

Jun 3rd, 9:00 AM - Jun 6th, 5:00 PM

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Categorizing Visual Argumentation Processes: Visual commonplaces in civic culture

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ABSTRACT: This essay argues that a theoretical framework for understanding visual argumentation should ideally account for the “etymology,” “syntax,” and “field” of visual arguments and offers an elaboration of these concepts. It defends the notion of a visual argument’s “etymology” or historical sense and advocates inquiry that accounts for how the reception of particular images has been conditioned by the production of prior visual arguments.

KEYWORDS: digital manipulation, figures, John Kerry, visual argument, visual deception



1. INTRODUCTION

What argumentative function does this unusual photograph of Lyndon Johnson lying in bed have?¹ The bed-ridden president commands the attention of all surrounding him; one apparent doctor manipulates something near Johnson’s chest—most likely a bandage covering the president’s abdominal incision—as another oversees this process while

¹ This image is believed to be in the public domain. It is generally agreed that the initial circulation of this image began at <http://truthabouttrinity.blogspot.com>. The image achieved its prominence when it was presented and on the PBS show *Bill Moyers Journal*, April 25, 2008.

appearing to inform the president of the condition of his scar; the gap between his index finger and thumb appears to approximate the length of the scar. The technician directly behind the president attends to his fluids and a largely occluded and non-descript observer passively monitors this interaction. Of the four figures immediately surrounding the president, the pair immediately behind him are the most obscured. Standing at the far right of the immediate entourage is Johnson's all but occluded press secretary, Bill Moyers. In front of him and immediately behind the president stands an obscured Cardio-Pulmonary technician, largely blocked by the iv bag. The technician's lower body is hidden behind covered by Johnson's bed, and his upper body is bisected by the pole holding the iv, but his bare left arm shows enough of his skin to reveal his African-American ethnicity.

This obscure image was thrust into the public domain late in the democratic primary campaign, April 25, 2008, to rebut the extensive criticism of a few excerpted passages selectively culled from the sermons of Jeremiah Wright, the African-American man standing directly behind Johnson. (Bill Moyers Journal). Because he was Barak Obama's preacher and because the selections purportedly contained racist (anti-white) and treasonous (anti-American) statements, Obama faced tremendous pressure to condemn Wright. Just as the reverend's immediate efforts to defend himself only marginalized him further, Obama's efforts to distance himself from the reverend were largely unsuccessful. Ultimately the democratic candidate publicly rebuked the reverend in one of his most important speeches to date, "On A More Perfect Union," and it was during this time that an image of the ailing LBJ was circulated as a rebuttal to the accusations rendered against the reverend. How does an image of a man from 1966 acquit him of accusations of preaching hate forty years later?

To begin with, the narrative setting of the image demonstrates the extensive care being administered; its semantic meaning is derived from the shared assumption that a supine patient is vulnerable and deserving of both attention and sympathy. The intensity of this scene is amplified by the four personnel along the perimeter of the image; two more medical personnel wearing white coats and looking down at something (his charts?) and behind them lie a pair of security agents monitoring a strange device. This image presumptively enjoins the audience to muster concern for the patient, and hope and trust for the people administering the care. Just as the syntax of a sentence is broadly oriented around subjects, verbs, and objects, images typically position and emphasize subject, object, and verb. In this case, the subject is Wright and the image communicates that Reverend Wright was entrusted with the responsibility to care for a standing president's life at a time when the president was quite vulnerable. This image's emergence and circulation at a time when Obama was distancing himself from the reverend and when public opinion had turned against the reverend recast Wright as a man who had been entrusted with the fate of the nation's figure-head, by metonym, with the nation itself. Wright performed a figurative loyalty oath, a pledge of allegiance. No mention of this image was made in the American print media, and it is doubtful that a full dissemination of this image could have led the American public to acquit Wright of his more recent "racist" behaviour. Wright's unapologetic condemnation and derision of the media produced reluctant testimony that left him with few public supporters. Even the most cursory reading of the ways this image engaged in a rebuttal depends upon a larger framework of visual argumentation.

