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# What Is Visual in Visual Argumentation?

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**ABSTRACT:** Is visual argumentation possible? My personal opinion is that it is, despite of the burden of verbal argumentation and the numerous critiques made against visual arguments. Insofar as most of these critiques are related to the difference between words and images, I will focus my paper on this issue, which is a theoretical one, as it seems to me that taking these critiques seriously is a first step before analyzing concretely how visual arguments work.

**KEYWORDS:** linguistic imperialism, verbal and visual, visual argument, visual argumentation, visual semiotics, words and images.

*This anxiety, this need to defend “our speech” against “the visual” is, I want to suggest, a sure sign that a pictorial turn is taking place.*  
W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Is visual argumentation possible?<sup>1</sup> My personal opinion is that it is, despite of the burden of verbal argumentation and the numerous critiques made against visual arguments, amongst which that images are emotional and not rational and therefore would play a role that is more persuasive than convincing. Insofar as most of these critiques are related to the difference between words and images, I will focus my paper on this issue, which is a theoretical one, as it seems to me that taking these critiques seriously is a first step before analyzing concretely how visual arguments work.

As a starting point, I will take two of the best papers ever written about visual argumentation: “Why ‘Visual arguments’ aren’t Arguments” (Johnson 2003); and “Can Pictures be arguments?” (Fleming 1996). Indeed, if arguments are, arguably, prompted by issues that are controversial, it is then much more interesting and more stimulating to analyze the arguments of those who are against the idea you would like to promote. Most of their objections to visual arguments rest on the differences between the verbal and the visual: “Why do we need a theory of visual argument?,” asks Johnson (2003, p. 1). Indeed, if we already have a theory of verbal argumentation (or rather many of them),

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<sup>1</sup> For the growing literature on the topic, see Birdsell and Groarke 1996; Birdsell and Groarke 2007; Groarke 2007; for some references in French, see Roque 2004.

why would we need a theory of *visual* argument, that is necessarily incipient, fragile, weak and so on. Such a statement, which implies that we don't have to take into account what is visual in a visual argument, is characteristic of what has been called *linguistic imperialism* (Mitchell 1986, p. 56; Groupe µ 1992, pp. 10, 52-54). Roughly speaking, it is the belief that verbal language is language *par excellence*. This conception has been claimed, for instance, by the linguist Benveniste, explaining that if there are many different semiotic languages, verbal language has the privilege of being metasemiotic insofar as it is the "interpretant of all semiotic systems" (Benveniste 1974, p. 61). This linguistic imperialism takes various forms.

## 2. AN ARGUMENT BY DEFINITION

One consequence of linguistic imperialism is the hegemony of verbal argumentation, which imposes itself as a paradigm. Up to a certain point, we can understand that it is a standard, as the advances in this field have been substantive in the past fifty years. However, this monopolistic situation also has a cost when we try to define other forms of argumentation: being verbal argumentation the standard account of argumentation, it becomes the norm that serves to evaluate other forms of argumentation, which often fall outside the norm.

Given this situation, defining a visual argument thus means examining to what extent visual arguments can fit definitions of verbal arguments. Yet it is very easy to find out that almost any definition of verbal argument considers that argumentation requires the use of language, which makes it possible to discard visual argument. This "argument by definition," also sometimes called argument by essence (Plantin 1996, p. 53), is basically the strategy adopted by Fleming in the first part of his paper (Fleming 1996, pp. 11-13). This is obviously an *ad hoc* claim, since visual arguments necessarily fall outside definitions of argument as discursive<sup>2</sup> or linguistic. Furthermore, it depends on the definition used and, again, it is easy to find restrictive ones in order to exclude the visual. Fleming relies for instance on an old definition given by van Eemeren in 1984, while more recent definitions of Pragma-Dialectics are less restrictive.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that in an argument by definition like this, the mere presence of the word "language" seems to be sufficient to discard visual arguments: authors using this claim take for granted that the only language is verbal language and consider, accordingly, that the visual is not a language. However, this is far from being granted. It depends indeed on how language itself is defined. The general claim has been that language requires a double articulation: the elements of first articulation combined into syntagms and equipped with signifieds can ultimately be analyzed into elements of second articulation, called phonemes (Benveniste 1974, p. 58; Lévi-Strauss 1964, pp. 28-29). Now, insofar as the visual lacks this requirement, it cannot be considered a language, a claim that has been strongly refuted by Umberto Eco, who calls it the dogma of double articulation (Eco 1972, pp. 201-205).

