

From Visual Rhetoric to Multimodal Argumentation — Assimakis Tseronis (Örebro University), 12-13 April 2026 – Ljubljana

1. What This Presentation Is About

On the first day, the lecture is about how meaning and persuasion work when communication is multimodal: not just words, but also images, layout, typography, and other non-verbal modes and about how multimodal meaning can be exploited for persuasive purposes.

The main idea running throughout the presentation is that multimodality is the default for human communication, so analyzing persuasion requires tools that handle multiple sign systems at once, not language alone.

The discussion builds toward a framework for analyzing persuasive images and multimodal artifacts using concepts from semiotics, social semiotics, and rhetoric, culminating in questions that the students can use to perform rhetorical analysis.

On the second day, students present own examples of advertising images that communicate their message using one or more of the visual figures presented during the lecture and discussing the semiotic resources that they exploit in order to construct these figures.

2. Multimodality: What It Means and Why It Matters

Multimodality definition — Multimodal communication combines multiple modes (sign systems) and requires audiences to integrate them semantically and formally rather than interpreting each channel in isolation.

Multimodal artifacts: The presentation treats “documents/texts/artefacts” as inherently multimodal, illustrated through multiple example images of different real-world visual formats, ranging from front pages and front covers to advertising posters and social awareness posters, infographics and websites, but also cartoons, memes and social media posts.

Meaning isn't fixed — A repeated theme is meaning potential: images and modes don't have one stable meaning; meaning emerges through features, combinations, context, and culture.

3. Semiotics Foundations: How Signs Create Meaning

Before saying more about multimodal analysis of artefacts, the presentation continues with the origins of multimodality, namely semiotics.

What semiotics studies — How signs make sense, relate to each other, and combine into more complex semiotic texts.

Three key figures in semiotics are briefly discussed and the distinctions they have proposed are presented with relevant examples.

Two-part model (Saussure) — Meaning is framed via signifier (form) and signified (concept), illustrated with an example linking a word-form (e.g., a spoken/written word) to a concept (e.g., a flower type).

Three sign types (Peirce) — Peirce distinguishes symbolic (conventional), iconic (resemblance), and indexical (causal/physical link) signs, supported by image examples.

Two orders of meaning (Barthes) — Denotation (common-sense, literal meaning) versus connotation (culturally constructed associations), with visuals used to cue how connotation “rides on” denotation.

4. From Semiotics to Social Semiotics: Meaning as Social Practice

While semiotics focuses on the sign itself social semiotics focuses on how people use semiotic resources in specific social situations and practices.

Three main social semiotics assumptions: 1) Communication is always multi-modal, 2) Modes are shaped by cultural and historical use, and 3) Meanings across modes are interwoven rather than separable.

Mode and affordance — A mode is a socially recognized set of meaning resources, and modal affordance is what that mode can express particularly well (and what it constrains).

5. Semiotic Resources and the Building Blocks of Multimodal Design

Semiotic resources are defined as a community’s means for making meaning, spanning:

- material resources (modes) — e.g., image, writing, layout, speech, gesture, sound/music.
- immaterial conceptual resources — e.g., relations like intensity, coherence, proximity that are realized through modes.

Two key analytic layers:

- Formal features (“how”) — In static visuals: color, lines, composition/layout, size/distance, typography, spacing; in dynamic visuals: editing, speed, rhythm; and in sound: volume, rhythm, melody.

- Content (“what”) — actors/participants, actions/events, objects, attributes, props, settings, and embedded text.

How non-verbal meaning works — Meaning arises through internal visual grammar, interaction with other modes, genre/practice embedding, and cultural-historical value associations. That is why one talks about ‘meaning potential’ and not about fixed meaning.

6. “Sites” of Meaning-Making

Meaning is shaped across different “sites,” such as:

- Production — who made it, under what constraints/intentions.
- Composition/image itself — how the artifact is structured visually.
- Circulation — where/how it travels and is encountered.
- Reception/audiencing — how audiences interpret it in context.

Why this matters? — Persuasion can’t be read off the image alone; it depends on how it was made, where it appears, and how audiences are positioned to respond.

7. What about persuasion in Multimodal Communication?

Insights from rhetoric can help us answer the question about potential effects of the various semiotic choices on an audience.

