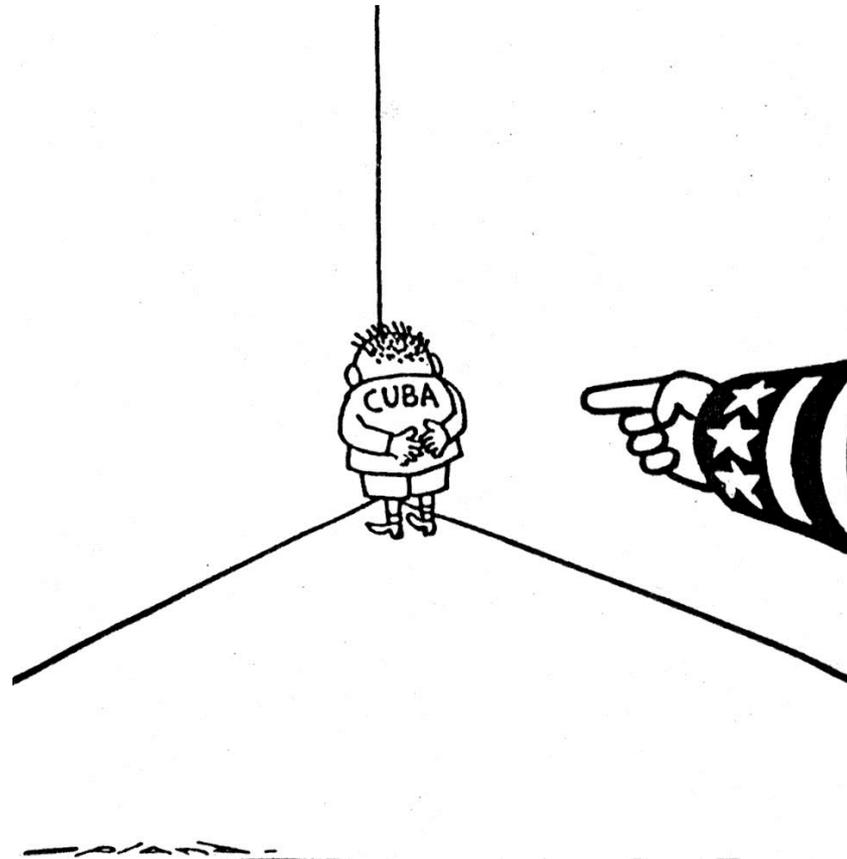


# The semiotics of multimodal argumentation



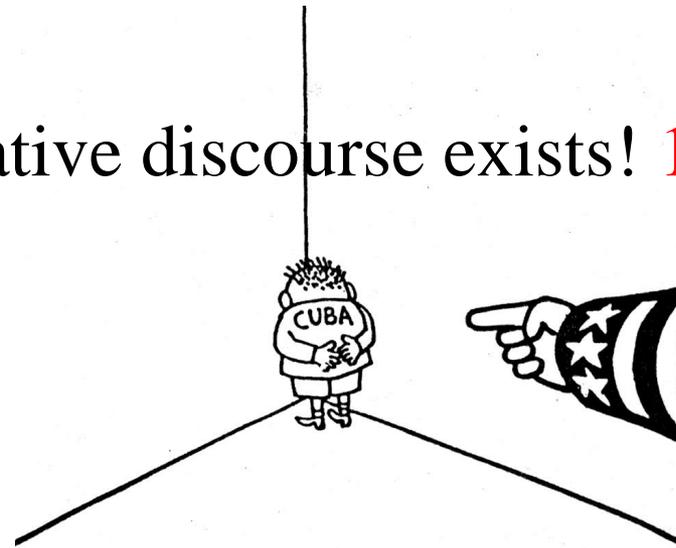
Paul van den Hoven, Utrecht University, Xiamen University



# Multimodal argumentative discourse exists!

- **Rhetorical discourse** is discourse that attempts to influence an audience's attitudes towards its future behavior.
- **Argumentative discourse** is discourse that attempts to do this, predominantly employing the human inclination to reason.
- The cartoon just shown is an attempt to make the audience reason, constructing an argument.

