



**Doctoral School of  
Social Communication**

## **THESIS SUMMARY**

**to the Ph.D. dissertation of**

**Gabriella Németh**

**titled**

**The Rhetorical – Semiotic Analysis**

**In the Intersection of Paradigms**

**Supervisor:**

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full professor

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**Institute of Behavioural Sciences and Communication Theory**

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## **1. Background of research, relevance of the topic**

It has become essential in the last few decades to analyse the multimodal tools of convergence culture in order to interpret the meanings revealed by new platforms and contexts of communication. The concept of convergence culture means an altered context that has unveiled multimodal communicative forms that are not always possible to be analysed by traditional stylistic methods. The reason behind this is the fact that convergence is not only regarded as a technological phenomenon but also as an industrial, cultural and social change. Convergence is a phenomenon of the postmodern era that simultaneously influences social reality and modern rhetoric. Not only do the consumers of this age have access to information but also the power to contribute and to create new meanings.

Research in visual communication has several directions. Images can be analysed from aesthetic, ethical, semiotic, rhetorical, cultural, critical points of view as well as from the approaches of reception theory and visual intelligence theory. This dissertation intends to offer a new interpretive – methodological frame that alloys rhetorical and semiotic terms and methods. In this regard, the new interpretive – methodological frame unites the strengths of the two disciplines.

This dissertation claims that there is a great need for a new methodological frame that is able to simultaneously manage the signifiers, the meanings and the communicative effects of visual artefacts in a visual age. This need is possibly fulfilled by the rhetorical – semiotic analysis that unites structural and conceptual dimensions of visual rhetoric with the analysis of semiotics.

The analysis of convergent contents is best to be carried out by a convergent methodology. The rhetorical – semiotic approach is highly reasonable in the age determined by visibility and convergence, in which representation does not always build on reality and in which rhetorical operations do not always correlate with tropes that adhere to meaning. The dissertation also introduces hermeneutic aspects in a separate chapter.

To summarise the above-mentioned statements, the aim of this dissertation is the concentration of rhetorical and semiotic theoretical and operative frames and thus the development of a new theoretical – methodological frame, by which I carry out a critical analysis and provide empirical research to underline my claims. The critical analysis of the dissertation is based on the following theoretical assumptions:

- 1) Regardless whether an image or a visual artefact applies a rhetorical operation/strategy (adjectio, detractio, immutatio, transmutatio), it is not sure it also has meaning on the level of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony).
- 2) A rhetorical image always comes to existence as the result of semiosis.
- 3) In case an image contains a visual figure of thought (trope), it also contains the three components of sign determined by Peirce (interpretamen, interpretant, sign) and thus iconic, symbolic or indexical mode of meaning is also to be detected.

## **2. Methodology of the dissertation**

### **2.1. Case study**

The method of case study originates in the legal and business sectors. However, in recent years, it has frequently been applied in social sciences as well. The reason behind this is the fact that case studies are able to observe comprehensive areas. Quantitative methods have limitations in “providing holistic and in-depth explanations of the social and behavioural problems in question.” The method of case study helps the researcher to be able “to go beyond the quantitative statistical results and understand the behavioural conditions through the actor’s perspective.” However, by doing so it simultaneously manages qualitative and quantitative data (Zainal [2007] p. 1.).

The case study is an applicable method to analyse the data of a specific context. It always engages with contemporary phenomena or events. By examining the limited number of elements of the context, it reveals comprehensive results and conclusions connected to the studied contemporary phenomenon. A case study then always makes empirical analysis of contemporary phenomena within a specific context in a way that the “the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin [1984] p. 13.). A case study always reflects on several perspectives and sources.

On the one hand, a case study attempts to reach the comprehensive understanding of the examined phenomenon, on the other hand, it is “to develop more general theoretical statements about the regularities in the observed phenomena” (Fidel [1984] p. 274.). The case study is not planned strictly. It is characterised by a kind of flexibility that makes it possible

for the study not to predict or pre-conceptualise the results in advance but to observe certain facts and results during the research.

