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Commentary on Slade

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I write this response to Christina Slade with some trepidation. As an argumentation theorist at an argumentation conference, I feel compelled to argue with the paper I have been asked to comment on. This is something I find difficult to do because I am in substantial agreement with Slade's views and the arguments she forwards in favour of them.

In light of my predicament, I shall keep my comments brief and restrict myself to two remarks—the first a note about other work on visual argumentation; the second a suggestion about the future of such research. In the process, I hope to comment on the past, present and future of theories of visual argument.

It is important to begin by noting that Slade's views are not unique, and that a very similar position has been defended by a number of other argumentation theorists. They include David Birdsell (1996), J. Anthony Blair (1996) and myself (Groarke 1996). I don't point this out because I think it undermines the significance of Slade's paper, but because I think such work could provide a richer context for her own contribution to the debate. The significance of this contribution is assured so long as argumentation theory and associated disciplines continue to pay scant attention to the visual side of argument.

Once one accepts Slade's basic claim that visual persuasion can be understood in standard argumentative terms, we need to begin constructing a more detailed theory of visual argument. Such a theory must be founded on the basic insight that visuals are much less arbitrary and much more calculated than usually imagined, and not the pure creation of irrational artistic genius or an unexplainable inspiration of the Muses. Once we recognize that this is so, we must further our understanding of visual persuasion by systematically distinguishing the different techniques and themes which can be used to construct—and deconstruct—visual arguments.

One finds some initial moves in this direction in Slade's account of amplification, and in the example that begins her paper. In the latter case, women are visually transformed in an advertisement because of the underwear they are said to wear. We can begin to better understand and assess the logic of such an argument by recognizing other instances in which advertisements are founded on the theme of transformation. In a comparable case I have used as an example elsewhere, an American advertisement for vodka shows an enormous bottle of vodka pouring out its contents over a sleepy rural town. Though the bulk of the town remains a somewhat dreary landscape, the place where the vodka rains down has been transformed into an exciting downtown metropolis, complete with bars and night life. The point is entirely obvious—that drinking this particular brand of vodka can transform one's sleepy humdrum life into the exciting times one might associate with Manhattan.

Once we recognize that this vodka advertisement and Slade's example are, despite their very different visuals, two instances of one advertising genre, we can begin to chart the structure of this genre. Among other things, this requires a detailed account of: (i) the visual vocabulary that make such visuals possible; (ii) the argumentative structure of the arguments they forward; (iii) the ways in which such arguments should be assessed; and (iv) the weaknesses that tend to

characterize them (though we should not rule out the possibility that there may exist good arguments of this sort).

One might illustrate what these four steps might require in practice by considering simply the first: the visual vocabulary that makes visual persuasion possible. By visual vocabulary I mean those visual motifs that are used to visually convey meaning in argumentative debate. As the visual vocabulary used in "transformation" advertisements is quite complex, I will use a simpler illustration here.

One example that can usefully illustrate how visual vocabulary functions is the famous nose which is associated with the children's story of Pinocchio, the legendary wooden puppet who is magically turned into a real boy. The nose is notable because it grows "sometimes to absurd extents" whenever Pinocchio is lying. This is one feature of the Pinocchio story which is memorably captured in the well known Walt Disney movie, which features a Pinocchio who is at times afflicted with an absurdly long pencil nose that at one point functions as a roost for a bird. In the context of the history of visual argument, the story of Pinocchio is of some significance, for it has made a long extended nose a symbol for lying which is regularly exploited in visual depictions that are intended as contributions to argumentative discussion.

The following are a few examples of the way in which this particular visual expression has been employed in argumentative debate.

1) In 1968, Paul Szep drew a famous depiction of Lyndon B. Johnson for the *Boston Globe*, portraying Johnson as a wooden Pinocchio puppet with an absurdly long nose as he attests that he will not send "American Boys" to Vietnam.

2) More recently, in the wake of the Monica Lewinsky scandal, President Clinton's notoriety for lying has repeatedly been parodied in cartoons and photographs that depict him with an extended nose. One commercial adaptation of this theme was the—Clinton Growing Nose Watch, which featured a nose that "actually triples in length every ten seconds," offered for sale on the internet, at:

3) <http://www.callawaywatches.com/clintonpin.html>.

