

Cognitive Semiotics in Argumentation: A Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract Argumentation is a *cognitive* category. Texts cannot be said to be argumentation, nor can argumentation be said to lie in texts. This is an almost trivial semiotic point of departure, but it is quite relevant nevertheless. In this contribution, three reasons are developed to emphasize and to articulate the semiotic component of argumentation to show that it is a crucial element that cannot be disregarded. Two of these reasons are mentioned only in passing as other contributions in this volume deal with them more substantially. The third reason, being that argumentation requires an exchange of discourse worlds and that consequently the *mimetic* construction of these discourse worlds is part of the argumentation, is discussed in some detail in this paper. It will be argued that a lack of attention for the *mimetics* of argumentation is regrettable, both theoretically and practically. Focusing on the mimetics raises questions concerning the dominant ‘propositional’ format of argumentation assumed to be essential for argumentative assessment.

Keywords Cognitive semiotics · Discourse · Diegetics · Evidence · Hedging · Mimetics · Multimodal argumentation · Proposition · Straw man

1 Introduction

Argumentation is a *cognitive* category (compare Kjeldsen 2007).¹ In texts, people can ‘express’ points of view and provide reasons to justify these or refute claims to the

¹ Kjeldsen (2007) discusses ‘visual argumentation’ but develops arguments for the necessity of a cognitive approach that regard argumentation in general. He refers among others to the much older contribution of Hamble 1980.

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contrary; in texts, people can ‘read’ about points of view and the reasons provided to justify them or to refute claims to the contrary. However, the text structures as such are not the argumentation per se. The argumentation per se takes place in the mind. In many contexts—for example that of a reasonable discussion between two or more participants—we consider it desirable and even regard it as a requirement for successful communication that the text, as a sign vehicle, conveys the argumentation that the one participant intends to express ‘adequately’ to the other participant. By this we mean that the ‘receiving’ participant constructs from the text a more or less equivalent argumentation. In that sense, argumentation can be said to be a socialized phenomenon, a specific relation between two or more mental representations. Still, this does not detract from the fact that the argumentation in the mind of the reader is mediated by the text as a sign.²

At a meta-level we can speak about the cognitive meaning structures that we call *argumentation*. Obviously, we can speak about the relation between the intention to express such meanings in a text and the textual structures resulting from this intention, and we can speak about the relation between ‘reading’ arguments in texts and the textual structures that may evoke such a reading. We can theoretically and empirically investigate these relations and we may conclude that some text structures are to be considered prototypical in conveying arguments from one person to another. This is why one may be tempted to say that such specific text structures ‘are’ arguments. But that is a figure of speech, a metonym in which ‘argumentation’ stands for the cognitive semiotic processes.

It is important to elaborate on this rather trivial semiotic point of departure.³ There are three reasons I would like to adduce to show why it is important to emphasize that texts are ‘merely’ sign vehicles and that therefore it is metonymical to denote text structures that prototypically convey argumentation as being *argumentative texts* or *argumentative discourse* or just *argumentation*.⁴ (1) Emphasizing this point raises attention for text structures that convey argumentation in a non-prototypical way; (2) opens up the realm for non-prototypical relations that may still appeal to reason; and (3) increases the attention for the mental construction of the discourse world and its mimetics as an indissoluble part of argumentation.

² In this contribution, we disregard the very special situations in which participants are arguing orally about an issue that is immediately present in the situation and therefore available for deictic expressions as well as for direct sense impressions. An example would be a situation in a courtroom where a discussion develops about the reliability of a witness who is present on the spot. In such exceptional situations, the semiotic process is still relevant but is in some respects different and even semiotically less complicated compared to the text-mediated discourse types that we predominantly discuss here.

³ It is trivial in the sense that it is a semiotic point of departure for all categories of ‘meaning’. The discussion about *argumentation* here is similar to that about *narratives* in narratology where the issue is whether certain texts are narratives while others are not (as reviewed in Ryan (2004)). It is no coincidence that the latter discussion is reviewed in a book about narratives across media and that the present parallel discussion about argumentation should take place in a special issue about multimodal arguments.

⁴ There is nothing wrong with using metonymic expressions; we use them all the time because they are efficient and appealing. However, sometimes it is good to remind ourselves of what the metonym actually represents.

Although we claim that the necessity of a semiotic approach applies to all discourse that invites an interpretation as (partly) argumentative, even to the most prototypically organized, verbally conveyed argumentative discourse (compare Van den Hoven, to appear), a ‘prototypical’ example of multimodal argumentative discourse may suffice to informally introduce the issues that we deal with in this article. Suppose that two discussants have a difference of opinion on whether it is worth visiting a specific location to investigate a plot of land that is for sale. One discussant brings in a photo, concluding that the land appears to meet the main requirement of not being too large. The other discussant expresses his doubts about the correctness of this interpretation, questioning the relation between what the photo ‘shows’ (we call this the mimesis) and the actual plot of land, the factual ‘reality’ on the spot (we call this the mimetic relation). He says: “Counting the bean poles my guess is that the garden is much larger than it looks here. I would guess this photo has been taken with at least a 70 mm lens. I agree it looks perfect for us in the photograph but it will (almost) certainly turn out to be too large; it is not worth spending time to visit this location”.

This fictitious dialogue introduces in a nutshell the issues relevant for the theoretical arguments to be developed in this article. The first discussant presents a multimodal discourse using what he believes is the best way available (he will most certainly not know the exact size of the garden) to present his point. The second discussant makes explicit that the discourse just presented introduces a ‘discourse world’. This ‘world’, which is to be mentally constructed by the interpreter of the discourse, claims to be relevant for the ‘reality’ as perceived by the discussants. This reality is supposed to exist, but is not immediately verifiable for the discussants. The discourse world as conveyed has mimetic elements; besides this, interpretations are explicitly formulated by one of the discussants (diegesis). The claimed and admitted relation between discourse world and ‘reality’ is one of correspondence. But this relation is not a straightforward one and therefore it is open to debate (that is why we prefer to use the term ‘mime’ rather than ‘(re)present’ to indicate this correspondence). Because of the complex, ‘mediated’ relation to ‘reality’, the diegetic elements that are valid in the discourse world do not simply transfer to the ‘reality’, even though the pictorial elements in the photo do correspond in a specific way to this reality. Assuming a straightforward relation (which is indeed often assumed in cases of indexical, pictorial discourses such as photo and film) is called *naive realism* (Feigenson 2010).

