Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument

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To cite this article: David S. Birdsell & Leo Groarke (2007) Outlines of a Theory of Visual Argument, Argumentation and Advocacy, 43:3-4, 103-113, DOI: 10.1080/00028533.2007.11821666

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/00028533.2007.11821666

Published online: 02 Feb 2017.

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OUTLINES OF A THEORY OF VISUAL ARGUMENT

David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke, Guest Editors

In 1996, Argumentation and Advocacy published a special double issue on visual argument. Ten years later, this new special issue charts some of the progress made in our understanding of visual argument, presents state-of-the-art papers exploring visual argument, and points the way to new issues and topics that need to be explored.

In our previous introduction, we argued that it was time to reject assumptions that excluded the visual from the various strands of argumentation theory (Birdsell and Groarke). We emphasized three prerequisites for a theory of visual argument: an acceptance of visual meaning, a broader recognition of the argumentative aspects of representation and resemblance, and a better account of the relationship between images and the contexts in which they occur.

Today, we think it is possible to elaborate on these prerequisites. In doing so, we provide the outlines of a theory of visual argument. In the future, we hope that these outlines will be expanded and elaborated in a way that can account for the great variety of images that inform the world of visual argument.

VISUAL ARGUMENTS

We understand visual arguments to be arguments (in the traditional premise and conclusion sense) which are conveyed in images. Like verbal arguments, they can be understood and analyzed through the standard components of arguments. For example, we can understand and assess such arguments by applying Aristotle’s rhetorical framework: by asking how individual visual arguments should be understood and assessed from the point of view of logos, pathos, and ethos.

Images play a key role in many kinds of argument, for a variety of reasons. In some cases, they more accurately and concisely present information and evidence that is relevant to an argument. In other cases, they have rhetorical advantages and are more forceful and...
persuasive than words. A description of a horrible crime is unlikely to be as powerful as a video, even if the action in the video is a re-enactment.

Some visual arguments are made up entirely of visual elements, but many incorporate verbal components. Authors attempting to construct convincing arguments in real life use whatever means are at their disposal. They tend to see the verbal and the visual as complementary modes of communication, combining them in ways that build on their respective strengths.

**The Principles of Visual Communication**

Traditional accounts of the meaning of images have been major obstacles to recognition of the significance of images in argument. Among other things, such accounts maintain that images cannot assert; that they are too vague and ambiguous to function as propositions; that they are emotional and never cognitive; that they cannot express negations; and that words have ultimate authority in the realm of argument (see, e.g., Fleming; Johnson). Here, we outline an emerging view of images and their meaning which is more conducive to their role in visual argument. It is consistent with the view of communicative speech acts that informs the pragma-dialectical view of argument.

Pragma-dialectics maintains that we should interpret speech acts in a way that renders them comprehensible, sincere, relevant, consistent, and appropriate in the context of the other speech acts that surround them (Eemeren and Grootendorst 49–55). The principles of communication play an important role in the interpretation of speech acts that are figurative, implicit, or metaphorical, or in some other way demand something more than a literal interpretation. Eemeren and Grootendorst’s principles of communication, for example, enable us to interpret the remark that “Julie is a block of ice” not literally [a claim that would be incomprehensible] but as a metaphorical way to claim that Julie is cold and unfriendly.

Groarke has shown how the pragma-dialectical principles of communication can be applied to our interpretation of images in argument. He reduces the pragma-dialectical principles to three key “principles of visual communication” that must guide our interpretation: (i) such images can be understood in principle; (ii) they should be interpreted in a manner that makes sense of the major (visual and verbal) elements they contain; and (iii) they should be interpreted in a manner that fits the context in which they are situated.

**Modes of Visual Meaning**

When one applies these principles of visual communication to visual arguments, one discovers that images in such contexts are used in standard ways. Building on Shelley’s distinction (“Rhetorical”) and Groarke and Tindale’s typology of visual meaning, we would distinguish five ways in which visual images are used: as flags, demonstrations, metaphors, symbols, and archetypes.