4) 3. In 1999, the Canadian novelist Farley Mowat was presented on the front cover of *Saturday Night* magazine with an upturned Pinocchio nose when its lead story criticized him for inventing stories he presented as fact.

5) 4. In April of 2000, the South African cricket legend Hansie Cronje, who admitted that he had not been—entirely honest—about a match fixing scandal, was featured in a caricature on the front cover of the newspaper *Sowetan*, his nose turned into a Pinocchio nose in the shape of a cricket bat with wads of dollar bills attached to it.

6) 5. During the 2000 American election, the AFL-CIO attacked soon to be President George Bush, claiming that he violated a promise to be more supportive of labour. In the course of their campaign, they distributed buttons denouncing Bush, featuring a cartoon that extended his nose in Pinocchio-like fashion.

As these and many other examples demonstrate, the Pinocchio nose has, within the world of visuals, become a standard way to express the claim that someone is a liar. Combined with other visuals—or with verbal text—the nose can function as an integral part of an argument in the premise-conclusion sense. In such cases it may point (sometimes literally) to some conclusion, or function as a conclusion which is established by other claims which surround it. Paul Szep's cartoon of Lyndon B. Johnson is a good example, for it ingeniously presents the reasons for believing that Johnson is a Pinocchio-like liar, on the one hand textually -- by quoting Johnson's claim that he would not send Americans to Vietnam; and visually   by calibrating Johnson's nose so that it reflects the additional troops sent in 1964, 65, 66, 67 and 68. One might summarize the cartoon's argument as the claim that Johnson is, like Pinocchio, a habitual liar, for he claimed that he would not send Americans to Vietnam but sent more troops during each year of his Presidency. In the context in which the ad appeared—during early campaigning for an upcoming presidential election—one could assign the further conclusion that Johnson was not fit to run for the Presidency again.

One important lesson we can learn from Pinocchio's nose is the extent to which visual and verbal means of communication are often intertwined. For as prevalent as it is in visual debate, Pinocchio's nose is equally significant in verbal discourse, where references to it carry the same implications. The following are a few examples:

7) An issue of California's *Special Education Observer* with a "Pinocchio's Nose Department" which poses the question "How low will special education's special interests go to mislead the public?" (1997/98)

8) An article from the *Manchester Guardian* on the last American election, announcing that the "question of the day is who has Pinocchio's nose." As the article explains, "Jim Nicholson, chairman of the Republican National Committee, is trying to graft the nose on Al Gore and Rupert Murdoch's New York Post has been foremost in obliging. More or less every day, it runs a caricature of Al with Nose in a sequence of scoreboxes, each purporting to document "Al's Lies". By Saturday, they were up to No 14." (Evans 2001, 1)

9) An article in the Saskatchewan *Ensign* (Santis 2000, 1) which complains that the Saskatchewan Minister of Economic Development Janice MacKinnon "cannot see beyond her growing Pinocchio's nose and realize that Saskatchewan is in a dire economic predicament."

Some of the issues that tie together the visual and verbal depiction of Pinocchio's nose are reflected in issues that arose in Florida after a retired naval Commander, James W. Dyer, was allegedly turned away from the polls in 1996 because he wore a "Clinocchio" t-shirt that featured "a caricature of Clinton with a long extended nose reminiscent of Pinocchio, the lovable Disney cartoon character whose probosis grew at roughly the same rate as his lies" (Finkelstein 1998, 1). Dyer subsequently sued the Orange County supervisor of elections, claiming that he had been refused permission to vote, and that this action had violated his right to free speech.

This is not the place to decide this particular case, especially as the facts were in dispute, but it does usefully make the point that saying something with a picture that features Pinocchio's nose is a way of saying something that contributes to political debate in a way that is analogous to verbal claims. As such, depictions of this sort do need to be treated in much the way that we

treat verbal claims. In the present context I will end by saying that this is true, not only in the context of discussions of politics and political rights, but also when we consider such discussions from the point of view of argumentation theory. Slade's paper and her insights are a useful move in this direction.

References

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