The example illustrates the necessity of a semiotic theory that is an element of argument theory because in a discourse world mimesis and diegesis are strongly intertwined; this makes it hard if not impossible to leave the semiotic relation to discourse studies and limit argument theory to assessment of interpreted semiotic objects; the mimetic interpretation is an inextricable element of the assessment. It also indicates the preferable direction to go in for the development of theoretical models for analysis and assessment of these non-prototypical argumentative text structures, conveying non-prototypical argumentative relations that involve complex mimetic and diegetic relations between a discourse world and a ‘reality’ that the discourse claims to be relevant for: semiotic theories on *mediation* need to be developed within the framework of argument theory. In this example an important

element in the mediation is made explicit in the discussion: the choice of the focus length of the lens and its semiotic impact on diegetic suggestion within the discourse world as well as the implications it may have for the assessment of the relations between this discourse world and the discussants' reality.

Current argument theories tend to work with argumentative reconstructions, not with the discourse pragmatics as such. Prototypically, such reconstructions consist of verbal statements, in a scheme that clearly expresses logical relations between these statements. Of course, these dominant theories do pay attention to the analytical process of deriving such a reconstruction from the text. However, that process of making the reconstruction—certainly not the core of the theoretical interest—is seen as separated from the further analysis and assessment of the argumentation as reconstructed. Without intending to construct current, dominant theoretical approaches as a straw man, the point to be made in this article is that a number of important theoretical issues to be dealt with in argument theory come up when focusing on the semiotic process, (a) giving up the idea that argumentation needs to be conveyed verbally, (b) giving up the a priori requirement that a discourse needs to be suitable to be formatted in a limited set of prototypical relations to be considered argumentation, and (c) taking into account that representing the world argued about (the discussants' 'reality') in the discourse world is tied up with interpreting and evaluating the relations between this world and this reality.

Obviously this simple example may be misleading in the sense that it fails to capture the complexity of the theoretical implications of incorporating a semiotic framework in argument theory. In the end, the impact of this focus length choice on elements of meaning construction is almost 'computational'. This rather technological element in the mediated mimetic relation (compare Fig. 1), however, should be extrapolated to relations in which complex narratives, creative metaphorical mapping processes, and so on are involved, relations that are known not to be fully computational (Fauconnier 1994; Fauconnier and Turner 2003).

In Sect. 2, it is explained how the semiotic perspective predicts a wide number of text formats as being potentially suited to conveying argumentation. In Sect. 3, it is suggested that one may encounter argument structures that are not verbally expressible or whose verbal expression in general, audience-independent terms is at best diffuse. Such structures may not fit very well into the argument schemes as distinguished in most theories, or the assessment procedures attached to such schemes may be felt to not fully cover the appeal to reason made through the discourse. In Sect. 4, the mental construction of the mimetics of a discourse world ('how does it look') are introduced as an indissoluble part of argumentation which, in current standard theories, is often reduced to interpretative and evaluative propositions about that world (diegetics). Cognitive semiotics allows us to elaborate on this analytical distinction between mimetic and diegetic elements in the mental representations of argumentative discourse.⁵ In Sect. 5, it will be argued that some

⁵ I use argumentative discourse here as a theoretical term to refer to a mental representation of a discourse world, its (merged) mimetics and diegetics, as well as the relations the audience represents between this world and its perceived reality. See also Van den Hoven (2012b) and Van den Hoven and Yang 2013.



Fig. 1 Three pictures taken from the same position with respectively: 35, 50, 70 mm

discourse formats, for example (visually or verbally conveyed) narratives are very well-suited to conveying mimetic elements, but that such discourse formats share the characteristic that they tend to merge mimetic with diegetic guidance in a such a way that it is hard to disentangle the two. In Sect. 6, an attempt is made to draw up the (rather challenging) balance resulting from the incorporation of the articulation of a cognitive semiotic component in argument theory; it means we are inevitably inviting in a large number of difficult theoretical and practical issues. This is caused by the fact that narratives as well as most images are far removed from the prototypical verbal, ‘propositional’ text format to convey argumentation while current theories are largely building on this format that is closest to the format of the argumentative reconstruction.

2 Non-prototypical Text Structures

The prototypical text format that comes to mind when we think of argumentation is: a verbal text in which an explicitly indicated standpoint is expressed and explicitly indicated utterances expressing propositions are brought forward as pretending to justify or refute this standpoint.⁶ In short, one thinks of text formats similar to the ones currently used in argument theory to ‘reconstruct’ argumentation from a text. It is indeed hard to imagine that an argumentation verbally expressed this format in a text will not be reconstructed from that text as a by and large equivalent argumentation by basically any reader—at least as far as mentally representing the standpoint and the arguments related to that standpoint are concerned.

Still, however, it is a metonymic expression to say that such a text *is* an argument. It is the mental representation that is the argument. The *guidance* provided by the text structure, however, is such that every competent language user may be assumed to arrive at a more or less similar mental representation: one can map text structure and mental structure in a step-by-step fashion. But still, what is taking place is a mapping process. The argument is the mental representation resulting from the cognitive processing activity.

⁶ In fact this issue of this text format being considered widely now as prototypical deserves a lengthy discussion. One might argue that considering this is typical for our post-Enlightenment society in which justification by means of reason is dominated by inference from logically related propositions, suppressing storytelling, anecdote, creative metaphor as means to reason, ranking argument schemes such as argument by analogy or argument by example relatively ‘low’, or secondary.