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<sup>2</sup> However, I have argued elsewhere that the concept of "discourse" does not necessarily exclude the field of the visual discourse (Roque forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> Twenty years later, the definition was broadened: "In practice, argumentation can also be partly, or wholly, non-verbal" (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, note 2 p. 2).

## WHAT IS VISUAL IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION?

### 3. THE SLIPPERY SLOPE ARGUMENT OF STRETCHING THE DEFINITION

Since all the standard definitions of argumentation have been elaborated for verbal argumentation only, how can visual arguments be taken into account? Another attitude frequently adopted, and apparently more open, consists in saying that since visual arguments are excluded from a strict definition of verbal argument, the latter needs to be extended. From this point of view, the choice of terminology is significant. Some talk about “broadening” the definition of verbal argumentation (Willard 1989, p. 109; Johnson 2004, pp. 2, 10:); others about “extending” it (Fleming<sup>4</sup> 1996, p. 11) or “stretching” it (Blair 2004, p. 45). How difficult the task is can be seen in the terminology itself. If we conceive of argumentation as basically or essentially verbal, if this is the norm, the hegemonic norm, and if visual argumentation is in the position of an outsider, it is very difficult if not impossible to give a satisfactory definition of visual argumentation. It is indeed quite easy to reply: “No, we cannot broaden the concept of argument that much, or if we do so, everything could be called argument, and we can’t accept that.” Even Tony Blair, who is open to the possibility of visual argumentation, warns us: “I am trying to urge that we be cautious about stretching the concept of argument too far” (Blair 2004, p. 45). And he is right. If the concept of argument has been elaborated for verbal argumentation, it cannot be stretched “too far” and one is quite easily lured into the argument of the slippery slope, as these authors are.

However, this doesn’t mean that we have to renounce proposing a definition of visual argumentation, but that, instead of taking as a starting point one of the many definitions of verbal argument (about which, by the way, there is not yet consensus), what we need is rather to start from the level of the visual world and examining how a visual argument works before trying to propose a definition that might later be compared to one of verbal argumentation. Let me add that I am not able to propose such a definition at the moment. I simply want to stress that the claim laid by hegemonic verbal argumentation to being the norm from which visual argumentation be evaluated is exaggerated.

### 4. THE FALLACY OF “PURITY”

Another claim made by opponents to visual arguments is that 1) despite the fact that we are surrounded by images, there are no pure images but always mixed cases of words and images. Now, 2) when we have both words and images, the argumentative role is played by words only. So, 3) we need to find pure visual arguments in order to show that a visual argument is possible. However, 4) even if one could find a purely visual argument, words would still be necessary to verbalize the argument. (I summarize various claims made by Johnson 2003 and Fleming 1996.)

Here again, if we accept this way of presenting a visual argument, it is quite easy to prove that no visual argument can meet the standard. But this is because the reasoning is wrong. The elements of this reasoning must be broken down in order to be analyzed better.

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<sup>4</sup> The first sentence of this paper reads: “My purpose in the following paper is to consider whether the term ‘argument’ should be extended to include pictures” (Fleming 1996, p. 11).

a) The first one, which is typical of the arrogance of the linguistic imperialism, is that, since a visual argument needs language in order to be verbalized, it would therefore lose its visual nature and fall into the realm of language.

This kind of reasoning rests on a supposedly strict and absolute division between words and images which doesn't exist. Words and images are strongly intertwined, so that it is quite impossible to conceive of a universe of images without words. But the opposite is true, too: the universe of words also depends on images. It would be beyond the scope of this paper to enter the details of this interrelation (see Roque 2005). Suffice it to say that words play a very important part not only in the interpretation of images, but even in the way we see them (Roque 1996). And on the other side, many of the verbal concepts we use are also verbal images (Denis 1989) or come from percepts (Arnheim 1969). This is also true for the semantic universe of signifieds, which are not freed from images as if they belonged to a more abstract level liberated from any visual reference. As Umberto Eco put it:

The semantic analysis of a given expression can and must also contain nonverbal markers such as directions, spatial coordinates, relationships of order and so on. The content 'dog' must also consist of images of the dog, just as the content of the graphic representation of a dog also consists of the concept of a dog and the word that corresponds to it. (Eco 1992, p. 69 n. 1).

