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Commentary on Johnson

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Commentary on: R. Johnson's "Why 'Visual Arguments' aren't Arguments"

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        In his paper, Ralph Johnson marshals a number of arguments against my thesis that informal logic needs a theory of visual argument. In responding to them, I shall argue that the fundamental issue that they raise is not whether a theory of visual argument is viable or desirable, but why some argumentation theorists continue to resist its development. For reasons I will elaborate, I think the latter question takes us to the heart of some central issues argumentation theorists must confront as we try to develop a contemporary theory of argument.

Visual Arguments

        According to the account I favour, a visual argument is an argument conveyed by (non-verbal) visual means. One can find visual arguments that contain no verbal elements, but most combine the visual and the verbal. In some cases, a visual argument makes the same claims both visually and verbally, reinforcing the verbal with the visual (or the visual with the verbal). More frequently, the visual and the verbal contribute different elements that combine to create an argument.
        If visual images could only reinforce the verbal, one might argue that a theory of visual argument is unnecessary. Instead of relying on such a theory, one might base one's analysis of an argument with visual components on an analysis of the verbal elements it contains. There may be visual arguments that can be analysed in this way, but it is not difficult to find instances of visual argument that demonstrate the need for something more.
        Argumentation theorists need to develop a theory of visual argument because there are many arguments that cannot be understood, much less assessed, if we ignore the visual elements they contain. Three simple examples follow.

1. In the wake of a provincial proposal to make identification cards mandatory for all Ontario citizens, the Toronto *Star* published an editorial cartoon commenting on the issue. In it, Dusan Petricic rejects this as a sinister idea, visually suggesting it is an instance of "Big Brother Is Watching You" by etching the face of the then Ontario Premier (Mike Harris) onto the back of an Ontario citizen reading a newspaper with the headline ΛNew ID Plan for Ontarians."

2. In a local advertisement for a Honda "Winterization" package for Honda automobiles, the rhetorical question: "If you're not getting your Honda serviced at Honda, what will you end up with?" appears beside the image of a strange animal that is a bizarre conglomeration of zebra, ostrich, and gnu. The argument conveyed might be summarized as: "If you're not getting your

Honda serviced at Honda, you'll end up with something that doesn't fit together properly. You don=t want that. So you should get your Honda serviced at Honda."

3. A sign at a "pro-choice" abortion rally displays a macabre photo of a dead woman on a table with a coat hanger extending from her vagina. Superimposed over the photo was a red circle with a line through it – the negation symbol a "No Smoking" sign might superimpose over an image of a burning cigarette. One might summarize the message as the claim that abortion should be legal because it is unacceptable to have women, like the woman in the poster, dying from back street abortions.

These three examples – and others like them – illustrate the need for a theory of visual argument because one cannot understand (much less assess) them if one ignores their visual components. But once one accepts the need to explain their visual components, one implicitly accepts the need for the kind of understanding that is the goal of a theory of visual argument.

Beyond the Yada Yada

Johnson writes that the proponents of a theory of visual argument need to move "beyond the yada yada" and provide a detailed theory of such arguments. This is a sentiment that I share, so long as it is recognized that it does not refute the thesis that we should develop such a theory. One cannot criticize the call to develop a theory by pointing out that the theory has not yet been developed. No one should expect a theory of visual argument (or any other phenomenon) to spring to life full blown (the way that Athena is said to have sprung from the head of Zeus).

Unlike Johnson, I think that a number of argumentation theorists are making significant contributions to the development of a theory of visual argument. In my own work, I have argued that the account of argumentative communication one finds in pragma-dialectics can explain the way in which visual images can act as argumentative 'communication acts.' In a forthcoming book with Chris Tindale, I have elaborated ways to assess four different kinds of non-verbal argument. I think that the other theorists Johnson mentions – Gilbert, Slade, Shelley, Blair, Lunsford et. al. – are contributing to the discussion that will ultimately produce a comprehensive theory of visual argument (or, more probably, theor*ies* of visual argument). I expect that many aspects of the theories that Johnson treats as alternatives to such a theory (theories of advertising, for example) will probably have a place within it.

As a detailed account of such developments is impossible here, it must suffice to say that there are good reasons for pursuing them. In commenting on the analysis of a UVA poster I discussed in a previous paper, Johnson writes that "The poster... seems to have a certain power and efficacy. The argument that Groarke gets out of it not only does not explain this power; it seems to some degree to undermine it. With respect to this particular image, then, I fail to see the benefit of interpreting it as an argument." It may be true that there are nuances in the poster that cannot be captured in a simple paraphrase. This is one of the reasons why it would be a mistake to think that visuals can simply be dispensed with. That said, the argument I locate in the poster plausibly ties it to impassioned arguments about gender equity that proceed by cataloguing the gender of an institution's most senior leaders.

Such arguments have been a powerful way to promote affirmative action. At the same time, the argument the poster conveys is more open to debate than it may appear if one looks at

the image uncritically. Instead of showing that my analysis is deficient, this demonstrates precisely *why* it is important. That is, because the standpoints visual arguments convey need to be opened up to discussion and debate. In the cases where an argument is weak this is an important way to defuse the seductive power of a striking visual. In such cases, the difference between our initial reaction to a visual argument and our view of it after analysis is "the benefit of interpreting it as an argument." By promoting the notion that visuals are not to be analysed as arguments Johnson increases, rather than decreases, the likelihood that we will remain uncritical of the visual, allowing it to remain seductive.

Why do argumentation theorists resist the theory of visual argument?

        I have already suggested that there are many reasons why we should develop a theory of visual arguments. It is easy to find examples of visual argument. We need to understand their visual components in order to properly understand and assess them. A failure to develop this understanding promotes an uncritical attitude to visual arguments. And a number of theorists are developing tools that can be used to analyse visual arguments.
        In light of these considerations, why are some argumentation theorists so reluctant to countenance visual arguments? A simple answer is that this requires that we develop new habits and attitudes that go against the grain. Traditionally, the analysis of argument ignores the visual realm. We, and especially we argumentation theorists, think of arguments as verbal entities. Because we aren't used to looking at visuals with an argumentative eye, we need to develop the ability to recognize visual arguments and their components.
        There is something to this explanation, but I would add that there is more to the matter than this suggests. More deeply, I think that some argumentation theorists resist visual arguments because a move in this direction requires that they give up a paradigm to which they are committed. I would summarize this paradigm as the view that the extended written essay is the model we should emulate in the exercise of argument and rationality.
        While I believe that Johnson's comments underestimate many aspects of the visual (its dialectical nature, the contexts in which maps and diagrams and photos and images are much more powerful than their verbal counterparts, etc.), it may be more important to say that many verbal arguments do not fit with the paradigm he assumes. In particular, I think that his conception of verbal argument does not recognize the extent to which much verbal argumentation is emotional, vague, open to various interpretations, and couched in fables, stories, anecdotes, and other forms of discourse that might be contrasted with the extended written essay.
        If one accepts that the extended essay is the paradigm rational exercise, then one is likely to believe that we should spend our time studying and introducing our students to this particular genre. I would guess that it is this that precipitates Johnson's poignant remark that "...it seems clear that the 20th century has witnessed an important cultural shift, and sometimes it seems to me that the shift is so immense that I have real questions about the degree to which our students are capable of function in which I call argumentative space..."
        I think that this comment raises crucial questions that deserve more attention than they have received. My own view is that the extended essay should continue to occupy a central place in argumentation and the study of argumentation, but that it is equally important that we

expand argumentation theory to include a much broader range of genres that play, and should play, an equally important role in public discourse.