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Virtues of visual argumentation: How pictures make the importance and strength of an argument salient

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ABSTRACT: Some forms of argumentation are best performed through words. However, there are also some forms of argumentation that benefit most from being presented visually. Thus, in this paper I will examine the virtues of visual argumentation. What makes visual argumentation distinct from verbal argumentation? What can be considered especially beneficial of visual argumentation, in relation to both effect and ethics?

KEYWORDS: image, picture, presence, rhetoric, semiotic, strength, thick description, visual argumentation, weight

1. INTRODUCTION

These days most argumentation and rhetoric researchers believe that visual argumentation is both a possibility and an actuality (cf. Blair, 1996). So do I. Leo Groarke, for instance, has illustrated in several texts how visuals perform argumentation (e.g. 1996, cf. Birdsell & Groarke, 2007) and illustrated how the key components in Stephen Toulmin's argumentation model can be expressed in images (Groarke, 2009). However, we also have to acknowledge that argumentation through visual media is different from argumentation through words. Thus, we can assume argumentation through words will have some benefits, and argumentation through visuals will have other benefits.

In this paper I examine the virtues of visual argumentation. Because of the limitation of time and words, however, I shall constrain myself to examining one central aspect of the virtues of visual argumentation, namely the potential of pictures to provide presence and "thick descriptions" of issues thereby making the importance and strength of the argument salient.

2. RHETORICAL ARGUMENTATION

It is important to make clear that I am discussing rhetorical argumentation. By this I mean argumentation from a speaker intended to persuade the addressed audience by appealing to ethos, logos and pathos (cf. Tindale, 2004). This is what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca understand as informal reasoning intended to obtain or reinforce the adherence of an audience (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969).

However, as Christian Kock has pointed out, rhetorical argumentation is also, perhaps primarily, defined with reference to the domain of the issues being discussed. In this view, following Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the domain of rhetorical argumentation is centred "on the choice of action in the civic sphere". The domain of rhetorical argumentation thus "centrally includes decisions about specific actions" (Kock, 2009, p. 61, 65).

I am concerned with rhetorical argumentation in the sense of providing good reasons for actions or evaluations, which means that I am not primarily examining arguments and propositions about truth or probability. I am also not attempting to determine that there is such a thing as pure visual arguments, even though I believe that this is both a possibility and an actuality. Most of the rhetorical communication we encounter today has a visually dominated multimodal form. So, if we are to understand rhetorical argumentation in general, we have to understand the visual and multimodal aspects of the communication. Visual argumentation, or multimodal argumentation, may come in many different forms of expression (paintings, cartoons, signs, tables, charts, diagrams and other forms of images), but in this paper I will limit myself to talking about presentational pictures and photography.

3. THIN PREMISES, THICK DESCRIPTIONS

In order to understand visual argumentation we should start by acknowledging an important semiotic difference between images and words. According to semiotics pictures only have one level of articulation, whereas verbal language has two levels (cf. Barthes, 1977; Eco, 1979; Chandler, 2006). The first level – the *primary articulation* – consists of the smallest meaningful units available, such as words. The second level of articulation – called the *secondary articulation* – consists of elements that lack meaning in themselves. Examples of these elements – which are also referred to as *figures* or *minimal functional units* – could be phonemes and letters. A letter has form, but no content. Because it does not refer to a specific meaning it is a signifier without a signified.

When we turn to pictures it becomes very difficult – probably impossible – to distinguish between these two levels. What might be the non-signifying minimal functional units ("figures") in pictures? Spots? Lines? Or? If a line is such a unit, when does it change from being a figure to becoming a meaningful sign? Exactly when does a line becomes, for instance, a nose, or and eye or the profile of Alfred Hitchcock? Does it make a difference if the line is thick or thin, black, grey or colored? In comparison to verbal language pictures do not allow for these kinds of distinctions between pertinent and optional (facultative) traits; meaning traits that are necessary for creating a message and traits that are not strictly necessary. Because the language of images does not consist of such well-defined units, it is, semiotically speaking, weakly coded (Eco, 1979, p. 213).

