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# On the norms of visual argument

David M. Godden
*Old Dominion University, Department of Philosophy*

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## DAVID M. GODDEN

*Department of Philosophy*
*Old Dominion University*
*Norfolk, Virginia*
*U.S.A. 23529*
*dgodden@odu.edu*

ABSTRACT: While pictures can persuade, can they do so rationally – by offering reasons? Existing debate has focused on whether images are – or can be – arguments. Yet, from a normative perspective, a more pressing question concerns how the persuasive operation of images ought to be evaluated. By analyzing the concept of argument as necessarily involving reasons the paper argues that the possibility of visual arguments requires no revision to our existing normative theories of argument.

KEYWORDS: argument evaluation, multi-modal argumentation, normative revisionism, normative non-revisionism, visual argument.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In our increasingly information-saturated environments, people are constantly subjected to persuasive forces – predominately these are visual in nature. Although few would deny that images have persuasive force, affecting our beliefs and influencing our decisions, quite a different question concerns whether pictures persuade rationally – by offering reasons. To date, the locus of debate concerning visual arguments has focused on the theoretical question of whether images are – or can be – arguments. Yet, from a normative perspective, a far more important question concerns how the persuasive operation of images ought to be evaluated.

This paper assumes that there are visual arguments. Quite frankly, I don't take this assumption to be controversial, despite the long-standing debate between visionaries (innovators) and enthusiasts (early adopters) (e.g., Leo) on the one hand, and skeptics (or laggards) (e.g., Ralph) on the other. (Personally, I count myself among the pragmatists, or early majority, on this question, though some of you might rather place me among the conservatives, or late majority, when you hear what I have to say.) While it may turn out to be the case that there are far fewer visual arguments than the early adopters want to admit, or perhaps that the cases are far less interesting – a Venn diagram[1] rather than a salacious advertisement or scandalous political cartoon – I don't take it to be a far stretch to say that there are at least some visual arguments. Perhaps interpreting some images as arguments is a real stretch; yet in other cases it seems both entirely plausible and eminently

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[1] Cf. (Barwise & Etchmemendy, 1996), (Allewin & Barwise (Eds.), 1996, *passim*), and (Dove, 2002).

practical. Certainly (*pace* Fleming (1996)) they are not impossible (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996; Blair, 1996, 2004). That said, I do not want to argue particular examples, and I definitely don't want to worry about how to properly 'read,' 'interpret,' or 'analyze' visual images as arguments. I am willing to grant that there may be special interpretative tools (concepts, theories, or methods) required in order to properly interpret, analyze or determine the argumentative content of visual arguments. And, whatever these turn out to be, they are not the topic of my present discussion. (I will, though, have something to say on this point in the context of pedagogy and information literacy in my concluding remarks.)

So, let's assume that there are visual arguments, and that we have a suitable way of identifying their argumentative content. More important than the question of whether there are visual arguments, it seems to me, is the question of why should we care? What does it matter whether or not there are visual arguments? Besides the obvious point about how we should approach or treat visual media, there's another point about the normative significance of visual arguments. As I see things, this is the most important theoretical issue arising from the debate over the existence visual arguments. (At any rate, it will be the one I'm concerned with today.) On the one hand, the existence of visual arguments would be normatively significant if it called for any revision in our normative theories or standards. On the other hand, if the existence of visual arguments does not require any revision in our normative theories or standards, then considerably less hangs on the question of whether there are any.

## 2. EVALUATING VISUAL ARGUMENTS: REVISIONISTS & NON-REVISIONISTS

Examining the literature, it would seem that there are two schools of thought concerning the evaluation of visual arguments. *Normative non-revisionists* claim that visual arguments can be properly assessed using existing (or at least non-specialized) methods and standards of evaluation. *Normative revisionists*, by contrast, claim that visual arguments require their own methods and standards of evaluation, often on the grounds that visual arguments are incommensurable with non-visual ones.

### 2.1 Normative non-revisionists

Both Leo Groarke and Tony Blair countenance visual arguments. Groarke, an innovator and enthusiast, wrote that "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" (Groarke, 2003, p. 1). By the same token, when describing the means of assessment Groarke's position is clearly conservative.

In making the case for the existence of visual arguments, Groarke (1996, p. 107) claimed that visual images are not mere instruments of (irrational) persuasion, but that they can indeed instruments of (rational) convincing – and hence properly belong to the study of argument. Among the four reasons he offered for this claim, the fourth is:

> Visual arguments can ... contain a premise-conclusion structure which is amenable to standard forms of argument analysis. Visual arguments can, therefore, be judged by common standards of reasoned convincing, and in this way transcend the bounds of mere persuasion. (Groarke, 1996, p. 107)

Groarke (1996, p. 108) went on to identify the chief impediment to understanding images as arguments as "a failure to adapt logical tools to visual contexts rather than the inherent nature of visual images."[2]

Later in the same article, Groarke (1996, p. 114) proceeded to recommend a procedure for the evaluation of visual argument, which is worth quoting in its entirety.

