Multimodal argumentation and dissent – a perspective of multimodal critical discourse analysis

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In this paper, I advance a multimodal perspective on argumentative practices to investigate the way dissent can manifest in audio-visual documentary film texts, especially focusing on the role of music and sound in addition to language and images. This perspective combines aspects from critical discourse analysis, multimodal studies and the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. It proposes a comprehensive analytical framework that investigates the material, referential and interpretative aspects of multimodal argumentative practices.

KEYWORDS: multimodal argumentation, dissent, critical discourse studies, multimodality, semiotics, Peirce, audio-visual texts, documentary film

1. INTRODUCTION

The conference theme "reason to dissent" serves as the starting point for this paper. In it, I try to reflect on the relationship between dissent and the study of visual and multimodal argumentation. I conceive of dissent in a broad sense, encompassing criticism, disagreement, objections, denial, refutation and controversies. My main assumption is that dissent has been at the heart of many of the discussions about visual and multimodal argumentation in the last 20 years in at least two ways: dissent *about* the object of study and dissent *as* the object of study of visual and multimodal argumentation.

From the outset, there have been dissenting views about the possibility, the actuality and the character of "visual" argumentation. Thus, the idea of visual argumentation has met with dissent or objections from early on. In this controversy, a shift can be seen in recent years from a focus on "visual" argumentation to "multimodal" argumentation. This shift has promised to overcome the common juxtaposition between "verbal" and "visual" argument that lies at the

heart of a lot of the previous controversies around the issue. I ascribe to this shift and will show in this paper that a truly multimodal approach to argumentation acknowledges that all communicative acts – and thus all argumentative practices – are necessarily multimodal. Argumentative meaning is thus created through the complex interplay of different modes, including spoken and written language, static and dynamic images, music and sound.

Specifically, I will advance a perspective on multimodal argumentation that comes from the tradition of multimodal critical discourse analysis, combining aspects from critical discourse analysis, multimodal studies and the semiotic theory of Charles S. Peirce. As part of this approach, I propose a comprehensive analytical framework that investigates the material, referential and interpretative aspects of multimodal argumentative practices (Sedlaczek, 2018).

I will then use this framework to investigate dissent as an object of study. In the research on visual and multimodal argumentation, the question whether dissent in the form of negation, denial and refutation can be expressed visually, has been long discussed (and has also met with dissenting views). Many previous contributions on this question of dissent have confined themselves to the visual or the interaction of the visual and verbal mode in both static as well as dynamic text genres. In this paper, I will show the relevance of a more comprehensive multimodal approach that explores the implications of adding other modes beside the verbal and visual for creating dissent. I will investigate the way dissent can manifest in multimodal, audio-visual texts, and I will especially focus on the way music and sound – in addition to language and images – can contribute to expressing dissent. I will illustrate this discussion with an example from a documentary film about climate change – a discursive context, where dissent and controversy is very relevant as well.

2. DISSENT *ABOUT* THE OBJECT OF STUDY: FROM VISUAL TO MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATION

The interest in the study of "visual" argumentation has already a long history within argumentation theory (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, 2007; Groarke, Palczewski, & Godden, 2016). From the outset, dissenting views were voiced that discussed questions such as whether visual arguments are possible and whether they exist (Blair, 1996; Champagne & Pietarinen, 2019; Fleming, 1996; Johnson, 2003; Patterson, 2010).

At the same time, the research on visual argumentation increasingly broadened to investigate argumentative practices in a wide range of communicative forms and media genres. These studies increasingly looked beyond the visual on its own to consider the

interaction between the verbal and the visual and other communicative modes, such as music, gestures or sound. Thus, the discussions increasingly shifted from "visual" to "multimodal" argumentation (Kjeldsen, 2015; Tseronis & Forceville, 2017b). In these newer discussions, two different approaches can be discerned: The first approach displays a – what I call – 'additive' perspective towards the role of different modes in argumentation. Starting from the perceived primacy of 'verbal arguments', other possible forms of argument – starting with the visual – are explored and added to the analytical focus. Groarke (2015, p. 151) for example suggests to look at verbal, visual, olfactory, tactile, savoury and auditory "modes of arguing" and how they interact.

