comparison, allowing the study to identify which visual elements remain similar and which are presented differently. The images serve as the primary data sources, while relevant academic literature on multimodal social semiotics, digital literacy, and critical literacy serves as the secondary source of theoretical and conceptual support. The exact origin and publication details of each image should be documented to ensure that the selected materials can be identified and checked.

The data consist of visual elements and their relationships within the three posters. These elements include represented participants, objects, settings, gaze, viewing angle, shot distance, colour, typography, salience, framing, and spatial arrangement. Represented participants refer to the people or other entities depicted in the images, while objects and settings provide additional visual information about the film's fictional world. Gaze, angle, and shot distance are examined to understand how each image positions potential viewers in relation to the represented subjects. Colour, typography, placement, and framing are considered to explain how the poster organizes information and emphasizes particular details. The study also considers differences in the selection and prominence of visual elements across the three variants. These data are descriptive and interpretive rather than numerical because the main purpose is to understand how visual resources contribute to meaning.

Data collection is conducted through documentation and systematic observation of the selected posters. First, the researcher identifies and collects the three poster variants, ensuring that each image is sufficiently clear for visual examination and that its source can be recorded. Second, each poster is observed carefully to identify its main visual components, including participants, objects, background, colour, text, and composition. Third, the identified features are recorded in an analytical table or coding sheet to maintain consistency throughout the research process. The researcher documents the position, prominence, and relationship of the visual elements rather than merely listing what appears in each image. Finally, the observations are organized according to the theoretical categories used in the study. This process provides a structured record of the visual evidence and creates a consistent basis for comparing the three posters.

Data analysis is conducted in several connected stages. The first stage involves identifying and describing the visible elements in each poster. At this stage, the researcher records what is depicted without immediately assigning broader meanings to individual

features. The second stage applies Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) framework. Representational analysis examines the participants, objects, settings, and relationships depicted in the images. Interactive analysis considers gaze, viewing angle, and shot distance to explain how the posters establish a relationship between their subjects and potential viewers. Compositional analysis examines salience, placement, framing, and the distribution of visual information to identify which elements receive greater emphasis and how the image forms a coherent whole.

The third stage involves interpreting the findings through digital literacy and critical literacy perspectives. Digital literacy provides a context for considering how promotional images are encountered within streaming environments, where viewers browse multiple titles through an interface. However, the analysis does not assume that a particular visual feature was created for algorithmic targeting or that the posters were distributed through personalized recommendations. Such claims would require additional evidence about platform practices. Critical literacy, drawing on Janks (2010) and Vasquez (2014), supports an examination of how the posters select and emphasize particular representations, organize visual information, and communicate promotional messages. The analysis considers questions of power, access, diversity, and design where they are supported by the visual evidence, without assuming that every design choice reflects a deliberate ideological intention.

The final stage is comparative interpretation. The findings from the three posters are compared to identify recurring visual features, differences in emphasis, and alternative ways of introducing the film. The comparison considers what each poster depicts, how its elements are arranged, how viewers may be positioned in relation to the image, and what possible narrative expectations the visual design may encourage. The results are then discussed in relation to the study's research questions and theoretical framework. To strengthen analytical credibility, interpretations are checked against the recorded visual evidence and relevant academic literature. The researcher distinguishes direct observations from interpretations and broader contextual explanations, avoiding claims about actual audience responses, viewing decisions, or Netflix's internal algorithms that cannot be established through poster analysis alone. Through this procedure, the study aims to provide a systematic and evidence-based account of how the three promotional posters construct visual meaning within the context of digital film promotion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Moving Beyond Surface Viewing

The three promotional variants for Leave the World Behind encourage a mode of engagement that moves beyond surface viewing and treats the poster as a layered semiotic structure. An unreflective reading might treat the stag, the highway, or the row of actors

simply as pictures of things that appear in the film. Read through Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) metafunctions, however, these elements emerge as calibrated instruments of positioning: they determine whether the viewer is addressed or permitted to observe, whether the film is framed as an environmental omen or a social drama, and whether prestige or suspense is offered as the reason to press play.

