

# **ISSA Proceedings 2014 ~ The Argumentative Role Of Visual Metaphor And Visual Antithesis In 'Fly-On-The-Wall' Documentary**

*Abstract:* In this paper, we explore the argumentative role of visual metaphor and visual antithesis in the so-called 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary. In this subtype of documentary, which emphatically renounces voice-over narration, the filmmakers guide their viewers into reaching certain conclusions by making choices regarding the editing as well as the cinematography. We analyse a number of scenes from two films by one major representative of the Direct Cinema or 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary, Frederick Wiseman.

*Keywords:* visual/pictorial metaphor, visual antithesis, multimodal rhetoric, fly on the wall documentary, Direct Cinema, Frederick Wiseman

## *1. Introduction*

While a number of argumentation scholars would probably still maintain that argumentation is essentially a verbal activity, there has been substantial work in the last two decades arguing for the possibility and actuality of conveying argumentation by means of other modes than the verbal one (Groarke, 1996; Kjeldsen, 2012; Roque, 2012; Tseronis, submitted; Van den Hoven & Yang, 2013). It is to this line of research within argumentation studies that we want to contribute by discussing the possible argumentative functions of metaphor and antithesis conveyed visually or multimodally in a specific genre of documentary film, the fly-on-the-wall documentary. To identify the verbal and visual cues that may be combined in order to convey a certain figure constitutes the first step. To explain their use and effect as having to do with argumentation is the next one. For the latter task, the analyst needs to have systematic recourse to the properties of the modes used, their interaction, as well as to the broader context (consideration of the narrative, the genre as well as the cultural context and background knowledge).

By taking a broad understanding of argumentation as a procedure, not merely as

a product consisting of premises that support the acceptability of a conclusion, we seek to identify the function of such figures as metaphor and antithesis, when conveyed multimodally, in the process of arguing for one's position. Such functions are not merely decorative but, as explained by Fahnestock (1999), can be understood as epitomizing the line of reasoning of the filmmaker. Kjeldsen (2012, p. 239) makes a similar point with regard to the use of pictures in advertisements, namely that figures "are not only ornamental, but also support the creation of arguments". According to him, "rhetorical figures direct the audience to read arguments" (ibidem) by delimiting the possible interpretations of the pictures used, and thereby evoking the intended arguments.

Among the various rhetorical figures, metaphor has received substantial attention within the Cognitive Metaphor Theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Lakoff and Johnson's central idea is that humans think metaphorically rather than just use metaphorical language. Acceptance of this idea means that, in principle, metaphor can have visual manifestations as well. Indeed, the past two decades have witnessed a series of studies (see for example, Forceville, 1996, 2008; Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009; El Refaie, 2003) that analyse visual and multimodal metaphors in genres including advertising and political cartoons, wherein verbal elements interact mainly with static images. Steps have also been taken to analyse visual metaphors in other genres of argumentative communication centrally involving *moving* images, and to investigate how tropes other than metaphor can be cued non-verbally or multimodally (Forceville, 2009; Teng & Sun, 2002). The argumentative effect that the use of metaphor and other tropes may have is an area that needs to be yet further explored.

The fly-on-the-wall documentary [i] constitutes an object of study that allows us to explore the potential of combining insights from argumentation studies and metaphor theory and to illustrate their usefulness for the multimodal analysis of moving images. As this type of documentary is a genre that leaves the drawing of conclusions largely to the viewer, due to the fact that it lacks voice-over narration and staging of events, it becomes even more important to study the visual (and audio) means by which the filmmaker guides the audience's inference process. To show the direction this kind of research could take, we analyse the argumentative use of metaphors and antitheses in a number of scenes from two documentary films by one representative of the fly-on-the-wall cinema, Frederick Wiseman.