An image functions as a visual flag when it is used to attract attention to a message conveyed to some audience. Visual flags solve a fundamental problem in argumentative discourse, in which someone who wishes to convey a message to an audience must try to stand out against a flood of messages that others are trying to send. One effective way to do so is by using an arresting image which, like a waved flag, captures attention. The striking images used in the United Colors of Benetton advertising campaigns are a good example (the problems of interpretation that such flags can pose is amply demonstrated in Pineda and Sowards’ article in this issue).
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In some cases, an image that functions as a visual flag also employs other modes of meaning. An image is a visual demonstration when it is used to convey information which can best be presented visually. Demonstrations of this sort are the most effective way to explain or describe the irregular shape of a piece of land; the strategy of a hunting wolf pack; the appearance of Victorian houses in Pacific Heights, San Francisco; or the differences in contour of the skulls of different peoples (see Finnegans). Visual demonstrations also can present abstract information that is not conveyed easily in words. A graph or chart, for example, may present a whole catalogue of relationships, such as correlations between GNP and military spending in various countries over the past century, that cannot be captured easily (or precisely) in a verbal description.

Like a verbal metaphor, a visual metaphor conveys some claim figuratively, by portraying someone or something as some other thing. If we want to say that someone moves slowly, we might draw a cartoon of their head on a snail’s body. In a well known photomontage in 1933, John Heartfield presented Hermann Goering as an inhuman butcher by portraying him holding a blood-spattered butcher’s cleaver and apron, with war scenes in the background.

Visual symbols have strong associations that allow them to stand for something they represent. In part, we are able to communicate effectively with images because we share (at least to some degree) a common vocabulary of symbols that can be used to make convenient references. Everyone passingly familiar with Western culture knows (in the absence of strong contextual information to the contrary) that the Union Jack represents the United Kingdom, that a cross represents Christianity, and that a skull, skeleton, or the grim reaper represents death.

What can be said of visual symbols often applies to words and verbal symbols as well. Knowledge of a symbol system is required to decode any symbol, whether verbal or visual. In either case, although the sources of knowledge may differ, reconstruction may be easier or more difficult, and so on, lack of knowledge predicates failure.

We include visual archetypes as a kind of visual symbol whose meaning derives from popular narratives. In our culture, one example is an extended nose, which has come to symbolize lying. It is derived, of course, from the story of Pinocchio, the puppet who, on his way to becoming a boy, was endowed with a magic nose that grew whenever he told a lie. Artists who use an extended nose as a visual sign of lying can harness the power of the Pinocchio narrative as a vehicle that can tell a parallel story. For example, an image depicting Bill Clinton with an elongated nose can suggest that the former president lied about the Lewinsky affair (“Political Humor”). This is one way in which visual images can convey more complex messages than usually supposed. In the Pinocchio case, the visual archetype provides a convenient way to declare that someone is not telling the truth.

Other visual archetypes can be derived from culturally pervasive narratives such as comprise Aesop’s fables, the story of Christ, and classical mythology. The latter inform our understanding of the meaning of many of the most important works in the history of western painting. Their importance, and the importance of historical considerations in this context, is a well established feature of iconography (see, e.g., Panofsky).

Two or more of these five uses may coexist in any given image. For example, were the Clinton-as-Pinnochio image rendered as a cartoon, with Clinton more clearly puppet-like, his strings pulled by a more naturalistic Hillary Rodham Clinton, the archetypal resources of the Pinocchio tale would be joined to the metaphoric image of the marionette (not to mention gendered connotations regarding hen-pecked husbands). Doublings such as this can
deepen the contextual cues that shape interpretation, multiplying the formal resonance of an image and extending its argumentative force.

**VISUAL PROPOSITIONS**

In the context of argumentation, the different modes of visual meaning allow us to assert that something or other is the case. Visual flags need not be propositional in this sense, but they may be and, even when they are not, they often are used to attract our attention to other images that make statements in this sense.

A visual demonstration is inherently propositional because a visual image is used to convey information that is purportedly true. For example, even if highly abstracted and presenting only a fraction of the geographic information about a given location, a map purports to be an accurate ("true") representation of the arrangement of places in space. A road map is designed to help a traveler get from one place to another; its elisions and abstractions make travel easier (and affirm the value of visual demonstration) by removing complexities.