> Once we have identified the structure of simple and extended visual arguments we can assess them by applying well-established theories of argument developed by logicians, rhetoricians and pragma-dialecticians. Among other things, these theories raise the questions:
> 1. whether a visual argument's premises are acceptable;
> 2. whether a visual argument's conclusion follows, deductively or inductively, from its premises;
> 3. Whether a visual argument is appropriate or effective in the context of a particular audience or a particular kind of dialogue; and
> 4. whether a visual argument contains a fallacy or conforms to some standard pattern of reasoning (argument by analogy, straw man reasoning, *modus ponens*, and so on). (Groarke, 1996, p. 114)

Notice that Groarke's evaluative procedure could just as easily apply to non-visual arguments merely by removing the word "visual" from each of the numbered steps. Indeed, Groarke's assessment procedure for visual arguments explicitly recommends "applying well-established theories of argument developed by logicians, rhetoricians and pragma-dialecticians."

Blair (1996, 2004) adopts a similar position. While certainly an early adopter, Blair seems to write more in the tone of a pragmatist. "Argument in the traditional sense," he wrote (2004, p. 59), "can readily be visual." Though on the question of assessment, Blair's position, like Groarke's, is conservative. Again, it is worth quoting Blair at length.

> Let me sum up this part of the discussion. While visual arguments are possible, they seem not to be widespread. More significantly, they seem not to constitute a radically different kind of argument from verbal ones. ... There is no reason to ignore or overlook visual arguments. However, their existence presents no

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[2] Birdsell and Groarke (1996, p. 9) identified a series of tasks that must be met by any theory of visual argument: "any account of visual argument must identify how we can (a) identify the internal images of a visual image (b) understand the contexts in which images are interpreted (c) establish the consistence of an interpretation of the visual, and (d) chart changes in the visual perspective over time." Importantly, all of these are interpretative tasks relating to the identification and analysis of images, rather than anything related to their evaluation as arguments. Nor were any such items added in their revised agenda (2007). It would seem, then, that Birdsell and Groarke found the evaluative apparatus to be already in place.

theoretical challenge to the standard sorts of verbal argument analysis. They are easily assimilated to the paradigm model of verbal argument characterized by O'Keefe's concept of argument$_1$. The difficulties they do present are practical ones of exegesis or interpretation. Moreover, we have to translate them into verbal arguments in order to analyze and criticize them. So verbal arguments retain their position of primacy. (Blair, 1996, p. 34)

Amalgamating these two positions, the general, anti-revisionist view seems to be that visual arguments are not radically different in kind from non-visual arguments, and that no special norms or methods of evaluation are required to properly assess images as arguments.

## 2.2 Normative revisionists

Let's contrast this kind of view with that of the normative revisionists. Now, while I'm not entirely sure that there actually are any of these, we do have several clear articulations of what such a position might be. The first of these is found in Ralph Johnson's autonomy thesis, and a second can be extrapolated from Michael Gilbert's multi-modal argumentation.

Johnson's autonomy thesis: A first revisionist position can be found in the recent work of Ralph Johnson, who might well be among the more skeptical among us concerning the existence of visual arguments (2003).

In 2010, and in an effort to characterize another's views, Ralph Johnson articulated something he called the *autonomy thesis*,[3] which he defined as follows:

> *Autonomy thesis*: "Visual argument is a distinct and autonomous type of argument, and is not to be treated as an extension of verbal argument." (Johnson, 2010 p. 2)

Roughly, the autonomy thesis asserts the irreducibility of visual to verbal argument.

Importantly, Johnson claims that a consequence of the autonomy thesis is the normative independence of the visual: "it seems to me to follow from this view [i.e., the autonomy thesis] that there are, or should be, distinctive criteria for the evaluation of visual argument; these criteria should not be transported over and adapted from the realm of verbal argumentation" (Johnson, 2010, p. 5).

> *Normative independence of the visual*: There are distinctive criteria for the evaluation of visual argument which are independent of, and not reducible to, evaluative criteria for non-visual argument.

Gilbert's multi-modal argumentation:[4] A second revisionist position would be one which takes Gilbert's (1994, 1997) multi-modal approach to argumentation

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[3] Johnson was trying to understand the views of Roque (2009), and attributed the autonomy thesis to him. It is not relevant to our discussion whether Roque actually subscribes to the autonomy thesis or the normative independence of the visual.

[4] This section draws on Godden (2004).