## 2. *On metaphor and antithesis*

## 2.1 Metaphor

Metaphor is traditionally studied under the banner of 'tropes,' together with synecdoche, metonymy and irony, among others. It has received extensive attention from both rhetoricians and cognitive linguists. While the former have been sensitive to the fact that metaphor is not the only figure of speech, Lakoff and Johnson take metaphor to underlie much, if not all, of our thinking. In the first chapter of her book, Fahnestock takes issue with this 'dominance of metaphor'. She writes (1999, pp. 5-6):

*The tight focus on metaphor in science studies, like the fixation on metaphor and allied tropes in textual studies, has taken attention away from other possible conceptual and heuristic resources that are also identifiable formal features in texts and that also come from the same tradition that produced metaphor, the rhetorical tradition of the figures of speech.*

According to Aristotle, metaphor plays an important role for prose style, since it contributes clarity as well as the unfamiliar, surprising effect that avoids banality and tediousness. While in the later tradition the use of metaphors has been seen as a matter of mere decoration, which has to delight the hearer, Aristotle stresses the cognitive function of metaphors. In order to understand a metaphor, the hearer has to find something common between the metaphor and the thing the metaphor refers to (Rapp, 2010).

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) discuss metaphor under their third type of argumentative techniques, namely those establishing the structure of reality. Within this technique, two subcategories are identified, namely those arguments that establish the structure of reality through a particular case (by example or illustration) and those whereby one reasons by analogy. They write (p. 399):

*In our view, the role of metaphor will appear most clearly when seen in the context of the argumentative theory of analogy. ... In the context of argumentation, at least, we cannot better describe a metaphor than by conceiving it as a condensed analogy, resulting from the fusion of an element from the phoros with an element from the theme.*

Forceville (1996) has combined insights from Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and from Black (1979) in order to propose a way for extending the cognitive account of metaphor into the field of visual communication. He formulates the following three questions for identifying a pictorial metaphor of the creative variety in static advertisements:

- (1) Which are the two terms of the metaphor, and how do we know?
- (2) Which is the target and which is the source, and how do we know?
- (3) Which are the features that are mapped from source to target, and how do we decide on these features?

These questions remain pertinent in the analysis of visual metaphor in moving advertisements, that is, commercials – although the latter can draw on a wider variety of techniques than static advertisements that help answer these three questions. Moving images can for instance make use of specific camera movements and montage to create metaphors. What makes the identification of metaphors in advertising (whether in static or in moving images) relatively easy, is the genre convention, namely that advertisements always want to make a positive claim about a product or service. This means that usually the target of the metaphor coincides with the product, which is then presented in terms of a source domain from which appropriate positive features are mapped onto the target/product. As we will see later on, in the absence of such clear-cut genre conventions, identifying metaphors and other tropes in fly-on-the-wall documentaries is less easy.

## 2.2 *Antithesis*

Fahnestock (1999, pp. 46-47), following Aristotle, defines antithesis as a verbal structure that places contrasted or opposed terms in parallel or balanced cola or phrases. She writes:

*[Parallel phrasing without opposed terms does not produce an antithesis, nor do opposed terms alone without strategic positioning in symmetrical phrasing. Instead, the figure antithesis, according to Aristotle, must meet both syntactic and semantic requirements.]* **[ii]**

The opposed terms may be contraries (both terms can be true of an object depending on the perspective one adopts: good vs evil; cold vs hot), contradictories (pairs that form exhaustive either/or alternatives: clean -/unclean; polite -/impolite), or correlatives (pairs that convey reciprocal or complementary relationships: buying and selling; cause and effect; lead and follow) (see Fahnestock, 1999, p. 48). When it comes to identifying the various contrasting relations in the visual mode, it may be difficult to identify exhaustive either/or alternatives. Based on the viewer's knowledge of what is being depicted and on such formal cues as the use of colour (or the use of sounds when it comes to the audio mode), it may be possible to identify contraries or correlatives.

As regards the syntactic requirement, the opposed terms need to be placed in some parallel structure. This syntactic requirement is also typical of the figure parallelism. Antithesis, however, contains only two parallel clauses, featuring pairs of antonyms and cannot be used to deliver more than two examples, while parallelism does not use antonyms and typically presents three things before an audience (see Fahnestock, 2003, p. 128). In film, such a parallel structure can be conveyed first and foremost by the mere sequencing of the scenes but also within the shot by means of composition and mise-en-scène.

Questions one can ask for identifying an antithesis and distinguishing it from mere contrast (following Forceville's questions for the identification of a pictorial metaphor) would be:

- (1) Which are the two terms of the antithesis, and how do we know?
- (2) How are these two terms opposed (contraries - contradictories - correlatives), and how do we know?
- (3) What are the differences being stressed?