# Multimodal argumentative discourse exists! 1



- **Standpoint:** The US deserves to be condemned for its acting towards Cuba.
- **Data:** the US considers itself as if it was a teacher allowed to punish 'schoolboy' Cuba.
- **Ground:** In diplomatic foreign affairs, actors are presumed to be each other's equal, not to consider themselves more and less.

## Multimodal argumentative discourse exists! 2

- In Van den Hoven & Yang 2013, we reconstruct the argumentation conveyed by an ABC-News item. Clearly argumentative, clearly multimodal in the sense that all modalities contribute to the reconstruction.
- [Hu Jintao Visit Economics and Panda Bears Video - ABC News.mp4](#)

*The 400 million (1939)*



On one side — CHINA —  
which has enriched the  
world for 4000 years  
with its treasures of art and  
wisdom. On the other side  
— the rulers of JAPAN —  
determined to capture all  
China, and with the aid  
of her immense resources,

*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



*The 400 million (1939)*



## Multimodal argumentative discourse exists! 3

- In his impressive documentary *The 400 million* (1939), Joris Ivens shows the world images of the Chinese population suffering under the Japanese attacks:
  1. His argument is largely pictorial, though supported by a voice-over.
  2. His ‘data’ are true but his narrative causal chain is not ‘true’ in a strict sense. He presents a *model*.
  3. His appeal is a sincere appeal to reason.

# The problem

- Although clearly argumentative, all three discourses are far removed from the standard format of a reconstructed argument.

## The point to make in this lecture

- Incorporating this type of discourse in argument theory **cannot** be done by splitting its issues up in two groups:
- (1) issues concerning the reconstruction of the discourse in the standard format we know from currently dominant theories and
- (2) the issues concerning assessment of the reconstructed discourse.

## The point to make

- The point to make rephrased: incorporating this type of discourse in argument theory obliges argument theory to work on the ‘raw’ materials,
- and therefore to develop a semiotic theory.
- The reason is that reconstruction and assessment are deeply intertwined.

## The structure of the talk

- I will show you what **a semiotic component in argument theory** minimally implicates.
- Then I will map a ‘simple’, verbally reconstructed argumentation on the semiotic model.
- **WOW!! ARGUMENT THEORISTS ARE RELEASED!**

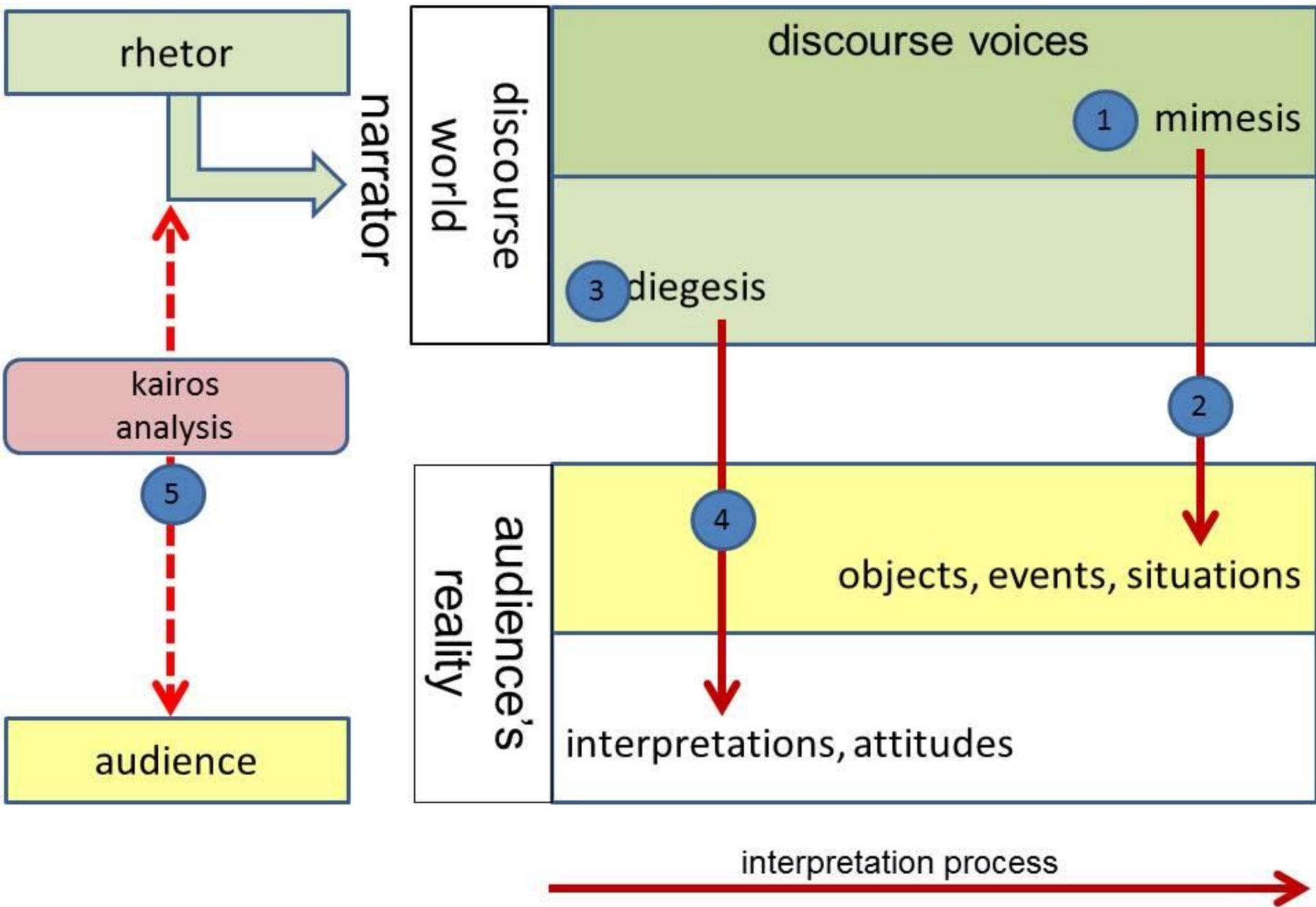
WHY?