This interpretive progression is reinforced by the material conditions of the interface. As Buckeridge (2020) argues, thumbnails on personalised platforms are selected for performance, which means that formal choices such as scale of typography and intensity of contrast are simultaneously aesthetic and economic decisions. The following readings apply the three metafunctions to each variant in turn before comparing them.

Poster Variant	Interactive & Representational	Compositional & Digital Strategy
Poster 1: Symbolic / Environmental Anomaly	Offer / soft-demand image; conceptual symbolic process	Top/Bottom (Ideal/Real) hierarchy; high salience through bold red typography; targeted at mystery and thriller genre clusters
Poster 2: Ensemble Cast / Star Power	Demand image (direct gaze); narrative action vectors	Given/New horizontal axis; salience through actor celebrity; targeted at star-driven recommendation algorithms
Poster 3: Hybrid Literary Adaptation	Formal demand/offer gaze; classificatory conceptual structure	Stacking of literary seals; salience on bestseller prestige; targeted at literary and book-to-screen viewers

Poster 1: Symbolic / Environmental Anomaly



Figure 1. Teaser poster: the solitary stag on an empty highway.

Representational Metafunction: The poster features a solitary stag positioned on an empty highway that cuts through dense forest. There is no human participant and no clear vector of action, so the image operates through a conceptual symbolic process rather than a narrative one. The animal stands as a symbolic participant representing environmental anomaly, the

displacement of nature, and impending catastrophe. The emptiness of the road is itself meaningful: a structure built for human movement is shown without any human presence, encoding absence and rupture.

Interactive Metafunction.: The stag's head is turned slightly toward the viewer, producing a soft demand image that instils a sense of uncanny confrontation. Because the participant is an animal rather than a person, the address is unsettling rather than socially inviting. The elevated perspective looking down the receding highway creates considerable social and psychological distance, placing the viewer in an analytical and observational position rather than an intimate one.

Compositional Metafunction: The composition relies on an Ideal/Real vertical axis. The upper section carries the cast names and the tagline against dense foliage, functioning as the idealised zone of abstract tension and promise, while the lower section grounds the disrupted highway and the animal as tangible reality. Salience is concentrated in the stark red typography of the title, which overlays the centre of the frame and provides an immediate anchor that remains legible when the poster is reduced to a small mobile thumbnail. The narrow corridor of the road frames the stag and forces the eye toward it.

Digital and Critical Reading: Withholding the cast's faces while foregrounding an ambiguous symbol is a strategy suited to viewers whose histories favour mystery, thriller, and science fiction. Critically, the variant sells uncertainty: it makes a promise about atmosphere rather than about story or performers, and it invites the viewer to resolve an enigma by watching.

Poster 2: Ensemble Cast / Star Power



Figure 2. Theatrical poster: the four principal characters on the highway.

Representational Metafunction: The four lead characters stand on an open asphalt road, with a disrupted urban skyline visible in the far distance and the stag now reduced to a small figure on the horizon. The human participants form narrative vectors through their varied postures, body language, and spacing, signalling interpersonal tension and social division. The distant

skyline supplies a circumstance of setting that locates the private drama within a wider collapse.

Interactive Metafunction: The participants engage the viewer through direct eye contact, producing a demand image that requests recognition and alignment. The eye-level medium-long shot establishes an equal power relation and a sociable distance, inviting the viewer into a relationship with characters who are also recognisable stars. The casting of Julia Roberts, Mahershala Ali, Ethan Hawke, and Myha'la is itself a semiotic resource, since familiarity with these performers supplies genre expectations before any plot information is given.

Compositional Metafunction: Information value is distributed horizontally along a Given/New axis. The left side, occupied by the familiar family unit, functions as the given social anchor, while the right side, occupied by the arriving strangers, introduces the new and destabilising element. The symmetrical placement of the four figures in the lower two-thirds makes them the primary site of salience, and the road itself acts as a framing device that separates the two pairs while binding them within one receding perspective.