The empirical research of the dissertation introduces a typology and a case study. Firstly, I offer a typology of visual rhetorical figures. The typology makes a categorization through a structural and a meaning dimension. The structural dimension consists of the operations/strategies of classical rhetoric, while the meaning dimension collects the master tropes. The typology provides visual examples for visual tropes that are created by the application of rhetorical structural strategies. The typology is a rhetorical one that means it adheres only to rhetorical images. A significant result of this part of the research is that it definitely interprets rhetorical tropes as meaning operations and not only as decorative elements of the messages. The typology systemises rhetorical images. Consequently, the typology offers the systematic management of visual rhetorical tropes and figures, by making an empirical analysis of images while it also reveals regularities. One of the results the typology may show is that it proves that metonymy and synecdoche do not occur at the category of *comparison* within meaning operations but can be located only at the category *connection*. It suggests the assumption that metonymy and synecdoche associate themselves with indexical meanings only, which is going to be proved by the case study. I finish the typology with the summary of its results. However, I also need to introduce some weaker points that have left some questions open. These questions are going to be answered by the case study.

The case study – a meme analysis – explicitly aims to build on the results of the typology. The main aim of the case study is to connect the concept of meaning to the structural and meaning dimensions of visual rhetorical figures and tropes as well as to effectively manage communicative effects of non-rhetorical images. During the meme analysis, I analysed 260 memes having been distributed and spread on the internet. In this research, I applied rhetorical and semiotic approaches. The conclusions of this analysis cover the mentioning of rhetorical practices altered by the participatory culture as well as the importance of visual literacy theory and the critical theory of visual communication. The method of case study is applicable to the rhetorical – semiotic analysis of internet memes as it is able to simultaneously manage several factors and conceptual connections, it does not follow strict pre-regulated procedures that would determine the factors or connections to be taken into account. Moreover, the observed factors and connections of the meme analysis are indirectly observable. Besides the structural and conceptual analysis of memes, the case study draws general conclusions on the regularities of the social phenomenon of the memes as well as on the features of

contemporary *convergence culture*. The meme analysis also highlights that certain memes are interpretable without their contexts, while other memes are interpretable only with the a priori knowledge of their contextual factors. The case study also integrates the method of content analysis as it analyses a big number of memes. By doing so it analyses the visual structures of the memes as well as it separates the different meaning variations of memes. Moreover, the case study also reflects on the memes that do not have any semantic meaning while they are still able to achieve communicative effects.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1. Typology – Systematization of visual rhetorical figures and tropes**

The dissertation aims to unite the visual structure and the dimension of meaning of visual rhetorical figures. In order to fulfil this aim, a rhetorical typology is offered which serves to systematically categorise visual rhetorical figures by also taking the conceptual and structural factors into consideration. In order to create this typology, I applied a typology offered by Phillips and McQuarrie (Phillips – McQuarrie [2004]) as a starting point. But the typology of Phillips and McQuarrie – taking into consideration that it neither deals with the strategies of classical rhetoric nor with tropes – has been significantly completed and modified. The categories of visual structure in the typology of Phillips and McQuarrie were the following: juxtaposition, fusion, and replacement (see Table 1). Among the categories of meaning operation they defined *connection* and *comparison*.


Complexity		 Richness		
		<b>MEANING OPERATION</b>		
		CONNECTION (“A is associated with B”)	COMPARISON	
	<b>VISUAL STRUCTURE</b>		SIMILARITY (“A is like B”)	OPPOSITION (“A is not like B”)
	JUXTAPOSITION (Two side-by- side images)			
	FUSION (Two combined images)			
REPLACEMENT (Image present points to an absent image)				

Table 1: A visual rhetorical typology of visual structure and meaning operations (Source: Phillips – McQuarrie [2004])

By combining classical rhetorical strategies with the categories of the visual structure of Phillips and McQuarrie, in this dissertation I define the following categories of structure in the developed typology: *adjectio*, *detractio*, *immutatio*, *transmutatio*, *fusion*. Meaning operations then are associated with the four master tropes while also using up the two meaning operations *Connection* and *Comparison* of Phillips and McQuarrie. All in all, my statement here is that there are more possibilities for configuration serving the systematic management of images in the new typology than in that of Phillips and McQuarrie. The new typology definitely applies rhetorical categories, concepts and terms and it draws the attention to a semiotic direction by the meaning dimension. However, semiotics here is only implicitly referred to. What makes semiotic approach and terms explicit is going to be the case study of the dissertation. The typology mentioned and detailed above is shown by Table 2. In the dissertation I listed pictorial examples for the typology.