It is easy to think of similar examples. If someone asks what the eastern shores of Newfoundland look like, we may answer by providing a book of photographs. In such a context, these photographs function as the visual equivalent of descriptive propositions. Similarly, we might use images to show what a dust mite looks like; the nature of a medical condition; or, through time-lapse photography, the way a Venus' flytrap lures and eats its prey. In such cases, the best verbal equivalent of some image or set of images is a proposition like "It looks like this!" Such a proposition, however, only highlights the limits of verbal propositions, for its meaning is wholly parasitic on the images in question. The power of visual demonstrations also is evident in the more complex, abstract relationships conveyed by graphs, diagrams, and illustrations. Barwise and Etchemendy have shown how visual presentations better capture a variety of geometric relationships, and Tufte provides many poignant examples.

Visual metaphors and symbols often are used to convey propositions in political debate.
and discourse. In Figures 1 and 2, the American economy is presented metaphorically, as a body with a George W. Bush head. The head presents the signature Bush caricature: exaggerated ("chimpanzee") ears, a hook nose, eyes tightly together, a cleft chin, and so on. As any viewer will recognize, neither cartoon suggests that the American economy is literally a person; such interpretation would render the cartoons incomprehensible and violate the principles of visual communication. Rather, the cartoons personify the economy in order metaphorically to attribute to it the properties of the body pictured.

Figure 1 tells us how the White House Press Office sees the American economy: as powerful, virile ("masculine"), strong, and healthy. At its head (literally, in the drawing) is a smiling, confident George W. Bush. In Figure 2, incongruity between the image and its caption makes the cartoon a sarcastic expression of the proposition that the American economy lacks muscle and is headed by a president who is out of touch with this reality.

The meaning of the two cartoons is conveyed by several visual symbols. A dollar sign on the right bicep of the first figure (the place where one traditionally "shows one's muscle") implies a strong economy and the wealth that makes it so. The cent sign on the same bicep in the second cartoon suggests the opposite. The American flag tattoo in the first cartoon presents a patriotic image that is proudly committed to America (a meaning that could be emphasized by red, white, and blue coloring).

A more complex comment on the same subject can be achieved by employing a visual archetype. Figure 3 does so in a way that combines images from the previous cartoons. In so doing, it invokes the idea of a magic mirror, a popular element in myths and folk tales (such as Snow White, Venus, Merlin, the Snow Queen, Beauty and the Beast, and the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca).

In different stories, the magic mirror does different things. In this case, the magic mirror is a poignant archetype because the White House Press Office, and the media more generally, usually are thought to be "good" mirrors insofar as they accurately reflect events and issues. In the real world, this is reflected in newspaper names, such as The Daily Mirror and The Sunday Mirror.
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Figure 3: The Economy Reflected in the White House Press Office’s Magic Mirror

According to our cartoon, rather than reflecting reality, the White House Press Office—like the magic mirror in the drawing—presents a distorted view that absurdly lauds the Bush administration. In this way, the cartoon mobilizes the following propositions: (i) A weak George Bush sees himself and the economy as strong. (ii) This image is a false one, visible only in the “magic mirror” in the White House. (iii) The real George Bush and the economy he leads (visible to viewers in front of the reflected image) are weak. (iv) The White House Press Office propagates this false image.

VISUAL ARGUMENTS

In an argumentative context, images and visual propositions are employed for many reasons. Sometimes they are effective argument flags and can attract an audience to a claim or argument. Sometimes they are used because they convey information much more directly and effectively (and convincingly) than verbal claims. In still other cases, they are used because images have significant rhetorical advantages, such as appealing much more effectively to *pathos*.

All the modes of visual meaning may play a role in visual arguments, which we take to be arguments conveyed, in some essential way, through images. In most (but not all) cases, such arguments employ both images and words for the simple reason that doing so combines the force of two powerful means of conveying arguments.