In antithesis, unlike metaphor, the direction (identifying which is target and which is source) of opposition between the two elements does not play a role. Moreover (as in metaphor), the two elements of the antithesis may be conveyed each in a different mode, verbal, visual, or audio, for example. As we have pointed out above, the contrasting relation between the two elements can be conveyed not only in what is being depicted but also in *how* something is being depicted.

Both metaphor and antithesis seem to rely on a certain comparative/parallel structure, whereby in the first case likeness is stressed (or differences are backgrounded) while in the second case it is difference that is stressed (or likeness that is backgrounded). Clifton (1983), who provides an inventory of rhetorical figures found in films, notes the following with respect to simile, a figure that is usually seen as related to metaphor (p.72):

*It is clear then that in every simile there is present both difference and likeness, and both are a part of its effect. By ignoring differences, we find a simile and may perhaps find an antithesis in the same event, by ignoring likeness.*

Fahnestock, too, observes that both a simile and an antithesis are based on a parallelism structure, that invites comparison. The question then arises: how do the similarities become salient in one case and how do the differences stand out in the other? It seems that audiovisual cues as such can be used to trigger

different tropes; we need to take into consideration genre-conventions and contextual information within a specific scene to make an appropriate assessment which trope, if any, is at stake.

### 2.3 Possible argumentative functions

As has been suggested above, metaphor can be related to the use of analogy in argumentation. The distinctive argumentative work of metaphor, according to Fahnestock (2011, p. 105) is that it “creates new links, allowing the rhetor to illuminate one term (or concept) by features or senses borrowed from another”. For Fahnestock then, metaphor, like other figures, does not merely have a decorative role, accompanying an argument, but constitutes *a verbal summary that epitomizes the argument. It is a condensed or even diagram-like rendering of the relationship among a set of terms, a relationship that constitutes the argument and that could be expressed at greater length.* (1999, p. 24)

Whether metaphor is to be identified exclusively with a scheme of arguing from analogy, however, is an issue that requires further study. According to Garssen (2009), for example, the argumentative relevance of the use of figurative analogy in argumentation should not to be related to the analogy argument scheme. Instead, Garssen maintains that figurative analogy functions as a presentational device used to put forward other (symptomatic or causal) types of argumentation. Moreover, Garssen and Kienpointner (2011, p. 40) stress the fact that not all metaphors are to be analysed as argument by analogy:

*utterances containing metaphors can only be classified as arguments from figurative analogies if they are used as argumentative utterances and the speaker wants to prove a controversial standpoint by making a comparison based on relevant similarities between entities from different domains of reality.*

Garssen and Kienpointner (2011, p. 46) mention, among others, the following functions of figurative analogies: creative function (used as a creative means of opening the argumentative space),**[iii]** persuasive function (a means of shifting the burden of proof by choosing highly persuasive types of *phoros*), didactic function (a pedagogical device for illustrating and clarifying complicated issues), refutative function (as ironical *reductio ad absurdum*), and competitive function (as provocative attack at the opponent).

When it comes to antithesis, a distinction can be drawn between antithesis of

words and antithesis of thought, the former being a purely stylistic one, while the latter provides a premise-conclusion pair, according to Fahnestock (1999). Within the latter type of antithesis, three cases can be distinguished, depending on the status of the opposed terms. In the first case, the antithesis employs two opposing terms that are already known to the audience. In this way, the arguer exploits the audience's prior recognition of the contrast as well as the values attached to the opposed terms. In the second case, the antithesis pushes the two terms apart, creating thus an opposition between them that the audience was not necessarily previously aware of. In the last case, the antithesis reconfigures an existing opposition by changing or reinforcing the relation between the two terms in order to change the audience's conception of a known antithetical pair.

