



Article

Discursive effects of multimodal metaphor instantiation in environmental documentary films: An ecolinguistic perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents analyses of the discursive effects of multimodal metaphor instantiation in the documentary films *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021). The documentaries deal with one of the main reasons for the ecological crisis — consumerism — and question the dominant destructive metaphors that the current economic system relies on: MORE IS BETTER, WEALTH IS HAPPINESS, CONSUMPTION IS HAPPINESS, and ECONOMIC GROWTH IS A PRIMARY GOAL. The research is informed by ecolinguistics, positive discourse analysis (PDA), conceptual metaphor theory, multimodal metaphor theory, and discursive analysis of metaphor. In the focus of my attention are the discursive effects of metaphors that are instantiated in verbal, visual and/or aural modes, providing beneficial alternatives to destructive economic metaphors. The films, through negative and positive discursive effects of multimodal metaphor instantiation, dissuade the audience from certain ecologically unfriendly actions, resist the destructive stories that harm the environment and people and provide beneficial alternatives.

Keywords: ecolinguistics; documentary; multimodal metaphor instantiation; positive discourse analysis

1. Introduction

This paper offers analyses of three environmental documentaries: *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021), all of which deal with the problem of consumerism. Consumerism is an economic theory according to which a person's well-being and happiness directly depend on how many

goods and services they buy and consume. The increase in the consumption of goods and services is considered a desirable goal that supports economic growth. A person's well-being and happiness is believed to depend on obtaining material possessions.

Beliefs like that, which are widespread in society, are based on stories — “mental models which influence behaviour and lie at the heart of ecological challenges we are facing” (Stibbe, 2021, p. 1). The stories of the industrialised world, such as MORE IS BETTER, WEALTH IS HAPPINESS, CONSUMPTION IS HAPPINESS, ECONOMIC GROWTH IS A PRIMARY GOAL, lead towards a future of increasing injustice, pollution, and ecological destruction. Researchers who have studied stories describe how we are exposed to them in everyday life (news reports, advertisements, conversations with friends, textbooks, etc.) without being aware that they are stories, and so we experience them as the world (Loy, as cited in Stibbe, 2021, p. 5). That is why it is of vital importance to reveal them and be aware of how these stories change our lives.

The present study focuses on the use of multimodal conceptual metaphors related to consumerism and its alternative, minimalism, in the above-mentioned documentary films. Theoretically, the research is informed by ecolinguistics, positive discourse analysis, and conceptual metaphor theories. Metaphor analysis departs from conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999), extending it by multimodal metaphor theory (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009), and discursive view of metaphor (Musolff, 2006), which considers metaphors as condensed micronarratives or stories. The aim of this article is to analyse the multimodal metaphor instantiations in the documentary films *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021) and to investigate their discursive effects.

The results of the study demonstrate that the interaction of three modes, verbal, visual, and aural, in conceptual metaphors instantiations creates certain discursive effects: negative and positive. Negative discursive effects create a negative perception of the target concept of a metaphor by causing negative emotions and feelings in viewers. Positive discursive effects, on the contrary, create a positive perception of the target concept. Thus, negative discursive effects question destructive metaphors and stories prevailing in society, while positive discursive effects provide alternatives to them. As a result, the documentary films promote ecologically beneficial actions of the films' audiences and resist the destructive stories that harm the environment and people.

Structurally, the article consists of six parts: 1) introduction; 2) literature overview; 3) research methodology; 4) results; 5) discussion; and 6) conclusion. The literature overview, which follows this introduction, presents the key points of ecolinguistic perspective, positive discourse analysis and conceptual metaphor theories. The methodological part describes the sample and process of analysing multimodal instantiations of the conceptual metaphors in the documentary films. This is followed by a presentation of results and then a discussion. Finally, the conclusion summarises the findings.

2. Literature overview

2.1. Ecolinguistic perspective

Ecolinguistics has evolved over the last five decades. Over this time, the term *ecolinguistics* has been used to describe a wide range of studies, including language interaction and diversity, analysis of texts about the environment, studies of how words in a language relate to objects in the local environment, studies of dialects in different geographical locations, and many more (Stibbe, 2015, p. 8). Over time, the word has become an umbrella term for any linguistic research that adopts an ecological perspective (Zhou, 2021, p. 472) and bears on stories we live by (Stibbe, 2015, 2021).

The ecological perspective is neither a theory nor a method; it is a way of thinking and a way of acting (van Lier, 2004, p. 3). This approach is based on the basic principles of the concept of ecology: recognition and protection of diversity, recognition of relationships and interaction of organisms with each other and with the environment, and the principle of integrity and unity instead of fragmentation (Fill & Mühlhäusler, 2001, p. 60). When applied to linguistic research, the ecological perspective assumes that language is not an isolated system, but integrated with personal, situational, cultural and social factors that together influence the formation and development of language (Kramsch & Steffensen, 2008).

Researchers working in the field of ecolinguistics see its main task in the identification of nominative units and syntactic structures that provoke the destruction of the environment, as well as the search for language forms and structures capable of inspiring people to protect the environment (Stibbe, 2015, p. 1). The way we think affects the way we act, because language can push a person to destroy the ecosystems on which life depends, or to protect them.

