

LECTURE 1: From Visual Rhetoric to Multimodal Argumentation

The lecture introduces key concepts and analytical frameworks for understanding how meaning and persuasion are constructed through multimodal communication. It introduces some basic concepts from semiotics and multimodality before presenting the field of study called visual rhetoric and multimodal argumentation.

1. Semiotics and Social Semiotics

- **Semiotics** is the study of signs and of the ways in which they combine to form complex texts.
- Key Thinkers of semiotics are: a) **Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913)**, who emphasized the signifier/signified distinction, b) **Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914)**, who proposed the triadic model (representamen, interpretant, object), and **Roland Barthes (1915–1980)**, who introduced the idea of multiple levels of meaning and cultural codes.
- Saussure distinguished between two levels of the linguistic sign: a) the **Signifier**: The form the sign takes (e.g., a word, image, sound) and b) the **Signified**: The concept or mental representation associated with the signifier.
- Peirce identified three types of sign according to the relation of the sign (consisting of a representamen and an interpretant) with its object (real-world referent): a) **Symbol**: a sign whose connection with its object is purely a matter of *convention* (cf. a word), b) **Icon**: a sign that is related to its real-world referent through similarity, *resemblance* (cf. a portrait), and c) **Index**: a sign connected to its object not by convention but *causally or physically* (cf. natural signs, medical symptoms, etc.).
- Barthes, inspired by Saussure's structure of the sign, proposed a distinction between two Orders of Signification: a) **Denotation**: Literal, common-sense meaning, and b) **Connotation**: Cultural or emotional associations layered on top of denotation.
- While traditional semiotics focuses on the sign itself, **Social semiotics** shifts attention to how people use semiotic resources (modes like image, text, sound) within social contexts to produce and interpret meaning.

2. Multimodality

- Stöckl (2004: 9) offers the following **definition of multimodality**: “Multimodal refers to communicative artefacts and processes which combine various sign systems

(modes) and whose production and reception calls upon the communicators to semantically and formally interrelate all sign repertoires present”.

- Two key figures in the social semiotic approach to the study of multimodality are **Gunther Kress (1940–2019)** and **Theo van Leeuwen**, who proposed a grammar approach to visual communication.
- Bezemer and Jewitt (2010) mention the following three theoretical assumptions that characterize the social semiotic approach to multimodality: a) Representation and communication always draw on a **multiplicity of modes**, b) All forms of communication are shaped through their **cultural, historical and social uses** to realize social functions, and c) The meanings realized by any mode are always **interwoven with the meanings made with other co-present modes**.
- **Modes** are defined as the socially organized set of semiotic resources for making meaning
- While **semiotic resources** are defined as a certain community’s means for making meaning (material and conceptual).
- Meaning arises not simply from the **content** of what is depicted (representation of actors or actions, objects, attributes and settings) and what is said but also **from** formal features that characterize different genres of communication, such as color, lines, layout, and typography, when it comes to static images, editing, speed and rhythm, when it comes to dynamic images, and volume, speed, and melody when it comes to sound or music.

3. Visual Rhetoric

- While Rhetoric was originally defined as the art of using **language** to convince or persuade, modern approaches to rhetoric, such as Burke’s (1950) definition of it as “the use of **symbols** to persuade creatures who by their nature respond to symbols”, have opened the way to study other means beyond the spoken or written word as contributing to effective, persuasive communication.
- **Visual rhetoric** provides a model of inquiry that analyzes images and other non-verbal artefacts in order to explain the ways in which they construct and create meaning that address a public in order to persuade.
- Persuasion operates through **ethos** (credibility), **pathos** (emotions), and **logos** (reasoning), which can be expressed visually.

4. Visual Figures

- One of the focus areas of visual rhetoric is the study of the visual equivalents of rhetorical figures such as: **metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole, antithesis, personification, allusion, rhyme, repetition**. Examples from advertisements are offered to illustrate each of these figures and their function.
- These figures create emphasis, contrast, or association, shaping interpretation and persuasive effect.

5. Multimodal Argumentation

- While a rhetorical approach to multimodal communication focuses on how messages are crafted and their persuasive impact, an argumentative approach is interested in identifying the structure of the argument and the reasoning behind it.
- Tseronis (2018) offers the following **definition of multimodal argumentation**: “A rational and social communicative activity, in which more than one mode (besides spoken or written language) play a role in the procedure of testing the acceptability of a claim/standpoint that has been put (or is likely to be put) into question by another party (present or implicit)”.
- The study of multimodal argumentation is an **interdisciplinary enterprise** that requires the analyst to draw insights from at least three broad areas, namely Argumentation and Rhetorical Studies, Multimodality Studies, and the specific area of study that focuses on the genre and medium of the artefacts and phenomena analyzed (be it films, cartoons, magazines, advertisements, infographics, etc.).
- It is important to note that not all multimodal texts are argumentative, just like not all written or spoken texts contain arguments; argumentation requires a standpoint, reasons, and warrants.
- The identification and analysis of multimodal argumentation is a cyclical process that requires paying attention to **what is depicted, how it is depicted, and in what context/genre**.
- Examples from advertisements are offered in order to show how one can start the analysis by focusing on what is depicted, or on how it is depicted, or on the genre and topic, which allow the analyst to identify the main elements of an argument, namely a claim, reason(s) in support of it, and the inferential link between them.