Following Garssen and Kienpointner (2011), who take metaphor to constitute a presentational device for conveying a number of argumentative functions, we believe that antithesis, too, can be shown to contribute in a number of ways to the argumentative activity. To begin with, it needs to be acknowledged that not all antitheses have an argumentative role, just as is the case with metaphors. Contrasting two elements in order to win the viewer's attention or merely claiming that two elements are opposed, without making it explicit that the stated opposition contributes in a direct or indirect way to an act of convincing an audience about the tenability of a standpoint, do not count as an argumentative use of antithesis. In a clearly defined argumentative situation, antithesis can be said to contribute directly to the argumentation when it is used to convey the claim for which further support is advanced. In this case, the antithesis is either used to push two terms apart or to reconfigure an existing opposition. Antithesis may also be used to convey the argument in support of a contested claim. In this case, the arguer would be making use of an antithesis that contains opposed terms already accepted as such by the audience. Finally, another direct contribution of antithesis to an argumentative discussion would be its use to refute or anticipate counter-arguments advanced by the audience. When antithesis contributes in an indirect way to the argumentative discussion, its role is to draw attention to the argument or to assist the audience in testing the case in dispute, as Tindale (2009) suggests.

In general, the rhetorical effect of the use of metaphor or antithesis - or of any other figure for that matter - can be explained in terms of the inference process that the audience is invited to follow in order to determine the meaning of the

similarities or contrasts that each of these two figures conveys. The audience confronted with a metaphor or antithesis is invited to participate in the construction of the meaning, adding the second term of the antithesis or identifying the properties that are mapped in the metaphor, for example, or attaching their own values and norms to the terms involved in either figure. Once the audience understands the metaphor or the antithesis, it may be more prone to accept the mappings proposed by the figure as premises for a certain conclusion. In what way exactly the different nature of metaphor and antithesis can be exploited so as to contribute accordingly to the possible argumentative functions named in the previous paragraph remains a subject for further study. Moreover, the effect achieved by conveying either of these figures verbally, visually or multimodally deserves further attention. Kjeldsen (2013, p. 437) explains the effect of conveying figures visually or multimodally instead of using exclusively the verbal mode in the following way:

*In order to make meaning of the multimodal presentation, the viewer has to actively transform a main line of reasoning. In this way, the images contribute to making the viewer himself construct the arguments meant to persuade him.*

When it comes to the argumentative role these figures may play in a film, in particular, it is important not to over-interpret their presence and their use. Clifton (1983) has inventoried a great number of figures found in scenes from a number of films; but even if one takes the identification of these figures to be correct, it is another matter whether these figures have an argumentative function in all of the scenes described. In addition, it is important to consider whether their role is to contribute to an argument identified at a local level, within a sequence or scene of the film, or to an argument that can be said to run through the whole film. **[iv]** In order to be justified in searching for the argumentative function of these figures in film, one needs to specify an argumentative situation in which a contested claim is being supported and in which a figure may play a role other than a purely aesthetic one. One needs therefore to have recourse to the specific genre of the film as well as to background knowledge concerning the theme of the film and the filmmaker's own interests. Assuming that the documentary is a genre that seeks to communicate a message to its audience more than simply to please them, we can be justified in searching for the argumentative function of metaphor and antithesis when we have identified these figures in a documentary film.



### 3. *On documentary film and fly on the wall documentary*

As Nichols (2010, p. 104) puts it, in his Introduction to Documentary:

*Documentary work does not appeal exclusively to our aesthetic sensibility: it may entertain or please, but does so in relation to a rhetorical or persuasive effort aimed at the existing social world.*

Compared to fiction films and experimental films, the subject matter of documentaries is real life itself. [v] It is from this reality that filmmakers extract their material to use as evidence in support of the assertive stance they take towards what is being filmed (see Plantinga, 1997). In the various typologies of documentary film that exist, three main forms can be identified namely narrative, categorical and rhetorical (Bordwell & Thompson, 2013, p. 355). But even when a documentary represents historical events as they occurred in time (narrative form), or when it conveys categorized information about a given topic mostly from a synchronic perspective (categorical form), it is safe to expect that it still employs rhetorical techniques to address an audience so that they eventually accept that information as valid or endorse the filmmaker's perspective. After all, as Plantinga (1997, p. 105) remarks, it is rarely the case that each of these forms appears independent of the others and does not mix in the course of a documentary film.

An extensive typology of documentary films has been proposed by Nichols (2010), based on the "voice" that is predominant throughout the film. He identifies the following six modes: the expository, the observational, the interactive (also called participatory), the reflexive, the performative and the poetic. Of these, it is the expository mode, the mode that most people associate with documentary in general, that emphasises verbal commentary and has a clear argumentative logic. The Direct Cinema documentary (also known as fly-on-the-wall) falls under the observational mode.