However, modern ecolinguistic description is much deeper than the usual commenting, criticism or, on the contrary, distribution of texts about ecology. Ecolinguistics investigates more general linguistic constructions, mental models and narratives that determine how we think, behave and relate to the environment (Stibbe, 2015, p. 2). Modern ecolinguistics aims to “investigate the stories we live by — mental models which influence behaviour and lie at the heart of ecological challenges we are facing” (Stibbe, 2021, p. 1). People are exposed to these stories in everyday life (news reports, advertisements, conversations with friends, textbooks, etc.) without being aware that they are stories (Stibbe, 2021, p. 5), which makes it of vital importance to reveal them and to resist the destructive ones, as well as to find and promote the beneficial ones. The latter is the main task of positive discourse analysis, which is described in Section 2.2.

2.2. Positive discourse analysis

From the beginning of its existence, ecolinguistics has mostly focused on criticising

destructive dominant discourses. Different scholars, such as Halliday (2001), Mühlhäusler (2001), Fill (2001), and others, looked at the grammatical and lexical structures of the languages, aiming to reveal how they promote ecologically destructive behaviour, such as unnecessary consumption, unending economic growth, agricultural production, human dominance over the natural world, etc.

There have also been other researchers who took a more positive approach. Kemmerer (2006), Schultz (2001) and Dunayer (2001) offered new lexical items that seemed to be more accurate and correct in terms of caring about the environment, being part of the natural world instead of dominating it, etc. These new lexical items could promote ecologically beneficial actions if accepted and used by the speakers of the language. However, imposing artificial lexical units or grammatical structures on a language is hard and not very effective. What is more effective is the search for new ways of using a language to talk about the most pressing problems of nowadays, new ways of using a language to resist the destructive dominant stories and to find (or create) and promote new beneficial ones.

This approach is called “positive discourse analysis” (Martin, 2006). It is based on a similar methodology to “critical discourse analysis”, which involves a critical and detailed examination of a text or texts and its linguistic features to reveal underlying ideologies (Stibbe, 2018, p. 174). The difference between critical discourse analysis and positive discourse analysis is that the latter focuses on finding and promoting positive texts and discourses rather than criticising negative ones. However, the main goal of positive discourse analysis in analysing positive texts is not only to promote them, but also “to assemble clusters of linguistic features that can be useful in conveying new and beneficial stories” (Stibbe, 2018, p. 171).

The complexity of positive discourse analysis as a methodology for ecolinguistics is to define which texts and discourses are positive and which are not. The solution to this, as offered by Arran Stibbe (2015, 2018), is to compare the underlying ideologies to the ecological philosophy — or ecosophy — of the analyst. The ideologies that align with the ecosophy are considered beneficial, and the ones that contradict it are destructive. Thus, positive texts or discourses are the ones containing beneficial stories.

In this study, the focus is on three environmental documentaries, which can be considered positive discourses since the stories conveyed in them with the help of multimodal metaphors are beneficial ones.

2.3. Conceptual metaphor in environmental documentaries

The conceptual metaphor theory originates from the book by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), where metaphor is considered not as a trope, but as an instrument of thinking, structuring, restructuring, and even creating reality. This idea is central for both the classical conceptual metaphor theory and its modern modifications — the discursive metaphor theory and the multimodal metaphor theory.

In the conceptual metaphor theory, a conceptual metaphor is defined as a partial understanding of one concept in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 1). The concept identified in a metaphor is called the target concept, and the concept involved in the comparison is called the source concept. During the process of metaphorisation, certain conceptual features of the source domain are mapped onto the conceptual features of the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3). The process also entails certain inferences, or conceptual features that are not directly mentioned but are logically deduced from the conceptual metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 47). As a result, conceptual metaphors allow thinking about abstract and poorly defined concepts in terms of more concrete and better-defined ones, and thus play a central role in the perception and conceptualisation of reality (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3).

The classical conceptual metaphor theory has been criticised for considering linguistic metaphors as surface manifestations of deep structures — conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2015; Sanford, 2012). Obviously, there is no special device in the brain responsible for creating and understanding metaphors, or a certain part of the brain where these processes can occur; instead, metaphors emerge (Kövecses, 2015, p. 147). From this emergentist perspective, individual metaphors are best understood as entities that arise out of language in use, rather than based on underlying structures (Sanford, 2012, pp. 356-357). Hence comes the discursive metaphor theory, which analyses metaphors inseparable from the context and discourse they emerge in. Researchers (Musolff, 2006; Tang et al., 2020) who study the peculiarities of conceptual metaphors emerging in a discourse consider metaphors as condensed micronarratives able to convey ideological meanings or stories.

A conceptual metaphor, in its traditional understanding, is monomodal; that is, its source and target concepts are embodied in the same mode. However, the source and target concepts of a metaphor and their inferences can be instantiated in several modes, not exclusively verbal or visual. A metaphor whose source and target concepts are instantiated in several modes is called multimodal (Forceville & Urios-Aparisi, 2009, p. 24).

In my research of environmental documentaries, I consider multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors as an emerging phenomenon and focus on the following modes: the verbal mode (written vs spoken), the visual mode (static vs dynamic images), and the aural mode (sound vs music). I consider metaphors to be condensed micronarratives and stories.