In contrast to this verbal language is strongly coded. If we encounter the sentence "Peter is reading a book", we will respond in a conceptual, general and abstract way. We might mentally construct a sort of average and general – and seemingly unambiguous – conception of the event "a person by the name of Peter is reading a book". We do this without knowing what Peter looks like, which book he

reads, whether he is sitting or standing, if the book is big or small, what it looks like or what its name is. The sentence provides no information about all this. In this way verbal utterances provide, in principle, *precise, but thin information.*

With pictures such as photographs this is different. A picture of Peter reading, shows us not only what Peter looks like, but also what he is wearing, if he is sitting or standing, what the book looks like, what's behind him and in front of him. Furthermore, the photograph is necessarily taken from a certain angle, with a certain distance, in a certain light with a certain lens. Such conditions contribute in creating the meaning – and thus the potential argumentative dimensions – of the picture. All these innumerable visual details provide a *thick and rich description* of the situation. They provide the picture with *plenitude* (cf. Barthes, 1977, 18f.). We may say that pictures, in principle, are *imprecise, but rich in information*.

Now, this seem to confirm that we cannot really make arguments using pictures, because it becomes very difficult to determine and isolate the propositional elements in an image. In comparison to verbal language pictures lack clear syntactical or grammatical rules for coordinating the different elements of an utterance. I have argued elsewhere that this does not prevent an ability to make argument (Kjeldsen, 2012a, c), and will not pursue this at length. The aim here is first and foremost to examine differences between visual and verbal argumentation and to try to establish what might be the virtues of visual argumentation. Therefore I shall restrict myself to claiming that visual argumentation is possible because argumentation is performative communication action; and since pictures can perform the role of enunciation and communicative action, they can also perform argumentation.

Pictures, I suggest, have the potential to argue because they can offer a rhetorical enthymematic process in which something is condensed or omitted, and, as a consequence, it is up to the spectator to provide the unspoken premises. Such rational condensation in pictures, then, is the visual counterpart of verbal argumentation. In order for the viewer to be able to reconstruct the implied arguments, the viewer may draw upon knowledge of the context of the picture, such as in the circumstances of the current situation (Kjeldsen, 2007). At other times – particularly in advertising – the viewer's reconstruction of arguments may be enabled through visual tropes and figures, which help delimit the possible interpretations, thus allowing for the evocation and creation of implied arguments (Kjeldsen, 2012a).

Because of the difficulty in distinguishing between different meaning making units pictures "are *comparatively* open-textured, with meaning *more* dependent on the internal relations among their components (shapes, colors, etc.) and *less* governed by agreed-upon meanings of each component in isolation (definitions of terms) and codified rules governing the relations among these components (grammar and syntax)" (Lake & Pickering, 1998, pp. 79-80). In spite of attempts to create a grammar of visual communication (e.g. Kress & van Leuwen, 1996), the nature of presentational communication does not really allow a proper vocabulary for meaning-making elements in images (cf. Langer, 1980, p. 95).

This means that context is essential in determining the meaning and rhetorical agency of images. Furthermore, we should be aware that argumentation

is a process, a communicative action between people, which means that specific arguments always must be understood in terms of the ongoing debate or discussion they are part of. A rhetorical argument never exists in itself, it is never presented in a vacuum, but it is always part of human interaction, some kind of communication; if not, then it is simply not a rhetorical argument.

The contextual, situational and procedural circumstances mean that in spite of the lack of clear rules of visual grammar and syntax and double articulation, we actually *can* use images to perform argumentation. Furthermore, *because of their ability for plenitude* pictures have the potential to impart certain communicative values and virtues to argumentation. One of these virtues is the semantic richness of pictures. The semantic richness of pictures such as photographs, notes Roland Barthes, has a feeling of "analogical plentitude" so great that verbal description is literally impossible. There are so many details in a photograph that it would require a lengthy book to try to describe it, and still you would not succeed, because to describe a picture is "not simply to be imprecise or incomplete, it is to change structures, to signify something different to what is shown" (Barthes, 1977, p. 18f.).