Digital and Critical Reading: This variant is designed for recommendation contexts in which star recognition drives selection, and its salience structure survives small-scale display because faces remain identifiable. Critically, the poster markets the film as a character drama about mistrust between two families, foregrounding celebrity capital as a guarantee of quality and softening the apocalyptic dimension that the teaser emphasises.

Poster 3: Hybrid Literary Adaptation



Figure 3. Tie-in cover of Rumaan Alam's novel bearing the Netflix seal.

Representational Metafunction: This variant presents a hybrid visual structure in which the four characters are arranged in a flat row across the lower third while dominant red typography reproduces the layout of a physical book cover. The participants are shown in a static classificatory posture: they are not acting but being catalogued, presented as equivalent members of a set. The desaturated field and storm-laden sky behind them function as an analytical backdrop of impending disturbance rather than as a site of action.

Interactive Metafunction: The participants return an intense and serious gaze, but the frontal, evenly spaced arrangement establishes a formal and evaluative relationship rather than an action-driven one. The address is closer to that of a portrait than an invitation, positioning the viewer as an appraiser of a cultural object. The Netflix roundel placed in the upper right introduces a second, institutional voice into the image.

Compositional Metafunction: The upper two-thirds of the visual field are dominated by the oversized title and by literary seals, including the New York Times bestseller banner and the National Book Award finalist line, with the author's name and publisher's imprint closing the composition. The compositional hierarchy therefore prioritises intellectual prestige over cinematic action, since the accolades occupy the Ideal position while the performers occupy the Real. Salience is produced by the sheer scale of the red lettering, which overprints the figures and visually subordinates the film to the book.

Digital and Critical Reading: As a tie-in artefact, this variant addresses subscribers who engage with book-to-screen adaptations and prestige drama, and it circulates in retail as well as streaming environments. Critically, it borrows the cultural authority of literary institutions to legitimise a platform product, converting awards discourse into promotional capital and presenting the adaptation as a continuation of an already validated text.

Context and Comparative Reading

Read side by side, the three variants demonstrate that a single film text can be refracted into incompatible visual arguments. The teaser promises an environmental enigma, the theatrical poster promises a star-led drama of social mistrust, and the tie-in cover promises literary prestige. Each configuration is internally coherent, and none is false; what differs is the audience segment being addressed and the value proposition being advanced. This variation is precisely the phenomenon that digital literacy makes visible, since it corresponds to platform practices of personalisation and thumbnail testing described by Buckeridge (2020).

Context also operates at the level of cultural memory. The stag on an empty road draws on a long tradition of omen imagery in which the appearance of wild animals in human space signals disorder. The frontal family group recalls the conventions of ensemble disaster and home-invasion cinema. The stacked seals of the novel cover belong to the visual grammar of publishing prestige. Recognising these traditions allows a viewer to situate each variant within an existing discourse rather than treating it as a self-contained design choice.

Supporting Literacies

The primary focus of this analysis on visual literacy is reinforced by two supporting literacies. Digital literacy equips viewers with an understanding of the conditions under which the image appears: that artwork is selected for a user rather than for an audience in general, that a thumbnail is optimised for a particular screen size, and that visibility is an algorithmic

outcome. Without this awareness, the variation among the three posters would appear to be mere redundancy rather than evidence of segmentation.

Critical literacy, in turn, empowers viewers to interrogate how these images construct value, authority, and desire (Janks, 2010; Vasquez, 2014). It prompts questions about why literary accolades are made larger than the performers, why a demanding gaze is used for one audience and withheld from another, and whose interests are served when the same narrative is sold as ecological dread, as celebrity drama, and as prestige adaptation. In this way the analysis transforms passive scrolling into an active evaluation of platform persuasion.

Strengths and Limitations

A major strength of this approach lies in its systematic method, which demonstrates the intrinsic link between visual form and commercial function. By integrating close semiotic reading with digital and critical perspectives, the analysis supplies concrete tools for interpreting artefacts that viewers encounter daily but rarely examine. The use of three variants of one film also controls for narrative content, making the semiotic differences unusually legible.

