

MULTIMODALITY, MEANING,
AND INSTITUTIONS

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
ORGANIZATIONS VOLUME 54A

**MULTIMODALITY,
MEANING, AND
INSTITUTIONS**

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MULTIMODALITY, MEANING, AND INSTITUTIONS: EDITORIAL

Markus A. Höllerer, Thibault Daudigeos and Dennis
Jancsary

ABSTRACT

In this editorial for a double volume on “Multimodality, Meaning, and Institutions” in Research in the Sociology of Organizations, we aim to achieve three objectives: first, we provide a set of guiding ideas about what a multimodal prism entails for the study of meaning and institutions; second, we give an overview of the topics, concepts, and methods covered in this volume and briefly introduce the central contributions and insights of each article; third, we outline a number of open questions and fruitful avenues for a future research agenda at the intersection of organization studies, institutional theory, and multimodality research.

Keywords: Multimodality; meaning; institutions; organization studies; institutional theory

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INTRODUCTION

The insight that institutions – and the communicative practices that create, sustain, and challenge them – are essentially *multimodal* accomplishments has garnered increasing attention from scholars in organization research over the last decade (Jones, Meyer, Jancsary, & Höllerer, 2017). In particular, traditional understandings of social knowledge and inter-subjectively shared meaning as being constituted primarily through verbal discourse (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967) have been challenged and extended by work that promotes the centrality of visual (e.g., Bell & Davison, 2013; Bell, Warren, & Schroeder, 2014; Höllerer, Jancsary, Meyer, & Vettori, 2013; Meyer, Höllerer, Jancsary, & van Leeuwen, 2013), material (e.g., Jones, Boxenbaum, & Anthony, 2013; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012), and other sign systems such as audio (e.g., Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2012) or scent (e.g., Islam, Endrissat, & Noppeney, 2016).

It is in this way that a rejuvenated research agenda – driven primarily by attention to the visual and material modes of meaning construction in and around organizations – has gained considerable momentum also in organization and management studies. Special issues in journals such as *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal* (2009), *Qualitative Research Methods in Organizations and Management* (2012), *Organizational Research Methods* (2016), and *Organization Studies* (forthcoming) have integrated scholarly contributions that acknowledge how communication and the communicative construction of reality (e.g., Luckmann, 2006) consistently draw on modes other than the spoken and written word. However, despite these efforts, and although prominent discursive and communicative approaches to organization have emphasized the relevance of modes other than the verbal for some time (e.g., Cornelissen, Durand, Fiss, Lammers, & Vaara, 2015; Phillips & Oswick, 2012), systematic research on *multimodality* – i.e., the combination and orchestration of multiple modes in communicative acts – has remained rather sparse in our domain of scholarly inquiry. This is both surprising and regrettable: if indeed various modes play a role in the social construction of reality and each does so in its own particular way (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Meyer et al., 2013), then more thorough conceptual and empirical work on these “multimodal compositions” (Höllerer, Jancsary, & Grafström, 2017) and how they influence institutions and social meaning(s) is imperative.

This volume brings together innovative work that demonstrates the potential of multimodal studies to revitalize and extend the study of organizations and institutions, advances the design of relevant and rigorous methods of analysis for the study of multimodal communicative practices in and around organizations, and/or revisits the study of “classic” issues in institutional

theory as seen through a multimodal lens. The collection of articles in this volume therefore provides an inspiring variety of research topics, concepts, and analytical approaches which prove that the opportunities for bringing multimodality into organizational and/or institutional inquiry are manifold and that the implications might be substantial.

In this editorial for the double volume at hand, we provide a set of guiding ideas about what – in our view – a multimodal prism entails for the study of meaning and institutions. We then give an overview of the topics, concepts, and methods covered in this volume and briefly introduce the central contributions and insights of each article. Finally, we outline a number of open questions and fruitful avenues for a future research agenda at the intersection of organization studies, institutional theory, and multimodality research.

DELINEATING MULTIMODAL INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

Due at least in part to its status as a novel conceptual lens and approach in organizational and/or institutional inquiry, multimodality is notoriously difficult to pin down and to define precisely. The contributions in this volume are testament to the many different “shades” that multimodality encompasses and to the varied contributions that these different facets enable. Instead of starting with a clear-cut definition of multimodality – or even a concise model of how it interacts with institutions –, we suggest a number of guiding ideas as a point of departure for engaging with issues of multimodality. We hope that in this way we shall delineate a distinct field of research without overly narrowing or constricting it into one particular perspective.