3. Research methodology

The empirical data for this study were collected from three documentary films: *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021). All three documentaries are centred on the topic of excessive consumption, which is the central principle of the dominant industrial economic system.

I Am (2010) is a documentary film created by Tom Shadyac, a director of numerous comedy films. After an accident in his life, Tom decides to find out what is wrong with our

modern world and how we can improve the way we live in it. One of the main discovered problems is excessive consumption.

Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things is a 2015 documentary film directed by Matt D'Avella. The film examines the benefits of a non-materialistic and minimalist lifestyle and presents to the viewers the lives of Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Field Millburn, authors and podcasters who have been practising minimalism for some years. They talk about their own minimalist lives and the lives of others, families, entrepreneurs, architects, artists, journalists, scientists, and even a former Wall Street broker, who follow these ideas, trying to educate and spread awareness about the excessive amount of garbage, the excess of unnecessary possessions in the modern world and the senseless pursuit of consuming more and more material things.

The Minimalists: Less Is Now (2021) is a new documentary film by the same director, Matt D'Avella, and the two minimalists, Ryan Nicodemus and Joshua Field Millburn, who wanted to remake their first film. The title "Less Is Now" is meant to create a sense of urgency for today's consumer culture. The authors aim to convey the message: now is the time for less; now is the time to stop endless and excessive consumption and hunt for more.

The analysis included three steps:

1. Identification of multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors, their target domains and source domains, and the modes in which they were instantiated. The selection criteria for the conceptual metaphors were that their target domain should be related to the topic of consumerism or an alternative ideology. The modes considered were verbal, visual, and aural.
2. Interpretation of metaphorical entailments of the conceptual metaphors and explanation of the stories that they convey.
3. Analysing discursive effects of the multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors.

The first two steps of the analysis are presented in Section 4 below, and the third step is presented in Section 5.

4. Results

This section presents the analysis of the multimodal metaphor instantiations in the analysed documentary films. Each subsection analyses metaphors from a particular film, as together they convey the story of the whole film. In the focus of attention are the modes of instantiation of source and target domains of the metaphors, as well as their entailments and stories.

4.1. *I Am* (2010)

The documentary film starts with the song "Where Is the Love?" by Black Eyed Peas, the

first line of which — *What's wrong with the world, mama?* — sounds slightly louder than the next ones. After this line, Tom Shadyac, the director and the main narrator of the film, starts speaking. He introduces himself as a comedy director, and emphasises that this film is a different story:

- (1) *My name is Tom Shadyac, I'm a movie director, comedies mostly. ... But this is a different story, this is my story. And this is a story of a mental illness.* (I Am, 01:12 – 01:36)

This episode implies the conceptual metaphor THE MODERN WORLD IS MENTALLY ILL. While the source concept MENTAL ILLNESS is expressed explicitly verbally (*a story of a mental illness*), the target concept THE MODERN WORLD is stated in the aural mode (*what's wrong with the world*) and implied contextually, as viewers understand that this is an environmental documentary, which is supposed to be about our world and environmental problems rather than mental illness.

So, the story offered by this metaphor is that the way we live nowadays is not logical or sensible; there is something wrong with it. However, it is not yet clear exactly what is wrong with it.

Further in the film, Tom Shadyac speaks with intellectual and spiritual leaders trying to answer two main questions: What is wrong with our world? And, what can we do about it? One of these leaders is Marc Ian Barasch, a writer, producer, editor, and environmental activist. Marc says:

- (2) *We always try to avoid unpleasantness ... so we need more stuff. To get more stuff and protect that stuff, we have to make war whether it's an actual war or an ineffective war of rich against the poor.* (I Am, 16:11 – 16:30)

There is the song “Society” by Eddie Vedder playing in the background. When Marc finishes speaking, viewers can hear the following lines from this song:

- (3) *Society, have mercy on me
I hope you're not angry if I disagree
Society, crazy indeed
I hope you're not lonely
Without me*

Meanwhile, the video sequence shows different images of a war: war machinery, people carrying a coffin, people protesting against the war, missiles being launched, burning and destroyed war machinery, explosions, fires, etc. This sequence ends with a picture of a broken doll lying on some trash.

This episode is an instantiation of the metaphor CONSUMERISM IS CRAZINESS. The target concept CONSUMERISM is expressed verbally (*we need more stuff; to get more stuff and*

protect that stuff). The source concept CRAZINESS is expressed aurally by the lyrics of the song playing in the background. There is also the concept WAR involved in this metaphor, which adds new meaning, linking consumerism with war. This concept is expressed verbally (*an actual war; an ineffective war of rich against the poor*) and visually (images of war). The message of the metaphor is the following: our consumer-driven world leads to numerous problems and all sorts of wars, both literal and metaphorical (rich vs poor). However, consumerism is still the dominant culture and is, metaphorically, a form of mental illness.

After speaking with several leaders, Tom continues by giving his opinion on the two questions. He says that the problem is that we, people, break the main law of nature every day:

(4) *The law is this: nothing in nature takes more than it needs. And when something does, it becomes subject to this law and it dies off.* (I Am, 59:48 – 59:56)

Then Tom compares nature to the body:

(5) *We have a term for something in the body when it takes more than it should, we call it cancer.* (I Am, 1:00:09 – 1:00:14)

The words are accompanied by an image of a vein and blood moving within it, which changes into an image of escalators in a shopping mall and people moving all around. Then the image again turns into an image of a cancer cell. In the background, viewers can hear melancholic and slightly tense music.