As a specialist of cinema—a perfect example of a mixed media, both verbal and visual—explained, there is always a link between the verbal and the visual at the level of the signified, what he calls an “inter-codal transit” (Metz 1975, p. 362). The fact that we need words in order to analyze images is widely acknowledged by specialists of images and semiotics. However, we cannot accept this form of blackmail that consists of saying that a visual argument would be admitted if and only if it needed no verbal help to be explained.

b) Once it is agreement that we live in a universe where words and images are closely intertwined, where it is hardly possible to isolate pure images (or pure words), the next step is to analyze the claim that we need verbal language in order to extract an argument from the visual material.

Behind this claim lies an old philosophical prejudice we could summarize through a series of oppositions: images are to words what perception is to understanding, material to intellectual, passive to active, vague to precise, emotional to rational, and so on. In other words, verbal language would be necessary for extracting from the image the argument it might contain. This is wrong again for several reasons.

First, the fact that “the picture is perceived to be closer to the material world than language” (Fleming 1996, p. 17) comes from a limited conception of images as likenesses (Fleming 1996, p. 11). This view was developed during the Enlightenment, when images were opposed to verbal language, just as *natural* signs to *conventional* signs. It has been largely criticized (Eco 1992; Mitchell 1986; for colors, see Roque 1999, pp. 41-44).

Second, the fact that we need to translate an image linguistically because “it lacks the requisite internal differentiation” (Fleming 1996, p. 13) is also far from granted. If we need to learn how to analyze images, the same holds true for language: if we listen to a foreign language we don't know, all we perceive is a chain of noises in which we are unable to recognize meaningful segments. Furthermore, if we consider that images are a “visual chaos” since they lack internal differentiation, the same could be said about

## WHAT IS VISUAL IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION?

verbal language. For sure, a sentence can be broken down into words. However, linguists nowadays agree that the word is *not* the unit of meaning into which a sentence should be divided (Groupe  $\mu$  1992, p. 55), so that differentiating between words as units is of little help in understanding the process of meaning, which must also be “translated” or “extracted” even in the case of verbal language.

Third. To be sure, segmentation of the image is a complicated (and debated) issue. However, just as in linguistics, the word as “unit” is no longer considered a unit of meaning, so in visual semiotics it is preferable to speak about visual enunciates (Groupe  $\mu$  1992, pp. 54-56). Now if we look for enunciates instead of propositions, the task of understanding a visual argument becomes easier.

Fourth, the claim that verbal language is necessary for “extracting” the visual argument and transforming it, if possible, into a proposition is another aspect of linguistic imperialism, for it presupposes not only that such a translation is necessary due to the inferiority of the image, but also that verbal language would provide an accurate account of the visual. From this perspective, another version of linguistic imperialism consists in considering that it is the case that verbal language allows us to speak accurately about the visual world. This view was expressed carelessly by Roland Barthes when developing his semiology in the early 1960s:

It appears increasingly more difficult to conceive of a system of images or objects whose *signifieds* can exist independently of language: to perceive what a substance signifies is necessarily using the cutting [découpage] of language: there is no meaning which is not named, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language. (Barthes 1977, p. 11; translation modified).

This controversial statement (deleted when the book was reprinted in the seventies) is typical of the triumphant semiology of the time: the belief that verbal language is not only able to translate the meaning of images, but that there was no other way, since the world of signified *is* the world of language. To understand why this position has changed, it is necessary to go into further detail on visual semiotics. The model Barthes and other semioticians after him had in mind was that the visual world is constituted by pure signifiers only, so that in order for them to achieve the status of signs, they must be completed with a linguistic signified. As a consequence of this model (prevalent in visual semiotics during the seventies and eighties), the visual world was considered to have no meaning in itself, since its meaning could only come from the superimposition of a linguistic signified. Consequently, the simplistic model of the so-called visual sign was that of the relationship between a visual signifier and a linguistic signified. However, in such a conception, the visual completely loses its specificity. Furthermore, it reduces the visual to the iconic and this is the reason why it has been strongly criticized (Groupe  $\mu$  1992, pp. 10, 52ff; 146ff; Greimas 1979, p. 177). To summarize these critiques, we can say, roughly, that verbal language is not the best suited code, nor is it sufficient, for providing an account of the visual. On the one hand, we very often need visual tools: drawings, charts, tables, schemes, plates, diagrams, graphs, and so on, which are indispensable in many fields (mathematics, biology, chemistry, etc.). On the other hand, many concepts come from perception, like roundness, for instance: insofar as shapes are concepts, we can perceive the visual concept of roundness independently of its lexicalization through verbal language (Arnheim 1969, p. 27).