Classical foundation (Aristotle) — while the emphasis in classical rhetoric was admittedly on verbal spoken communication, rhetoric is framed as the ability to see available means of persuasion in any case, not simply “using language.”

It is the modern rhetorical perspective proposed by Kenneth Burke of rhetoric as the study of symbols that opened up the way for the study of non-verbal persuasion.

Visual rhetoric defined — One understanding of visual rhetoric takes the term to be synonymous to multimodal artefacts. It thus treats visuals (alone or combined with words) as: public and situated, audience-directed and instrumental, symbolic, and potentially persuasive.

Another understanding of visual rhetoric treats visual rhetoric as inquiry into how visual artifacts create meaning, alongside (but distinct from) purely aesthetic or purely semiotic analysis.

8. The Three Persuasive Appeals (Pathos, Ethos, Logos) — Applied to Images

One way to understand the persuasiveness of multimodal artefacts is by explaining the ways in which they connect to the three means of persuasion:

- Pathos (emotion) — Persuasion via emotional disposition (values, fear appeal, pleasure, humor). Images can be said to be primarily connected with appeals to emotions. See examples of iconic press photos, fear appeals used in climate campaigns or health campaigns.

- Ethos (credibility/character) — Persuasion via the communicator's projected trustworthiness, authority, expertise, sincerity, benevolence, and identification cues. Images of politicians in presidential portraits or the logos of companies or the design of professional websites are examples of how visual choices can help to construct visual credibility.

- Logos (reasoning) — Persuasion via claims and support: reasons, evidence, plausibility, explanation, definition, and inference. Visual examples of infographics, comparison advertisements, and comparison memes illustrate how images can also function as "reasons" through evidential styling and structured presentation and not simply as visual flags or emotional or ethical appeals.

9. From Verbal Rhetorical Devices to Visual Rhetorical Figures

A second way of accounting for the persuasiveness of multimodal artefacts is by focusing on the meaning that certain visual figures convey.

The understanding of verbal rhetorical figures as artful deviations can be extended to describe visual figures.

In the classical rhetorical traditions two main groups of rhetorical figures are recognized:

- Schemes — Deviations in arrangement and repetition/emphasis (e.g., parallelism, antithesis, alliteration).

- Tropes — Deviations in signification (e.g., metaphor, metonymy, irony, hyperbole).

Examples from advertising images are presented and discussed illustrating how known rhetorical figures can be construed entirely by visual means or by the combination of verbal and visual elements.

10. Visual Rhetorical Figures: The Practical Toolkit

- Metaphor — A visual element represents an abstract idea or another object by suggesting a similarity/connection.
- Metonymy — A visual element represents something else via association/contiguity.
- Synecdoche — A part stands for whole (or vice versa) in the visual.
- Irony — Visual contradiction of common sense or cultural expectations, producing a surprising/critical effect.
- Hyperbole — Visual exaggeration for impact/emphasis.
- Antithesis — Strong visual contrast highlighting differences.
- Personification — Non-human entities or abstractions given human traits/forms.
- Allusion — Reference to a well-known object/event/person/symbol relying on prior knowledge.
- Rhyme — Visual similarity producing harmony/coherence.
- Repetition — Repeated shapes/colors/forms producing intensity or abundance.

In preparation for the workshop during the second day, students are advised to search for printed advertisements on a website like ads of the world or other websites or ideally bring an advertisement from their own country.

For the presentation and discussion of the advertisements the following steps of visual rhetorical criticism are followed:

- Identify function — What function the image communicates, grounded in interpretation of the image's material features.
- Assess support and execution — How well the function is communicated via stylistic and substantive dimensions.

- Scrutinize legitimacy — Whether the function is sound, and what its implications/consequences are.

Specific questions may concern:

- Rhetorical situation — producer, audience, message, medium, location/context.
- Selection and framing — what is shown vs omitted; how the image is framed.
- Arrangement — how elements relate compositionally.
- Persuasive means — how ethos/pathos/logos are used.
- Figures — which visual rhetorical figures are present and what they do.
- Effectiveness/appropriateness — whether choices fit the situation and persuasive goal.

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