This is an instantiation of the conceptual metaphor OVERCONSUMPTION IS CANCER. The target concept OVERCONSUMPTION is expressed verbally (*takes more than it needs*) and visually (image of escalators in a shopping mall and crowds of people moving around). The source concept CANCER is expressed verbally (*cancer*) and visually (image of cancer cells). The mapping is ensured by the visual mode when the image of a shopping mall turns into the image of cells, which emphasises the link between them.

The story here is the following: overconsumption, which is one of the main consequences of consumerism, is harmful to our environment and our planet. Consumption grows and spreads just like cancer; when we get one thing that we wanted, we already want a few more different things. This behaviour is dangerous both for us and for our planet. In nature, the species that behave this way usually die off. If we do not stop and change our consumer-driven behaviour, this is the future that waits for us.

The documentary film started by hinting at the metaphor THE MODERN WORLD IS MENTALLY ILL and it finishes with a clearer explanation of the same metaphor. Tom Shadyac summarises the idea of the film:

(6) *Well, I told you this was a story of a mental illness. And I know you were probably expecting something like this.* (I Am, 1:09:00 – 1:09:05)

At these words, the video shows a psychiatric hospital with its patients. Then Tom continues:

(7) *Instead, you got something like this.* (I Am, 1:09:08 – 1:09:11)

The words are accompanied by Tom's picture, where he is standing next to his car and his private jet. Then, a picture of him next to his huge mansion. Tom explains:

(8) *It may not be your everyday definition of the criminally insane, but what else would you call it, when this exists across the street. Or across the country. Or across the border. Or across the world.*
(I Am, 1:09:15 – 1:09:35)

At these words, Tom's pictures change into pictures of poverty: a woman searching through a bin, a man lying on the pavement where others walk, a boy searching through the rubbish on a very polluted street, an extremely poor settlement of people living in tents outdoors.

This episode brings back the metaphor THE MODERN WORLD IS MENTALLY ILL. The target concept MODERN WORLD is expressed visually (Tom's pictures and pictures of poverty). The source concept MENTAL ILLNESS is expressed verbally (*a mental illness; criminally insane*). This time, the metaphor clearly explains what is meant here. It is a form of illness at the level of society that some people only think about accumulating more and more stuff, while others live in such poverty, suffering wars or discrimination.

4.2. *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015)

The two central concepts described in this documentary film are CONSUMERISM and MINIMALISM. On top of that, the film deals with other concepts related to the modern consumerist culture, which are considered as indicators of happiness, such as WEALTH and SUCCESS.

The film starts with the view of a busy street in the centre of a big city: high-rise glass office buildings, lots of billboards with all sorts of advertisements on them, cars, taxis, and buses, all hardly moving due to the traffic, and crowds of people rushing somewhere. The background sound goes from complete silence to a dull, tense sound. The viewers can also hear the voice of the author, Dan Harris:

(9) *So much of our life is lived in a fog of automatic habitual behaviour. We spend so much time on the hunt. But nothing ever quite does it for us. And we get so wrapped up in the hunt that it kind of makes us miserable.* (Minimalism, 00:10 – 00:33)

The words *on the hunt* are accompanied by an image of a woman in a shop looking confused and lost. After the words, there appears a different scene: a shop packed with people who

are pushing each other, rushing to be the first to get some goods from the shelves, falling, crawling on the floor towards the goods, etc.

This episode is an instantiation of the multimodal metaphor CONSUMERISM IS HUNTING together with an appraisal pattern (Stibbe, 2021, pp. 78-98) that represents the hunt negatively. The negative appraisal pattern consists of the word *misery* in the verbal mode and the consumerist frenzy and expression of confusion on the woman's face in the visual mode. The target concept CONSUMERISM is expressed visually by images of numerous advertisements, a woman in a shop, and then crowds of people rushing to buy things in shops. The concept HUNT, which is the source concept for the first metaphor and the target concept for the second one, is expressed verbally (*on the hunt; wrapped up in the hunt*). The source concept of the second metaphor MISERY is expressed verbally (*makes us miserable*) and aurally by tense music.

The entailment of this metaphor is that consumerism leads to unhappiness, which resists the common story that purchasing products is a path to happiness. A new feature is also brought in by the phrase *in a fog of automatic habitual behaviour*, which emphasises that most of this consumerist shopping happens without much thinking. Thus, the story behind the metaphors is that we, people, thoughtlessly live our lives as consumers; we are constantly looking for something, trying to find better deals. Once we find one thing, we start looking for another. We are in this hunt all the time, and this is what makes us miserable. However, we do not notice it as we are not thinking critically about our behaviour.