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2. OUTLINE OF A THEORY OF VISUAL RHETORIC

A coherent and systematic theory of visual argument has not been developed, despite the extensive interest in visual argumentation scholarship, made evident both by the increasing volume of published studies and by the increasing level of sophistication applied to these studies. Such a theory should address three particular relationships between visual images and cultures of argumentation, namely the “semantics,” “syntax,” and “pragmatics” of visual arguments, roughly speaking, their meaning, form, and use. Each area, “meaning,” “form,” and “use” contributes to the dynamism of the visual argument form, and although a blanket transference of these linguistic concepts to the field of visual studies risks overshadowing some of the more notable features of the visual argumentative form, they secure a wide enough scope to understand the depth and range of visual argumentation.

Before moving forward, I would like to acknowledge that the individual notions I am putting forth are not the most ground-breaking. Scholars have conducted case studies of visual argument that have addressed the various ways that visual arguments operate. The notion of visual semantics has been subject to the most extensive analysis. In general, such discussions address the ways in which an image either points to a material condition as a visual flag, or to the ways in which it figuratively embodies these conditions through the visual form of a metaphor, symbol, or archetype (Birdsell & Groarke 2007). Visual images have also been studied *in situ* to give argument scholars an appreciation for their argumentative role. Unfortunately, many of these pragmatic analyses have been presented in lieu of more systematic discussions of the visual’s argumentative form (e.g. Smith 2007; Lake & Pickering 1998). Of the three broad conceptual domains that I am outlining in this paper, the domain of visual syntax have been the least favorably received. For instance, Anthony Blair has contended that the very symbolic nature of visual images places them in contradistinction from language, noting that in this symbolic domain “[t]here is no grammar, just signs and symbols: conventionalized images.” (Blair, p. 96). More recently however, Groarke has outlined the ways that visual images can function within the Toulmin system of argumentation (Groarke 2009). Though not specifically focused on syntax, an analysis of the intersections between the Toulmin model and visual images necessarily addresses the ways images structure relationships between concepts to formulate complex ideas like arguments. Such discussions then augment our understanding of the ways images function as data, accounting for the syntactic processes that enable visual images to articulate intricate argumentative processes. Stated simply, argument scholars have laid the groundwork for a more systemic discussion of the various argumentative modes assumed by the visual forms and it is my hope that this essay prompts and advances that discussion.

Despite their resonance of realism and the depiction of particulars, photographic images are latent with figurative potential, and accordingly, an appreciation for all figurative language contributes to our understanding of how images communicate. Understanding an image’s “syntax” by an application of linguistic grammatical terms is limited since images resist being entirely reduced to verbal forms, but a sense of syntax, predicated on the conceptual dynamics within any given image gives a critical framework for understanding the image. Traditionally, rhetorical figures have been studied as a

coherent structural accounting of verbal forms, also offer a way to describe the wide range of abstract thought processes and conceptual relationships produced by images.

The bulk of this essay examines how manipulated pictures can contribute to our appreciation of visual argumentation. Instead of dismissing such images as simple forgeries, argumentation scholars might appreciate their underlying argumentative purpose. In fact, their falsity does not alter the fact that such images make defeasible arguments. The reality of a false image is irrelevant to its probative power, an indication that the interactions and relationships conveyed by the image possesses an autonomous argumentative force. The circulation of such images during controversies underscores their argumentative cogency and strength. False images do not function to attest truths, they function to advance argumentative positions. Their argumentative function can be clarified by investigation centering upon the argumentative relationship binding such images to the wider agonistic context.