So, if we seek a rhetorical understanding of pictorial argumentation, we cannot simply extract the verbal lines of reasoning, transform them into propositions and present them in argumentation models (cf. Blair, 2004). There is a difference between the two modes of representation. Pictures are able to provide vivid presence (evidentia), realism and immediacy in perception (cf. Kjeldsen, 2012b), which is difficult to achieve with words only. Pictures are rich in visual information, because they provide innumerable details for the eye. We may say that pictorial representation has the ability of performing a sort of "thick description" (cf. Geertz, 1973), which in an instant may provide a full sense of an actual situation and an embedded narrative connected to certain lines of reasoning. This visual richness and semantic "thickness" disappears if we reduce the pictorial representation to nothing more than "thin" propositions.

4. AMENDMENT ONE

Let me illustrate the point with a picture that was part of the website and campaign "every1against1" (See illustration 1):

Illustration 1: We serve married couples only (Ad from "every1against1" campaign)

"every1against1" was an initiative from 2011 trying to persuade the people of North Carolina to vote against Amendment One, which would change the state constitution to say that "[m]arriage between a man and a woman is the only domestic legal union". The website was an important tool for the campaign (see illustration 2). At the website under a caption saying "Separate is never equal", the copy text reads:

> Simply put, Amendment One is an unnecessary, thinly veiled attack on civil rights — a gross injustice to North Carolina's unmarried couples, children, families, seniors, women and businesses.
>   If Amendment One passes, what's next? It would mark the first time the North Carolina constitution was amended in order to discriminate against specific individuals. This flies in the face of the state's tradition of amending the constitution to increase equality.

Illustration 2: Screen shot from website "every1against1"

Looking at the image it should be obvious that this is an analogical argument, comparing the possible consequences of adopting the amendment with segregation. A reconstruction of the argument would be something like this:

Claim: Vote against Amendment One
Backing: Adopting Amendment One will establish a kind of discrimination similar to the racial segregation that used to exist in the US
Warrant: You should vote against discrimination that is similar to the racial segregation that used to exist in the US.

Now, the image in itself does not really give any support to the claim that Amendment One is a kind of discrimination. It does not tell precisely what in the amendment is similar to the racial segregation previously practiced in the US. Nonetheless, it still puts forward an argument for voting against the amendment.

One of the main rhetorical assets of the picture, however, is the evocation of certain circumstances and feelings in connection with the idea – and historical period – of racial segregation in the U.S. The picture offers us the experience of standing outside a cafeteria not being allowed to enter. Aesthetically, the dark, closed front of the window, covering the entire picture frame, creates this blocking. We see no door that we might enter though; there is no opening of any kind into the cafeteria, and no contact can be made with the man sitting inside. He is in; we are out. The darkness of windowpane signals dark times, while simultaneously making the white letters stand out. Even though the reflexions of the cars in the window make us aware that this is present time, the letters on the window has a font

reminiscent of the 1950s, thereby fusing the segregation of the past with the world of the present.

It may be argued that even though the image has evocative power (cf. Blair, 2004, pp. 49-50), this does not constitute argumentation. However, looking closely at the image it becomes obvious that the aesthetic elements of the picture are more than just superficial style and flavour; the visual presentation is an essential part of the argument. In fact, it is the aesthetic elements of the picture that establishes the argumentative comparison between the historical then and now. Without these elements, there would be no comparison, and hence no argument. What I wish to examine in more detail, however, is how the visual presentation and style contributes to a presence and realism that gives the argument importance and strength. The "thick depiction" of the image invites a vivid realisation of what it was like during segregation, thereby making present a thicker understanding of the consequences – and the society – that Amendment One could lead to. In this way the picture helps provide a full sense of the undesirability of consequences. It makes us aware of the gravity of the issue, and the importance and urgency of voting no. So, inherent in the picture is a reinforcement of the argument, displaying its importance, strength, and urgency.