Another episode of the film presents the concept CONSUMERISM with the help of the metaphor CONSUMERISM IS DELUSIONAL NOISE. In this episode, different people talk about consumerism as a deceptive idea imposed on people against their true interests. An author, Patrick Rhone, comments:

- (10) *This is something that has been sold to us, I would say, the past 100 years, slowly but surely, by those that want to make a lot of money. ... They want us to believe that you really need these things. (Minimalism, 05:37 – 05:54)*

The words are accompanied by some old black and white advertisements and melancholic music. Then, director and photographer Yarrow Kraner continues:

- (11) *Every year that passes has more stimulators, more pressure, there's more options, there's more media, more noise, noise, noise ... (Minimalism, 06:04 – 06:12)*

These words are accompanied by a video sequence consisting of snippets of advertising messages, films, and social media, which replace each other with increasing speed, culminating in the words *noise, noise, noise*. The increasing speed of changing images and their culmination are also marked audibly, first by increasing background noise, and after the climax by silence.

In this episode, the target concept CONSUMERISM is instantiated in visual mode by images of numerous advertisements as a visual metonym of consumerism. The source concept NOISE is expressed in verbal mode (*more ..., more ..., more ..., noise, noise, noise*), visual mode, by the way the images change quickly, almost flashing, and also in aural mode, by intensifying quick background music. On top of that, the phrases *has been sold to us* and *they want us to believe* emphasise that this noise is deceptive and illusional.

Thus, the story of this metaphor is that the craving to buy more and more is just a delusion imposed on us by endless advertisements, films, and messages in social media. It has been there for many years, and this noise makes us stop thinking. We do not hear ourselves anymore, we just want to buy the things that corporations want to sell us.

The above-described episode continues with another metaphor. In the silence following the culmination of advertisements and noise, Yarrow Kraner continues:

(12) *And by streamlining, simplifying, and just letting people know they have the option, is a wake-up call that is very valuable in a very critical time now.* (Minimalism, 06:12 – 06:25)

There is also a contrast that is conveyed visually: after a lot of bright images, we only see the director sitting relaxed on a bench against the background of small old buildings, old objects and film sets.

This episode presents the conceptual metaphor MINIMALISM IS A WAKE-UP CALL. The target concept MINIMALISM is expressed verbally (*streamlining, simplifying and just letting people know they have the option*), as well as visually (contrasting a simple and calm image after a series of flashing and bright frames) and aurally (contrasting silence after intense background noise). The source concept A WAKE-UP CALL is expressed verbally.

Such nominations as *valuable* and *critical time* also contribute to the formation of meaning because they intensify certain conceptual features and add new ones. The adjective *valuable* introduces a new element of meaning — the importance of minimalism, and the phrase *critical time* reinforces this importance. A calm image and silence after an intense visual-aural tension creates an effect of calmness and satisfaction, which comes from getting rid of the irritant.

Thus, the message of the metaphor MINIMALISM IS A WAKE-UP CALL is the following: minimalism is something that can help us realise that we have been dreaming, that consumerism is not what we really need or want. The dreaming is the delusional noise, and waking up represents the emergence from the nightmare of delusion into a quiet and peaceful reality.

Let us consider another episode from the film, in which the two minimalists and authors of the film, two friends, share their impressions of the time when they discovered minimalism. Ryan Nicodemus begins by describing his condition at the time when he noticed some changes in his friend, Joshua Field Millburn. While Ryan was almost in despair because he no longer understood what was really important in his life, his friend Josh, who had previously been just as unhappy as himself, had changed quite a bit:

- (13) *Josh, he seemed happy for the first time in a really long time, like truly happy, ecstatic. But I didn't understand why, because we had both worked at the same corporation. We both wasted our twenties climbing the corporate ladder together, and he had been just as miserable as me.* (Minimalism, 06:48 – 07:06)

Visually, viewers can see a photo of the two friends standing together, where Josh is smiling and seems to be really happy, while Ryan looks a bit confused. Then Josh explains:

- (14) *Before I discovered minimalism, I think my life was like pretty much anyone else's. I had a lot of stuff. Hundreds, thousands of books, DVDs and VHSs, closets full of expensive clothes. All these things that I brought into my life without questioning. But when I started to let it go, I started feeling freer and happier and lighter.* (Minimalism, 07:25 – 08:09)

The enumeration of the stuff that Josh used to have is illustrated visually: piles of books, DVDs, packed wardrobes, lots of tools and small stuff, sunglasses, watches, etc. The rhythmic music also creates a sense of pressure. Then, the images are contrasted with the images of his new life as a minimalist, much less stuff, much more space, much more freedom.

This episode presents a strong positive appraisal pattern that associates minimalism with the appraising item “happiness”. Happiness is expressed verbally (*happy for the first time in a really long time; truly happy, ecstatic; Why the hell are you so happy?; feeling freer and happier and lighter*) and visually (the photo of friends where Josh, a representative of minimalism, smiles widely). This appraisal pattern is contrasted with the negative appraisal of corporate life as “miserable”:

- (15) *We both wasted our twenties climbing the corporate ladder together, and he had been just as miserable as me.* (Minimalism, 07:00 – 07:06)

It mentions the usual story of success and happiness (SUCCESS and HAPPINESS are CAREER and MONEY) and questions its correctness and appropriateness, because the main characters of the film lived that way before, having a brilliant career and making lots of money, but as a result they turned out to be unhappy and confused (*miserable; I didn't know what was important anymore*). In contrast to such an example, which expresses doubt about the usual understanding of happiness, the idea of minimalism as true happiness is put forward.