Key Takeaways

- Multimodal artefacts can be persuasive and argumentative when produced in contexts of doubt or disagreement.
- Effective analysis integrates semiotic, rhetorical, and argumentation theories.
- Visual and multimodal communication is central to contemporary discourse, requiring systematic study of form, content, and context.

References

- Bateman, J. (2014). *Text and image. A critical introduction to the visual/verbal divide*. Routledge.
- Bateman, J., Wildfeuer, J., & Hiippala, T. (2017). *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis—A Problem-Oriented Introduction*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Birdsell, D. S., & Groarke, L. (1996). Toward a theory of visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 33, 1-10.
- Birdsell, D. S., & Groarke, L. (2007). Outlines of a theory of visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 43, 103-113.
- Blair, A. J. (2004). The rhetoric of visual arguments. In C. A. Hill, & M. Helmers (Eds.), *Defining visual rhetorics* (pp. 41-62). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The basics*. Routledge.
- Groarke, L. (2015). Going multimodal: What is a mode of arguing and why does it matter? *Argumentation*, 29, 133-155.
- Jewitt, C. (Ed.). (2014). *The Routledge handbook of multimodal analysis* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Jewitt, C., Bezemer, J., & O'Halloran, K. (2016). *Introducing multimodality*. Routledge.
- Kjeldsen, J. (2012). Pictorial argumentation in advertising: Visual tropes and figures as a way of creating visual argumentation. In F. H. van Eemeren, & B. Garssen (Eds.), *Topical themes in argumentation theory: Twenty exploratory studies* (pp. 239-256). Springer.
- Kjeldsen, J. (2015). The study of visual and multimodal argumentation. *Argumentation*, 29, 115-132.
- Kress, G. & Van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (3rd edition in 2020). Routledge
- Ledin, P., & Machin, D. (2020). *Introduction to multimodal analysis* (2nd edition). Bloomsbury.
- Norris, S., & Maier, C. (Eds.) (2014). *Interactions, images and texts: A reader in multimodality*. Walter de Gruyter.
- Pauwels, Luc, & Mannay, Dawn (Eds.) (2019). *The SAGE Handbook Visual Research Methods* (2nd edition). SAGE Publications.
- Pollaroli, C., & Rocci, A. (2015). The argumentative relevance of pictorial and multimodal metaphor in advertising. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 4, 158-199.
- Ripley, L. M. (2008). Argumentation theorists argue that an ad is an argument. *Argumentation*, 22, 507-519.
- Rose, G. (2016). *Visual methodologies: An introduction to researching with visual materials* (4th edition). Sage.

- Scott, L. M. (1994). Images in advertising: The need for a theory of visual rhetoric. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 21, 252-273.
- Slade, C. (2003). Seeing reasons: Visual argumentation in advertisements. *Argumentation*, 17, 145-160.
- Stöckl, H. (2004). In between modes: Language and image in printed media. In E. Ventola, C. Charles, & M. Kaltenbacher (Eds.), *Perspectives on multimodality* (pp. 9-30). John Benjamins.
- Stöckl, H. & Tseronis, A. (2024). Multimodal rhetoric and argumentation: Applications – genres – methods. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 13(2), 167–176.
- Tseronis, A. (2015). Multimodal argumentation in news magazine covers: A case study of front covers putting Greece on the spot of the European economic crisis. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 7, 18–27.
- Tseronis, A. (2017). Analysing multimodal argumentation within the pragma-dialectical framework. In H. H. van Eemeren & Wu Peng (Eds.), *Contextualizing Pragma-Dialectics* (pp. 335-359). John Benjamins.
- Tseronis, A. (2018). Multimodal argumentation: Beyond the verbal/visual divide. *Semiotica*, 220, 41-67.
- Tseronis, A. (2021). From visual rhetoric to multimodal argumentation: Exploring the rhetorical and argumentative relevance of multimodal figures on the covers of The Economist. *Visual Communication*, 20(3), 374–396.
- Tseronis, A., & Forceville, C. (2017). Arguing against corporate claims visually and multimodally: The genre of subvertisements. *Multimodal Communication*, 6, 143-157.
- Tseronis, A., & Forceville, C. (Eds.) (2017). *Multimodal argumentation and rhetoric in media genres*. John Benjamins.
- Tseronis, A., & Pollaroli, C. (2018). Introduction: Pragmatic insights for multimodal argumentation. *International Review of Pragmatics*, 10, 147-157.
- Tseronis, A., Younis, R., & Üzelgün, M. A. (2024). A proposal for the evaluation of multimodal argumentation: Assessing reasonableness and effectiveness in environmental campaign posters. *Journal of Argumentation in Context*, 13(2), 292–317.