Documentary films of the observational mode have no voice-over commentary, no supplementary music or sound effects, no inter-titles, no historical re-enactments, no behaviour repeated for the camera, and do not make use of interviews (Nichols, 2010, pp. 172ff). Editing and cinematography in the fly-on-the-wall documentary avoid directing the viewer along a clear path of meaning, as Plantinga (1997, pp. 153-155) observes. The viewer is therefore invited to take a more active role in determining the significance of what is said and done, as Nichols (2010, p. 174) also remarks. It is thus not without a reason that we focus

on the use of rhetorical figures such as metaphor and antithesis, which may be construed by choices made regarding the editing and the cinematography, as an alternative means employed by the filmmaker to guide the viewers through a path of meaning.

#### 4. *Frederick Wiseman's documentaries*

Frederick Wiseman began making films in the 1960s, working at the same time as Richard Leacock, D.A. Pennebaker and David and Albert Maysles, who are all considered as representatives of the fly on the wall documentary (see Aitken, 2013). His films focus on American institutions, such as the school, the court, the hospital, the army, and the prison, among others; they thus become “studies of the exercise of power in American society”, as Barnouw (1993, p. 244) puts it.

Nevertheless, as Plantinga writes (1997, p. 195), Wiseman has always distanced himself from direct cinema, even though his films are considered prototypical examples of the observational mode of documentary film. Wiseman calls his cinema ‘reality fiction’ and acknowledges the creative manipulation in his films, whereby he makes use of editing in order to restructure his material according to principles other than chronology and narrative (see Benson & Anderson, 2002, pp. 1-2). Nichols (1981, p. 211) notes that while the individual sequences are organized by narrative codes of construction, aiming for a smooth flow of time and space, the relations between these sequences are organized by principles that are more rhetorical. The sequences may thus relate, for example, in terms of comparison, contrast, parallelism, inversion, irony, evidence, summation and so on. Benson (1980, 1985), who has analysed *High School* (1968) and *Primate* (1974), from the perspective of rhetorical criticism, concludes that Wiseman’s films are characterized by a dialectical structure that invites the audience to construct meaning and grasp the film’s logic.

Wiseman acknowledges that he began making films out of an urge for social reform and awareness (Grant, 1998). At the same time, he refrains from dictating his own point of view to the audience. In an interview cited in Nichols (1981, p. 218), he says:

*One of the things that intrigues me in all the films is how to make a more abstract, general statement about the issues, not through the use of a narrator, but through the relationship of events to each other through editing.*

While it is true that Wiseman’s films, like other documentary films of the

observational mode, leave it up to the audience to interpret the film and discover the director's position, it does not mean that the director himself does not have a point of view. It is then up to a close examination of his films to show how such a view can be reconstructed.

#### 4.1 *Titicut Follies* (1967)

*Titicut Follies* is Wiseman's first documentary. It was filmed at Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Bridgewater, a prison hospital for the mentally ill. Due to a legal ban by the state of Massachusetts on the presentation of the film in public, it was only in 1991 that the film became widely known.**[vi]** The title of the film refers to the title of the musical show that the inmates put on.

The film's opening sequence shows eight inmates lined up in two rows and dressed up in parade costumes singing George Gershwin's song 'Strike up the band'. The camera is placed among the audience giving a view of the stage on which the inmates perform, before it zooms in to the face of each inmate singing in the front row. The light comes from below, illuminating their faces in a horror-like manner. At the end of the act, the director of the institution appears, saying "It keeps getting better" and goes on to tell a joke to the audience who is applauding. The opening scene contrasts with the following sequence that shows the guards at the institution inspecting the new inmates and asking them to take their clothes off. In this scene, the director appears again, wearing his uniform this time, instead of the black costume of the master of ceremonies he was wearing in the opening scene. In the rest of the film, there are at least two other moments where the inmates and the director of the institution are shown singing. Nevertheless, the majority of the film depicts moments in which the inmates are being treated rather disrespectfully and as less than human by the staff.