Multimodality is an Opalescent Notion

One characteristic of multimodality is its opalescence, which enables a number of different approaches to the topic. A common understanding shared by all scholars engaging with multimodality is that it entails a combination of multiple sign systems, each of which provides its very own way of storing and communicating social meaning (e.g., [Kress, 2010](#); [Toraldo, Islam, & Mangia, 2016](#); [Zilber, this volume](#)). However, while some research focuses on the social and cultural construction and use of modes as sign systems and resources for meaning making (e.g., [Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001](#); Meyer, Jancsary, Höllerer, & Boxenbaum, forthcoming), a slightly different approach is interested primarily in the sensory perception of modes (“sensory modalities” or

“multisensoriality”; see, e.g., [Classen, 1993](#), [Pink, 2011](#)). Also, there is ongoing debate about the material and symbolic aspects of modes and whether these need to be analytically disentangled with regard to their roles in meaning construction and institutional processes (e.g., [Jones et al., 2017](#); [Oliveira, Islam, & Toraldo, this volume](#)). We suggest that this multiplicity of understandings is of inspiring nature and characteristic of a nascent field of scholarly inquiry, and we therefore see much value in protean understandings of multimodality and its relevance for examining meaning and institutions.

*Multimodality is Not a Novel Phenomenon Per Se, But an
Innovative Lens on the Social World*

The recent shift and “multimodal turn” in research on organizations and institutions should by no means be taken as an indicator that multimodal communication is a novel phenomenon. On the contrary, the social world has always been multimodally constructed, just as institutions are inherently “multimodal accomplishments” (e.g., [Jancsary, Meyer, Höllerer, & Boxenbaum, this volume](#)). Social actors communicate their concerns in ways that they regard as most suitable (e.g., [Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006](#)), choosing from and combining a variety of semiotic resources. We experience organizations and institutions through their visual impression, written description, material and spatial design – and even their scent. Cities, for instance, are clearly multimodally inscribed and experienced (e.g., [Jones & Svejnova, this volume](#)). What has been largely missing from the research agenda in institutional research, however, is an explicit engagement with the multimodality prevalent in the social sphere. This means that although there is a broad agreement among researchers that the social world is not constituted exclusively through verbal discourse (e.g., [Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004](#)), our field currently lacks both the conceptual and methodological resources needed to adequately deal with the multimodal construction of social reality. The volume at hand is meant as a collection of existing and emerging knowledge offered to further the multimodal capabilities of institutional scholarship.

Multimodality Research is Inherently Multidisciplinary

Not only is multimodality a prevalent feature of the social world, it has also been extensively addressed in various ways and forms in disciplines outside organization and management research. For instance, [Meyer et al. \(2013\)](#) provide a brief overview of how the visual construction of reality has been acknowledged in philosophy, sociology, media studies, linguistics, and psychology. The dispersed recognition of multimodality in the social sciences and humanities has, on the

one hand, contributed to the opalescent nature of the notion of multimodality (see above), and also provides, on the other hand, a rather substantial “toolkit” from which to draw both conceptual and methodological inspirations. Maybe even more importantly, multimodality impacts institutionalization and institutions in various ways that can be unveiled fully only by employing, comparing and/or combining concepts and analytical tools from multiple disciplines. A Peircean perspective on multimodal artifacts, for instance, highlights issues of style and the economy of signs (e.g., [Zhao, this volume](#)), while a social semiotic approach allows for a better understanding of how modes can be compared according to how they fulfill the requirements for the construction of meaningful texts (e.g., [Jancsary et al., this volume](#)).

*Multimodality Research Needs to Address Both the
Differentiation and the Integration of Modes*

A central challenge in multimodality research is how to go about conceptualizing the relationships between multiple modes. In essence, scholars tackling multimodality must be able to understand both the meaning construction potential inherent in and specific to each individual mode *and* the meanings that emerge only through the combination of modes. So far, pioneering research in organization and management studies has primarily tackled modes separately and compared their potentials and affordances for meaning construction (e.g., Meyer et al., forthcoming). However, as [Zilber \(this volume\)](#) argues, there is a point to be made for what she calls a “strong” multimodal agenda, meaning that the combination of modes poses new ontological and epistemological questions. In social semiotics (e.g., [O’Halloran, 2004](#)), similar trajectories can be observed: A “monomodal” phase was eventually succeeded by a “polymodal” phase, in which interactions between distinct modes were at the center of the research agenda. This was in turn followed by a more “radically” multimodal phase that questions the value of clearly distinguishing individual modes and explores multimodal artifacts more holistically ([Höllner et al., this volume](#)). Multimodal institutional research is still engaged in the second phase, with a number of contributions in this volume comparing and integrating the effects of multiple modes on meanings and institutions (e.g., [Bullinger, this volume](#); [Forgues & May, this volume](#); [Lefsrud, Graves, & Phillips, this volume](#)).