Departing from this insight it is obvious that the prototypical text format is not the sole format for conveying argumentation. There are other formats as well that are meant to and in fact do invite ‘readers’ to develop mental structures that we consider or should consider argumentation because (a) the texts inspire audiences to represent reasons for a standpoint, (b) an audience being inspired to create such a representation is not entirely idiosyncratic, nor hard to follow in its mental reconstruction and often (c) one may even develop a *prima facie* meta-argument that the rhetor can be held accountable for such an interpretation.⁷

As is often the case with prototypes, quantitatively non-prototypical text formats in fact make up the bulk of argumentation-evoking texts. This is widely recognized in argument theory, for example in the concept of indirect speech acts. The concept of *argumentative reconstruction* (Van Eemeren et al. 1993) is a clear recognition of this fact as well. A cognitive semiotic perspective suggests that, depending on foreknowledge and context, numerous text structures, verbal as well as multimodal, can guide specific audiences to the mental representation of argumentation, without any general mapping principle being detectable between the text structure presented and the mental structure.⁸ As was noted above, the focus length example presented in Sect. 1 may be misleadingly simple in this respect, because there is a mapping principle readily available that accounts for the diegetic suggestion in the discourse world as well as for the impact on the relations between the discourse world and the audience’s reality (although in practice many interpreting audiences turn out not to be trained enough to recognize and apply the mapping principle at hand). The following example may serve to illustrate better what is meant here. In the specific circumstances of the beginning of the Lewinski-affair, published on a specific spot, being a white board in one of the offices on Capitol Hill, the utterance “Had Bill Clinton been the ‘Titanic’, the iceberg would have sunk” can guide a specific audience to a rather complex argumentation (compare Van den Hoven 2012a, b for a reconstruction of an argumentative interpretation). There is, however, no general principle that maps this text structure onto an argumentation featuring a standpoint that Clinton’s presidency will/may survive the Lewinski-incident.⁹

This lack of a clear and general mapping principle between this verbal metaphorical text structure and argumentation makes the guidance of the interpretation process dependent both on the context and on foreknowledge (and perhaps also on attitudes of the interpreting audience). It explains why people may differ in opinion about whether a certain text structure ‘is an argument’. Some audiences might not be guided towards the mental representation of an argumentation by the Clinton-Titanic comparison, but some clearly are and when told, most

⁷ Compare in this volume for (a) and (b) for example Blair who presents perfectly intelligible interpretations of text materials that far removed from the prototypical formatting. Compare for the more challenging, additional criterion (c) Van den Hoven and Yang (2013).

⁸ Even partly non-discursive structures may guide an audience to the representation of an argument. Looking out of the window, watching a massive demonstration someone may ‘see’ an argument for a standpoint that there is massive support for (or opposition against) measure X.

⁹ The example is mentioned by Fauconnier and Turner (2003). In cognitive linguistics, this lack of a clear mapping principle between linguistic form and meaning is recognized as an important principle (Fauconnier 1994).

audiences will understand the relation between text and argumentation. In the question whether this text *is* an argument, the emphasis, deplorably, is on the text structure while it should be on the cognitive process instead. Even in this rather extreme example, it seems obvious that with a minimum of historical context added, for most audiences, criterion (a) and (b) mentioned above are met.

Also among argument theorists and informal logicians we come across a difference of opinion about whether a specific text structure *is* an argument. Somewhere in Mexico the remaining wreck of a severe car accident is placed, very visibly, on a pole along a highway. It has given rise among theorists to a discussion¹⁰ whether this ‘text’ *is* an argument(ation).¹¹ The main issue in the discussion is that it is not obvious which reasons for exactly which standpoint the text conveys. It is therefore not obvious how to verbally reconstruct the argumentation and therefore some theorists deny this ‘text’ “being an argumentation”. The semiotic perspective makes it clear that two issues are getting mixed up here. The first one is once again the (inadequate) question whether the argumentation *is* in the ‘text’; it never is. The second issue involves the more interesting question whether the mental representation that an audience constructs from the ‘text’ has to map in a systematic way onto the prototypical verbal argumentative reconstruction that we described above as a verbal text in which an explicitly indicated standpoint is expressed and explicitly indicated utterances expressing propositions are brought forward as pretending to justify or refute this standpoint. In his important reflection on the possibility of visual argumentation, Johnson (2003) takes this position in extremo, denying the possibility of ‘visual’ arguments, not only requiring the verbal representation as a necessary intermediate step, but concluding from it that the intermediate verbal rephrasing (into the prototypical format) actually *is* the argumentation and not the ‘visual’ text (or, we assume he would say, the metaphorical (verbal or pictorial¹²) text, or the narrative (verbal of pictorial) text) as such. However, if we consider argumentation to be a cognitive category and if not all cognitive content is verbalized or even can be verbalized, then it follows that the possibility of a verbal reconstruction in the prototypical format is not a requirement.

The discussion whether all mentally represented, non-verbally expressed arguments can be verbally reconstructed, or need to be verbally reconstructed to be considered an argument (essentially Johnson’s 2003 argument) is in fact more complex than it seems at first sight. The semiotic approach indicates clearly: not all arguments can be verbally reconstructed and it is not required. However, that does not mean that on a meta-level, one cannot speak *about* such arguments in words (compare the concept of meta-argumentation of Finocchiaro as discussed in this

¹⁰ This happened during the *Windsor 4th Summer Institute On Argumentation: Multi-Modal Arguments: Making sense of images (and other non-verbal content) in Argument*, May 27–31, 2013. Of course I can only give my personal reconstruction of this debate.

¹¹ I use *argumentation* for a standpoint with justifying or refuting reasons and *argument* for a justifying or refuting reason.