Wiseman makes thus a salient choice from his material by not only opening the film with a scene from the inmates' musical show but also by ending it with the final act of the same show. Grant (1998, p. 243) remarks that by framing the film in this way Wiseman suggests that "the inmates are forever 'on stage', as they are always under observation by the staff". The director of the institution is thus presented as the ringmaster and the patients as attractions in a theatre of curiosities, where they are being inspected, undressed, washed, put into their cells, entertained, fed etc. A metaphor could thus be construed whereby the mental institution is associated with a theatre of curiosities and freaks. The close-ups of the faces of the inmates performing on stage as well as their body language

do not suggest that they are particularly enjoying it - unlike the director of the institution - but rather that this is just one other chore they are asked to perform.

In the rest of the film, Wiseman creates contrasts between the inmates' world and the outside world, doctors and patients, sanity and insanity inviting the audience to think over these boundaries. Even if Wiseman does not stage the events or directs the inmates and controls their positions, he nevertheless succeeds in conveying these antitheses not only by means of editing the material in the post-production but also by means of composition within the frame, while filming.

One such moment is the scene where an inmate is singing a popular song from the 1920s called 'Chinatown, my Chinatown' in front of the camera, while in the background a TV screen shows Nana Mouskouri singing a love-song called 'Johnny'. The contrast is cued not only in the audio mode, with the inmate's cacophonous voice juxtaposed with Mouskouri's melodious voice, but also by the posture: the inmate is facing the audience directly while Mouskouri is facing the side (see Figure 1).

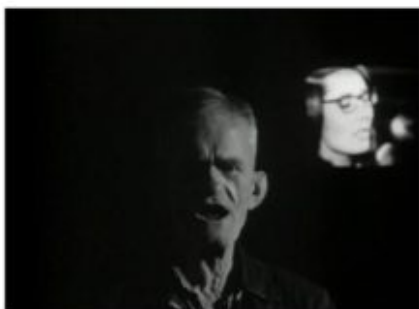


Figure 1. Still from *Titicut Follies* (1967), scene starting at app.18:44.  
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Figure 1. Still from *Titicut Follies* (1967), scene starting at app.18:44.  
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Another moment is the scene where inmate Vladimir is arguing with dr. Ross about his wish to leave the institution and return to prison where he believes he belongs, since he claims that he is not mentally insane. For the most part of the scene the two interlocutors are filmed in medium long shot facing each other against the background of the bricked wall of the institution's courtyard.

Wiseman spots the water pipeline going down the wall and slightly reframes the camera so as to let the pipeline appear in the background, thereby dividing the two interlocutors, the one representing the institution and the other the patients (see Figure 2).**[vii]**

These antitheses, and others conveyed by the editing of the scenes, can be considered as putting forward evidence for Wiseman's claim about the internal contradictions of the mental institution or as opening up the space for discussion on what is (in)sanity and who decides on the boundaries.



Figure 2. Still from *Titicut Follies* (1967), scene starting at app.34:01.  
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Figure 2. Still from *Titicut Follies* (1967), scene starting at app.34:01.  
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The sequence which crowns the film, and in which Wiseman's critique of the staff becomes most apparent, is the one which depicts the forced tubefeeding of an aged and starving patient, Mr. Malinowski, by dr. Ross (see also Aitken, 2013, p. 914). It is part of a larger sequence which lasts for almost ten minutes, starting with the scene where dr. Ross visits the patient in his cell and asks him whether he has eaten, and ending with the scene of a staff member pushing a tray with a dead body inside the mortuary refrigerator. The whole sequence is placed almost in the middle of the film. The scene of Mr. Malinowski's tubefeeding is cross-cut with shots from another scene in which the dead body of an inmate, probably Mr. Malinowski himself, is being shaved and perfumed. While there is a certain parallelism between the two scenes (there is a match on action between the shot where the doctor removes the towel from the patient's face and the shot where a staff member is airing a towel on the corpse's face, as well as between the shot

where the guards shut the door of Mr. Malinowski's cell and the shot where the guard is pushing the tray with the dead body in the refrigerator), overall a stark contrast is created both through the visual and the audio mode. In the shots of the tube-feeding scene, one hears the dialogue between the staff involved in the action as well as the surrounding sounds from the room. The shots of the embalming scene, however, have no sound whatsoever. Moreover, a great contrast exists between the way the patient in the two scenes is treated. While in the tube-feeding scene the live Mr. Malinowski is kept tied and treated disrespectfully, the dead body of Mr. Malinowski receives the careful attention of the staff.