Compared to other methods of message production, photographic images have traditionally held a privileged status due both to the richness of the visual medium and to the presumed truthful relationship between its image and the events it portrays. Although the creation of deceptive images has been possible since the origin of photographic techniques, the accessibility of photo editing software such as Adobe Photoshop™ has greatly facilitated this potential to deceive. Distorted and manipulated images will likely gain prominence since the means for rapidly producing, replicating, and disseminating these images are becoming more accessible to more people. In short, we can see that digital images are becoming increasingly prevalent in a variety of forms, that the diffusion of digital technology has outpaced attempts to standardize rules for processing digital images in a wide range of areas, and that technological innovations have increased the ease with which digital images become altered and manipulated. Given the likelihood of further replications and disseminations of fabricated images in newscasts, as newscasts report on the widely diffuse digital pictures and images found on chatrooms and blogs, their argumentative function needs to be understood. The incorporation of digital manipulation in a wide range of image production industries suggests that digital images are understood less as faithful representations of the real and more as standpoints, propositions, assumptions, and arguments. These altered conceptions are most evident in the argumentative context surrounding the recent visual distortion of John Kerry, during the 2004 presidential race.

Fonda Speaks To Vietnam Veterans At Anti-War Rally



Actress And Anti-War Activist Jane Fonda Speaks to a crowd of Vietnam Veterans as Activist and former Vietnam Vet John Kerry (LEFT) listens and prepares to speak next concerning the war in Vietnam (AP Photo)

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3. THE CASE OF HANOI JOHN

The anti-climactic 2004 presidential race will likely be forgotten or ignored and by campaign historians. To the dismay of many, the campaign degenerated from being a referendum on the U.S. role in Iraq into a contest to depict John Kerry's role as a soldier and activist during the Vietnam War. The verb "swift-boat," to engage in stealthy character assassination, entered into the political vernacular as John Kerry was subjected to a barrage of attacks on his character, including one in the form of a digitally manipulated photograph depicting him speaking alongside Jane Fonda at an anti-war rally. The mendacity of the black and white photo in which Fonda and Kerry share the same stage was proven soon after the photo was released for public consumption. Both images were taken from a catalogue of stock photo images from Corbis Photo Agency. The merged image included a caption including an AP credit making it appear as the photo had originally appeared in a newspaper.² Ken Light, the photographer responsible for the John Kerry photo (Jane Fonda was the photo-shop addition), took the opportunity to emphasize that the truth-distorting power of photo shop techniques was amplified by internet distribution.³

There is some reason to doubt whether the person who photo-shopped this image expected it to remain undetected from its February release up through the November election. Given that it was a falsified image, the Kerry campaign likely would have devoted enough time and effort to debunk the photo in the nine months remaining in the 2004 campaign. The image's false listing as an AP photo added a surface-level verisimilitude, at the expense of giving a means to verify whether the purported event had in fact occurred. Similarly, the lack of a corresponding story made it easy to insinuate the photo into the public domain, but also prevented anyone from supplying any critical details about this fictitious rally. The photo-shopper likely anticipated the eventual debunking of the photo-fakery, and the swift debunking of the picture completely undercut its function as a truthful document, but the image continued to function as a carefully crafted campaign argument. But even though the media quickly treated the photograph as a fiction, the Kerry campaign failed to acquit its candidate of the charges implied by the image.

The semantic meaning conveyed by the image, which has been labelled the "Hanoi John" photo, calls Kerry's loyalty into question. Kerry's stern glare contrasts with Fonda's ambiguous smile, vaguely suggesting some level of disapproval, doubt, or discomfort. Fonda's haircut, posture, and even mode of delivery signal a level of enthusiasm and zeal for her activity; she speaks impromptu, vigorously keeps her body

² Cockrell, Cathy (2004). Photo fakery 'at its worst' riles Ken Light J-School photographer's 1971 image of Kerry altered for partisan purposes, UCBerkeleyNews, http://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2004/02/18_light.shtml (accessed 1-22-05); Light, Ken (2004). The Real Fake, The Digital Journalist, http://www.digitaljournalist.org/issue0403/dis_light.html (accessed 1-22-05)