	Metaphor			Metonymy			Synecdoche			Irony		
	Connectio	Comparison		Connec-tion	Comparison		Conn	Comp		Conn	Comp	
		Similarity	Opposition		Sim	Opp		Sim	Opp		Sim	Opp
Juxtaposition (Adjectio)												
Replacement (Immutatio)												
Fusion												
Detractio												
Transmutatio												

Table 2<sup>1</sup>: A new typology of visual rhetorical figures and tropes (Source: Németh [2011])

The typology was first published in 2011 after an international conference organised by the Visual Learning Lab of Budapest University of Technology and Economics. The empirical material justifying the statements of the typology was a collection of giant billboards of ARC Exhibition<sup>2</sup> which is an annual exhibition in Hungary. In the dissertation I completed the empirical data with other billboards and pictorial advertisements. The typology definitely separates structural rhetorical strategies from tropes. Tropes are not only the tools of decoration.

The aim of the typology of visual rhetorical figures is not to release a quantitative research of empirical data but to prove that with the application of a new typology created on the edge of structural and meaning dimensions helps the systematic management of visual rhetorical figures.

The typology is a rhetorical typology which only deals with rhetorical images. This is essentially important as it explores that rhetorical images are not exclusively created along the structural strategies of the image (adjectio, detractio, immutatio, transmutatio, fusion) but also along with the dimension of meaning (tropes). Although the typology of Phillips and McQuarrie also manages the conceptual domain (meaning operation), it narrows it down to

<sup>1</sup> Original publication of the typology: Benedek, András – Nyíri, Kristóf (eds.) (2011): Images in Language. Metaphors and Metamorphoses. Visual Learning. Volume 1. Peter Lang; Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften; Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien. (99-113). Since the first publication it has been completed with images. The main aim of the typology in 2011 was not to offer example for each configurations but to prove the usage of visual rhetorical figures of the ordinary visual culture.

<sup>2</sup> <https://arcmagazin.hu/>

comparison and association. The dissertation consequently manages figures and tropes separately but in a complex, systematic way. A further result of the typology is that it is able to explore the phenomenon of *layering* (Phillips – McQuarrie [2004]).

With the application of the typology, it is possible to systematically manage rhetorical images, rhetorical tropes and figures and make inferences on the most frequently applied rhetorical figures and tropes in the case of the examined material. It is necessary here to refer to the fact that consuming culture developed into a participatory culture, in which the generation of content is carried out from below too. In a convergence culture, where contexts are not clearly separable, rhetoric has also been transformed. A dramatic model of rhetoric is under development in the convergence culture in which meaning is not always clear. In the age of *floating signifiers* (Chandler [2007]) semiotics serve to understand how meaning is distorted, how a metaphor is created, what the methods of meaning creation are and why it is so difficult to differentiate *simulacrum* from reality (Baudrillard [2014]).

### **3.2. Case Study – The rhetorical – semiotic analysis**

In the case study of the dissertation a meme analysis<sup>3</sup> is carried out in which I analyse 260 memes collected from the internet by the method of random sampling. This part of the research is the one I call rhetorical – semiotic analysis. The memes are from the sectors of politics, pop culture, movies, sports and sometimes from convergent sectors combining the afore-mentioned fields. The reason for the relevance of a meme analysis in the convergence culture is the fact that a huge amount of memes cannot be regarded as rhetorical images, though they have significant communicative effects. A disadvantage of the typology is that it is not able to manage non-rhetorical images nor does it analyse meaning thoroughly. This weakness is eliminated by the case study, the rhetorical – semiotic analysis of memes. The structural categories of the typology are utilised at the syntactic analysis. The dimension of meaning of the typology (tropes) are applied in the examination of the semantic analysis of memes. The pragmatic analysis explores the communication effects a non-rhetorical – the images that do not reflect on reality and do not have semantic meaning – meme may have.