With the last shot of the whole Malinowski sequence being the pushing of the tray with the dead body into the refrigerator, Wiseman lets the audience see the paradoxical consequences of the doctor's act of feeding that patient. By creating a parallel between the two events, Wiseman lets the inconsistencies in the behaviour of the staff members come to the fore. At the same time, the acts carried out by the staff members in both scenes underlie the passivity of the patient who is treated as a lifeless object (in the second scene this is literally the case). As a whole, the sequence can be understood as evidence in support of Wiseman's critique of the institution and its staff for acting upon and treating the patients in ways that counter the patients' own dignity and needs, if not put their lives in danger.

#### 4.2 *Primate* (1974)

*Primate* is Wiseman's eighth film and the first of a trilogy of films, produced over a period of three years, expressing how far life has become objectified and commodified (see Aitken, 2013, p. 988).**[viii]** As the title suggests, the film is about a federally funded research institute on primates, the Yerkes Primate Research Centre in Atlanta. Grant (1998, p. 251) notes that this is the only other Wiseman documentary, next to *Titicut Follies*, to have caused substantial controversy, not only about its disturbing scenes of vivisection experiments carried out on gibbons, chimpanzees and gorillas, but also on the questions it raises on the ethics and goals of medical research involving animals.

The opening sequence of the film establishes an analogy between apes and humans. This is how Benson (1985, p. 208) describes it:

*The film opens with a long series of shots in which we may first notice the ambiguity of the film's title, which applies equally well to men and apes. We see a large composite photograph, with portraits of eminent scientists, hanging,*

*presumably, on a wall at the Yerkes Center. Wiseman cuts from the composite portrait to a series of eight individual portraits, in series, then to a sign, an exterior shot of the Center, and then a series of four shots of apes in their cages. The comparison is obvious, though not particularly forceful, and it depends for its meaning both upon the structure Wiseman has chosen to use - at least he does not intercut the apes and the portraits - and upon our own predictable surprise at noticing how human the apes look.*

While the analogy could indeed be read in either direction, humans are like apes or apes are like humans, we think it is important for understanding the way the rest of the film builds up to consider that Wiseman takes apes to be the source not the target of the metaphor. The assumption that humans are like apes is used to justify the research carried out on primates with the aim of discovering more about humans, by conducting experiments that otherwise could not have been carried out on humans. Framing the film's topic in this way, it becomes even more gruesome for the viewer to imagine that the vivisection experiments shown later in the film could have actually been carried out on humans. Moreover, the analogy between humans and apes, underscored in a number of sequences throughout the film, succeeds in making even stronger the contrasts that Wiseman's camera captures between the words and deeds of the scientists. As Benson (1985, p. 209) observes:

*comparison both justifies and condemns the research, and Wiseman exploits that comparison not simply to attack vivisection, or scientific research in general, but also to engage us in actively considering the paradoxes of our institutions and ourselves.*



Figure 3. Still from *Primate* (1976), scene starting at app.56:38.  
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Figure 3. Still from *Primate* (1976), scene starting at app.56:38.

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The metaphor is thereby used to open the space for the discussion, in a similar way that the various antitheses discussed in *Titicut Follies* do.

One interesting moment, in which Wiseman employs antithesis as a means for countering possible refutations of the analogy he has established between humans and apes, is the sequence in which a researcher explains his view about the differences between the great apes on the one hand and humans on the other. The sequence starts with a number of shots where the researcher is shown interacting with a chimpanzee in a laboratory room, inciting the animal to grab fruits hanging from a rope and to hang from a swing. At one moment, the researcher is shown being suspended from the swing in an attempt to make the chimpanzee imitate him (see Figure 3).

Then comes a shot of the researcher in close-up against a background of electronic equipment explaining how the experiment is conducted and what its rationale is (see Figure 4). From then on, there is intercutting between the researcher and shots of the actual experiment carried out by himself and an Afro-American assistant. Wiseman lets the researcher's voice run over the shots from the laboratory experiment, functioning, in a certain way, as a voice-over commentary of what is being depicted.