# The structure of the talk

- BECAUSE:
- This mapping suggests the model is unnecessarily complicated as long as we only deal with straightforward, propositionally organized argumentative reconstructions
- (which is why current theory largely lacks a semiotic component).

# The structure of the talk

- BUT: Then I will give you five reasons:
  - why even such seemingly straightforward verbal utterance is in fact not that straightforward and already requires a semiotic component
  - Why this is a fortiori the case when we allow for multimodal formats and formats such as narratives, metaphors and so on, as means to convey argumentation (as we should).



# What is standard argumentation?

- A set of verbal utterances,
- conveying clear propositions,
- without much problems to be ordered in (informal) logic argument schemes.

# Mapping standard argumentation on the semiotic model

- The **mimesis** of the discourse world is constructed through (verbal) utterances that claim to convey facts.
- That is: the description of what the discourse world looks like is claimed to correspond to a situation (actual or in the past) in the audience's reality.
- This does not mean that the mimesis is a 'true' mime of that reality, but that it claims to be.

# Mapping standard argumentation on the semiotic model

- The **diegesis** of the discourse world consists of one or more interpretative or evaluative (verbal) utterances.
- These utterances convey standpoints of which the mimetic elements are the data.
- The inference rules that claim to account for the step from data to standpoint are based on grounds that are claimed to be ‘true’ or valid in the audience’s reality.

# Mapping standard argumentation on the semiotic model

- If a ground is not claimed to be ‘true’ (remember that this is just short for ‘claimed to correspond to something the audience is supposed to accept as element of its reality’), then it is to be considered a diegetic element.

## Example of a simple verbal argumentation

- The city of Dongguan in South China's Guangdong province is a city long known for its hotel sex trade.
- Prostitution is illegal in China and anyone who organizes prostitution can be arrested.
- Therefore the recent crackdown is definitely justifiable.

## Mimetic elements

1. The city of Dongguan in South China's Guangdong province, in which there is a longstanding tradition of hotel sex trade.
2. The institutional fact that prostitution is illegal, laid down in an existing formal criminal law.
3. The institutional fact that organizing prostitution is illegal, again laid down in an existing formal criminal law.

## Diegetic elements

**standpoint:** The crackdown is definitely justifiable.

**(implicit) inference rule:** If a certain practice has existed on a large scale, and for a long time [based on mimetic element 1] and that practice is illegal [based on mimetic elements 2 and 3], then a police action against this practice ('crackdown') is to be evaluated as (definitely) justifiable.