Summing it, I analyse memes in three stages. The first step is the identification of visual rhetorical strategies/figures, which is the syntactic analysis of the rhetorical – semiotic

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<sup>3</sup> The analysis of memes uses certain conclusions of my former publication. However, as an independent study it analyses new memes and is built on the rhetorical – semiotic analysis. Original publication of the meme analysis: Németh, Gabriella (2015): Paradoxical Representation of Tropes in Visual Rhetoric. In: Benedek, András – Nyíri, Kristóf (szerk.) (2015): Beyond words. Pictures, Parables, Paradoxes. Visual Learning. Volume 5. Peter Lang; Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York, Oxford, Wien. (pp. 185-193) ISBN: 978-3-631-66385-1 (Print) DOI: 10.3726/978-3-653-05883-3

analysis. The syntactic analysis covers the applied structural rhetorical strategies: adjectio, detractio, immutatio, transmutatio, fusion. This kind of examination of the visual artefact – or in this special case the meme – is the analysis of the visual structure. It strives to raise the question how the depicted elements are related to each other. It is necessary to highlight that all the memes have figures/strategies in their visual structure, because the meme is created by these visual structural procedures. However, visual structure is not necessarily accompanied by the features that make a meme rhetorical that is the application of meaning, or trope. The second stage of analysis is the exploration of the semantic aspects of the images. For the systematic management of meaning and tropes I use Table 3. I strive to prove that in case an image/meme applies a trope besides the visual structural procedures, it must be regarded as a sign and it must be determined by iconic, symbolic or indexical relations. The identification of the type of meaning makes it possible to identify the trope with greater certainty. The interaction of meaning and tropes is shown by + signs in Table 3. According to this table metaphor and irony are built on iconic or symbolic meanings, while synecdoche and metonymy are built on indexical signs. Trope and meaning (rhetoric and semiotics) support mutual identification this way. These statements are illustrated by several visual examples in the dissertation. Following the semantic analysis of memes, I go on with the pragmatic approach of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis. The pragmatic aspects of tropes are the role of stylistic variety, the presence of tropes in everyday usage, the argumentative function of tropes, the decorative function of tropes, the role of tropes in hermeneutics, and the emotive function of tropes.

	<b>Iconic mode</b> (similarity between the signifier and the signified)	<b>Indexical mode</b> (real connection between the signifier and the signified)	<b>Symbolic mode</b> (arbitrary association between the signifier and the signified)
<b>Metaphor</b>	+	–	+
<b>Irony</b>	+	–	+
<b>Metonymy</b>	–	+	–
<b>Synecdoche</b>	–	+	–

*Table 3: The semantic interaction of master tropes and meaning modes*

## 4. Summary of conclusions

### 4.1. Proving the assumptions, summing up the results of the typology and the case study

The aim of the dissertation was to synthesise the conceptual and operative frames of rhetoric and semiotics and in this was to create a new theoretical – methodological frame. By doing so, I made a critical analysis, and by preparing a typology and a case study, I introduced empirical researches to prove the relevance of a convergent methodology in social sciences. The critical – theoretical assumptions of the dissertation have been the followings:

- 1) Regardless whether an image or visual artefact applies a rhetorical operation/strategy (adjectio, detractio, immutatio, transmutatio), it is not sure it also has meaning on the level of tropes (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony). I proved this assumption in Chapter 2.3.6. I concluded that rhetorical images that do not only use visual tools to decorate the message often apply the visual tools to create tropes, to change or transfer meaning. In the case of rhetorical images meaning can be justified and grabbed by the application of semiotic tools.
- 2) A rhetorical image always comes to existence as the result of semiosis. For justifying this assumption I applied the theories of Saussure and Jakobson (Benczik [2010]). A basic condition of a sign is that it has three components: interpretamen, interpretant, sign. Another important fact is that a sign always has iconic, indexical or symbolic meaning that is based on the type of relation between its components. (CP 2.274). I have proved that based on cognitive theory, tropes are strongly connected to meaning on the conceptual level. Consequently, a visual rhetorical trope is always connected to one of the modes of meaning (iconic, indexical or symbolic). I proved this assumption in Chapter 3.4.3.
- 3) In case an image contains a visual figure of thought (trope), it also contains the three components of sign determined by Peirce (interpretamen, interpretant, sign) and iconic, symbolic or indexical mode of meaning is also to be detected. I have driven the justification for this assumption from the statement – that was proved by the analysis – visual rhetorical structural procedures do not necessarily create real signs. But in case visual rhetorical structural procedures create a trope, it does not only have syntactic relevance but is also transferred into the semantic province and it consequently has one of the modes of meaning. Meaning operations of visual rhetoric (tropes) may be

associated and created with the modes of meaning (iconic, indexical or symbolic mode) of semiotics. I proved this assumption in Chapter 3.4.3.