³ "It's not that photographic imagery was ever unquestionable in its veracity; as long as pictures have been made from photographic film, people have known how to alter images by cropping. But what I've been trying to teach my students about how easy and professional-looking these distortions of truth have become in the age of Photoshop -- and how harmful the results can be -- had never hit me so personally as the day I found out somebody had pulled my Kerry picture off my agency's Web site, stuck Fonda at his side, and then used the massive, unedited reach of the Internet to distribute it all over the world." (Washington Post, February 24, 2008)

open to the audience, and is relaxed in both dress and hair style. Kerry's dress and demeanour send a contrasting signal; his button down oxford, feathered hair, and prepared comments collectively signal a degree of undue formality, while the slouched shoulders and low-hanging arms concealing his body indicate some degree of insecurity. This insecurity, whether due to a hostile crowd, his appearance along with Jane Fonda, or to a poorly timed photo snap, demonstrate a lack of confidence. The image of Kerry displaying a profound lack of confidence and doubt are intrinsic components of his character. Viewers can easily see a resemblance to the pose Kerry often assumes as a Senator, when presiding over hearings, and they can easily interpret a similar level of ambivalence in the presidential candidate.

The caption underneath this photo might be interpreted as a false proposition, but such an interpretation arises from an excessively literal reading of the photo. A pseudo-event sets the scene for the Hanoi John photo as indicated by its ambiguous caption, which reads "Fonda Speaks to Vietnam Veterans at Anti-War Rally." The caption prioritized Fonda's role in the anti-war rally, reducing Kerry to the role of a happenstance participant, a move which primes the viewer to accept that the image's prior obscurity could have been due to the documented event's unimportance. Because the caption under the photo and its misleading "AP photo" reference omit any detail of the occasion, the image's design makes it emblematic of all antiwar rhetoric. By itself, the caption offers no argument, but simply presents the data to support the provocative claim made by the image. As data, it simply confirmed uncontested facts that the American public already knew, namely that Jane Fonda had actively campaigned against the United States' involvement in the war. Instead of prioritizing the verbal cues present in the caption, the more plausible argumentative reasoning is supplied by the image itself, which equivocates Kerry to Fonda, a fellow conspirator against the Vietnam war and the government that waged it.

The rhetorical figure epergesis elucidates the syntactic processes that enable the pairing of Fonda and Kerry's to express a viable argument. The figure is achieved by the joining of two nouns together without a verb. In this case, the image pairs Kerry with Fonda, approximating a categorical argument absent the verb "to be." Instead of saying all men are mortal, the epergetic process of pairing the two substantive nouns together blends the major and minor premise together into one statement, allowing for a statement saying something like the following "all men, Socrateses are mortal." When an epergesis pairs two substantive nouns together, it frontloads the minor premise into the major premise. In the case of the Hanoi John image, the major premise may be something like "Jane Fonda's Vietnam-era rhetoric was treasonous" and the minor premise consubstantiates Kerry and Fonda's speech asserting that at least "some of Kerry's activities were Jane Fonda's Vietnam-era rhetoric." The epergetic pairing of Fonda with Kerry applies all of Fonda's predicate attributes to Kerry, from her gender to her political orientation. These predicate attributes are supplied by the audience's pre-existing perceptions of Jane Fonda, which naturally vary. Nevertheless, some predicates are clearly more dominant, and the epergetic movement sets up an argumentative structure that allows for the application of them all. As a consequence, the image argues that some of Kerry's activities were treasonous. In the case of this image, the epergesis' blending of major and minor premise together also supplies a deductive conclusion compressing the entire syllogism into a coherent statement; "Some Kerry-Fonda speech was treasonous."

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The pragmatic domain of this argumentative field is laid out in a second image of Fonda and Kerry, which circulated and provoked public argumentation at the same time as the Hanoi John image did. In this color image, Fonda sits in the foreground and Kerry in the background a few rows up. The photo did not conclusively prove the proposition that Kerry actively conspired with Fonda, but its gain probative force was bolstered by other argumentation addressing the role played by Kerry and Fonda in the anti-war movement. This image structures the conclusion of this argument. Hanoi Jane met with the North Vietnamese enemy at a time of war and John Kerry met with the treasonous Hanoi Jane during the war, hence Kerry actively worked with the Vietnamese. This photo accompanied the mainstream media, or the conservative press's discussion of Kerry's dubious activities.