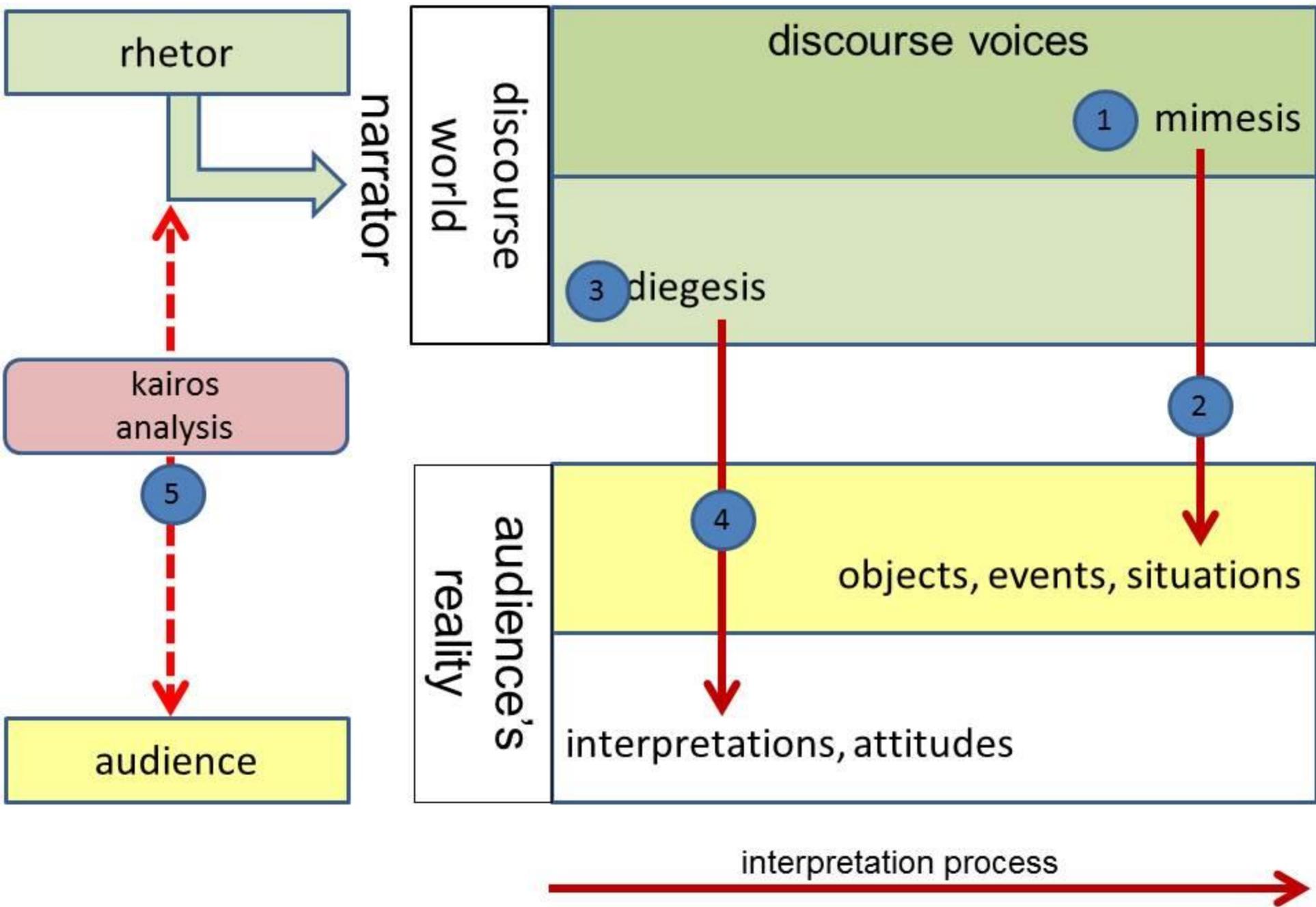
**(implicit) ground:** It is definitely justifiable for a government to have the police enforce compliance with the criminal law.

## Many argument theorists now say:

- Distinguishing the discourse world from the audience's reality as well as distinguishing mimesis from diegesis is irrelevant and unnecessarily complicated.
- The audience only has to make assessments about the acceptability of all expressions.