Multimodality Is Socially Constructed

What follows is a word of caution: since multimodality is often understood as relating to the human sensory apparatus, there is a certain danger of objectifying

and universalizing the effects of certain modes on meaning construction (see also [van Leeuwen, this volume](#)). However, we firmly suggest a cultural view in which no mode has an effect independent from the particular socio-temporal context of its production and reception. For instance, the idea that visual text is often able to “fly under the radar of control” is the result of a specific institutional and cultural construction of the visual mode as compared to the verbal mode, which is dominant in modern western societies (e.g., [Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006](#); Meyer et al., forthcoming). Contexts in which verbal language is much more flexible and even less regulated than visual depiction are easily conceivable. Modes and their specific uses are therefore culturally and institutionally regulated, and institutional inquiry, in particular, is well advised to acknowledge this. Spinning this thought further, it also means that interactions between modes in constructing particular meaning(s) are not necessarily stable but subject to processes of negotiation and institutional change – which, in turn, poses particular challenges for historical multimodal research (e.g., [Quattrone, 2015](#)).

Multimodality is Both Explanans and Explanandum

Finally, if multimodality is itself subject to institutional dynamics, then it is interesting both as an influencing factor *and* as an outcome of processes of institutionalization. So far, most multimodal research has focused on the impact of multimodality on institutions (e.g., [Boxenbaum, Daudigeos, Pillet, & Colombero, this volume](#); [Cartel, Colombero, & Boxenbaum, this volume](#); [Croidieu, Soppe, & Powell, this volume](#); [Höllerer et al., 2017](#)). However, some studies suggest that multimodality may also be an outcome of institutional processes (e.g., [Eisenman, this volume](#)), related to historical trajectories (e.g., [Ober, Drori, & Delmestri, this volume](#)), or a way of dealing with multiple institutional prescriptions (e.g., [Perschina & Soppe, this volume](#)). This reminds us that sign systems are both a means and a target of institutionalization (e.g., [Berger & Luckmann, 1967](#)). Institutions are constituted multimodally but also govern the use and effect of multimodal texts. Especially the potential for using symbolism and analogy in meaning construction through a particular mode (e.g., [Oliveira et al., this volume](#)) is strongly dependent on which meanings can be expressed through which mode in a particular societal domain and cultural context.

OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS (PART A)

In the following paragraphs, we give an overview of the topics, concepts, and methods covered in this volume and briefly introduce the central insights of each article.

*Section 1: Pushing Forward the Multimodal Agenda
in Organization Studies*

The first section of this double volume (see Table 1) is dedicated to some conceptual reflections on the nature of multimodality in organizational research. The two articles explore the question of what multimodality may mean for organizations and institutions, and what it can offer to researchers who wish to study such topics. [Zilber \(this volume\)](#) situates the emergence of the multimodal movement in organizational and institutional research in a general dissatisfaction with the discursive turn, which has, on the one hand, conceptually understood “discourse” as encompassing almost everything going on in and around organizations and, on the other hand, empirically focused almost exclusively on verbal and linguistic expression, thereby marginalizing the non-verbal realm. She takes a clear stance for what she calls a “strong” multimodal approach that sees the linguistic and non-linguistic as co-emergent rather than separate. With this, she suggests that primacy be given neither to the linguistic nor to the non-linguistic modalities but that new questions and answers will develop by focusing on their interactions. In addition, a “mode” is not simply a specific way of expressing things, but is inevitably and inherently embedded in a specific material and cultural context, as [Oliveira et al. \(this volume\)](#) impressively demonstrate. Modes can be disentangled into different “imaginaries,” that is, into the different ways in which a mode may feature in practices, narratives, and theories. Materiality, for instance, can be understood (a) as the physicality of objects that provide certain affordances to be utilized by actors, (b) discursively as a carrier of social meanings, and (c) as a trigger for mimetic processes and embodied analogies that bridge the concrete and the conceptual. Both articles, in their own ways, critically reflect upon and make visible the complexities of taking multimodality seriously in research on organizations and institutions. They make us aware of the fact that taking into account additional resources for meaning making involves more than simply “learning a new sign system” – it also entails engaging with broader questions regarding ontology and epistemology.

Section 2: Methodological Advances in Multimodal Research

Articles in the second section (see Table 2) have the potential to substantially expand our repertoire of methodological approaches and analytical techniques regarding the analysis of different modes and their interaction. As previous engagement with multimodality has shown, the challenge of

Table 1. Pushing Forward the Multimodal Agenda in Organization Studies.

