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Changing the (Semantic) Frame

Intermodal Contrast as a Narrative
Device in Film

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Overview

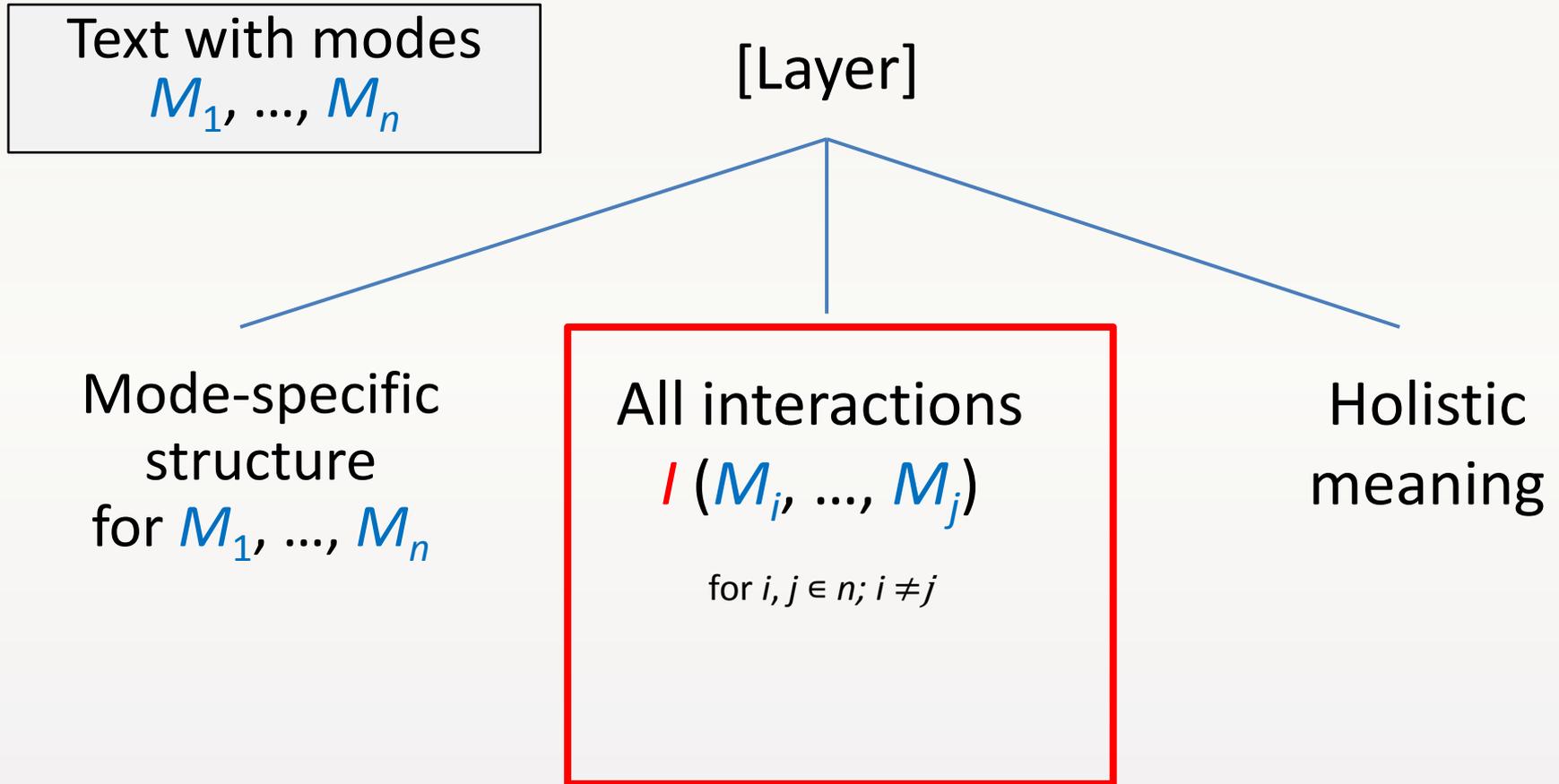
1. Intermodal interaction types (IITs)
2. The IIT *Intermodal contrast*
3. Multimodality and semantic frames
4. Three filmic examples

What are intermodal interactions?

- In multimodal texts, semiotic modes are **closely integrated** – how to describe this?
- Academic disciplines traditionally look at **separate modes** (e.g. language, music, images, gesture)
- Multimodality research often focuses on the “**holistic picture**”
- **Intermodality / cross-modality**: additional textual properties that are caused by relations between modes
- **Intermodal interaction types (IITs)**: one mode influences the other in a definable way

Martin Siefkes (in print), „How semiotic modes work together in multimodal texts: Representing intermodal interactions “. *10plus1 – Living Linguistics* 1/2015.

Layers in multimodal texts



Example 1

Gattaca (1997, dir. Andrew Niccols)

13:06 – 14:28

- *Gattaca* describes a future “not too distant” from 1997 in which eugenics, and discrimination based on gene tests, are widespread
- Refers to highly charged discourses of the time

Intermodal contrast

- Anton and Vincent are playing the game of “chicken”, by **swimming out to sea**
- **[Mode₁]** **Narrator’s commentary:**
“By the time we were playing at blood brothers, I understood there was something very different flowing through my veins, and I’d need an awful lot more than a drop if I was going to get anywhere”
- **[Mode₂]** **Moving images:** Anton doesn’t scratch himself with the sharp shell offered by Vincent
- **Two interpretations** are possible:
 - a) Anton doesn’t want to be Vincent’s blood brother
 - b) Anton is the “chicken” (= coward), he doesn’t dare to scratch himself