¹² In this article, ‘pictorial’ is preferred to denote a specific, visual, not verbal text modality, written language being visual too, still this is a very rough indication of a group of sources of information in a discourse (compare Kress 2009).

volume by Blair). One can formulate in words that a photo clearly shows A, but that does not mean that that meta-statement conveys the reason or that any assessment can be made apart from the photo. Verbal reconstructions as standard in current argument theories typically tend to contain a lot of these statements, containing for example ideographs (McGee 1980) or references to events that are complexes of narratives, images, comments, and so on. Having shown a collages of all kind of materials concerning the reconstruction of how 9/11 could happen and concerning its horrible impact, one may reconstruct the standpoint: We should be less reluctant towards government practices that may be somewhat at odds with an individual's privacy, with an argument: (9/11 has taught us the consequences of such reluctance. These verbal statements do actually not convey the reasons for the claim but merely refer to presupposed knowledge that forms the reasons; the audience has to construct the argument from foreknowledge, an argument that may be hard if not impossible to express verbally. Of course this can be done anyhow in verbal discourse: "9/11 provides us with a very strong argument to be less reluctant towards government practices that may be somewhat at odds with an individual's privacy".

To sum up, the cognitive semiotic perspective approaches argumentation as a cognitive category, resulting from a complex cognitive process of interpretation. No general and systematic mapping procedure exists between a text structure and the argumentation that an audience mentally represents on the basis of that text. It is not a requirement that all audiences are guided in a similar way towards representing an argumentation, audiences being different in context and foreknowledge. Neither is it obvious that the possibility of a verbal reconstruction in the prototypical format is a requirement for considering a certain mental representation of justifying or refuting reasons for a standpoint to be *argumentation*. In the next section, further consequences of this insight will be briefly investigated.

3 Non-verbal Argument Structures that Resist the Prototype

Argumentation is a cognitive category. As current argument theories thus far predominantly study argumentations that are verbally reconstructable in the prototypical format, it is very well possible that theories that depart from an elaborated cognitive semiotic perspective will come up with more argument structures than theories building on prototypical verbal reconstructions do. Not all cognitive content has to be verbalized or has to be verbally reconstructable. Justifying or refuting reasons may be of a kind that is very hard or impossible to represent verbally. This is a second reason why it is fruitful to elaborate on the semiotic component of argumentation.

Considering argumentation a cognitive category may suggest for a moment that the mode of expression of the discourse is arbitrary, irrelevant. That of course is not the case. On the contrary, different discourse modalities may inspire audiences to interpret different argument types from it, some of them more frequently conveyed by the one discourse modality than by the other, some of them maybe even uniquely conveyed by one or more specific discourse modalities. If these discourse modalities

differ from the prototypical verbal modality, it may well be the case that current argument theories overlook, neglect or deny such argument types.

In this volume, the contribution by Ian Dove elaborates on argumentation that is hard if not impossible to reconstruct verbally in the standard format. In his earlier work, he has already presented convincing examples of graphics that illustrate the point that texts can give guidance to the mental representation of justifying or refuting reasons that cannot be expressed verbally.¹³

A 'modest' version of the same phenomenon concerns argumentations that are to some extent verbally expressible, but where it is hard to decide which of the many ways in which this can be done is 'valid'. In Sect. 1 we looked at an argumentative exchange in which a photo corresponding to a reality but clearly being a mediated 'mime' of that reality plays a crucial part. Although in this example the most important mediating principle—the focus length—in principle is recognizable and can be verbally expressed, it is easy to imagine that in many other cases it is extremely hard to notice the numerous mimetic elements that are relevant for properly assessing the mimetic relation between the discourse world and the 'reality' it claims to be relevant for: camera framing, coloring, props placed in the *mise-en-scène*, selective focus, camera movements, effects of added music, effects of the specific technology to display the discourse (big screen in the dark, iPad, desktop screen, high quality print, and so on), the specifics of the situation in which the discourse is presented compared to the specifics of the situation in which the footage is collected (watching a war documentary safely at home, watching a (surveillance camera) recording of a sudden and totally unexpected criminal event in a courtroom with prior knowledge of what one is going to watch), and so on.¹⁴ It may be even harder to verbally express these elements of the mimesis as distinctive elements, clearly indicating their effects on the mimetic construction or their diegetic suggestions in a reconstruction that meets the prototypical requirements.

In Sect. 2, we looked at an argument based on a metaphor. It is comparison that evokes a mapping process that results in argumentation (at least for some audiences). In this specific Clinton-Titanic example the appeal to reason lies predominantly—if not uniquely—in the resulting tenor of the metaphor (the target domain: the situations Clinton was able to escape from before) and not in the vehicle [the source domain: the (reversed) history of the Titanic and the iceberg]. However, in more didactic metaphors this may be different. The point that needs to be made is that the metaphorical mapping process is often not easy to contain in a final and determined structure and may even be fundamentally 'creative' (Coulson 2006). What is meant by this is that the interpreting audience actively supplies information that co-determines the cognitive process. It is therefore difficult to format such argumentation in the static and general standard text format. It is hard if not impossible to decide in general which aspects of the vehicle are involved in the

¹³ This does not mean that assessment criteria formulated on the most general level, for example acceptability and relevance of the argument, do not apply to all conceivable forms of argumentation; in that respect the position taken here is not necessarily incompatible with Blair's position in this volume.

¹⁴ Notice how many of these mediating elements that require to consider the discourse world a complex mime of the reality it claims to be relevant for also apply to many if not all forms of verbal discourse that invite an audience to construct an argumentation.

mapping process and in what way. And always remains the strong intuition that the verbalization does not really replace the (argumentative) force of the metaphor. This may explain why most argument theories are slightly uncomfortable with creative metaphors as a ‘form of argumentation’.¹⁵ From a cognitive semiotic perspective it seems obvious that such textual guidance towards a metaphorical mapping process may result in the representation of argumentation. However, to express our point once more in a somewhat different way, in an attempt to replace the presented discourse by a prototypically formatted verbal format two discussants may very well come up with different proposals while at the same time agreeing that this difference does not reflect a difference of opinion about the argumentative meaning of the discourse as presented; they may fully agree that this difference is due to the very limited and imperfect way the discourse can be represented or (on a meta level) be summarized verbally in the required format.