In the case of the visual sign, the reduction of its meaning to the linguistic signified has at least two related consequences. First, it means that the signified of an image is reduced to what is represented: consequently, the way it is represented, which may differ considerably from an image to another, is not taken into account. And second, it means that, if the signified of an image is identified with its iconic component, and the latter with the linguistic signified, the plastic dimension of the image (color, lines, texture, shapes) is completely ignored insofar as it fails to measure up to a verbalization reduced to a linguistic signified. As a consequence, scholars such as Claude Lévi-Strauss consider that abstract art is not composed of signs, since they do not denote any referent (for a critique of his conception, see Roque 2003, 289ff).

Instead of focusing the debate on whether or not the supposed visual argument could be transformed into a verbal proposition, I prefer to stress a different question: why should the visual element be converted into a verbal proposition?<sup>5</sup> Such a “conversion” is probably impossible due to the differences between the two systems of signification. However, here we must anticipate a possible objection: if it is impossible to convert a visual argument into a verbal proposition, then we cannot speak of visual argument at all. My reply is that we need to find within the language of images how an argument can be expressed, instead of trying to reduce it artificially to a verbal proposition.

c) We can now come back to part of the general claim that has been left aside: the fact that in the case of mixed media, the argumentative process would rest essentially on words. In fact, this claim comes from another prejudice: that the image is ambiguous, vague, more emotional than rational and cannot therefore play an important part in an argumentative process.<sup>6</sup> According to Barthes, for instance, in the case of mixed media, the text plays a restraining role (what he called “un rôle d’ancrage”) when faced with the polysemy of the image (Barthes 1964, p. 44). In some cases, however, the opposite may be held, i.e. when images are monosemic and words polysemic (see Roque 1990, pp. 260-261). And as for their respective roles in the argumentative process, different cases must be taken into account. It is true that in some cases, the argumentative structure lies in the text, so that the image functions like what Leo Groarke calls a “visual flag,” i.e. a way of attracting attention to the (verbal) argument (Groarke 2002, p. 140, and Birdsell and Groarke 2007, p. 104). However, there are also cases where the argument is mainly conveyed by the image.

## 5. BEGGING THE QUESTION: ARGUMENTATION *IS* VERBAL

Finally, I would like to raise a last issue regarding the relation between verbal and visual argumentation. It is another consequence of linguistic imperialism, namely the belief that argumentation *is* verbal, or rather the belief in their complete identification. It seems to me that here lies the crux of linguistic imperialism: if the opponents of visual argumentation are so arrogant and so confident in the virtue of the verbal, as well as in

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<sup>5</sup> At the same time, there is some question as to whether it is indispensable for an argument to take the form of a proposition; this last point has been made by Blair 2004, pp. 48-49. The view that arguments are made up of propositions has also been criticized by Groarke, who calls it “verbalism” (Groarke 2007, p. 119).

<sup>6</sup> For advertising, see for instance Adam and Bonhomme 2005, p. 194 and 217, despite their efforts to take into account the visual component of this mixed argumentation.

## WHAT IS VISUAL IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION?

the central part it should play in extracting the meaning of a visual argument, this is because they believe that argumentation is verbal by nature.<sup>7</sup>

It could be argued here that when they maintain that argumentation is verbal by nature they are begging the question. However, I prefer to suggest that argumentation must be dissociated from the verbal. This might be surprising at first glance. Is it not thanks to the verbal that we owe all the developments of the theory of argumentation? Is it not thanks to language that we can name all the concepts we need in order to analyze argumentation as well as to practice it? Well, it is true that oral and written argumentation are the starting point from which the theory of argumentation has developed and spread, but this does not mean that argumentation must be identified with the verbal. In other words, the fact that language has been and still is fundamental for proposing concepts in order to understand and analyze how argumentation works does not imply that the different argumentative tools we constantly use are verbal by nature. From this perspective, a distinction should be made between words that help us to name and to conceptualize the different stages of the argumentative process, and words that we use as a *channel* in order to utter an argument verbally or in a written form.