This second image, an authentic documentation of a political rally in Pennsylvania attended by Fonda and Kerry categorizes the two together but places them within a larger grouping of anti-war protesters. In this case, the rhetorical figure is closer to tmesis, a figure which divides a word and then places an additional word between it (e.g. “out-bloody-rageous”). In this case, the conjoined concept might be expressed as “John-agitating-fonda.” Kerry and Fonda are not consubstantial, but they are united here by a larger political purpose. In this crowd scene, each immediate person surrounding Fonda supplies a visual flag linking the entire audience to the counter-culture (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007). The man on her right, to the left of the photograph, has the dishevelled hair, shades, and sideburns. This man is the only one directly engaging with the camera. We cannot see where his eyes are directed, but his face looks at the camera. Directly behind her is a young bearded man with shades, a collar necklace, and long shoulder-length hair and to Fonda's immediate left at the far right of the image we see a young man with an apparently government issued jacket with the American flag sewn on the sleeve. On this man's head is another government issued sun hat with a peace button on top. This man dons the dress of an anti-war veteran. A few rows behind this group, a young John Kerry looks up at the speaker. Notably, both Kerry and Fonda are spectators here. The dress of the surrounding people and the prevalence of glasses, suggests young anti-war intellectual, associations to demean Kerry's status as a protesting veteran.

The second image accompanied dozens of conservative commentaries from early 2004 that analyzed Kerry's role in the anti-Vietnam movement. It undermined the Kerry

campaign's presentation of Kerry as a loyal soldier, who protested the war in the same spirit that he supported it; a difficult if not impossible nuance to convey given its basis of appeal as a multi-dimensional conception of the character. This particular image ran on the cover of the February 16, 2004 issue of *Human Events*, a conservative news weekly, under the headline Banner "Kerry Accused U.S. of War Crimes." At the same time that the faked Hanoi John image was circulating and exposed as a fraud, this image, from an anti-war rally in Pennsylvania, was offered to illustrate Kerry's notorious testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in April 1971. The story itself, interspersed with the rebuttals from a few contemporary congressmen clearly opposed to Kerry, depicted Kerry's testimony as deceitful, un-American, and treacherously excusing the Vietnamese of crimes far worse than anything committed by American soldiers.

The movement of the *Human Events* article begins with Kerry's testimony and anti-war activities, moves to his presence with Jane Fonda at a Pennsylvania anti-war rally, and concludes with an association with Jane Fonda, the symbolic leader of the anti-war movement. Clearly the Hanoi John photo would not have circulated as widely if it lacked probative force, and more significantly, the debunking of the photo's veracity did not reduce the plausibility of its proposition in many people's eyes. Consequently, presentations of Fonda's anti-war activities during the campaign season, with the Iraq war in clear public eye and with the general consensus disapproving of any sign of negotiation, discussion with Iranians or treasonous Iraqis, the Al Qaeda, the associations or type of behaviour was judged under the lens of the contemporary eye. Whether this photo was instrumental in the larger project of Swift-Boating Kerry is irrelevant to the discussion of the propositional nature of the image.

4. CONCLUSION

The argumentation surrounding the visual indictment of Kerry's role in the antiwar movement, like that of the Wright photo, demonstrates the complex relationships linking photographs to their argumentative domain. Exclusive analysis of visual arguments that treat images either as either extra-verbal cues substituting for verbal forms or as non-verbal symbols that escape verbal reduction will inevitably miss some of the vital ways visual images interact with argumentative processes. A coherent accounting of these processes can only emerge if argumentation scholars integrate the insights that have been rendered to date and use them to render a more systematic analysis of these processes.

[Link to commentary](#)

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