In the dissertation, I introduced a typology and a case study. The typology of visual rhetorical figures united and managed visual structure and meaning operations in a systematic way. I definitely differentiated figures of structure and figures of thought. The case study justified the everyday usage of visual tropes and it managed syntactic (structural figures) and semantic (tropes) operations in a complex, unified way. However, the typology lacked pragmatic aspects. Although it referred to some pragmatic relevance in the case of layering, it did not explicitly show certain pragmatic-communicative effects.

The case study of the dissertation – the meme analysis – applied the above-detailed typology, which means it studied the syntactic – structural and semantic – rhetorical aspects of memes. I associated semiotic modes of meaning with the tropes, which served as the semantic approach of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis. Pragmatic aspects were analysed in both cases: the memes having only syntactic-structural relevance and the memes having syntactic and semantic-rhetorical relevance as well. Besides the syntactic, semantic and pragmatic analyses of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis of memes, it has critical-theoretical references too. In the conclusion, I have already mentioned the societal usability of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis that is going to be detailed at a later stage of the dissertation.

#### **4.2. Application of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis in social sciences**

The critical theory of visual communication is comprehensive as it is connected to each field of visual communication. The critical theory of visual communication manages the different fields separately, however it is also able to connect them in a dynamic and interdisciplinary way. The related theoretical background is detailed at the beginning of the dissertation. As I have mentioned, the dissertation explores critical analytical points to the developed rhetorical – semiotic analysis. For this reason, if we put the rhetorical – semiotic analysis into the theoretical frames of critical theory of visual communication, it may actively contribute to each discipline of visual communication (aesthetic theory, cognitive theory, rhetorical theory, semiotic theory, representation theory, visual literacy theory, cultural theory, visual ethical theory, reception theory, perception theory). The uncritical reception is one of the problematic issues in the case of the reception of mutating internet memes spread on the net. This is because pictures may serve to represent or to simulate reality as well.

New multimodal tools created by convergence culture can only be treated by a methodological frame that is able to manage convergent, interdisciplinary contexts. I also highlight that participatory rhetoric changes the practices of rhetoric and power structures in a dramatic, community public sphere. New producers of culture of the virtual panopticon (Foucault [1990]) create visual artefacts that do not necessarily have reference to reality. The creation of content of panopticon and social reality is the responsibility and interest of all of us. An essential pillar of this responsibility is the in-debt knowledge of the fields of visual communication. Another important pillar is the presence of critical theory in everyday thinking. A basic tool for satisfying these pillars is possibly the rhetorical – semiotic analysis.

#### **4.3. Application of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis in society**

The meme as being a significant phenomenon of convergence culture is a good example for the infinity and freedom of participatory culture and in many cases the lack of reference to reality. Such convergent freedom of publication of content can be connected to the 21st century. When discussing the societal usability of the rhetorical – semiotic analysis, I am going to explore the problems of continuous presence, simulation, visibility and the visualisation of reality.

A returning thought of Baudrillard is that reality is not the base of representation: representation is the base of illusion. Video, interactive media, multimedia, internet, virtual reality – despite being business potentialities – are considered traps in Baudrillard's view. For Baudrillard interactivity appearing to be present in each sector of human lives is a danger and threat. He claims that something has disappeared and the disappearance of this thing has transformed not only society but individual perception and value judgement too. By the falling down of boundaries it is not possible anymore to clearly define the issues, segments, phenomena of the surrounding world. The meme is only one example for *floating signifiers* lacking meaning.

When summarising the thoughts of Baudrillard, Chandler comes to the conclusion that simulacra occurs in three forms: counterfeit – imitation (when there is a direct link between signifier and their signified), production – illusion (when there is an indirect link between signifier and signified) and simulation – fake (signifiers came to stand in relation only to other signifiers and not in relation to any fixed external reality) (Chandler [2007] p. 81.).