The main message of the metaphor is the following: the usual understanding of happiness turned out to be wrong; many people who tried to achieve it and lived by all the “rules” of happiness never became happy; however, those who abandoned the idea of “more is better” and began to enjoy fewer things became truly happy.

4.3. *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021)

This documentary film is a remake of the previous one. While CONSUMERISM and MINIMALISM along with related concepts remain central, the metaphors they are presented in are different.

The film starts with short excerpts of interviews, where the first question answered is “*Why do you think this idea of minimalism or simplifying is really catching on right now?*”. A few people answering it point out the opportunities we have today, people’s love and addiction to stuff, and the possibility of getting almost anything within 24 hours. From time to time, the answers are interrupted by news excerpts. One of them says:

- (16) *When you look up at the sky, you may soon see Amazon’s army of new-age deliveries. The electronic aircraft would have a 15-mile range and deliver packages within 30 minutes.* (Less Is Now, 0:54 – 01:04)

The video sequence shows a news studio and two news presenters, followed by a schematic video of parcels flying in the air on parachutes. Then the interviewees continue:

- (17) *The consumer world understands that if I can get you to choose before you think, I’m gonna get you to buy things you do not need.* (Less Is Now, 01:05 – 01:12)

The words are accompanied by some advertisements for cars, tablets and laptops. Then, an interviewee says:

- (18) *My senses are just being bombarded with reminders, like, “Hey, you should buy this. You’d be happier if you buy this.” You know? And it’s just sort of like, in so many ways, they’re trying to beat you into submission. “Okay, I’ll buy it! I need it! I need it!”* (Less Is Now, 01:12 – 01:25)

This episode is an instantiation of the conceptual metaphor THE CONSUMER WORLD IS WAR. The target concept THE CONSUMER WORLD is expressed verbally (*the consumer world; get you to choose; get you to buy things*) and visually by different advertisements. The source concept WAR is expressed verbally (*Amazon’s army; are just being bombarded; to beat you into submission*).

The entailments of the metaphor are the following: CORPORATIONS are ENEMIES, BUYING STUFF is SUBMISSION, BEING A CONSUMER is LOSING THE WAR. Thus, the consumer world is a constant fight between corporations and people. The corporations try to beat us into buying stuff that we do not need and that does not add any value to our lives. By giving in and buying the stuff, we lose the war. Another interviewee, answering the same question, says:

- (19) *Stuff is contributing to our discontent in so many different ways, because it's taking the place of the things that actually do give us more happiness.* (Less Is Now, 01:40 – 01:56)

The image of a woman answering the question changes to the image of a huge garbage truck emptying itself into a landfill. There are a lot of birds flying all over the rubbish. Then the perspective changes, and we see the landfill from above. Its scale is massive.

This short episode represents consumerism with a negative appraisal pattern. Consumerism is expressed verbally (*stuff*) and visually by the image of the landfill, as this is where, sooner or later, all the stuff we buy goes. The negative appraisal pattern is expressed verbally (*contributing to our discontent; taking the place of the things that actually do give us more happiness*). So, by consuming and buying a lot of stuff, we contribute to our misery, not to our happiness, contrary to what most people would expect.

Two other important things in this episode are the image of the landfill, which appears exactly on the words *taking the place*, and the birds flying over it. This hints at what it is that actually makes us happy in life. This is nature, which we trash with all the stuff.

Another episode further in the film goes back to the concept THE CONSUMER WORLD. In the episode, T. K. Coleman, the director of the Foundation for Economic Education, comments:

- (20) *I think one of the biggest problems we have in our world now is that people really aren't free to choose. We talk about being in a free market or a free society, but people aren't really free to choose. Because you just have one or two large institutions that have these artificial monopolies, and they get to decide for everyone what you can watch, what you can listen to. And so, manipulation of... of our interests, manipulation of our natural, God-given taste really is happening.* (Less Is Now, 08:00 – 09:26)

On the first words, *not free to choose*, the video shows a doorway, a closed door and a parcel from Amazon being brought there. Then the door opens, and viewers can see a woman's feet. The woman bends and takes the parcel, goes back inside, and closes the door. In the background of the doorway, the logos of three big corporations appear.

A bit later in the film, another interviewee, Dave Ramsey, the author of *The Total Money Makeover*, comments:

- (21) *And so, what you've done there is you gave up your independence, you gave up your freedom... in return for some stuff that's gonna be worth nothing in next year's garage sale.* (Less Is Now, 22:08 – 22:16)

The visual image is again almost the same: an Amazon parcel in the doorway. A man opens the door, picks up the parcel and takes it inside.

These are instantiations of the metaphor CONSUMERISM IS UNFREEDOM. The target concept CONSUMERISM is expressed visually by the image of a parcel from Amazon on the

doorway and verbally (*stuff*). The source concept UNFREEDOM is expressed verbally: *people really aren't free to choose; manipulation of... of our interests, manipulation of our natural, God-given taste; gave up your independence, gave up your freedom.*

The story behind this conceptual metaphor is the following: In the consumer world, people have no choice; what we buy, what we eat, what we listen to, everything is decided for us. Consumers are manipulated by corporations, which make decisions for them and make them buy the stuff they do not really need.

