

**THEO VAN LEEUWEN**

# **MULTIMODALITY AND TIME**

**A Social Semiotic Approach**



# Multimodality and Time

This ground-breaking book brings together the work of leading theorist, Theo van Leeuwen, on time-based multimodal forms of communication including speech, music, and film.

With chapters on the fundamental meaning-making role of rhythm, time in music, time in film, the representation of time and timing in language, and the visualization of time, this book offers a comprehensive approach to the subject that supplements the author's earlier work on visual communication. This book is richly illustrated with examples, including analyses of time management texts, everyday interactions such as waitressing in a restaurant, classic and contemporary films, television crime series and documentaries, a wide variety of kinds of music, online educational software, and SmartArt templates for the diagrammatic representation of time-based practices. Every chapter also includes questions and exercises to reinforce and extend learning.

Written in an accessible style, it will be essential reading for students, teachers, and researchers in the field of multimodal communication, whether in communication studies, media studies, or linguistics.

**Theo van Leeuwen** is currently Professor of Language and Communication at the University of Southern Denmark and Honorary Professor at the University of New South Wales. His many influential publications include *Introducing Social Semiotics*, *The Language of Colour*, *Reading Images* (with Gunther Kress), *Organizational Semiotics* (with Louise Ravelli, Markus Höllerer, and Dennis Jancsary), and *Multimodality and Identity*, all published by Routledge.



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**Theo van Leeuwen**

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# Preface

This book presents a social semiotic approach to analysing and interpreting time-based multimodal text and performances, including films, music, written texts, and everyday performances such as waitressing in a restaurant. Building on the work of sociologists and anthropologists such as Norbert Elias (1992) and Helga Nowotny (1994), I argue that the temporal organization of time-based multimodal texts and performances reflects the temporal structuring of social life and shows how the timing of social life is structured differently in different societies and different periods, for instance in agricultural societies, where time is conceived of as cyclical, based on daily routines and the cycling of the seasons, as compared to industrial societies, where time is strictly regulated by the clock and conceived of as linear, and as a commodity that can be saved, spent, wasted, and more.

This book therefore begins with the *social* part of social semiotics, with an introduction to the way time is structured differently in different societies and historical periods. Only then does it move to the *semiotic* part. Here, I argue that rhythmic structuring is the key to understanding how meaning is made in all time-based multimodal texts and performances and introduce what I call an embodied approach to rhythm analysis. The next three chapters then discuss, in turn, music, film, and language, showing how their temporal structuring reflects the temporal structuring of social life. This is followed by a chapter about the visualization of time.

This book draws, in part, on earlier work on music (e.g., van Leeuwen, 1999), film (e.g., van Leeuwen, 1985), rhythm (van Leeuwen, 2005), and the representation of time in language (van Leeuwen, 2008), but these earlier works are updated and reinterpreted in the light of the overall theoretical approach of the book.

I have been fortunate to be able to try out the material presented in this book with the students of a PhD course I gave in the Spring of 2022. Lively discussions and the wonderful examples the students came up with (several of which are now included in the book) helped me to clarify my ideas and to gain confidence that this book will be of interest to students and researchers much younger than I am, and that the analytical methods it introduces will be

useful to students and not more complicated than necessary. For this, I thank my ex-students Gye Young Lee, Laura Chen, Lungguh Ariang Bangga, Shuoyu Fang, Thu Ngo, Ann Hellwig, Rongle Tan, Natalia Laba, Jiayang Hu, Yumin Gao, Agita Nurhikawati, Dany Lopez Gonzalez, and Shiwei Fu. I would also like to take the opportunity to thank Jim Martin for organizing these courses, year after year. They have been of immense value to generations of PhD students from the various universities in Sydney, as well as to many visiting PhD students from other countries.

I would also like to thank Bob Hodge, Joshua Han, Emilia Djonov, Chiao-I Tseng, and Louise Ravelli for their always sharp and useful comments on various chapters and Louisa Semlyen from Routledge for her continuing and invaluable support of my work and of multimodality studies generally.

Finally, I hope this book will be of use to students and researchers in the steadily growing and ever-fascinating field of multimodality studies, and that it will stimulate further work, because there is still much more to be explored in this field.



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# 1 Time and society

## 1 Introduction

This book offers a social semiotic approach to analysing and understanding the temporal structuring of time-based multimodal texts such as films and performances such as speech and music. It will argue that the temporal structuring of multimodal texts and performances reflects the temporal structuring of social life. The book is therefore not so much about time as about *timing*, about how societies organize *when* and *for how long* people do what they do, and about how this is symbolized and celebrated by the temporal structuring of multimodal texts and performances. In other words, the book is not about what time *is*, in a philosophical or scientific sense, although philosophical and scientific ideas will crop up from time to time. Nor is it about how time is subjectively experienced, although that, too, will turn out to relate to social time. It is about *social timing* and this in two ways – timing as coordinating social activities and timing as symbolizing fundamental cultural meanings and values. This means that timing, though often connecting to the biological rhythms of the body and the cyclical movements of the sun and the planets, is never fully determined by such naturally occurring processes, but always socially constructed, and this in different ways in different cultures and historical periods.

