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

Text with modes $M_1, \ldots, M_n$

[Layer]

Mode-specific structure for $M_1, \ldots, M_n$

All interactions $I(M_i, \ldots, M_j)$

for $i, j \in n; i \neq j$

Holistic meaning
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

• \[ \text{Mode}_1 \] 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”

• \[ \text{Mode}_2 \] 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


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

• [Mode$_1$] 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.

• [Mode$_2$] Music: “Amen” aus *Stabat Mater* by Giovanni Pergolesi (piece 12: *Quando Corpus – Amen*)
Intermodal contrast

• Straightforward relation of contrast:
  - Music one 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**
  
  \(\Rightarrow\) additional textual properties!

• **Gattaca**, 10:35 – 10:58: images give examples for what is more generally described in the verbal commentary.  
  \(\Rightarrow\) **Exemplification**
Frame Conception & Birth
(1997)_{real}

- **Actors**: mother, father, child, doctor, ...
- **Events**: love-making, conception, pregnancy, birth, health checks for the baby, ...
- **Script**: \(<\text{love-making} \Rightarrow \text{conception} \Rightarrow \text{pregnancy} \Rightarrow \text{birth} \Rightarrow \text{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)

• **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!