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Zilber	How can we take multiple modalities of institutions seriously?	Weak/strong multimodal approach	Three ethnographic vignettes from Israeli High-Tech conferences	Discursive and other modalities are not separate, but constitutive to each other. While both “weak” and “strong” multimodal research adds new kinds of data beyond verbal text, such as visuals and space, weak multimodal research uses that data to answer modality-agnostic theoretical questions. Strong multimodal research, on the other hand, allows us to ask new questions and potentially offers new insights and answers. Strong multimodal research requires rethinking the ontology, epistemology, and methodology we leverage to capture institutionalization processes.
Oliveira, Islam, and Toraldo	How do different ways of imagining the meaning-material relation affect the theoretical and empirical stories researchers can tell?	Multimodal imaginaries	Illustrative case study of a large urban project in São Paulo, Brazil	The article suggests three common multimodal imaginaries: (a) materiality as a set of concrete affordances that can be taken up by actors; (b) materiality as a semiotic-discursive mode that can be used to represent social meanings; and (c) materiality as providing the mimetic capacity to embody analogies and bridge the concrete and the conceptual.

Table 2. Methodological Advances in Multimodal Research.

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Jancsary, Meyer, Höllerer, and Boxenbaum	How can the specific character of visual communication be captured in order to better understand institutions as multimodal accomplishments?	Meta-functions, modal registers	Qualitative coding of the visual register exhibited in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reporting in Austria	Based on the premise that texts unfold their meanings through the interplay of metafunctions, the authors develop a set of methodological steps which take into account how the visual mode realizes metafunctions and allows for capturing meaning as expressed in visual registers. Specific patterns in the ways metafunctions are realized reveal visual registers and facilitate the task of “measuring meaning structures” from visual data.
Zhao	How can stylistic features of multimodal artifacts be captured, and how do styles and communicative purposes interact?	Icon/index/symbol, style as concision	Quantitative analysis of posters created and disseminated before and during the 2011–2012 Québecois student movement	The article advocates style sensitivity in the examination of rhetorical artifacts and multimodality in organization studies. The verbal and visual modes have different criteria regarding concision—the art of using signs efficiently. The study finds that concision is strongly linked to the rhetorical purpose of texts. Accordingly, artifacts of similar social purpose may be structurally similar in terms of their style.

devising suitable methodologies is still a major stumbling block when it comes to integrating multiple modes in empirical investigations (e.g., [Bell & Davison, 2013](#); [Meyer et al., 2013](#)). The two articles in this section provide suggestions from different strands of semiotics. [Jancsary et al. \(this volume\)](#) propose a conceptual framework based on social semiotics and functional linguistics that motivates a systematic methodological engagement with visual (and multimodal) material. They argue that each mode needs to fulfill certain *metafunctions* in order to work as a complete system of communication ([Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006](#)), and the realization of these metafunctions in particular institutional domains is achieved in the form of “modal registers” – collective adaptations of the meaning-making resources of a semiotic mode to the specific social/institutional context. Based on these conceptual starting points, the authors develop a methodological procedure suitable for capturing the specific visual registers of institutions. A Peircean tradition of semiotics informs [Zhao’s \(this volume\)](#) arguments for a stronger recognition of *style* in multimodal research. In particular, he argues that style is an important aspect of multimodal rhetoric and a key locus for exploring the different ways of structuring meaning through semiotic arrangements. Accordingly, Zhao develops a methodology for coding the *concision* of both verbal and visual signs as a way of unpacking the duality of content and style in multimodal research. Both of these contributions stress that each mode requires methodologies that acknowledge its specific form of constructing meaning and provide helpful advice on how to adapt research designs for scholars interested in studying data beyond the spoken and written text.

Section 3: Multimodality and the Institutionalization of Innovations

The third section of the volume (see Table 3) is dedicated to the study of how multimodality can facilitate institutional innovation of different kinds. The three articles all share an interest in how novel practices and products became first envisioned as ideas, then externalized, and finally institutionalized. Multimodality is found to have facilitated the *theorization* of reinforced concrete in the French construction industry ([Cartel et al., this volume](#)). Proponents of the new building material wanted to convince their audiences that reinforced concrete was both more stable than established materials and could nonetheless adequately fulfill the aesthetic requirements of modern architecture. Theorization was eventually achieved through *dramatization* and *evaluation*. Especially dramatization – the showcasing of empirical evidence to support claims – was effectively supported by multimodal compositions. The

Table 3. Multimediality and the Institutionalization of Innovations.