Images that function as argument flags may themselves convey propositions but may be used, more simply, to attract our attention to verbal arguments. When the *Western Standard* and the *Jewish Free Press*, two Alberta publications, published the controversial Danish cartoons lampooning Islam, they were not trying to advance arguments or claims conveyed
by these cartoons but, rather, to draw attention to verbal arguments about freedom of expression that accompanied their publication.

Shelley has shown that demonstrative images play a key role in many scientific arguments ("Aspects"; "Rhetorical"). But he dismisses them too quickly from the realm of informal argument. Examples to the contrary are found on an Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs' webpage that makes extensive use of vivid photographs. For example, a photo of two men in white "clean suits" inspecting the burned-out hulk of a large vehicle shows the aftermath of the suicide bombing at Megiddo Junction on June 5, 2002 ("Palestinian Violence"). This image is not simply illustrative (and is not displayed in a way that makes it an argument flag) but visually demonstrates the human consequences of the violent acts in question. Images present situations with much greater impact than mere words do, and thus can convey human pain, suffering, and loss effectively and forcefully. One feels the same power in the widely dispersed souvenir photographs that American soldiers took of prisoners in Abu Ghraib (see Figure 4). Demonstrative visuals often are understood to constitute "eyewitness" testimony. This is not to say that visual demonstrations necessarily are more credible or accurate than verbal claims. Often, images capture irrelevant information or present distorted perspectives; indeed, they even may be manipulated deliberately in order to deceive. Their capacity to naturalize, however, makes visual demonstrations powerful tools of persuasion.

Arguments over the September 11 attack on the Pentagon often are buttressed by visual evidence used to "demonstrate" a proposition or sustain a conclusion. Consider two images from which two very different conclusions are drawn. The first is enlisted as grounds for concluding that, contrary to popular understanding, the Pentagon was not struck by a commercial airliner (see Figure 5). This picture shows cable spools that would appear to be in what would have been the airplane's flight path. Overlaid explanatory text points to a
gaping “center impact hole”—the point at which the fuselage supposedly struck the building—and the columns, numbered 16 and 17, that are “bent outward, not pushed in.” This pattern of damage, the authors assert, is inconsistent with the supposed impact of a commercial jet.

Rejecting this argument (and the alleged proof offered by Figure 5), OilEmpire.us presents an image of the intact Pentagon, on which is drawn the outline of post-impact damage (see Figure 6). A legend in the upper left hand corner frames and explains the damage. Free of the obscuring effects of post-impact smoke and fire, these advocates claim, the image shows that the pattern of damage is entirely consistent with the impact of a Boeing 757. Both pictures of the Pentagon address the question whether damage could have been caused by a commercial airliner, but argue for very different conclusions.
The rhetorical gestures implicit in these images also are very different. Figure 5 is strikingly dramatic. It was taken while the building was still burning and evokes the horror of the attack. Figure 6 is distanced. An image of the undamaged building relies on superimposed line drawings to carry the bulk of its argument. The images are the principal vehicles for conveying the respective advocates' conclusions about the attack and, simultaneously, themselves the subject of sustained verbal argument.

The rhetorical nuances that are possible are even more evident in visual arguments that rely on other modes of visual meaning. Figure 7 employs a visual metaphor to argue that the Bush administration is making slow progress, and leaving a trail of death and fiscal disaster, in Iraq. It does so by placing Bush's head on the body of a snail, a symbol of slowness. In support of its claim, the cartoon names three Iraqi cities (Sadr City, Najaf, Fallujah) in which the American occupation has met costly and difficult opposition. Whether or not the cartoon argument is convincing, it is rhetorically effective in a way that its verbal analogue is unlikely to be. It grabs our attention and communicates its point in an immediate and compact way—it has "punch". It appeals to *pathos* by making us laugh at Bush's expense, making his repeated claim that the United States is making progress in Iraq look ridiculous (both because a snail making such a claim would be absurd and because Bush, with his antennae, large ears, and bewildered expression, looks absurd).

Like words, images may convey arguments. In these and other contexts, they also may be the subject of argument. A photograph may be claimed to be a forgery. A claim conveyed in a political cartoon may be criticized as inaccurate, false, or misleading. The world of images and the world of arguments intersect.