5. IMPORTANCE IS IMPORTANT

As we know, there are different ways of understanding and evaluating argumentation. In general we can say that *acceptability*, *relevance* and *sufficiency* are the recognized dimensions of argument evaluation (cf. Kock, 2007a, p. 99; van Eemeren et al, 2009, p. 178 ff.). However, in practical reasoning and argumentation when arguing about *the preferable* (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969), we seek the adherence of an audience in matters of proposals, evaluations and actions. In this kind of rhetorical reasoning some arguments will be – and should be – preferred, not because they refute other arguments or because of having acceptability, relevance or suffiency; but because they are simply be more *important*.[1]

Importance is not about inference from premise to conclusion; it goes beyond validity in a single argument. Instead, importance is similar to the concepts of weight and strength in practical reasoning. Both of these concepts refer to arguments' "impact of a certain strength to a decision-maker's decision" about a proposal (cf. Kock, 2007a, p. 99f.). An audience may deem one argument more influential that another because they find that ethical considerations outweigh economical ones – or the other way around.[2]

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[1] We may also say that they have more *weight* or *strength*.

[2] Even though Christian Kock has used the term "weight" in some publications (e.g. 2007b), he expresses resistance to using this term in other publications, because it seems to indicate that everything can be measured on the same scale, thereby neglecting the intersubjectivity and multidimensionality of rhetorical reasoning (Kock, 2003, 2007a, 2009). Kock now seem to prefer the term *argument strength*. Unfortunately, Toulmin (1958) uses strength as an equivalent with soundness, validity and cogency, which does not denote the same as Kock's use of strength.

So, strength and importance signifies the attribution of value to arguments in particular situations. In arguing about whether or not we should use the seatbelts when driving a car, we can make valid arguments both when claiming that wearing seatbelts saves lives, and claiming that wearing seatbelts is a little inconvenient. For most people, however, saving lives would be more important than inconvenience. Therefore, this argument has more strength. It is the more persuasive argument, and – as a matter of fact – it is also the more ethical argument.[3]

We find a similar kind of thinking in the beginning of the chapter about "The Interaction of Arguments" in *The New Rhetoric*. Here Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca provides an insight, which is too often overlooked: arguments are in constant interaction. There is interaction, they write:

> between various arguments put forward, interaction between the arguments and the overall argumentative situation, between the arguments and their conclusion, and, finally between arguments occurring in the discourse and those that are about the discourse (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 460)

When we take this perspective we see more clearly that the rhetorical and ethical value of an argument does not only lie in the movement from premises to conclusion. Validity and soundness is just a necessity for the argument to be weighed or have its importance evaluated. In practical reasoning the rhetorical and ethical value of an argument lies in the importance and the urgency of the issue and the strength of the proposition in relation to the audience.

This is relevant to visual argumentation, because pictures are especially good at providing an argument with a vivid presence that makes the importance and strength of the argument salient. In *The New Rhetoric* Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca describe presence as something that "acts directly on our sensibility", it makes present what is actually absent, but something that the speaker "considers important to his argument or, by making them more present, to enhance the value of some of the elements of which one has actually been conscious" (1969, p. 116f.). They consider presence to be "of paramount importance for the technique of argumentation" (1969, p. 119). The ad opposing Amendment One illustrates one way that such visual presence is connected to argumentation techniques. The photograph creates a comparison, an analogy between times of segregation and the situation if Amendment One is adopted. Analogy is a form of reasoning that functions to establish the structure of reality. In order to act as proof, and not as ornamentation, "it must attain presence; it must become 'real' and urgent to the auditor or reader" (Murphy, 1994, p. 4). Thus, realism and urgency are key elements of presence. By evoking a sense of the situation for African-Americans during

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[3] I am aware that many argumentation scholars are deeply sceptical of notions such as strength, weight, and importance in argumentation theory. Because of the element of subjectivity in this kind of argumentation appraisal, some theorists label this kind of thinking relativistic. However, as Kock has argued, there is necessarily "inherent audience-relativity of argumentation over issues where values are involved" (Kock, 2007b, p. 189). Calling an argumentation theory that takes strength, importance and values into considerations relativistic "does not make the facts it describes less true or more avoidable" (Kock, 2007a, p. 105).

segregation the ad gives presence to the argument and provides it with importance and urgency.