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Cartel, Colombero, and Boxenbaum	What is the role of multimodal rhetoric in processes of theorization?	Theorization	Emergence of reinforced concrete in the French construction industry; archival data from a leading French architectural journal 1885–1939	Theorization entails two recursive activities: dramatization and evaluation. While dramatization relies on both verbal and visual (i.e., multimodal) means, evaluation relies on verbal means. The authors further integrate these components into a dynamic model of theorization that explains how visual discourse contributes to theorization beyond the effects of verbal discourse.
Eisenman	How do verbal and visual modes contribute to the institutionalization of aesthetic innovations in a field?	Aesthetic innovation, institutionalization	Case study of the institutionalization of aesthetic innovation in the personal computer (PC) industry examining the color and shape of PCs over the 1992–2003 period; content of PC reviews and interviews of executives in the industry	Findings show an increase in aesthetic innovation as manifested in the use of color and the manipulation of shapes across the industry, rather than as a consequence of firm-level differentiation. The article discusses how the visual attributes of PCs are related to descriptions of users' identities and to the emotions and sensations the PCs elicit. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that reviewing PCs for their visual merits became an institutionalized industry practice.
Pershina and Soppe	How do organizations use multimodality to translate institutional complexity into innovative new products?	Institutional complexity, organizational artifacts	Qualitative analysis of over 100 serious games developed after 2010; content analysis of the game design through three dimensions: aesthetics, story, and gameplay	The article identifies two design strategies – proximity and amplification strategies – which organizations employ to balance multiple institutional logics and design novel products that meet competing institutional expectations. They detect three degrees of proximity between logics manifested as design approaches: hybridizing, composing, and decomposing. Product designers also employ three sets of amplifications: structural enrichment, emotions, and metaphors.

institutionalization of an aesthetic innovation is the main topic of Eisenman's (this volume) study. Although existing research has understood *aesthetic innovation* predominantly as a form of differentiation used by individual firms, Eisenman shows that there was substantial isomorphism in the adoption of certain aesthetic styles (primarily relating to shape and color) in the PC industry between 1992 and 2003. Manufacturers increasingly understood PCs as multimodal artifacts that communicate identities and emotions through aesthetics. Institutionalization was further supported by industry reviews using multimodal text to discuss the aesthetic merits of design. Finally, multimodality also supports the integration of multiple, potentially contradictory *institutional logics* into complex product designs (Pershina & Soppe, this volume). Two design strategies – proximity and amplification – allowed designers of “serious games” to balance multiple institutional logics. This balancing act is instantiated in the whole “ensemble” of modes that constitute a serious game. Accordingly, the authors understand modes as carriers of institutional meaning, and institutional logics as implemented through particular modes within the ensemble. Together, the three articles in this section show how analyzing a multiplicity of modes and their interactions can lead to a better understanding of institutionalization processes and mechanisms.

OVERVIEW OF CONTRIBUTIONS (PART B)

Section 4: Multimodal Perspectives on Institutional Persistence and Change

Articles in the fourth section (see Table 4) elaborate on the role of multimodality in institutional persistence and/or change. These studies extend our insights into how different modes are used in order to create and/or sustain rationalized myths, maintain institutional arrangements, strategically “play” with identity narratives through references to the past, and serve as resources for the legitimation and de-legitimation of organizations and institutions. The four articles excellently illustrate how organizations and communities employ multimodal artifacts in an attempt to influence institutional processes. The *emergence of the rationalized myth* of industrialization in the French construction industry between 1945 and 1970 is studied by Boxenbaum, Daugeos, Pillet, and Colombero (this volume). Such a process requires the coupling of means and ends, as well as the reconciliation of *formal* and *substantive* forms of rationality. The authors develop a model that progresses in several stages, and in which means are first coupled to formal ends, and later to substantive ends. In this process, the interplay between visual and verbal

Table 4. Multimodal Perspectives on Institutional Persistence and Change.

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Boxenbaum, Daudigeos, Pillet, and Colombero	What is the particular role of visuals relative to verbal communication in establishing and spreading a rational myth within an organization field?	Rational myth	Longitudinal and multimodal analysis of the rational myth of industrialization in the French construction industry (1945–1970); visual and textual analysis of 35 articles from a leading French architectural journal	Rational myths are socially constructed in a stepwise process, in which actors use visuals to suggest associations between new practices and valuable purposes before using verbal text to establish the technical rationality of those practices, and then using both verbal and visual communication to establish their mythical features.
Croidieu, Soppe, and Powell	How are multimodal resources utilized and combined to maintain an institution? How much is congruence or expansion of resources necessary for institutional persistence?	Institutional persistence	Historical study of the persistence of the chateau tradition in the Bordeaux wine community; content analysis of the vocabularies and pictures on bottle labels	The more community members elaborate symbolic and material carriers when performing maintenance activities, the more the focal institution persists. Community organizations with a high status and interstitial position reinforce and sustain the expansion of symbolic, material, rule-like, and relational carriers; such bridging efforts lead the focal institution to persist.