On the contrary to this view of consumerism, minimalism is presented as freedom in a few instantiations in the film. Let us consider two of them. Both authors of the film and blog about minimalism, Joshua Field Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, in turn, talk about their way to minimalism and how they got rid of the stuff they had accumulated. Joshua tells his story first as it was he who first discovered minimalism:

- (22) *Pondering each artifact in my home, I'd ask, "Does this thing add value to my life?" The more I asked this question, the more I gained momentum and embracing minimalism got easier by the day. The more you do it, the freer, and happier, and lighter you feel, and the more you wanna throw overboard. (Less Is Now, 37:23 – 37:42)*

The words accompany the video of Joshua taking all sorts of small and seemingly useless things from his cupboard. The focus is on the objects while the background is blurred. After Joshua, Ryan tells his story:

- (23) *So that's when I decided to let go. And you know what? I started to feel free for the first time in my life. I got my time back. I got my life back. And as I changed my life, I was focused on community, not consumerism. Giving, not taking. People, not stuff. (Less Is Now, 45:01 – 45:16)*

The video shows numerous boxes, which Ryan used to pack all the stuff he did not need. The boxes take up almost the whole room. On one of the boxes, there is the word "Donate".

These two episodes are instantiations of the metaphor MINIMALISM IS FREEDOM. The target concept MINIMALISM is expressed verbally (*embracing minimalism; I decided to let go*) with a visual illustration of getting rid of excessive stuff. The source concept of freedom is expressed verbally (*the freer, and happier, and lighter you feel; feel free; got my time back; got my life back*).

This metaphor is opposed to the previous one, CONSUMERISM IS UNFREEDOM, and continues its story. While living a consumer-driven life means unfreedom and dependence on big corporations, letting things go, simplifying and living a thoughtful life means being truly free and happy.

5. Discussion

The analysis of the multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors in the three documentary films *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021) allowed me to identify negative and positive discursive effects. The division of effects into positive or negative was based on how the target concept was presented in the multimodal metaphor. Thus, if the target concept was presented in a positive way, the metaphor was considered to have a positive discursive effect, or if the target concept was presented in a negative way, the metaphor was considered to have a negative discursive effect. Both negative and positive effects are considered below in more detail.

5.1. Negative discursive effects

The negative discursive effects of multimodal instantiations of conceptual metaphors in the analysed documentary films are the following:

- accusation;
- frightening;
- warning;
- provoking.

The discursive effect of accusation happens when the creators of a documentary film directly or indirectly accuse ordinary people, the potential viewers of the film, of causing or contributing to environmental problems by living their lives the way they do. The metaphor CONSUMERISM IS CRAZINESS links the need to get more and more stuff, which is so common in our society, with starting wars, with inequality, and other problems. The narration explains this connection between stuff and wars, but does not directly blame consumers. After that the visual mode gives a vivid illustration of one of the consequences of consumerism: war. The illustrations help the viewers to visualise what war and poverty look like. Meanwhile, the aural mode gives an evaluation of the situation when some people excessively consume so much stuff, while others suffer wars and poverty. Thus, the multimodal metaphor implies that consumers' behaviour causes these problems. Watching this and hearing the negative evaluation, viewers might feel guilty or at least think a bit more before making their next purchase.

Such indirect blame in both cases might make the viewers conclude that they are contributing to the problems by buying too much stuff. It is important that they are not blamed openly, as it might make them defensive. However, in this case, when viewers come to this conclusion themselves, there is more chance that they will want to change their behaviour.

The next metaphor, THE MODERN WORLD IS MENTALLY ILL, has a very similar

discursive effect and message. The verbal mode expresses Tom Shadyac's summary of the documentary film: *I told you this was a story of a mental illness*. He does not say what exactly is a mental illness. It is shown visually: the pictures of him and his ridiculously expensive possessions and, next to them, pictures of poverty, wars, drugs, and other problems. It might seem that Tom blames only himself in this metaphor, as there are no pictures of other people with their possessions. However, it is clear that one person could not have such great impact, and others who live the same way are to be blamed as well. Thus, this multimodal metaphor again indirectly blames consumer-driven behaviour.

Another discursive effect of multimodal metaphors is fear. It happens when the creators of a documentary film try to scare the viewers by showing them or hinting at the terrible consequences of their unecological behaviour.

For example, the metaphor OVERCONSUMPTION IS CANCER from the documentary film *I Am* (2010) compares excessive consumption with such a dangerous disease as cancer. The narration begins with a warning: *nothing in nature takes more than it needs. And when something does, it becomes subject to this law, and it dies off*. Then, while the narration moves on to cancer, the visual mode assures the mapping: it changes the image of crowds of people in a busy shopping mall to an image of cancer cells. It is not a secret that cancer very often leads to death. So, viewers might conclude that overconsumption can also lead to very bad consequences. This might make people relate to the situation and think of themselves as somebody who takes more than they need and, thus, who is threatened with dying off. As a result, those people might start consuming more wisely.