So, an important rhetorical function of the photograph is to argue for the severity of the problem and the urgency of the situation. The visual aesthetics of the image function as an integral part of the argumentation that we theoretically may render verbally as thin propositions. It creates presence and evokes the importance and urgency of the situation. In this way the argumentation of the image help make people understand the seriousness and importance of the issue at hand. Furthermore, the more severe the consequences will be if we do not follow the advice, the more reasonable it is to act in accordance with the claim put forward.

Presence and importance has special significance in debates about social issues such as same-sex marriage, abortion, welfare, smoking, and gun control. Here good and valid arguments can be made for each side. Two arguments on different sides of an issue may have equal *acceptability*, *relevance* and *sufficiency*, and still we have to make a decision. In such cases the most reasonable – as well as the most ethical – thing to do, is to be swayed by the most important argument.

6. A FULLER SENSE OF ISSUES AND CONSEQUENCES IN ORDER TO MAKE A CHOICE

One might argue *for* the amendment banning same-sex marriage, because rejecting it would lead to practical problems. This was the reasoning put forward by the house majority leader of the North Carolina senate, who argued that gay couples married in New York will move to North Carolina and seek legal rights: "They're going to bring with them their same-sex marriages. They're going to want to get divorced" and have custody issues decided, he said to *newsobserver.com*. "We're not equipped to handle that."[4]

His argument may be reconstructed in this way:

Claim 1:   Vote for Amendment One
Backing 1:   A rejection will lead to practical problems that we are
                 not equipped to handle
Warrant 1:   One should not vote for something leading to practical
                 problems that one is not equipped to handle

Claim 2/Backing 1: A rejection will lead to practical problems that we
                 are not equipped to handle
Backing 2:   Gay couples will move here and seek legal rights,
                 bringing same-sex marriages, getting divorces and have
                 custody issues decide.
Warrant 2:   We (the state of North Carolina) is not equipped to
                 handle the practical problems of all the people seeking
                 legal rights, getting divorces and having custody issues.

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[4] http://www.newsobserver.com/2011/09/13/1483783/house-oks-amendment-banning-gay.html

This argument is perfectly valid. Just like the argument against the amendment is perfectly valid. So, both arguments may be correct: an adoption may lead to a kind of discrimination similar to the racial segregation that used to exist in the US, and a rejection may lead to practical problems. However, this does not make the two arguments equal – assuming that they are both valid and correct. If we cannot have both, then what should we choose: discrimination, but no practical problems; or practical problems but no discrimination? My aim is not to decide which is the most desirable, respectable or tenable position in this specific case, but to illustrate that besides the criteria determining the intrinsic soundness or validity of an argument, the importance and strength of an argument is equally important in rhetorical argumentation. In the presented examples I suspect that most people will find the humanistic aspect of avoiding discrimination more important and desirable than the aspect of avoiding practical problems.

Presenting thick descriptions that provide importance to the argument is exactly what pictures such as photographs do well. By evoking vivid experiences of the kind of discrimination that the amendment might lead to, we get a better sense of the consequences and hence are provided a better and more persuasive argument. This, I suggest, may not only increase persuasion, but also the ethical significance of the argument. To put it in other words: an argument that neglects the full understanding of situation or consequence is as unethical as an argument that exaggerates the presentation of a situation or the consequences of an action.