There is a similar discussion going on with regard to narrative text structures in general and specific forms of narrative text structures as formats that may convey argumentation. Part of the explanation for the hesitant and marginal attention that such text structures receive in argument theory, a fate they share with many predominantly ‘visual’, multimodal text formats, may be that the justifying or refuting appeal to reason is hard to catch in the prototypical verbal reconstruction format. In the 9/11 example at the end of Sect. 2, the problem is not only what to select from the enormous amount of mental ‘images’, the problem may also be to determine exactly what the relation is between the argument and the standpoint. Again, the point is not that not a number of verbal (meta)-statements can be proposed, the point is that extracting such ‘reconstructions’ from the discourse is a semiotic process that is an inextricable part of the argumentative process.

Summing up we see that (1) often no systematic mapping processes relate discourse structure to argument structure; (2) the majority of the text structures do not map on the prototypical argument structure assumed by current general theories; (3) many invited argumentations cannot or only partially or only on a ‘meta-level’ (Finocchiaro) be verbalized. Together this underpins the necessity in argument theories to reflect upon the cognitive semiotic process taking place. Crucial issues concern the propositional format of argumentation, often assumed by current general theories. Limiting oneself to the prototypical discourse format, the concept of propositionality can be explained by identifying (complex) propositions with utterances in the text. (1) and (2) render this impossible, while under (3) the concept as such is obviously problematic.

There is, however, an even more fundamental consequence of opening up argument theory for discourse formats such as storytelling (verbal or in moving pictures) and creative metaphors (verbal or visual). Current general argument theories, implicitly, distinguish between describing or showing the phenomena the discourse is about (the *mimesis* of the discourse world) and propositions interpreting and evaluating these phenomena (the *diegesis* of the discourse world). Some

¹⁵ Compare for this discussion about the relation between the dominant paradigm in argument theory and the (cognitive) processing of extended metaphors as well for the cognitive aspects of metaphorical mapping in argumentative discourse (Oswald and Rihs 2014).

discourse formats more obviously than others resist that distinction. This is predominantly the case in discourse that invites an audience to construct argumentation based on (fictional) narratives and argumentations based on metaphor (for instance, the Clinton and the 9/11 examples), often but not necessarily conveyed by means of multimodal discourse.

Current general argument theories tend to focus uniquely on the diegetic aspect, neglecting the mimetic aspect. This may be a reason why they do not put such ‘problematic’ types of reasoning in the focus of their attention. A cognitive approach, however, makes clear that the distinction between mimesis and diegesis is artificial and theoretically untenable in most if not all discourses. This is the third reason for elaborating on a cognitive semiotic component in argument theory. This reason may be the most controversial insight; I use the remainder of this contribution to explain the point.

4 The Neglected Mimesis of the Discourse World

Going through text books on argumentation theory one comes across numerous examples. Closer inspection of a great many of them reveals that knowledge of the object or situation argued about is either presupposed, or introduced in an introduction of the excerpt, or presented as part of the excerpt but excluded from argumentative analysis. The classic textbook example par excellence illustrates this point quite clearly. The argument adduced for Socrates being mortal is the fact that he is a man. The sentence that Socrates is a man needs no further introduction or clarification because the audience is assumed to already have a mental representation of Socrates.

What if an audience were to associate the term *Socrates* with a software program, for instance, or an institution of the European Union or a fund for academic scholarships? None of these are human. The point here is that in this typical example Socrates is already presupposed as being present in the audience’s discourse world as a mimetic object. They can thus picture him in their minds and agree with the speaker that he is human. But what if no mental image of Socrates is present yet? In that case, it will have to be introduced into the discourse world, perhaps by means of a verbal description, perhaps by using an image. Having established this, we can now rephrase the informal observation made at the beginning of this section: glancing through textbooks, generally speaking, one finds that examples tend to presuppose the mimetics or isolate the mimetic elements in some preceding introduction or concentrate on what seem to be the diegetic elements that the text conveys explicitly. I use the term diegetic—to contrast it analytically with mimetic—for those elements in which the text guides the audience, implicitly or explicitly, towards qualifications or evaluations of objects or events in the discourse world, including towards arguments for such qualifications and evaluations.

This distinction between mimesis and diegesis is a theoretical and analytical one, and it is not without certain problems. This in fact is the main reason why argument

theory should not neglect the mimetics.¹⁶ If analytically and in practice the two elements could be distinguished and separated without any problems, one could indeed call it a matter of choice whether to include mimesis within the scope of argument theory or to exclude it.

Lawyers in court rooms cannot do what textbooks on argumentation theory do. From an ideological point of view, the discourse world is mimetically empty at the start of a case. All the elements that a lawyer considers relevant to the case—objects, events, relations—need to be introduced in the discourse world, usually accompanied by the claim that such elements are indeed part of and relevant to what ‘really’ happened, that is that the mimetics of the discourse world as presented are ‘true’. These mimetic acts—the lawyer claims to ‘mime’ reality in his text—are prototypically performed with the use of objects, images, narrative descriptions by witnesses, narratives by the lawyer himself. Legal argumentation distinguishes the phase of introducing and establishing the facts, guided by the rules of evidence, from qualifying the facts in legal terms and from attaching legal effects to these qualified facts. The last two steps are clearly diegetic. Argument theorists who give attention to this specific realm of the administration of law indeed show more specific interest in the process of establishing the facts, including the role of stories in this type of argumentation (compare Walton 2002).¹⁷

General argument theory seems designed to deal with these last two steps, but seems to more or less exclude the part of the first step where the relevant phenomena are introduced, the mimesis. At the same time, general argument theories show only marginal attention for the argumentative function of non-verbal discourse elements such as (narrative evoking) photos and drawings, moving pictures, just as they show equally marginal attention for verbal narrative evoking texts. This is no coincidence. We think that strong focus on the prototypical verbal propositional format goes along with (a) neglecting the semiotic fact that all communication and thus all argumentation presupposes a discourse world, (b) therefore necessarily separating mimesis from diegesis, (c) successively neglecting the mimetics of the discourse world as not a part of the argumentation, therefore (d) neglecting (or at least avoiding) pictorial modes, metaphors, narrative and other discourse formats that tend to merge mimetics with diegetics as phenomena to account for in argument theory.