Table 4. (Continued)

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Oberg, Drori, and Delmestri	How can we explain cross-sectional field-level heterogeneity that does not rest on the persistent enactment of the organizations' founding-epoch features?	Imprinting, visual identity narrative	Survey of contemporary logos of 814 universities around the globe and a series of case histories of university emblems	The visuality of organizational identity is configured through engagement with the organizations' founding epoch (cohort features) and the changing of fashions in their organizational field (era-specific features) to produce cross-sectional field-level heterogeneity of visualized identity narratives.
Lefsrud, Graves, and Phillips	How do organizational actors combine images and words to affect the legitimacy of organizations and their activities?	Visual rhetoric, legitimacy work	Analysis of textual and visual data, as well as their relationships, in a case study of the Canadian oil sands legitimacy struggle	Multimodal texts aim to create emotional responses leading to evaluative shortcutting and allowing for the study of how cognitive and emotional systems interact to influence legitimacy judgments. The article discusses the processes by which legitimacy and illegitimacy become rhetorically crafted and simultaneously embedded within several symbolic systems of meaning and emotion.

texts is particularly pronounced in the attempt to create associations between means and substantive ends, as the consolidation of mythical claims required the communicative potentials of multiple modes. Similarly, the *invention and maintenance of a particular tradition*, namely the “chateau” tradition in the Bordeaux wine community is at the center of [Croidieu et al.’s \(this volume\)](#) article. The *expansion of traditions* co-occurs with its deepened institutionalization and carries with it an extension of the variety of multimodal carriers of the tradition. Such extension is, in part, triggered by the emergence of a variety of rules, standards, conventions, artifacts, and vocabularies that are multimodally instantiated in wine bottle labels. The authors conclude that the *degree of elaboration* in symbolic and material carriers of a tradition in maintenance activities positively correlates with the prolonged persistence of the focal institution. While [Oberger et al.’s \(this volume\)](#) study of university logos is also focally interested in the construction of tradition and history, their article focuses, in particular, on the *variety and heterogeneity* observed in the logos of universities worldwide. The study identifies five paths towards such heterogeneity in visual identities: (1) enactment of the contemporary script (imprinting); (2) persistent enactment of epochal scripts (imprinting-cum-inertia); (3) enactment of an updated epochal script (renewal); (4) enactment of a recovered older epochal script (historization); and (5) simultaneous enactment of multiple epochal scripts (multiplicity). Accordingly, the visibility of organizational identity is influenced by relationships between the organizations’ founding epoch and changing fashions in the field. Institutional persistence and change also feature prominently in the article of [Lefsrud, Graves, and Phillips \(this volume\)](#), who aim at understanding how visuals contribute to legitimacy struggles. The authors apply the classical rhetorical concepts of “logos,” “pathos,” and “ethos” to analyze verbal elements in their data, as well as “gaze,” “distance,” and “image framing” for visual elements. Building on [Schriver \(1997\)](#), they classify the relationships between visual and verbal elements as supplementary, complementary, or as a juxtaposition. The authors suggest that such a multimodal approach is particularly well suited to capture the *affective* processes behind legitimation struggles. Together, the four articles demonstrate that the multimodal configuration of institutions is both an influencing factor and an outcome of institutional persistence and change.

Section 5: The Multimodal Construction of Identities

The fifth section (see Table 5), finally, is dedicated to the relationship between multimodality and the construction of organizational identities. All three

Table 5. The Multimodal Construction of Identities.

Authors	Research Questions	Key Concepts	Data and Methods	Key Findings on Multimodality
Bullinger	How do employers use multimodality to construct organizational identity claims?	Organizational identity, identity claims, economies of worth	Multimodal analysis of job advertisements used by German fashion companies between 1968 and 2013	The study emphasizes that the specific characteristics of visuals, especially their truth claims, are crucial for the effects of multimodal compositions on externalized understandings of identity. Multimodal compositions, through distinct interactions between the visual and the verbal, transport specific latent values. The salience of these values, as well as their multimodal representations, change over time. The authors show how organizations fine-tune messages by playing with possible interactions not only across modes, but also across media, in their quest for legitimate distinctiveness. Modes interact to “intensify,” “complement,” and “transpose” externalized meanings. Companies use more novel modes and media to claim distinctiveness by evoking less legitimate meaning spheres.
Forgues and May	How do organizations use different media to make identity claims?	Identity claims	Illustrative case study of single-malt Scotch whisky; comparison of identity claims made on the internet with those made by distilleries on their bottles	The article defines and elaborates a multimodal approach to city identity based on architecture. A city identity communicated through its architecture comprises the interaction of three sign systems: material, visual, and verbal.
Jones and Svejenova	What role do institutional actors play in constructing a city's identity over time, and what sign systems do they use?	City identity, synecdoche and asyndeton	Comparative case study of Barcelona and Boston 1970–2006; verbal and visual analysis of travel guides and critics' articles in newspapers	