When the researcher utters the sentence: "I do not subscribe to the theory that the living apes, chimpanzee and gorilla, closely resemble the ancestry of man", a shot from the laboratory experiment is shown in which the researcher is running around, jumping from one corner of the room to the other inviting the chimpanzee to chase him (see Figure 5).





Figure 4. Still from *Primate* (1976), scene starting at app.57:01.  
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Figure 4. Still from *Primate* (1976), scene starting at app.57:01.

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Wiseman lets the image of the researcher defeat the content of the latter's own words. He thereby exploits editing and voice-over to refute any possible objection to the idea that humans are like apes, that one may put forward in order to suggest that violence to apes is not the same as violence to humans. By similarly contrasting the filmed actions of the researchers with their own words, Wiseman shows that the increasingly violent and ultimately mortal experiments carried out on gibbons and gorillas are not necessarily justified by the significance of the findings. After the climactic sequence in which a researcher is shown cutting the head of a living gibbon, a scene in a laboratory is edited, where two colleagues looking through a microscope at tissues from presumably the same dead gibbon's brain have difficulty in specifying what it is they are looking at and what its significance is (see Benson, 1985, p. 211).



Figure 5. Still from *Primate* (1976), scene starting at app. 58:04.  
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Figure 5. Still from *Primate* (1976),

scene starting at app. 58:04.

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## 5. *Conclusion*

In this paper, we have only begun to tease out the valuable contributions that the combination of insights from metaphor theory, argumentation studies and film analysis can make to the argumentative analysis of multimodal communication. By extending Fahnstock's (1999) view of rhetorical figures as epitomes of a line of reasoning to the visual and the audio modes we have tried to describe the possible argumentative functions of such tropes as metaphor and antithesis. In order to illustrate the usefulness of the distinctions we propose, we have analysed a number of scenes from two documentaries by Frederick Wiseman, a representative of the so-called fly-on-the-wall documentary. Despite the lack of a voice-over commentary that could have made explicit the filmmaker's own position on the depicted material, the identification of metaphors and antitheses construed visually or multimodally has allowed us, in connection with our knowledge of the specific genre and of the specific director's work, to propose an interpretation of the contribution these figures make to the argument of the film.

A more systematic identification of the various metaphors and antitheses used in the two films as well as in other films by Wiseman is still required in order to show how these figures may combine in order to contribute to the overall argument that is built throughout the film. Moreover, a comparative study involving films by other representatives of the fly-on-the-wall genre would help support our view that these figures – and possibly others – can help guide the viewer's interpretation of the filmmaker's stance, despite the characteristic lack of voice-over and of other techniques that would explicitly mark the director's presence. Finally, further study is required for developing criteria to identify the various visual and multimodal tropes as well as to specify their argumentative relevance in a given situation.

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Zipporah Films is the distribution company of the Frederick Wiseman films. For more information visit <http://www.zipporah.com/>.

## NOTES

- i.** See Aitken (2013) under the term 'direct cinema'
- ii.** Tindale (2009), on the other hand, maintains that the figure antithesis does not require that two cola contain opposites, stressing the syntactical rather than the semantic property of this figure.
- iii.** Interestingly, this function of figurative analogy is similar to the one that Tindale (2009) describes for antithesis, namely to assist an audience in testing or weighing a case.
- iv.** Clifton (1983) remarks that antithesis or metaphor can be conveyed within one single shot and that the most extended form of antithesis or metaphor is when either is used to condense the meaning of the whole film. See the examples he discusses on pages 121 and 125 for antithesis, and on page 100 for metaphor.
- v.** Nichols (2010, pp. 7-17) summarizes the three commonsense assumptions about documentaries thus: "documentaries are about reality; documentaries are about real people; documentaries tell stories about what happens in the real world".
- vi.** The film was banned for reasons pertaining to the issue of the patients' informed consent and the of the prison authorities in it. See chapter 2 in Benson and Anderson (2002) for a detailed chronicle of the production of the film and the ensuing trials and controversy.
- vii.** Interestingly, when one also follows the content of the dialogue between Vladimir and dr. Ross, it becomes clear that it is Vladimir who builds a clear and strong argument in support of his request to be transferred to a prison, while the doctor's responses seem dogmatic and unconvincing. This provides an ironic view of who is the sane and who is the mad one of the two.
- viii.** The other two films are *Welfare* (1975) and *Meat* (1976).

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