## Many argument theorists say:

- If the arguments are considered acceptable, the audience should accept the standpoint and therefore behave according to that standpoint; if some expressions are not acceptable, the issue is not decided by the discourse.
- No distinction of a discourse world seems needed, and in fact also no distinction between mimesis and diegesis is needed (although assessment criteria may differ for descriptive and evaluative expressions).



rhetor

NO SEMIOTICS NEEDED!

WE CAN WORK WITH NEAT  
RECONSTRUCTIONS ONLY!

audience

reality

audience's

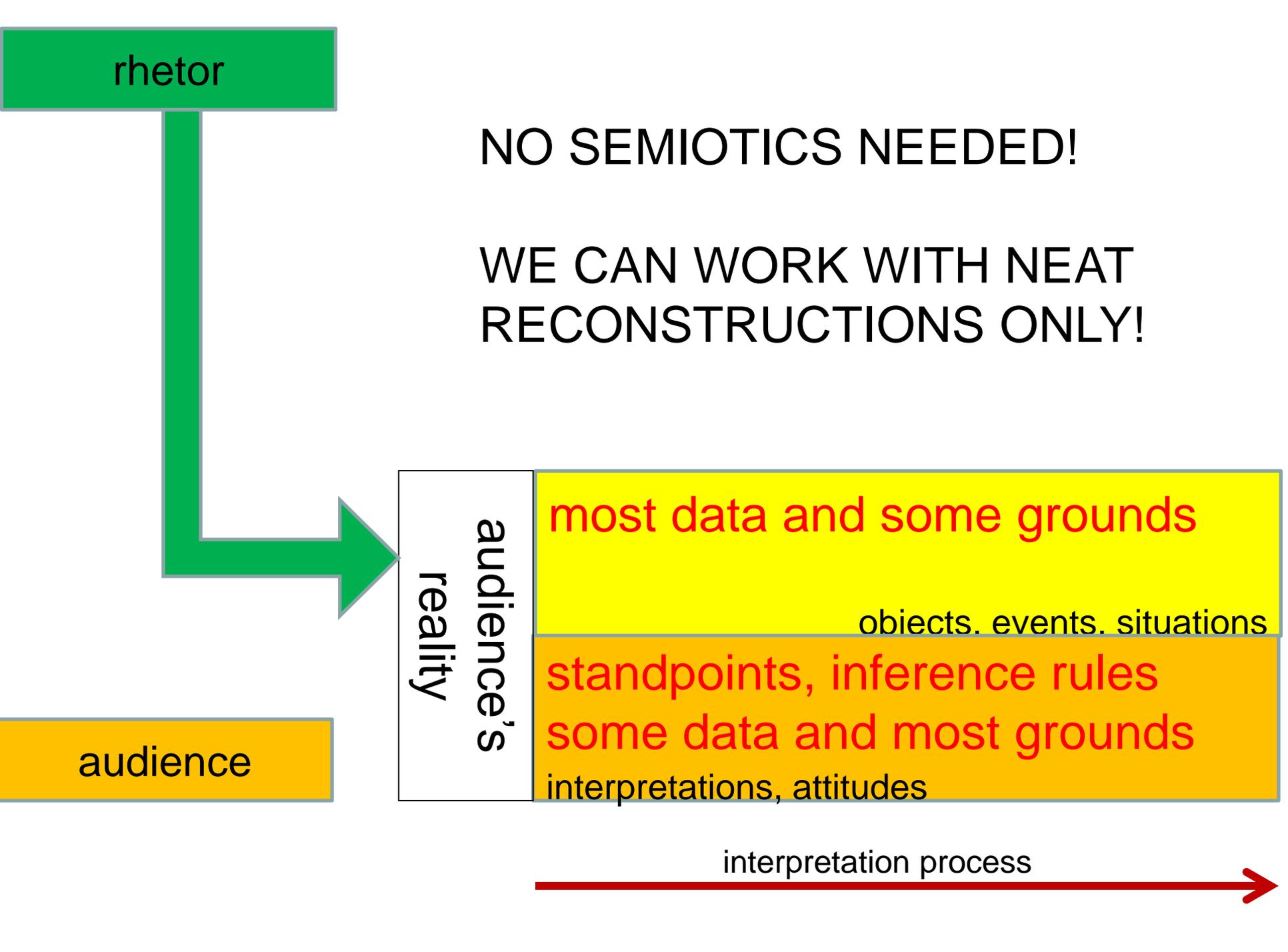
most data and some grounds

objects. events. situations

standpoints, inference rules  
some data and most grounds

interpretations, attitudes

interpretation process



## Why this does not work 1

1. Even in this extremely simple, straightforward, verbal example, we can see that the first mimetic utterance contains elements that should make us reflect on the issue whether there might also be a certain diegetic guidance hidden in the utterance.