articles in this section acknowledge and elaborate on the observation that different modes interact in specific ways in order to manifest particular identities. The *identity claims* in job advertisements of German fashion companies reveal a typology of interactions between verbal and visual elements in Bullinger's (this volume) study. One type focuses on company reputation and features visuals that primarily depict the company itself in order to show its market success and reputation. A second type focuses on the products and brand and shows models, clothes, and accessories in order to convey a specific lifestyle. The third and last type focuses on future employees and encompasses visuals of ideal-typical employees in order to signal what attributes applicants should have. The role of visuals in these three types of job ads corresponds to "demonstrating power," "proving aesthetic quality," and "personalizing specific people and settings for the viewer." Identity claims are also central in the study of Forgues and May (this volume) in the single-malt Scotch whisky industry. In addition to examining how multiple modes interact in the construction of *identity claims*, the authors investigate how such claims are put forward in different media – namely the whisky bottle itself, which is essentially material, and social media, which are digital in nature. The authors suggest that multimodal identity claims are composed of relationships that can be described as *intensifying* when modes reinforce claims by drawing on the same theme, as *complementing* when meanings are extended by complementary messages in different modes, and as *transposing* when a dominant theme in one message is transposed into another theme elsewhere. Jones and Svejenova (this volume) reconstruct city identities from yet another type of multimodal text – architecture, which involves three sign systems provided by materiality, visuality, and rhetoric. City identity, accordingly, is inherently multimodal, and its construction is distributed across a variety of institutional actors and longer periods of time. Such an approach enables the authors to anchor the collective identities of cities in the distinctiveness of place, and, specifically, in the physical world. Only through the combined and integrated affordances of the three modes under investigation does a comprehensive and holistic understanding of city identity emerge. In sum, this section presents a strong argument for the multimodality of the identity of social collectives and provides strong evidence that different modes add unique elements to such identities.

Finally, van Leeuwen (this volume), in his afterword, evaluates the endeavors and efforts of the contributions compiled in this double volume from the perspective of a renowned multimodality scholar. He highlights and emphasizes, in particular, the significant potential that is brought to the fore by marrying the prolific field of (institutional) organizational inquiry with the rich and interdisciplinary agenda of multimodal research and also points out – and cautions against – a number of pitfalls in multimodal inquiry.

THE ROAD AHEAD ...

The collection of articles at hand shows clearly the relevance of issues of multimodality for research on meaning and institutions. The interest of institutional scholars in multimodality is substantial, and the creativity employed to think of novel research questions and multimodal designs is highly inspiring. For future research, we contend that it will be important to move from the current state of exploration to a systematization of insights. In this section, we propose some tentative steps towards a future research agenda.

Taking Multimodal Communication and Meaning Construction Seriously

Institutional research has always placed a strong emphasis on the role of language and communication in the emergence, persistence, and change of institutions (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Luckmann, 2006). Discursive (e.g., Phillips et al., 2004), rhetorical (e.g., Green, 2004), semiotic (e.g., Li, 2017), vocabulary (e.g., Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012), and narrative (e.g., Zilber, 2009) approaches to institutions have had enormous impact on this field of study. Multimodality is, in many ways, the logical extension of such a research agenda and has the potential to help us improve our understanding of the communicative constitution of organizations and institutions (e.g., Cornelissen et al., 2015), as well as the meanings attached to them (e.g., Zilber, 2017). However, few studies have hitherto drawn on an explicit and systematic model of communication in their treatment of multimodality. Building on the broadly shared assumption that communicative acts do influence institutions and meaning(s), multimodal research in institutional inquiry has focused mostly on the “production” side, that is the meaning-making potential of communicative artifacts. However, full accounts of communicative processes need to consider producer, message, and recipient in order to fully explain the outcome of communicative processes. Different models of this relationship exist, and future multimodal research needs to focus more explicitly on how individual modes and their combinations fit into, but also extend, current understandings of communication itself. In addition, Meyer et al. (2013) show that different approaches to the study of communicative and discursive artifacts exist, each focusing on specific aspects. Combining such approaches in institutional research has the potential to probe much more deeply into the communicative foundation of institutions.

Closer Inspection of the Workings of Individual Modes

We also see value in further unraveling how individual modes create, transmit, and store meaning – and what this conceptually entails for institutional

processes and outcomes. Such research could take inspirations from work in organization and management research that has deeply engaged with the meaning-making potential of the visual (e.g., Meyer et al., forthcoming; see also Jancsary et al., *this volume*) and the material (e.g., Jones et al., 2013; Oliveira et al., *this volume*) (for an overview, see also Jones et al., 2017). Scholars in the tradition of social semiotics (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006) contend that each mode fulfills the same basic communicative functions, but does so in its very own ways. We need to better understand these different ways in order to more adequately assess the relevance of particular modes for institutional topics. This requires a conceptual language and terminology that allows us to discuss and characterize modes. Jancsary et al. (*this volume*), building on Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), suggest metafunctions and “modal registers” as a suitable conceptual framework for describing and comparing modes and their potentials. Other frameworks seem equally appropriate – and might already exist outside our own field. We wish to second Zilber’s (*this volume*) assessment that “strong” multimodal research needs to engage with epistemological and ontological questions related to the individual use (and combination) of modes and should not be satisfied merely with the acknowledgement that different sign systems provide different forms of expression.