In contrast to this additive perspective on different modes in argumentation, several contributions in recent years argue for a more inclusive and holistic perspective on multimodal argumentation. They want to overcome the conceptual distinction between "verbal", "visual" and other possible forms of argument and argue that meaning is always context-dependent and multimodal – thus, there is no (pure) visual or verbal argumentation, but only ever "multimodal argumentation" (Žagar, 2016). Popa (2016) for example calls it a "category mistake" to talk about "visual argument" or "verbal argument" as the communicative or argumentative act is not determined by its reproduction in particular modes. Tseronis (2018) similarly pertains that "verbal" and "visual" should not be seen as categories of different arguments but that argumentative meaning is produced through the intricate interaction of different modes in a situated communicative context. Moreover, the argumentative meaning created by various modes does not only evolve out of the propositional meaning embedded in words and images, but is also influenced by choices in form and style. Tseronis thus calls for a multimodal approach to argumentation that takes the functional and context-dependent construction of meaning through the intricate interaction of different modes and their specificities into account.

My own framework takes a similar multimodal perspective on argumentation. It is informed by approaches to argumentation theory, critical discourse analysis (Reisigl, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2016), multimodality (Bateman, Wildfeuer, & Hiippala, 2017; Kress, 2010; Wildfeuer, 2015) and semiotics in the tradition of Charles Sanders Peirce.

The framework presupposes a pragmatic, communicative and cognitive view on argumentation. Argumentation is situated in an interactional, communicative and discursive context, in which contentious claims are challenged and justified between various social actors who hold different points of view. Its basic purpose is to convince

or persuade the opposing party or recipient by bringing forth arguments in support of the claim (Reisigl, 2014, p. 70). This argumentative discussion is carried out in various stages, forming an intricate net of communicative acts. Argumentation is based on an abstract cognitive pattern of problem-solving that entails a functional relation between the central elements of an argumentation, i.e. the claim, the arguments or premises supporting this claim and a warrant or conclusion rule that links the arguments with the claim or conclusion (Reisigl, 2014, p. 70).

The cognitive and communicative nature of argumentation entails that an argumentative function can be established independently of the specific communicative resources used. Thus, argumentation does not have to be exclusively verbal. At the same time, the communicative choices made in the communicative acts – including the use of different modes – matter, as they influence the interpretation.

Here, I make reference to the semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce (1931–1958) to suggest a comprehensive framework for the analysis of multimodal argumentation. Peirce advances a triadic sign model that builds on a triadic relation between the *sign* itself, the *object* the sign refers to and the *interpretant* as the effect of the sign on an interpreter. On each of these three sign poles, Peirce makes further triadic distinctions. Taking these concepts, one can thus investigate the *material*, *referential* and *interpretative* aspects of sign processes respectively.

In terms of the *material* quality of the sign itself, Peirce distinguishes between potential, actual and habitual signs, which he names *qualisigns/tone*, *sinsigns/token* and *legisigns/type* (CP 2.244–246; 4.537).[1]

In terms of the *referential* aspects of sign processes, i.e. the relationship between sign and object, Peirce distinguishes a relationship of similarity, contiguity and convention, i.e. *iconic*, *indexical* and *symbolic* signs (CP 2.247–249).

In terms of the *interpretative* aspects of sign processes, Peirce makes several distinctions. Particularly relevant for the investigation of multimodal argumentation is his distinction of feelings, actions and thoughts as types of *interpretants* or sign effects, which he calls *emotional*, *energetic* and *logical interpretants* respectively (CP 5.575–476). In the case of a logical effect, Peirce further distinguishes between *rhematic*, *dicentic* and *argumentative* signs, which correspond to terms, propositions and inferences (CP 2.250–253).

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[1] In line with accepted Peirce scholarship, references to the Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (Peirce, 1931–1958) are made with the abbreviation CP, followed by the numbers of the volume and paragraph.

On the basis of this triadic sign model, I suggest that a thorough analysis of multimodal argumentative practices has to consider three aspects: the material properties of the semiotic modes used, the referential meaning created by them and their interpretative effects (for a more detailed discussion of this semiotic framework for multimodal argumentation see Sedlaczek, 2018).

3. DISSENT *AS* THE OBJECT OF STUDY OF VISUAL AND MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATION

In the following section, I will take the analytic framework presented in the last section as a foundation to look at the way dissent can manifest in multimodal texts. Dissent as an object of study of visual and multimodal argumentation has a long history. Whether images can express negation or denial and whether images can refute arguments has been a contentious issue from early on (Fleming, 1996, p. 17f.). A holistic multimodal perspective that sees argumentation as a communicative and cognitive phenomenon acknowledges that the argument does not lie in the picture itself. Rather, the argumentative function is established by the discourse participants in a particular discursive context. Thus, the question would have to be rephrased as "Can discourse participants use images to negate or refute arguments?" This question can be answered in the affirmative.