Looking at forensic argumentative discourse, this minimal attention for narratives, and sometimes even the hesitation to accept such narratives as means to convey argumentation altogether, is surprising because these text formats play a central role during the stage in which a case is introduced and the facts are

¹⁶ This is also the main point in Wagenaar et al. (1993); narratively organized facts invite diegetic elements; if one person is presented as factually good, his opponent tends to be evaluated as bad without supporting facts being adduced, and so on.

¹⁷ This does not imply by the way that in these approaches the full consequences are drawn from the semiotic insight that the discourse world is necessarily a complex mime of the ‘reality’ it claims to be relevant for, nor of the insight that mimesis and diegesis are strongly intertwined. On the contrary (see below, Sect. 5), also legal (argument) theory often maintains a strict distinction between issues of evidence and issues of legal interpretation, a distinction that in practice turns out time and again to be untenable.

discussed. It may actually be this very fact that offers an additional explanation for the marginal attention, because the introductory stage in which the objects, events, relations relevant to the argument are presented (the mimesis of the discourse world) is usually also neglected in argument theory, or even considered not to be part of the argumentative discourse at all. In other words, analytically this ‘introductory stage’ is acknowledged in some theories, but it is usually separated from the argumentation stage and is given a specific, preparatory content, as for example in pragma-dialectics the *opening stage* and the *confrontation stage* (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004). In legal theoretical contexts, we indeed find there is more of a debate going on about narrative structures¹⁸ and there is a substantial—be it predominantly critical—literature on the use of ‘mimetic’ images in this discourse to defend a position in a legal procedure.¹⁹ The fact that in legal discourse the mimetic element cannot be overlooked—because it is crucial in arguing a case—may offer an explanation for this difference in the attention paid to images and narratives.

The cognitive semiotic perspective predicts, or at least makes it highly plausible, that the guidance of the text in having the audience build up the mimesis of a discourse world will seldom if ever be separated from the guidance of the text to represent an argumentation; the mimetic aspect will often be an inseparable part of the argumentation. Often an audience encounters a text in a situation that is different from the situation that the communication is about; often the audience starts with a limited knowledge of that situation. The original situation will thus have to be introduced; a discourse world will have to be built. In the example about the piece of land we introduced in Sect. 1, the main topic of the argumentation regarded the mimetics of the situation in the discourse world and its relation to ‘reality’. This is the justification for certain classical rhetorical approaches to include an element in the genus *iudiciale* named *narratio*.²⁰ The speaker provides a narrative account of what has happened and generally explains the nature of the case. However, verbal narrative text structures, multimodal narrative text structures as well as visual texts in general, provide semiotic means that tend to merge ‘showing’ (mimesis) with ‘telling’, interpreting, evaluating (diegesis); in building the mimetics of the discourse world, the narrator conveys biased selections based on interpretations and

¹⁸ This debate is given a strong new dimension, in my view. In a crucial publication by Jackson (1988), in which it is argued that the presentation of seemingly propositional facts is actually guided by the pragmatics of a narrative act. Following this publication, there are important contributions from forensic psychology showing how narrative structures determine the frame in which facts are placed, selected, completed, evaluated (Crombag and Israels 2008; Wagenaar and Crombag 2005; Wagenaar et al. 1993; with an important comment by Twining (1995)). Bex 2009 tries to combine an ‘argumentative’ approach with a narrative approach while Kjus, building on Jackson (1988) as well as on Bennett and Feldman (1981) and Brooks and Gewirtz (1996), elaborates on the more fundamental thesis that narratives *are* arguments.

¹⁹ This literature is discussed in Van den Hoven (2010). Important are the reviews in Bright and Goodman-Delahunty (2004, 2006) as well as in Douglas et al. (1997) and Feigenson (2010). A typical study in which the argumentative value of images is analyzed as a problem is Kassin and Garfield (1991). A synthesis can be found in Feigenson and Spiesel (2009).

²⁰ Ad Herennium 1.8.11–1.9.16; Cicero. De Inventione. 1.19–21; Quintilian 4.2.

conveys evaluations that guide an audience in specific directions. Although from a theoretical point of view it can be argued that *all* discourse formats to some extent mix up mimetic elements with diegetic elements, narratives and creative metaphors are clear examples. The following sections concentrate on verbally or visually conveyed narratives.

It is difficult to substantiate the negative claim that in general argument theories only marginal attention is paid to (verbally or visual) narratives and that there may sometimes even be a hesitation to accept moving pictures modalities as sources conveying argumentation. Indeed, there are important exceptions, especially when one considers more ‘rhetorical’ approaches to argumentative discourse to be argument theories too. Fisher and Filloy (1982) claim that there ‘are arguments’ in narrative text forms, even in drama and literature. Subsequently, Fisher develops his test for narrative reason, including narrative probability and narrative fidelity (Fisher 1987). A debate develops (Rowland 2009). Oldenburg and Leff (2009, discussed in Govier and Jansen 2011), raise the question whether telling an anecdote can have argumentative force. However, notwithstanding these discussions, current theories in treatments of the argumentative stage built on structures of logically ordered propositions that maintain each of them a clear, tree-diagram reconstructed relation with the standpoint, which strongly stimulates—if not requires—images, metaphors as well as narrative to be replaced by verbal utterances.²¹

In the debate about the issue whether images can convey arguments there are a number of protagonists that answer this question in the affirmative (see Van den Hoven 2012a, b). Groarke (2002) tries to develop a set of criteria to assess images as arguments. Usually, adherents of multimodal or purely pictorial conveyed arguments—as this special issue illustrates—also advocate the necessity of an argument theory that is not building any longer on the prototypical propositional, tree-diagram ordered format. But still, as explained above, the core of argument theory finds its object and its examples in discourse in which more or less orderly sets of verbal utterances are assumed to convey single propositions that are more or less clearly related to a standpoint, even when open to visual arguments. For example, Dove (2012) seems to distinguish the evidential argument that interprets an image from the image itself, excluding the image itself from the argument as merely verifying the truth (p. 228).²²

²¹ From a cognitive semiotic point of view, such statements because they necessarily ‘interpret’ the mimesis are diegetic statements or at least contain a diegetic element. “Socrates is a human” as a replacement of an image of Socrates is, in the argumentative function it fulfils in the prototypical example, a diegetic element, interpreting the image (unless of course, it is felt to be entirely trivial—which seems to be the case and explains why this example is always felt to be no serious argument; premise minor as well as major are trivial).