Semiotics helps us not to take representations for granted as 'reflections of reality', enabling us to take them apart and consider whose realities they represent (Chandler [2007] p. 82.).

Therefore, simulacra (Baudrillard [2014]) then – as a frequent mode of representation in the visibility of convergence culture – raises critical and moral problems. The rhetorical – semiotic analysis offers critical- theoretical and analytical-methodological frames by which we are assisted by the competent interpretation of signs of reality and of simulation.

Michel Foucault's work *Discipline and Punish* introduces the theory of panopticon originating from Jeremy Bentham. Panopticon is a technological and psychological innovation, which means the prisoner is continuously being under observation, is being visible and is never able to be alone (Foucault [1990] p. 274.). This standard supervision, the burden of loneliness, the eternal observation is highly hopeless for the prisoner. Digital visibility, convergence, our eternal presence in the cyber space shows us all to be similar prisoners to those of the panopticon. The difference is volunteering. We voluntarily switch on Facebook, Instagram on the buses, on the trams, while having the breakfast coffee and as relaxation in the evening. We all want to be part of convergence culture. We do not only intend to show but to be shown.

Richard Sennett offers another theory that reflects to the consequences of visibility. He convincingly introduces the indifference and burden caused by „dead” public places. Eternal visibility turns us to be disinterested. Visibility results in demotivation, frustration and separation (Sennett [1998]).

In the view of Boorstin, the main turning point that has lead to the change in the attitude of people towards reality was the Graphic Revolution (Boorstin [1992]). His basic assumption is that owing to media people have exaggerated expectations towards the quantity of information, the greatness of humans, the distances of the world, the access for luxury. As a consequence, signs of reality are distorted that are motivated by the *image* (that is illusion, *simulacra*). We expect real signs, real heroes, real arguments, real events, but what we gain are pseudo-signs, pseudo-heroes, pseudo-arguments and pseudo-events (Boorstin [1992]).

In the age of digital convergence, all the definitions of public created before seem to be relevant. Public production of content, expression of opinion, access to information have never before been reachable to such an extent.

We excessively demand power for the management of the world, information, and experience. And convergence culture reacts to our expectations: contents are continuously being generated, presence is standard, and observation is never-ending. The rhetorical – semiotic

analysis is a method applicable within critical theoretical frames which makes it possible to interpret visual artefacts in a competent way. A merit of this dissertation is a warning that we should manage visual contents with an aware and critical attitude and by applicable methods of interpretation in order to avoid indifference and uncritical reception.

The fact that visual intelligence makes us able to receive the products of visual culture does not necessarily mean that we manage to properly interpret what we see. We tend to think we understand a sign or a visual message, while we in fact misinterpret the meanings. The person who is able to properly interpret the visual signs of the everyday visual culture equips himself/herself with a great skill. Visual artefacts of convergence culture – memes, gifs, movies, advertisements, ideological signs, photography – are only dangerous for those who receive them without critical/interpretive attitude.

The critical theory of visual communication provides the hermeneutic frame in which rhetorical-semiotic analysis is located. Rhetorical – semiotic analysis makes us able to navigate ourselves among visual signs. It also helps us to interpret the meanings (or the lack of meanings) behind structure as well as to identify the communicative effects.

In an age in which a sign may turn out not to be what it seems, it is essential to acknowledge our responsibility that we have got along with the access to information, with the freedom of opinion forming, with our ability to generate information, and with our power to express and receive value systems.

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## 6. Publications

### 6.1. Conference publication

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## **6.3. Book chapter**

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## **6.4. Related presentations**

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## **6.5. Publications with a co-writer**

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## **7. Appendix**

The dissertation has a 51-page-long appendix that contains 300 images according to the following subdivision: 21 ARC giant billboard images, 19 advertisements, 260 internet memes. Each image is signed with a code and shows the exact link of source. In order to avoid subjective faults, I have consulted with a co-decoder in order to check whether we have come to the same conclusions in the analysis of images. The co-decoder is Eszter Deli, Ph.D. candidate of Doctoral School of Social Communication of Corvinus University of Budapest.