Previous contributions have offered some promising explorations of possible strategies of visual refutation, denial or negation. In their seminal paper, Lake and Pickering (1998) identified three strategies of visual refutation in three documentary films about the controversial issue of abortion. The three films explicitly reference one another and thus enter into a critical discussion, putting forth arguments and counter-arguments or rebuttals. The three strategies of (visual) refutation are: *Dissection*, in which an image used by the opposing side is verbally dissected in order to refute it. *Substitution*, where images used by the opponent are replaced by different images that show a contrasting reality. And *transformation*, where an image used by the opponent is recontextualised in a new visual frame that leads to contrasting interpretations and associations.

A similar investigation of two documentary films with opposing standpoints (on the effects of fast food on health) is conducted by Bloomfield and Sangalang (2014). They focus on the strategy of *juxtaposition* through the use of before and after images. This strategy involves an (implied) claim about causality and argues enthymematically – leaving the audience to reconstruct a premise. The authors also explore how the synecdochic function of images can be

exploited as an argument of analogy, arguing that the images are not just depicting a singular reality but are generalizable.

The strategy of *erasure* for visual denial in static ad images is explored by Oversteegen and Schilperoord (2014). They investigate erasure as a type of visual anomaly or incongruity (along with insertion, substitution and distortion). In erasure, elements that are expected to be present in a particular visual representation – by being a natural part of a cognitive schema of an object, a scene or an event – are erased and thus an interpretation of negation is evoked. In a variation of this strategy of erasure, two almost identical images are juxtaposed, and a particular element is visibly omitted in one of the two images.

Visual incongruities are also explored by Tseronis and Forceville (2017a). They refine the proposed categories of visual refutation by Lake and Pickering (1998) by differentiating the way the substitution or transformation of visual and/or verbal elements are creating an incongruity between the message of the original text and the message of the new text and thus function as an objection or rebuttal. In an investigation of static ad images from the genre of subvertisements, they identify four ways of manipulating image-text-relations for creating dissent: verbal-visual incongruity by substitution of the visual; verbal-visual incongruity by substitution of the verbal; verbal-visual manipulation conveying incongruity by transformation of the verbal and visual; and visual manipulation by transformation of the visual.

Tseronis and Forceville (2017a) advance a comprehensive multimodal approach to the question of refutation and dissent that takes a pragmatic view on communication, treating multimodal entities, such as image-text-combinations, as communicate acts and stressing that images are complex entities that involve various choices regarding composition, colour, perspective etc. that convey meanings in addition to the meaning of the whole image. As they are concerned with static image-text-genres, they however miss other modes that are relevant in audio-visual texts.

Conversely, the two papers that looked at the audio-visual genre of documentary films did not consider the relevance of other modes beside the verbal and the visual, such as music and sound, for refutation. In the following section, I want to explore how dissent or refutation can be expressed in documentary films using language, images, music and sounds. This will be done from the perspective of the semiotic framework presented above, investigating the material, referential and interpretative aspects of argumentative practices.

4. DISSENT IN DOCUMENTARY FILMS ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE: A PERSPECTIVE OF MULTIMODAL ARGUMENTATION

I will investigate dissent in multimodal argumentation with the example of a documentary film about climate change. Similar to the previous studies of Lake and Pickering (1998) as well as Bloomfield and Sangalang (2014), this documentary film is explicitly presenting a dissenting view. The film is called *The Great Global Warming Swindle*. It is a television documentary from the British director Martin Durkin that was broadcast on the British channel 4 in 2007 and distributed internationally on DVD the following year (Durkin, 2008). It displays a sceptical position on the issue of anthropogenic climate change and tries to refute the common scientific consensus on this issue. Specifically, the film denies that climate change is caused by anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions but pertains that climate change has natural causes and that it will not have severe consequences – thus there is no need for the commonly proposed climate change mitigation measures. In particular, the film was meant as an opposing view to Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* that had been issued the previous year.

In the following discussion, I will focus on the multimodal strategies of dissent and refutation in this documentary film.[2] The film shows a clear focus on dissent and heavily relies on an evaluative opposition between the consensus position to be rebuked and the own sceptical position of the film. In this dissent, the strategies of *transformation* and *substitution* suggested by Lake and Pickering (1998) can be identified. These are applied audio-visually, using language (voice-over together with prosodic features[3]), image (film images together with choices in cinematography and montage), music and ambient sound. Two short segments – see the transcripts in table 1 and table 2 – exemplify these strategies and serve as the basis for my discussion.