The framework nevertheless carries unavoidable limitations. Visual meaning is polysemous, and semiotic description cannot be finalised into a single authoritative reading; viewers with different cultural backgrounds may plausibly interpret the stag, the gaze, or the colour red in other ways. Furthermore, claims about algorithmic targeting remain inferential, since platform testing data are proprietary and not publicly verifiable. Finally, the theoretical apparatus of multimodal social semiotics may present conceptual difficulty for novice readers who lack prior grounding in visual grammar. Recognising these boundaries keeps the analysis an invitation to closer looking rather than a fixed interpretive mandate.

Potential Impact

This multimodal reading is intended to offer more than an explanation of three particular images. Through the interpretive demonstrations provided above, viewers are guided to reframe their relationship to streaming interfaces, particularly by learning to look past what a poster literally depicts. The analysis illustrates that promotional meaning emerges from the interplay of composition, gaze, typography, platform mechanics, and commercial intent. It can therefore function as a pedagogical catalyst capable of advancing conceptual knowledge, sharpening analytical skill, raising critical awareness, and ultimately transforming habits of viewing.

Knowledge

The developmental process begins when viewers recognise that a poster's message rarely coincides with what it literally shows. Encountering a stag on a highway, for instance, they come to understand that the figure carries symbolic rather than descriptive weight, and that its meaning depends on its placement, framing, and relation to the surrounding text. Viewers similarly discover that the scale of a title or the direction of a gaze is a meaningful

decision rather than a neutral design default. Through concrete analytical models, they acquire a refined understanding of how visual devices construct meaning and of how platforms govern the visibility of those devices.

Skills

As this knowledge is internalised, the capacity to analyse visual texts grows accordingly. Instead of being persuaded without noticing, viewers learn to identify participants and processes, describe gaze and distance, locate salience, and trace information value across the frame. They learn to compare variants of the same product and to infer the audience each variant addresses. This step-by-step procedure provides a practical strategy for advancing from the identification of visual features to an understanding of their persuasive function, and it transfers readily to advertising, news imagery, and social media interfaces.

Awareness

The simultaneous growth of knowledge and skill fosters an elevated consciousness in how viewers approach streaming platforms. They come to understand that the first impression produced by a thumbnail is neither neutral nor inevitable, and that another subscriber may be shown a different image for the same title. Because visual meaning is generated through composition, symbol, typography, and algorithmic placement, viewers develop the patience to examine an interface before accepting its invitation. This heightened sensitivity aligns with the central aim of the study: fostering an integrated visual, digital, and critical literacy adequate to contemporary media environments.

Potential Change in Viewing Behaviour

This evolving awareness ultimately reshapes practical habits. A viewer whose instinct was once to ask what a poster shows shifts toward asking what the poster is arguing, whom it is addressing, and why this particular version has been placed on this particular screen. Though subtle, the transition marks an essential shift from consuming an interface to reading it. Viewers become more willing to compare artwork variants, to notice when prestige signals are substituted for narrative information, and to accept that promotional images are designed persuasions rather than descriptions. In this way the analysis aims to transform not only theoretical understanding of multimodal texts, but the ongoing practice of encountering them.

Analysis/Discussion

The analysis treats the three variants of *Leave the World Behind* as parallel multimodal texts promoting one film. Each poster is read through the representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions of Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar.[1] The findings are then interpreted through digital literacy, which asks under what conditions an image reaches a viewer, and critical literacy, which asks whose interests the image serves.[2] Because the narrative content is held constant, differences among the posters can be attributed to semiotic and strategic choices rather than to the film itself.

Poster 1: Environmental Anomaly as Symbolic Argument

Representationally, the teaser poster contains no human participant and no vector of action. A solitary stag stands on an empty highway, so the image operates through a conceptual symbolic process rather than a narrative one.[3] The stag is a symbolic attribute of environmental disorder, and the vacant road, a structure built for human movement, encodes absence. The poster tells nothing about plot. It offers an atmosphere to be decoded.