²² Later, however, he seems to acknowledge that the image as well as its interpretation together are the argument (p. 231, rejecting fig. 15.3). Sometimes it is not easy to ascertain whether scholars advocate the possibility of multimodal or purely visual arguments.

5 Merging Mimetics and Diegetics in Images and Narratives

We can be brief about the fact that the pictorial modality is superior to words in evoking images in the mind of the audience. Pictures are much more efficient and effective to introduce a crime scene into the discourse world than a merely verbal description. To introduce a document in the discourse world it is much more effective to submit the document or a photocopy of it than to describe it at length. The difference is clear.²³

By the same token, narrative discourse is mimetically superior to a discourse of utterances conveying propositions that are more or less ordered as premises and conclusion in argument schemes.²⁴ By indicating through the text structure an underlying narrative discourse structure, a discussant evokes the narrative scheme in the mind of the audience. A narrative scheme assumes a syntagmatically focused causal chain as well as a reason to tell, often called the epilogue (Brannigan, Branigan 1992, based on Labov). All acts in the causal chain can be characterized as constituting a pentad structure, a pentad of act, agent, agency, scene and purpose (Burke 1945). All this implies that the activated narrative scheme makes the audience construct a tightly connected web of information that far exceeds the content of the utterances that are presented to the audience. As argued before (Van den Hoven 2012a, b), read in isolation the utterance “Suspect hit his daughter on her wrist with a hammer” will be interpreted as conveying a single proposition, to be proved. Presented as an element in a narrative, however, it is the act of the villain that needs to be responded to, that disturbs the equilibrium that a family should live in, that characterizes the patient involved as a victim, that invokes almost visually an entire scene sharply contrasting with the prototypical scenes the audience relates to father–daughter interactions, that raises sets of questions and speculations about what must have preceded to end up in this horrific climax.

Avoiding the term holistic, the important point to make is that like an image, the narrative conveys more than a delineated set of propositions. Not only are additional propositions inferred—this is also the case in the most strictly ordered, purely diegetic, prototypically argumentative discourse as we find it in the textbooks—but a tight network of relations is evoked that is both creative and productive and not strictly delineated. This is the problem that is discussed by legal psychologists Wagenaar et al. (1993); an evoked narrative framework guides expectations because it is a tight syntagmatic (the chain) and paradigmatic (the pentad structure of act–agent–agency–scene–purpose) web of relations. It may therefore block alternative scenarios and limit hypotheses about what might possibly have happened. This in

²³ This puts also the statement of Blair into question: “(...) the conditions of interpretation of visual expression are indeterminate to a much greater degree than is the case with verbal expression” (Blair 2012: 210). Generally speaking, this seems to be incorrect as far as conveying mimetics is concerned. For a detailed discussion of the ‘hidden’ paradigm that seems to be Blair’s reference point when making his statement, see Van den Hoven (forthcoming).

²⁴ If that is possible at all. In Van den Hoven (2012a, b), I argued for a position that the interpreter will still read a narrative in a series of propositions. This is also a difficulty in the distinction Bex (2009) tries to make.

itself negative aspect illustrates the mimetic superiority of the narrative over a set of descriptive propositions.

In forensic discourse, the mimetics of the discourse world have to be introduced before they can be proven. Once proven, arguments can be put forward to propose legal qualifications. Once qualified, legal effects can be attached. Formulated this way, it appears that we have a distinguishable series of steps. Images and narratives play a major part in the first step. Stylized like this, one could take the theoretical position that the mimetic introduction of Socrates can be distinguished from the ‘real’ argumentation: mimesis can be separated from diegesis.²⁵

When argument theory takes a difference of opinion as its point of departure, this suggestion of separable stages is even stronger. In such theories, the final standpoint is the starting point for a reconstruction of the argumentation. We thus work backwards from the final standpoint. Once we have reached the premises that underpin the truth claims about the facts, we can declare the reconstruction completed. The image or the story is not part of the argument then, but the propositions about the image or the story are. Perhaps such a theory still considers utterances such as: “That is what the picture shows”, or “That is what the witness clearly states” to convey part of the argumentation, but that is as far as it goes. This means that in the end diegetic statements concerning the interpretation of the images convey part of the argumentation, and diegetic statements concerning the interpretation of the narratives do so as well, but not the images and narratives as such.

This reflects the ideology of legal theory that prefers to clearly separate these mimetic phases in the discourse from the ‘following’ phases. This approach does however leave a major problem unsolved, a problem that concerns not only argumentative discourse in general, but even judicial discourse submitted to the rules of court room procedures. The literature mentioned above on the use of images in courtroom procedures and on narrative in criminal cases, but also the theoretical work of Jackson (1988) emphasizes the pragmatics of courtroom communication in which not a clear distinction is in fact made or can be made between mimetic introduction and diegetic comment. The discourse does not start with the mortality claim about Socrates; the discourse starts with a highly elaborated web of mentally represented images of and stories about Socrates; that also explains why this prototypical example is so non-prototypical when it comes to real-life argumentation.