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[2] A comprehensive analysis of *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, including a comparison to *An Inconvenient Truth*, was done by Sedlaczek (2012).

[3] Kišiček (2016) has previously explored the role of prosodic features for argumentation.

Cuts	Images	Sounds	Voice-over	Music
2 sec.	the rough, dark-grey sea (medium shot)	sound of waves crashing		trumpet fanfare, dramatic music
1 sec.	a printing press is rapidly churning out newspapers (close-up, zoom-in)		"Each day news reports	…
2 sec.	a black tornado is raging against an eerily lighted violet sky (medium shot, shaky zoom-in)	sound of storm	about man-made global warming	…
2 sec.	a printing press is rapidly churning out newspapers (close-up, zoom-out)	…	grow more fantastically	…
1 sec.	palm trees are violently shaking in a storm (close-up, shaky camera)	sound of storm	apocalyptic.	…
2 sec.	the calm blue sea with a ship on the horizon (long shot, steady camera)	sound of waves	And	easy-going music with high rhythmic pattern
3 sec.	a human figure standing on a sandy beach, looking out at the calm see, bathed in yellow sunlight (long shot, steady camera)	…	yet a number of senior climate scientists now	…
3 sec.	gentle waves on the beach, glinting in the	…	say the theory simply	…

| | yellow sunlight (close-up, steady camera) | | doesn't make sense." | |

Table 1 – Multimodal dissent in *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, example 1, shots 77–84 (02:25–02:41) (Durkin, 2008)

Cuts	Images	Sounds	Voice-over	Music
2 sec.	a black tornado is raging against an eerily lighted violet sky (long shot, shaky zoom-out)			high trumpet fanfare, dramatic music
1 sec.	ships moored in a harbour are shaken by the rough sea (medium shot, shaky camera)	sounds of waves crashing	((deeper, dramatic voice)) "We are	…
1 sec.	two red pickup cars are submerged in violent dirty flood water (medium shot, shaky camera)	sounds of flood water	told that	…
1 sec.	a house is surrounded by dirty flood water (long shot, shaky pan)		we should be	…
2 sec.	palm trees are violently shaking in a storm (medium shot, shaky camera)	sounds of wind (piano)	worried, because the Earth's climate	…
1 sec.	palm trees and power lines are violently		is changing."	

	shaking in a storm (long shot, shaky camera)			
0,5 sec.	rain drops fall on a muddy ground (close-up, steady camera)			... finale of dramatic music
1,5 sec.	two human figures in rain coats and with an umbrella walk between trees (long shot, steady camera)		((change to higher tone of voice)) "But the Earth's climate is always changing.	... dramatic music fades out
2 sec.	a woman in a bikini is sitting on a sandy beach in front of a calm blue sea, with a cargo ship on the horizon (long shot, steady camera)			easy-going, whimsical music with fluctuating melodic phrases
2 sec.	a woman in a bikini is sitting on a sandy beach, applying sun lotion (medium shot, steady camera)		In Earth's long history	...
1 sec.	a palm tree in front of the clear, yellow-blue sky (medium shot, steady zoom-in)		there have been countless periods	...
1 sec.	two ships are moving on the horizon of a		when it was much warmer	...

	calm blue sea (long shot, steady camera)			
wipe, 2 sec.	a human figure in thick clothes walks in a snowstorm (medium shot, steady camera)	sounds of wind (piano)	and much cooler	...
1 sec.	a snowy mountain range (long shot, steady zoom-out)		than it is today.	...
wipe, 4 sec.	a calm sea in front of a yellow-orange sky (long shot, steady pan)		The climate has always changed, and changed without any help from us humans."	...

Table 2 – Multimodal dissent in *The Great Global Warming Swindle*, example 2, shots 144–158 (06:57–07:20) (Durkin, 2008)

The strategies of transformation and substitution are apparent in the recurring audio-visual contrasting between the two discourse positions: Through words, images, music and sound the consensus position is evoked and put into a new frame that discredits it as alarmist (*transformation*). This representation of the consensus position is then substituted by opposing words, images, music and sound that promotes the sceptical position as being more rational (*substitution*).

The way dissent is created through transformation and substitution can be more closely uncovered by investigating the material, referential and interpretative aspects of this multimodal text, following the framework I presented. The three elements of the framework should not be understood as separate analytic steps but rather as three dimensions that have to be simultaneously considered in accounting for each semiotic choice of the text in an iterative process.