## Why this does not work 1

- What exactly does ‘longstanding tradition’ mean? Merely that has been around for a long time (mimetic) or does this choice of words perhaps already suggest a negative evaluation (diegetic)?
- Does ‘trade’ simply and quite neutrally refers to a business (mimetic) or does it also convey a negative evaluation (diegetic)?

## Why this does not work 1

- Therefore, not only because the assessment criteria differ, but also because mixing up mimesis and diegesis is a strategic element of rhetorical devices, it is important to distinguish between presenting a discourse world and interpreting a discourse world, between mimesis and diegesis.

## Why this does not work 2

- Looking at for example the CCTV-item about this topic (a multimodal discourse type) it is even more obvious how strongly the mediating narrator influences the way the mimesis is presented.
- This not only implies that a careful reflection is required on what is mimetic and what is diegetic, but it also makes clear that simply claiming that the mimetic world corresponds to any reality is playing on what is called *naïve realism*.

## Mimetic elements (?)

1. The city of Dongguan in South China's Guangdong province, in which there is a longstanding tradition of hotel sex trade. **At least part of the audience can fill in this description with pictorial materials from the CCTV item.**
2. The institutional fact that prostitution is illegal, laid down in an existing formal criminal law, **to be filled in by part of the audience with pictorial material that renders this abstract element concrete, i.e., seeing the law being enforced.**

## Mimetic elements (?)

3. The institutional fact that organizing prostitution is illegal, again laid down in an existing formal criminal law, **to be filled in by part of the audience with pictorial material that renders this abstract element concrete.**

## Why this does not work 3

- The three explicit mimetic discourse element intends to convey a mimesis that encompasses much more than merely the direct, abstract verbal meaning. In its interpretation of the discourse, the audience supplies a lot of the mimesis from its own (supposed) foreknowledge. This may influence the acceptability of the inference rule as based on the grounds.

## Why this does not work 3

- It is therefore relevant to reflect upon the more ‘complete’ mimesis that is evoked as discourse world, given the kairos situation; which audience, where and why encounters the discourse.
- Besides this it is clear that the discourse world needs to be distinguished at least from reality (that reality does not change), but also from the reality as perceived by the audience.

## Why this does not work 4

- An important reason to distinguish the discourse world from the audience's reality is that the concept of 'truth', defined by us as the correspondence between mimesis and the audience's perception of reality, is in fact very complicated. The assessment of truth is not a simple 'yes' or 'no' issue.

## Why this does not work 4

- Reflecting on the correspondence to its perception of reality, an audience can come to complex assessments of a CCTV-clip such as: “Basically I agree with the picture given, although some elements are exaggerated and some aspects are hard to judge because of a lack of information”, and so on.

## Why this does not work 4

- This is all caused by and therefore accounted for by the fact that the discourse world is no mirror, no reflection but instead a mediated mime of a possible reality and therefore needs to be conceptualized as such.

## Why this does not work 5

- Finally, if we leave aside the simple prototypical argumentative example given here, there are numerous example of discourse that employ an audience's disposition to reason, but present discourse worlds with a mimesis that does not claim to correspond to a reality at all.

## Why this does not work 5

- The cartoon relates to reality as a metaphor.
- The ABC-news item includes three metaphors and a symbol.
- The documentary presents a generalized model.

# Objection

- If these semiotics are so complicated, that is even more a reason for argument theory to work solely with neat reconstructions, leaving the reconstruction as such to discourse theory.