This distinction is generally overlooked by those who contend that argumentation is necessarily verbal by essence. Indeed, if words are potent tools in order to produce concepts, what about words as a medium in order to express oneself? As Rudolf Arnheim explained:

Verbal language is a one-dimensional string of words because it is used by intellectual thinking to label sequences of concepts. [...] Intellectual thinking dismantles the simultaneity of spatial structure. It also transforms all linear relations into one-directional successions—the sort of event we represent by an arrow. Equality, for example, which can be the state of symmetrical interaction between two entities to the eye—twins sitting on a bench—is transformed by intellectual thinking into the sequential event of one thing equating itself with another. An equation is first of all a statement about a one-dimensional operation of one thing upon another; only secondary contemplation can transform it into an image of symmetrical coexistence. (Arnheim 1969, p. 246)

Let me give an example taken from the same author:

Intellectual operations [i.e. using words] are stepwise connections between fixed entities. Compare this with what happens when a person ascertains intuitively the size relations among the three men in Figure 1. He does so by inspecting the locations of the three within the total spatial pattern. If now, instead of looking at a picture, the person is presented with the propositions

A is taller than B  
B is taller than C  
Therefore, A is taller than C

He has to deal with two self-contained images that must be combined somehow to produce the third. (Arnheim 1969, p. 235)

This means at least two things. First, that there is up to a certain point an affinity between the linear sequence of words and argumentation. As Arnheim also noted: “Representative examples of intellectual thought processes are the stringing of concepts in verbal sequences, the counting or adding up of items, the chain of logical propositions

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<sup>7</sup> Groarke calls “reductionism” the claim that “the important argumentative elements of any visual argument is verbal, or can be reduced to verbal equivalents” (2007, p. 139).



in syllogisms or mathematical proofs” (Arnheim 1969, p. 234). However, we can see at the same time the limits of these comparisons.

As a result, argumentation cannot be simply equated with the verbal as a medium for expressing it. If we look at a typology of arguments such as the one proposed by Toulmin, Rieke and Janik, we find among their categories “Reasoning from authority.” Is this kind of reasoning typically verbal? Not at all. On the contrary, it is mostly visual. Interestingly, the first example given is that of commercial advertising (Toulmin, Rieke and Janik 1984, p. 228), which is usually more visual than verbal. Another category is what Toulmin and his colleagues call “Reasoning from sign.” Here again, the first examples are drawn from the visual field:

We see a flashing light and conclude that some kind of hazard is present; we see a red, white and blue shield with a number on it and know that we are driving on an interstate highway (Toulmin, Rieke and Janik 1984, pp. 222-223).

The next category is “Reasoning from cause.” And once more the first examples are drawn from the visual world:

Fingerprints and bloodstains may be not only signs of guilt, they may be caused by the presence of the accused at the scene of the crime (Toulmin, Rieke and Janik 1984, p. 226).

Yet, if we take into account the characteristics of the visual, and in particular its ability to compare structures and stress their isomorphy, we could even claim that the visual would provide better arguments by analogy than the verbal.

## 6. CONCLUSION

What can we conclude from this brief survey? Unlike what is claimed by the detractors of visual argumentation, some of the most used arguments are not verbal in character. They are mental or logical or cognitive operations that can be expressed verbally as well as visually. Seen this way, the verbal loses its prerogative of being the paradigm of all argumentation. It is just the most frequent and by far the most studied of the different channels that can be used to express an argument. This means that we can refuse the demand that a visual argument should be “translated” into a verbal argument in order to be evaluated and judged, i.e. most of the time discarded.

This leads me to *draw*—and here I stress the word “draw”—a general conclusion: we are now able to displace the main issue, which is no longer to determine to what extent the verbal concept of argument might be stretched in order to include the visual, or to argue about how to translate a visual argument into its verbal counterpart, for in so doing we are ignoring the *specificity* of the visual. The new issue we are able to raise at the end of this paper is the following: what is visual in visual argumentation?, which is the title of this paper. I hope it is now clear that what is properly visual in a visual argument is not the argument itself, but the way it is visually displayed, which call for a closer look at the syntactic layout of visual images.

[Link to commentary](#)

## WHAT IS VISUAL IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION?

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