**Contexts of Argument**

Our earlier article discussed the importance of three kinds of context: immediate visual context, immediate verbal context, and visual culture. Several of the articles in this collection affirm and usefully extend the role of context in visual argument, largely by building multiple
rings of “immediacy” around visual and verbal context and by showing the contested, manifold character of visual culture through close attention to challenges in interpreting particular images. Collectively they provide ample evidence that all three kinds of context are understood best as typological families rather than discrete collections of indicators that always point toward the same interpretive cues.

A better grasp on the typology of context requires, in turn, a better understanding of the way in which context is useful when interpreting the argumentative components of an image. Context can help us recognize an image as argumentative; identify its iconic, indexical, metaphorical, and other functions; and understand its enthymematic cuing. Many of the essays gathered here illustrate these uses of context.

Michelle Gibbons’ work on brain imaging examines the very different ways that fMRI images are recognized and understood in the scientific and popular press. Working explicitly within the theory of framing, Gibbons distinguishes scientists’ interest in the correlation between states of mind and neural activity evidenced (and in the cases she studies, averaged) by the visual conventions of the fMRI images from the popular leap from visual representations of the indicia of neural activity to the assumption that a state of mind is itself depicted in the fMRI printouts. The scientists’ frame—per Gibbons, a form of context—encourages them to construe fMRI images very differently than lay viewers.

In a similar vein, Kathleen Glenister Roberts shows how traditional depictions of Blackfeet dwellings were incorporated into otherwise European forms of fabric design. With these intercultural contextual cues, it is possible to interpret apparently benign, assimilative images as acts of resistance to cultural imposition, if not wholesale appropriation of dominant symbolism to serve indigenous ends. This interpretation is entirely unavailable to anyone working solely from within a Blackfeet or European tradition: precisely the lack of intercontextual apprehension (at least among the European Americans who ran Blackfeet schools) made this form of resistance possible.

Melanie McNaughton’s study of prison tattoos shows how context informs the functions of an image. She details tattooed inmates’ complicated embrace and rejection of community, their avowal of masculinity, their threat of violence, and the other socially significant meanings that tattoos convey within prison culture. Tattoos may resonate somewhat similarly inside and outside of prison, but their richer meanings draw from prison culture itself. In this context, the swastika functions not only as a symbol of hate but of probable membership in a group that might afford the inmate protection. In this way it gestures, indexically, toward a recognizable and powerful subset of prison society.

Valerie Smith’s essay treats the concept of the enthymeme in visual argument. It adduces several ways in which images can cue enthymematic participation in an argument’s meaning. Although they invoke the enthymeme per se only once, Richard Pineda and Stacey Sowards show how flag waving during immigration-related rallies in 2006 was read according to the enthymemes of nationhood mobilized in the different cultural communities involved. They show, too, how advocates alive to cultural differences in interpretation can improve their arguments’ effectiveness by deploying visual responses to unwelcome verbal characterizations.

**THREE THEMES**

Any account of visual argument must be built upon an understanding of visual meaning and the role of context. Against this background, the essays presented here emphasize three
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important themes: images and the language of argument, transgressive images and cultural context, and visual images and intercultural interpretation.

Both Smith and Kjeldsen use the traditional language of argumentation theory better to understand images, and vice versa. McNaughton and Hatfield, Hinck, and Birkholt are interested particularly in transgressive images that succeed precisely because they affront visual, narrative, and argumentative norms. Pineda and Sowards, Roberts, and Gibbons press the issue of intercultural interpretation. Pineda and Sowards, and Roberts, are concerned with ethnic cultures while Gibbons focuses on the argumentative slippage between professional (expert) and mass cultures.

All seven articles provide a robust account of the role of visual images in argument. All attend rigorously to visual and verbal contexts, and suggest a family of methods for scholars interested in extending the vocabularies of visual argument. And all, of course, pose questions for further study. We are pleased to collect their work for the second special issue of Argumentation and Advocacy devoted to this emerging field.

WORKS CITED