## The point to make in this lecture

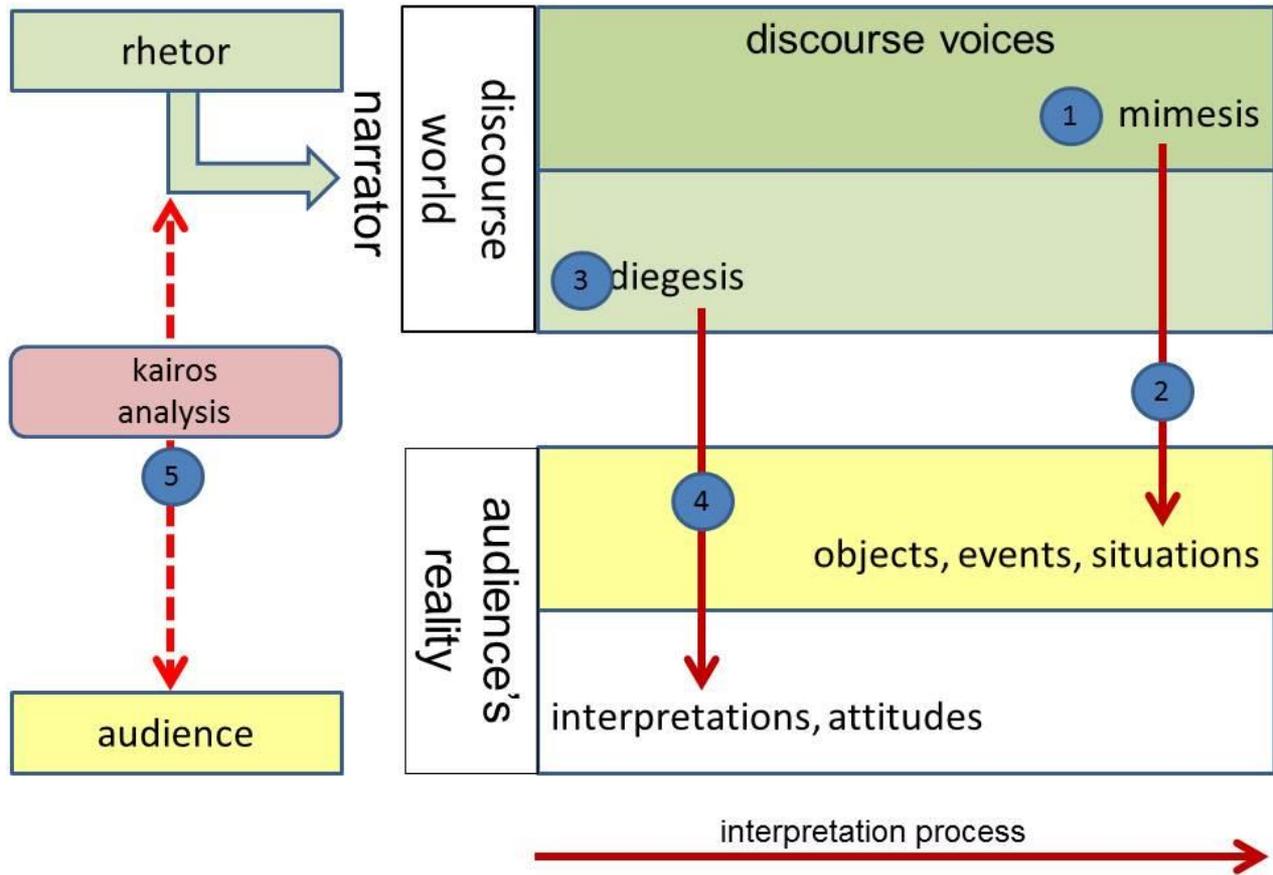
- Incorporating this type of discourse in argument theory **cannot** be done by splitting its issues up in two groups:
- (1) issues concerning the reconstruction of the discourse in the standard format we know from currently dominant theories and
- (2) the issues concerning assessment of the reconstructed discourse.

## Why not split the issues?

- If argument theory wants to account for and to model proponent's and opponent's argumentative accountabilities, we have to develop a relevant semiotic theory, whether we like it or not.
- If argument theory want to account for reasons that require creative mapping to even think about fitting them in some traditional argument scheme – if possible at all – we have to develop a relevant semiotic theory, whether we like it or not.

# Conclusion

- Incorporating this type of discourse in argument theory obliges argument theory to work on the ‘raw’ materials,
- and therefore to develop a semiotic theory.
- The reason is that reconstruction and assessment are deeply intertwined.



Thank you for your presence and attention!