Interactively, the stag's slightly turned head produces a soft demand image, but the address is unsettling because the participant is not human. The elevated viewpoint down a receding road adds social and psychological distance, placing the viewer in the role of observer. Compositionally, the Ideal/Real axis assigns abstract promise (cast names and tagline) to the upper foliage zone and tangible disruption (road and animal) to the lower zone.[5] The red title sits at the center of the frame and remains legible at thumbnail size, so salience is engineered for small screens.

From a digital perspective, withholding faces and foregrounding an ambiguous symbol suits viewers whose viewing histories favor mystery and thriller genres. Platforms that personalize artwork select thumbnails for measured performance, not for faithful summary.[6] Critically, this variant sells uncertainty. It makes a promise about mood, and the viewer pays for the resolution of the enigma by pressing play.

Poster 2: Star Power and Social Division

The theatrical poster reverses nearly every choice of the teaser. Four lead characters stand on the road, and the stag shrinks to a small figure on the horizon. Their postures and spacing create narrative vectors that signal mistrust, while the distant skyline places a private conflict within a larger collapse.[7]

Here the interactive metafunction is decisive. The characters look directly at the viewer, which Kress and van Leeuwen call a demand image, a visual form of address that asks for recognition and alignment.[8] The eye-level, medium-long shot suggests equality and a sociable distance. The casting of Julia Roberts, Mahershala Ali, Ethan Hawke, and Myha'la works as a semiotic resource in itself, because audience familiarity with these performers supplies genre expectations before any plot is conveyed.

Compositionally, information value runs along a Given/New axis. The familiar family unit on the left functions as the Given, and the arriving strangers on the right introduce the New and the destabilizing.[9] The road separates the two pairs yet binds them in one receding perspective, which visualizes the film's central tension. In terms of platform logic, faces remain identifiable at small sizes, which makes this variant effective where star recognition drives selection. Critically, it reframes an apocalyptic story as a character drama and uses celebrity capital as a guarantee of quality.

Poster 3: Literary Prestige as Commercial Capital

The third variant is a hybrid. It takes the layout of a book cover, with the four characters arranged in a flat row and dominant red lettering overprinting the lower field. The participants are not acting but being catalogued, which corresponds to a classificatory conceptual structure.[10] Their intense but frontal gaze creates a formal and evaluative relationship, closer to a portrait than to an invitation, and the viewer becomes an appraiser of a cultural object. The Netflix roundel adds an institutional voice to the image.

Compositionally, the upper two-thirds belong to the title and to literary seals such as the bestseller banner and the award-finalist line. Prestige therefore occupies the Ideal position, while the performers occupy the Real. The scale of the lettering visually subordinates the film to the book. Critically, this poster borrows the authority of literary institutions to legitimize a platform product and converts awards discourse into promotional capital. It addresses book-to-screen audiences and circulates in retail as well as streaming environments.

CONCLUSION

The multimodal analysis of Leave the World Behind (2023) demonstrates that streaming posters operate as highly specialised semiotic systems rather than decorative previews. By manipulating interactive gaze, compositional placement, and salience, the platform constructs distinct visual arguments across different variants of the same film text: an omen of environmental catastrophe, a star-driven drama of social mistrust, and a prestige literary adaptation. Each variant is coherent in itself, and their coexistence reveals the segmentation logic that governs contemporary distribution.

Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar of visual design provides the descriptive precision needed to identify these strategies, while digital literacy explains the conditions under which such images are produced and displayed, and critical literacy exposes the commercial interests they serve. Taken together, these perspectives strengthen the analytical approach by connecting formal description with questions of power and purpose.

For viewers, therefore, interpreting a streaming interface requires a combination of visual decoding, digital awareness of platform curation, and critical reflection on commercial intent. The contribution of this study lies not only in explaining three posters, but in modelling a more deliberate way of engaging with the images that increasingly mediate cultural choice, equipping audiences and media scholars alike to evaluate how digital interfaces shape narrative expectation before a single frame of film is played.

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