The discursive effect of the warning happens when the creators of a film, with the help of multimodal metaphors, try to warn the viewers about what is going on or what they are doing. The examples are the multimodal metaphors CONSUMERISM IS HUNTING from the film *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and CONSUMERISM IS UNFREEDOM from the film *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021). Both of them question two stories that are common in our society: WEALTH IS HAPPINESS, and CONSUMPTION IS HAPPINESS. They do it by presenting consumerism as a negative concept, misery in one case or unfreedom in the other. Neither of the concepts is something people would want to experience in their lives, especially when they do so much for it. Thus, the multimodal metaphors warn the viewers that by working so hard and buying more and more stuff they do not really need, they will not be as happy as they expect. On the contrary, this will lead to misery and unfreedom, when they will just do what corporations want them to do. The potential result is that some viewers will stop hunting for more and will be happy with less.

Finally, the discursive effect of provoking aims to make the viewers angry about something. The examples are multimodal metaphors CONSUMERISM IS DELUSIONAL NOISE from the film *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and THE CONSUMER WORLD IS WAR AGAINST CORPORATIONS from the film *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021).

The first metaphor, CONSUMERISM IS DELUSIONAL NOISE, presents consumerism as a delusion imposed on us by numerous advertisements, films, social media, etc. The

combination of verbal mode (*more ... , more ... , more ... , noise, noise, noise*), visual mode (quickly changing advertisements), and aural mode (intensifying background music) creates some provocation. What is more, the idea of being manipulated in their everyday lives and choices can make the viewers feel provoked, angry, or at least uncomfortable, as we all want to live our lives and do what we want to do and not something that is imposed upon us.

The second metaphor, THE CONSUMER WORLD IS WAR AGAINST CORPORATIONS, has a similar message: corporations manipulate us and make us believe that we need to buy all that stuff. So, corporations are the enemy. Again, the idea of being manipulated is unpleasant and provoking.

The result of this provocation in both metaphors is the potential desire to fight with corporations or stop buying everything they want to sell and limit it just to necessary things.

Different negative discursive effects cause different unpleasant emotions in the viewers, but they all aim to raise ecological awareness and make their behaviour more environmentally friendly and thoughtful.

5.2. Positive discursive effects

Positive discursive effects of multimodal metaphor instantiations aim to create a positive perception of a target concept. A multimodal metaphor with positive discursive effects is MINIMALISM IS A WAKE-UP CALL, along with the positive appraisal pattern that associates minimalism with happiness from the film *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and MINIMALISM IS FREEDOM from the film *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021).

The first example, the multimodal metaphor MINIMALISM IS A WAKE-UP CALL, introduces minimalism as an alternative to consumerism. In the film, this metaphor follows the multimodal metaphor CONSUMERISM IS DELUSIONAL NOISE, which had an intense visual-aural representation: intensifying sound and quickly changing images. Such preceding metaphor creates favourable conditions for introducing an alternative, a calm image and silence, which symbolise minimalism that can also be a relief after consumer-driven life. Thus, visual and aural modes create a pleasant emotional perception of the concept of minimalism, while verbal modes tell the story: it is a wake-up call. This representation aims to encourage people to undertake minimalism.

The appraisal pattern that associates minimalism with happiness provides an alternative to the usual understanding of happiness as wealth and consumerism. The narration questions this traditional understanding, as two friends achieved everything considered necessary for true happiness, but they still felt miserable, until they learnt about minimalism and started to live a minimalist life. This story gives examples for the viewers and aims to encourage them to do the same, as they probably still feel restless and not truly happy.

Finally, the third example, the multimodal metaphor MINIMALISM IS FREEDOM, has the same aim as the previous two. It promotes an alternative to consumerism and manipulation

by corporations. Minimalism, on the contrary, is presented as something that allows people to feel free and to live the life they want.

All three examples here show that positive discursive effects aim to create a positive image of a certain concept, which in these examples is minimalism, and promote it, encouraging people to undertake it.

6. Conclusion

This paper presented the analysis of multimodal metaphor instantiations in the three documentary films *I Am* (2010), *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015), and *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021). In the study, multimodal metaphors are considered as an emerging phenomenon, which conveys particular stories about the world. With the help of multimodal metaphors, the film *I Am* (2010) presents the modern world as mentally ill, as it seems abnormal that overconsumption, excessive wealth, and accumulation of unnecessary stuff exist next to extreme poverty and wars. The film *Minimalism: A Documentary About the Important Things* (2015) questions the dominant understanding of happiness as wealth and consumption by claiming that consumption is actually misery, while minimalism is an alternative that can lead to true happiness. The new film about minimalism, *The Minimalists: Less Is Now* (2021), aims to emphasise the urgency of the need to switch from overconsumption to minimalistic and thoughtful shopping. It introduces consumerism as unfreedom and manipulation by corporations, which is a bit more radical as it shows who is the enemy. Minimalism, in its turn, is presented as freedom.

The analysis of the discursive effects of multimodal metaphor instantiations in the above-mentioned documentaries has shown negative and positive effects. Negative discursive effects, such as accusation, frightening, warning, and provoking, aim to create a negative image of the target concept. Positive discursive effects aim to create a positive image of the target concept, e.g., through happiness and freedom. However, the final goal for both types is the same: to inhibit certain ecologically unfriendly actions of the documentaries' audiences, resist the destructive stories that harm the environment and people, and promote beneficial alternatives.

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