The important point is that images as well as narratives, and a fortiori narratives conveyed by multimodal discourse, communicate an inextricable mixture of mimetic elements and diegetic elements. If in the narrative structure the one agent is characterized as honest, and this is underpinned by evidence, this automatically suggests that his opponent is dishonest, without this being explicitly stated as such. The image of Socrates is a means to introduce Socrates as an element in the

²⁵ In practice, however, this turns out to be untenable, or, to express this in a rather more nuanced way: when codified in criminal procedural law, for instance, the distinction gave rise to many complicated dogmatic nuances in attempts to ‘maintain’ the distinction, and to this day there are many technical procedures involved in determining which way to best interpret the codified distinction (compare also Footnote 16).

discourse world, but at the same time the selection of the specific picture is an invitation to attribute certain features to him, denying others. A practicing lawyer once pointed out to me: “The moment I showed my client as a salesman in his shop, I saw the attitude of the judge change, although this occupation was already known to him from the files”. An animated reconstruction is a mixture of modelling the facts and interpreting the facts, a mixture that is hard (if not virtually impossible) to disentangle; the presentation of such a reconstruction complicates the merging of mimetics and diegetics even more. And so on.

This is due to the fact that in predominantly visual texts as well as in narrative discourse, much more so it seems than in the prototypical text format, a mediating organizing principle is at work, a *narrator*. We define the narrator as a set of choices that determines the form of the discourse. Even if the discourse claims to be true, then still the text can only convey a discourse world and the truth claim means that the discourse world as conveyed has an equivalent in the (usually past) reality. In the presentation of that discourse world many choices are and have to be made. Choices concerning the point of view; which time periods or events to summarize, which time period to go into in detail; the inevitable connotations implied in choosing certain terms; but most of all which elements to present explicitly in the network of relations that the narrative activates, and which elements to leave to the audience to supply. In discourse with visual elements we have to add decisions about the specific camera-positions, camera-movements, framing, editing, lighting. If we work with sound, all the characteristics of the sound may be involved such as the relative loudness of voices, added or eliminated background sounds/noises, and so on. If we work with directed materials the *mise-en-scene* in which elements are presented may be deliberately chosen. And so on. All such elements contribute to the *mimesis* (this victim in the video states his feelings truthfully/presents a truthful declaration of his feelings) but may also guide the audience towards a specific *diegesis* (while the victim is making his declaration, the camera briefly veers away to show his sad, anxious wife and the obviously empty spot where the dog used to be before the burglar killed it).

In courtroom procedures, techniques have been developed to extract sets of propositions from images and narratives and to identify unambiguously the protagonists for these propositions. In Dutch legal practice, images can be brought in. However, one of the participants is usually obliged to produce discourse in which is stated what can be seen on the image and this statement subsequently replaces the image as part of the argumentation. After telling a story, a witness can be interrogated, extracting sets of propositions. This seems to solve the problem in the courtroom.

How relative this is becomes clear from legal psychological and legal semiotic studies that were mentioned above. What may be more convincing even in this respect is the behaviour of experienced lawyers. As said, images can be acknowledged as part of the files, stories can be told, subsequently to be ‘replaced’ by sets of propositions. However, an experienced lawyer in his concluding remarks will present the images again as images and put the ‘propositional facts’ back in a narrative structure (Kjus 2010; Feigenson and Spiesel (2009) about the Moxley case).

This shows that replacing the tight suggestive networks by sets of propositions is not the ultimate solution in judicial discourse. Argument theory aims at an assessment of the reasonability of the discourse. If the stories remain relevant for the diegetic propositions extracted from them, images and stories should be phenomena argument theories deal with explicitly. A fortiori this is the case in many other discussion settings in which procedural rules do not oblige participants to specify what propositions should be inferred from the images or from the narratives. Outside the courtroom the problem is even more elusive. This step of extracting propositions, regulated by discussion rules, is usually missing.

6 Conclusions

In Sect. 2 we saw that articulating a cognitive semiotic point of departure opens up a wide realm of text formats that may convey argumentation, even without a general principle that maps the text structure on the resulting argument structure. What is more, whether and how a text conveys argumentation may be dependent on the specifics of the communicative situation and the audience. Once more, none of this is new, but (so far) it has not received much attention in current theories because the cognitive semiotic component is usually not emphasized. In Sect. 3 we saw that this may lead to argument structures that cannot be verbalized or whose verbalization in the prototypical standard format is at least not general and clear. In Sect. 4 we saw that the cognitive semiotic approach implies attention for the construction of the mimetics of the discourse world. But in Sect. 5 we subsequently saw that the distinction between mimetics and diegetics is an analytical one that in practice is often hard to make when such text formats as metaphors, narratives and predominantly visual texts are used. This partially explains the statement made in Sect. 3 that it is hard to verbally reconstruct such formats in the prototypical format, unless on a meta-level in the sense of Finocchiaro.

It will be clear now that articulating the cognitive semiotic process in argumentation raises a number of severe theoretical issues. One may even advocate a position that this is a good reason not to pursue this and to limit the object of argument theory to argumentations that are indeed reconstructed in the standard format, leaving the issue of the actual reconstruction to other disciplines. This is why I have been concentrating mostly on the issue of the construction of the discourse world, trying to show that this is not an option.

The crucial question the semiotic perspective confronts argument theory with is whether mimetic elements need to be formatted as sets of propositions and if so by whom? Neglecting this issue results in a situation in which analytically we cannot decide between the straw man fallacy and the fallacy of hedging. If one of the participants denies being accountable for a certain argumentative reconstruction, is he justified to do so (the antagonist commits a straw man fallacy) or is he escaping his argumentative commitments (hedging)? This depends entirely on the interpretation of the image or the narrative (Van den Hoven 2012a, b).

The implication for argument theory is that it either needs to develop reconstruction procedures that can deal with the mimetics of argumentation (as

we tried to propose in Van den Hoven (2012b) and in Van den Hoven and Yang (2013) or it needs to develop argument schemes such as argument by narration and argument by image, including narrative theory and visual semiotics as its elements.

Although some semiotic theories regarding these areas of images and narratives claim a fairly straightforward semantics in the visual domain (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996), the dominant insight seems to indicate that argument theory may be confronted with a necessary inclusion of domains in which the concept of propositionally may be problematic. This is of course something that is also indicated by legal psychological studies. Although it raises interesting theoretical problems, it may also reflect that argument theory needs to connect more closely to argumentative practice if only because we cannot deny that problems with propositionality that we run into are very real.

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