Moving Away From the “Low Hanging Fruits” and Tackling Some Hitherto Neglected Modes

As the contributions to this volume indicate, there is a certain imbalance in terms of the modes that are commonly being included in multimodal organization research. Verbal, visual, and material sign systems are clearly dominant in our research agenda. This makes perfect sense, since these three modes are at the core of institutional processes and mechanisms. They provide a suitable starting point for multimodal engagement as a lot of conceptual tools can be borrowed from neighboring disciplines. However, as a community, we should be aware of a “Matthew effect” with regard to the selection of modes. The more research is conducted on the visual and the material modes, the more attractive it is for others to build on this emerging stock of knowledge. It is equally important, however, to also include alternative modes in our analysis, while at the same time continuing to sharpen our insights into visibility and materiality. For instance, one promising area of research – already prominent in critical management studies – could be the human body itself as a “canvas” on which institutions and discourses become inscribed (e.g., Kenny & Bell, 2011; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). Additionally, the body also acts as an “instrument” for the expression of meanings (e.g., Gylfe, Franck, LeBaron, & Mantere, 2016). Another surprisingly largely neglected mode is scent (e.g.,

Gümüşay, Höllerer, & Meyer, 2017; Islam et al., 2016), a sign system that is omnipresent in human life and also in organizations (e.g., Riach & Warren, 2015) but has received only very little scientific attention in institutional research so far. Together, the body and scent have the potential to provide access to more pre-reflective, affective, and visceral aspects of institutions.

Focus on the Amalgamation of Modes

More recent advances in multimodality research have questioned whether all instantiations of a mode need to fulfill the full spectrum of basic linguistic functions at all times (e.g., Andersen, Boeriis, Magerø, & Tønnessen, 2015; Höllerer et al., 2018). Sometimes, it is only through the combination of modes within a text that a complete message becomes realized. This points to the possibility that some things can be communicated only through *genuinely* multimodal compositions that constitute “amalgamations” rather than “orchestrations.” In some cases, for instance, the meaning of a text becomes clear only when the visual and the verbal are processed simultaneously. This is distinctly different than “multimodal compositions” (Höllerer et al., 2017), in which one mode adds something to the other (e.g., Bullinger, *this volume*). For institutional research, such amalgamations could be particularly interesting for studying responses to institutional pluralism and complexity. Rather close to the idea of amalgamation is the study of Pershina and Soppe (*this volume*), which suggests that the logics of effectiveness and cultural production become integrated in digital artifacts through the combination of multiple modes. Multimodal amalgams may also be of substantial relevance to the study of discursive absences and institutional maintenance. Existing research agrees that explicit discussion of an idea ceases after full institutionalization (e.g., Green, 2004). Recent research has argued that such absence of discussion may, in part, be attributable to a shift from verbal to visual discourse (Meyer et al., *forthcoming*), since the latter is more subtle and less likely to initiate de-institutionalization. This means that what research focusing on the verbal mode perceives as “absence” may in some cases be simply the substitution of the verbal mode with another, and multimodal amalgams may be suitable ways to maintain existing institutions discursively.

New Avenues for Multimodal Methods

Finally, the multimodal study of institutions and meaning will gain significantly from integrating the latest methodological advances in other fields. For visual studies, there is still much to learn from, for instance, methods applied in social

semiotics (e.g., Jancsary et al., [this volume](#)). For other modes, such as physical space (Zilber, [this volume](#)) or materiality in general (Jones & Svejenova, [this volume](#)), there is certainly a lot of potential for inspiration in disciplines as diverse as geography and social studies of markets. If we follow the suggestion of Zilber to adopt a strong multimodal approach, the next methodological frontier is certainly at the intersection between modes as well as their amalgamation. Most contributions in this volume propose a sequential approach and analyze one mode after the other, with the analysis of one mode nurturing the analysis of the following one. Going beyond such a design, Bullinger ([this volume](#)) and Lefsrud et al. ([this volume](#)) leverage Schriver's (1997) taxonomy of five possible relationships between text and picture to analyze the interactions between verbal and visual data. Yet, much remains to be explored, and the multimodal interactions of other modes have hardly been covered at all.

However, each methodology that aims at reconstructing social meaning needs to build on a solid conceptual foundation of how any mono- or multimodal form of "text" relates to meaning. Accordingly, although the dearth of methodological tools may seem the most pressing problem for many researchers interested in multimodality, we suggest that conceptual work providing the very foundation for novel methodologies is, at this point, still a logical priority.

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