The consensus position is represented through images and corresponding sounds of extreme weather events or natural disasters, especially storms and floods, accompanied by dramatic music. In contrast, the sceptical position is represented by images and sounds of sandy beaches and the calm sea, often at sunset, accompanied by easy-

going or lively music. Both sets of images consist of generic stock video material. The video material was not filmed for the documentary itself but is obtained from video databases. The generic quality of the images means that they do not represent specific events – in Peirce's terms, they are *iconic types* that have a *rhematic interpretant*, i.e. a wide meaning potential. Ambient sounds accompanying the video material as *indexical* markers of authenticity are likewise confined to generic natural sounds. They are used sparingly and are clearly backgrounded in favour of the music. The generic film images only gain their referential meaning through the context of film editing. In line with documentary film theory, the documentary displays an *"evidentiary editing"* that is accompanied by a "voice-of-God narration" (Nichols, 2001, pp. 105-107). Thus, clear propositional and argumentative interpretations are evoked: The multimodal text audio-visually (images and sounds) and verbally (voice-over) asserts the claims of the consensus position to be rebuked and the dissenting sceptical position promoted:

The consensus position asserts that anthropogenic climate change leads to apocalyptic consequences (images of extreme weather events; "we should be worried, because the Earth's climate is changing"). This standpoint is vaguely ascribed to media reporting ("news reports about man-made global warming" / "We are being told") – visually emphasised through the intercutting of the images of extreme weather events with images of printing presses. Such a vague positioning of the source of the contentious standpoint to be rebuked can be seen as a strategy to avoid being accused of a straw man fallacy that exaggerates the real consensus position in order to dismiss it as alarmist. The sceptical position, in contrast, claims that a warming climate is due to natural, not anthropogenic causes and is leading to desirable consequences (evoked by the images of sandy beaches and the calm sea that invite leisure activities). This standpoint is backed with an argument of authority ("a number of senior climate scientists") and an argument of history ("the Earth's climate is always changing").

Language, images and ambient sounds thus collaborate in creating propositional assertions of argumentative claims. At the same time, the asserted positions are evaluated – again verbally as well as through the visual and musical frame created: The material quality of the images of extreme weather events is generally poor. The images mostly consist of grainy video material that has an amateurish look to it, with shaky hand camera as well as cold, dark and dirty colours. Thus, the images ascribed to the consensus position are presented as unprofessional, not to be taken seriously (verbally expressed as "fantastically apocalyptic"). In contrast to the visual and musical frame accompanying the consensus position, the images of sandy beaches and

the sea consist of high-quality, steady video material, dominated by warm and light colours. They are thus presented as more authoritative and trustworthy.

The music is likewise contributing to the evaluation of the two opposing positions. Music leads to *emotional interpretants*. It wants to evoke certain feelings in the audience. The dramatic music accompanying the images ascribed to the consensus position is characterised by a monotone, 'brooding' quality, overlaid with trumpet fanfares. It exaggerates the 'apocalyptic' message in a way that the audience should feel that the argument of the consensus position is ridiculous. In contrast, the music accompanying the assertion of the sceptical position has a playful or whimsical quality, characterised by distinct musical or rhythmical patterns. It is both reassuring the positive evaluation of climate change as well as reinforcing an attitude of scepticism and dissent. These opposing evaluations are also mirrored by the tone of voice chosen by the voice-over: The narrator uses a deeper, more "dramatic" and exaggerated voice when speaking about the consensus position and a higher, neutral and sometimes patronising voice, when bringing forth the refuting argument.

By considering the material qualities of the semiotic modes used, their possibilities for creating referential meanings as well as the emotional, propositional and argumentative interpretations evoked through their interplay, the above discussion tried to offer a close look on the way transformation and substitution are employed as strategies of refutation and dissent in the documentary film *The Great Global Warming Swindle*.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I investigated the strategies of dissent and refutation in a documentary film about climate change. I proposed an analytic framework for multimodal argumentation that investigates the material, referential and interpretative aspects of multimodal texts in a systematic way, taking into account language, images, music and sound. I argued that such a holistic framework can help to explore the argumentative functions of the different modes and how arguments, including dissenting or refuting views, are constructed in multimodal texts.

The framework incorporates insights from argumentation theory, critical discourse studies, the study of multimodality and the semiotics of C. S. Peirce. The holistic multimodal perspective on argumentation promoted by such an integration of approaches thus also sought to address the dissent experienced in the field of visual and multimodal argumentation, by offering a comprehensive account on the

way different modes with their distinct material qualities, their varying possibilities for representation and their potential effects combine to create argumentative meaning.

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