This idea was inspired by the work of the sociologist Norbert Elias, who stressed that time, and the way we think and talk about it, is a product of the *activity* of timing, or more precisely, the activity of measuring one kind of activity or time sequence against another kind of activity or event sequence (1992: 43):

The reifying character of the substantival form “time” disguises the instrumental character of the activity of timing. It obscures the fact that the activity of timing, e.g. by looking at one’s watch, has the function of relating to each other the positions of events in the successive order of two or more change continuums.

In this chapter, I will focus on the way social activities can be timed by being synchronized, more or less loosely, with three such ‘change

## 2 *Multimodality and Time*

continuums' – *natural synchronization* synchronizes social activities with naturally occurring events such as the time of day and the seasons, *social synchronization* synchronizes social activities with social activities other than the activity that is being timed, and *mechanical synchronization* synchronizes social activities with artificially produced 'change continuums' such as the clock. These forms of synchronization can combine in various combinations. I will return to this topic in Chapter 5, which discusses how these forms of timing find linguistic expression in texts.

Timing is social in another sense as well, because it is closely related to power, whether in very direct ways, as when teachers tell students to engage in specific activities at specific times and for specific durations, or mediated by normative discourses such as schedules and timetables, and, today, by digital technologies which, for instance, limit the amount of time we get to complete specific actions. At a larger scale, time systems such as calendars have always been decreed by powerful Emperors, Popes, and other rulers, and this in different ways in different periods and cultures. Even when there is no evident authority behind social timing, there will be customs, habits, and traditions which next generations will learn through observation and informal talk. Weber (1964 [1947]: 116), discussing 'types of social action', already noted that social action is often "a matter of almost automatic reaction to habitual stimuli which guide behaviour in a course which has been repeatedly followed". This topic, too, will be revisited in Chapter 5.

In later chapters, I will discuss how the temporal structuring of multimodal texts and performances represents the temporal structuring of social and economic life:

There is a correspondence, a correlation between a society's economy, the way it organizes work, the means it uses for the production of goods and services, and the way time is represented ... a representation that every individual receives, internalizes and accepts almost always with no problem

(Grossin, 1990: 307)

Two examples can perhaps make this clear: one drawn from the field of musical performance and one from the field of film. The symphony orchestra came into its own when industrialization began to change the organization of work in the late 18th century. Goods that were previously produced in workshops by autonomous craftsmen involved in every stage of the production, or by farmers during their winter rest periods, were now produced in factories which divided the production process into numerous small, in themselves meaningless tasks and introduced a new, hierarchical kind of social control. Andrew Ure, an early 19th-century apologist of the system (quoted in Mumford, 1934: 173), described the role of factory overseers as having to control "the distribution of the different members of the apparatus into one cooperative body, in impelling each man with the appropriate delicacy and speed,

and in training human beings to identify themselves with the unvarying regularity of the complex automaton". In the same period, Arnold (quoted in Koury, 1986: 61) wrote in very similar terms about the then newly introduced role of the conductor: "The fusion of the individual members to the reproduction of a single feeling is the work of the leader, concert master, music director or conductor". In other words, the symphony orchestra relates to the small ensemble as the factory relates to the small workshop. In addition, music, in this period, became 'homophonic', with one voice (the melody) dominating and other voices providing accompaniment, playing parts which usually were not melodically interesting in their own right and only meaningful in relation to the whole. Symphonic music thus celebrated hierarchy, discipline, and control – though accompaniment could also harmonically clash with the dominant melody, and increasingly began to do so in the course of the 19th century.

A second example dates from the early 20th century, when the new medium of film began to find its language. Nineteenth-century technologies (telegraph, telephone, radio) had by then disrupted the unity of time and space. The International Meridian Conference of 1884 had abolished local times and divided the world into time zones, each with one-hour difference. It now became possible to 'be' in two very distant spaces at the same time, something which, before, would have been very hard to conceive of. A few years later, in 1895, H.G. Wells published *The Time Machine*, in which a Victorian scientist creates a time machine that allowed him to stay in the same place but travel backwards and forwards through time, and the first moving pictures were projected for an audience by the Lumière brothers in Paris. The staged scenes in early films still maintained the theatre's unity of time and space. The camera was positioned in front of the stage, as it were, and the image only changed between 'acts', just as in the theatre, though the camera angles of documentary shots such as the Lumière Brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896) were less frontal. But one of the first innovations of the new medium was 'parallel editing' which disrupted the unity of time and space. In D.W. Griffith's *Enoch Arden* (1908), the action jumped halfway across the globe in a split second. At that time, this still confused audiences, as Griffith's widow later explained in her memoirs (Arvidson-Griffith, 1969 [1924]: 23)

When he suggested a scene showing Annie Lee waiting for her husband's return to be followed by a scene of Enoch cast away on a desert island, it was altogether too distracting. How can you tell a story jumping about like that?

Today parallel editing is as common as Zoom meetings between people in distant locations. To Summarize:

- A social semiotic understanding of the temporal organization of the multimodal texts and performances of a particular social context or historical