We find similar examples of the virtue of thick descriptions in visual argumentation in other rhetorical messages about social issues, where an understanding of the gravity, urgency, or consequences is essential to the argumentation. The (in)famous and controversial antiabortion film the *Silent Scream* from 1985 is a good example of this (cf. Lake & Pickering 1998). It depicts an abortion process via ultrasound 12 weeks after conception. The aim was to refute that the fetus is not a human being, deserving of legal protection, and to prove visually that the fetus is instead an unborn 'child', thereby claiming that abortion must be murder (Lake & Pickering 1998). In this film the ultrasound images functions as more than just evocation. They are the central part of a visual argumentative attempt to determine and define the fetus as a child. It is the presence and thick description created by the images that functions as backing for the claim *and* gives the argument importance and urgency: If what we are removing ("killing") is really a little child, then it is imperative that we stop this procedure.

The visuals work in a similar argumentative way in this Australian gun control print ad, which was published as a two page spread (see illustration 3 and 4 below).
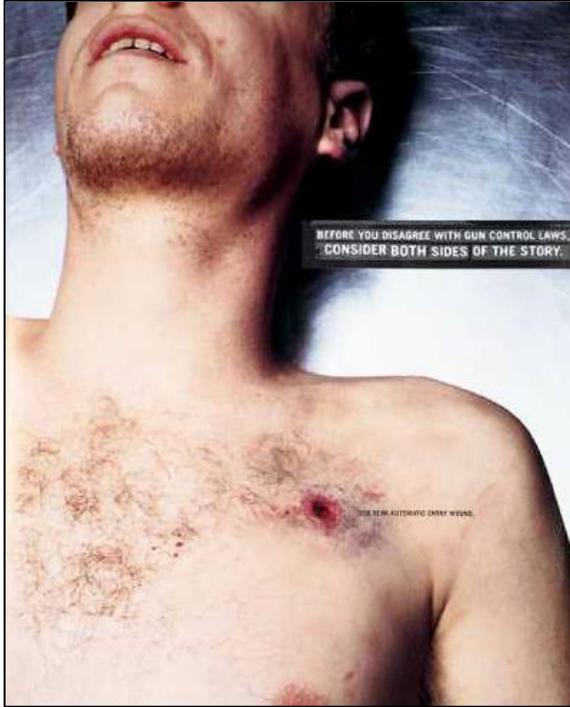
Illustration 3: Page 1 of gun control ad   Illustration 4: Page 2 of gun control ad

By showing the actual damage a gun does to human beings the ad attempts to give the consequences of gun violence presence, thereby making the argument for control more important.

We find the same kind of argumentative contribution in an anti-smoking television ad from the U.S. government organization CDC (see illustration 5 below).

Illustration 5: CDCs anti smoking ad with Terrie Hall

The ad begins with the text "A tip from a former smoker", and then presents a high school picture of the young and beautiful Terrie Hall. At the same time we hear the strange hoarse voice of an old lady saying: "I am Terrie, and I used to be a smoker. I want to give you some tips about getting ready in the morning".

We now see the worn out, ragged face of Terrie, who has lost her hair, and is forced to hold her thumb on the open hole she got in her throat after her tracheotomy surgery. Terrie puts in her false teeth, puts on a blonde wig and affixes a hands-free device to her tracheotomy hole to help her speak. The ad closes with the text: "Smoking causes immediate damage to your body" (see video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zWB4dLYChM).

If this is what smoking may actually lead to, then it would be neither accurate nor correct just to say that smoking is bad for you health. Instead, it would be more accurate to say that smoking can severely damage your health, and we would be even closer to the truth by actually seeing the images. When making arguments about smoking – as well as other issues – the degree of risk and damage should be an essential part of the argument, because this is in fact a reasonable and important consideration. And pictures may demonstrate this very well.

To sum up: Pictures may have several functions in argumentation. Here I have primarily described their ability to provide thick descriptions of issues and consequences, thereby making an argument important, and hence potentially both more persuasive and ethical. This, I believe, is a significant virtue of visual argumentation, which we should acknowledge and examine further.

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