Intermodal contrast

- Could be interpreted as the IIT *Intermodal disambiguation*
 - Narrator's commentary explains Anton's behavior
- **However**: later in the film, Anton is the “chicken”, he loses the game twice in decisive situations!
- *Intermodal contrast* has a double function:
 1. explains us Vincent's understanding at the time (**intradiegetic** information)
 2. Narrative hint (**extradiegetic** information) that Vincent is more courageous
 - **Facial expression** (as a further mode) supports this (“fearful expression”)
 - *haemophobia* (fear of blood)

Example 2

Strange Days (1995, dir. Kathryn Bigelow)

6:35 – 7:26

- Another dystopian science fiction film
- Story about the risks of virtual-reality-recordings of violence and sex used as drugs (“Wire tripping”)

Intermodal contrast

- [Mode₁] Moving images:

Lenny Nero is travelling in his car through Los Angeles, during Christmas holidays before New Year's eve of the year 2000. Among other scenes of street violence, we see how a man dressed as Santa Claus is chased and assailed.

- [Mode₂] Music: "Amen" aus *Stabat Mater* by Giovanni Pergolesi (piece 12: *Quando Corpus – Amen*)

Intermodal contrast

- Straightforward relation of contrast:
 - **Music** on the radio is Christian and fits the Christmas mood
 - Street violence in the **moving images** is in stark contrast
- Thematic relationship produces intermodal contrast:
 - Christian **music** ⇔ **images** of the hunted “Santa”
- Could also be interpreted as *Intermodal irony*
 - The **music** expresses the traditional image of Christmas
 - **Images** are an ironic commentary on the “Christmas message”
 - “Amen” translates as ‘so be it’: **Music** as ironic commentary on **images**

Intermodality and semantic frames

What are semantic frames?

- Background knowledge in texts
- Two traditions: Artificial intelligence research and Frame semantics (Minsky 1975, Schank/Abelson 1977).
- **Linguistics**: development of case grammar (Charles J. Fillmore; Ziem 2012)
- Verb arguments have semantic roles (e.g. *Agent, Object, Goal, Location, etc.*)
- **Computer linguistics**: Knowledge representation: ontologies; FrameNet; Semantic Web (OWL)

Semantic frames in film

- All **semiotic artefacts** are structured by frames
- Frames can be used to describe **background knowledge** in a general format
- **Intermodal relations** can be established through frames

Social / cultural change and textual depictions

- Frames describe the **conceptualisation of a domain** of a society
- Changing understanding of cultural domains can be understood as **frame change**
- Frame theory can be applied in **film analysis**: e.g. by comparing films from different times or cultures
- In Gattaca, **changing conceptualisations** are part of the subject matter of the film

Example 3

Gattaca (1997, dir. Andrew Niccols)

9:00 – 10:35

Intermodal differences between semantic frames

- **Music & images** of the conception scene refer to the frame *Conception & Birth (1997)*_{real}
- **Verbal language [narrative commentary]** refers to the frame *Conception & Birth (not-too-distant future)*_{real}
- **Intermodal irony** or **Intermodal commentary**
 - ⇒ additional textual properties!
- *Gattaca*, 10:35 – 10:58: images give examples for what is more generally described in the verbal commentary.
 - ⇒ **Exemplification**

Frame *Conception & Birth*

(1997)_{real}

- *Actors*: mother, father, child, doctor, ...
- *Events*: love-making, conception, pregnancy, birth, health checks for the baby, ...
- *Script*: <love-making ⇒ conception ⇒ pregnancy ⇒ birth ⇒ health checks>
- *Locations*: private home, hospital, ...
- *Artefacts*: hospital bed, ...
- *Terms & idioms*: “intelligence quotient”, “A child conceived in love has a greater chance of happiness”, ...

Frame *Conception & Birth*

(future that is “not too distant” from 1997)*fictional*

- *Actors*: mother, father, child, geneticist, doctor, ...
- *Events*: in-vitro fertilisation, testing of embryos, selection of suitable embryo (in consultation with the parents), conception, pregnancy, birth, genetic test, ...
- *Locations*: private home, geneticist’s practice, hospital, ...
- *Artefacts*: hospital bed, automated blood tests, genetic test set, ...
- *Terms & idioms*: “God’s child”, “faith birth”, “genetic quotient”, “borrowed ladder”, “genoism”, ...
- *Social norms*: *Discrimination is forbidden by law, but common (“No one takes the law seriously”)*

Frame networks

- Frames are connected: e.g. the frame *Conception & Birth* would be linked through the frame element *Caesarean section* with the frame *Operation* (hyperonym)
- Links are possible via elements (e.g. *actors, events ...*)
- *Connected frames* (1997): connected frames are *Love, Emotion, Family, Religion, Life, ...*
- *Connected frames* (a future not too distant from 1997):
 - *Genetic Engineering* (contains methods of *Birth & Conception*)
 - *Science* (contains the social domain structuring the frame)
 - *Eugenics* (describing cultural practices and goals of the frame)

Framing in film

- Films (and other texts) make use of frames to draw on existing cultural understanding
- Thorough world construction includes **fictional conceptualisation, terminology, social norms & practices**
- **Frame templates** have to be expanded accordingly
- Frame change → changes in world knowledge
- Use of frames to describe fictional worlds is **genre specific**: frequently used in science fiction & fantasy

Conclusion

- Proposal: differentiating types of **intermodal interactions** (IITs)
- The examples show that IITs influence **textual meaning** and have **narrative functions**
- Sometimes **different IITs** can be assumed (depending on analysis)
- IITs are connected with **mode specialisation**
- They are an **additional layer of textual meaning** that has to be considered in any theory of multimodality!

Selected bibliography

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