(or some adaptation thereof) and which also counts the visual as a distinct mode of argument.[5]

A multi-modal approach to argumentation can be understood by beginning from the observation that the same informational content can be expressed in a variety of different ways (Gilbert, 1997, pp. 80-88; cf. Godden, 2004, p. 224). Yet, Gilbert observes, in argumentation we respond not merely to what is said, but also to how it is said. Hence, communicative units are messages, where a message is a combination of informational content and presentational manner. Since the same content, presented differently, can have different rhetorical effects, not only is it worth incorporating these different presentational manners into theories of argument, but different presentational manners are not reducible to each other. Different modes of argument correspond to these different manners of presentation. When distinguishing different modes one from the next, it is not the content but the manner in which the content is presented that does the work.

An important and controversial consequence of the multi-modal thesis is normative pluralism (Godden, 2004, p. 225). Since content is 'modal' (i.e., indexed to mode), all of the normatively significant components of arguments (such as claim, data, warrant, and backing) are similarly modal (Gilbert, 1997, p. 80). Because the normative components of arguments are modal, Gilbert argued, so too are the normative properties of arguments. Take the example of backing. Gilbert argued that since modes are categories of, for instance, kinds of backing and "[b]acking contains within it rules of conduct, procedure and argument … [then w]hen a different mode of backing is the appropriate one, different rules and different forms of argument are relevant" (Gilbert, 1997, p. 92). For example, standard evaluative criteria such as relevance, sufficiency and acceptability are set internally to a particular mode. On the multi-modal view, the content of standards of argument "are delineated not by their internal characteristics, but by the mode in which they operate. In other words, each of the modes can define, for itself, relevance, sufficiency and acceptability" (Gilbert, 1997, p. 97).

Working from the normative pluralism consequence of a multi-modal approach to argument, one need only add the claim that the visual is a distinct mode of argument to derive the normative independence of the visual. Although Gilbert himself has not taken this step, the kinds of reasons he offers to distinguish different modes seem to apply equally well to the visual. The same informational content can be expressed visually and sententially, and there may well be different rhetorical effects depending on how the content is presented. Hence, the visual can be seen as a distinct presentational mode. Initially, and as a heuristic, Gilbert identified four argumentative modes: logical, emotional, visceral (physical) and kisceral (intuitive) (Gilbert, 1997, p. 75). Insofar as I have the multi-modal thesis correct, the norms governing each of these modes are independent from the others. Thus, if the visual qualifies as a presentational mode, then the normative independence of the visual follows as a consequence.

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[5] Gilbert's (1994, 1997) work on multi-modal argumentation does not take a position on whether the visual counts as a mode of argument, and recent correspondence confirms that Gilbert does not have a position on this question.

To summarize, the following similarity between these two normative revisionist positions might be noted. Each begins with a claim to the effect that the visual is somehow different from, and irreducible to, any non-visual (specifically verbal) form of argument. As a consequence, the norms of visual argument are likewise independent from, and irreducible to, the norms of non-visual argument.

## 3. THE ARGUMENT FOR NORMATIVE NON-REVISIONISM

Having surveyed the field, I now turn to make my case.

There has been some debate concerning how arguments are to be defined or identified, as though the matter as to whether there are any visual arguments could be settled by terminological fiat (e.g., Johnson, 2003, p. 10; Roque 2009). While I think that this way of construing the nature of the debate is mistaken and misleading, it reveals what I find to be an important truth. As Johnson (2003, p. 10) has put it: "of course, not everything is an argument." If everything ends up counting as an argument, then the concept is vacuous. For the category of argument to be useful it must distinguish those things which are arguments from those which are not.

What, then, are the distinguishing features of arguments? One of them – one for which I expect universal agreement – is that arguments necessarily involve or employ reasons. Whatever arguments are (in the first instance), be they communicative acts or meaningful artifacts, one of the things which distinguishes arguments from other acts and artifacts is that arguments contain or express reasons. Whatever uses to which arguments may be put, the means by which arguments – as opposed to anything else – accomplish those ends is by way of reasons. Finally, whatever the manner by which arguments may be presented, expressed or recorded, what is so presented, expressed or recorded must include reasons. If reasons are not among *what* is presented, then – no matter *how* it is presented – it is not an argument. The methodological focus of argument identification, then, must include a search for reasons.

If this is correct, then viewing images as arguments requires understanding images as conveying reasons. Now comes the important point. Because the standards for the evaluation of reasons do not change when those reasons are presented pictorially rather than textually, visual arguments do not require a special set of evaluative norms.

Here, then, is the kernel of the argument for normative non-revisionism.

*Normative Non-Revisionism for Visual Arguments*

P1. Arguments (whatever else they are or do, and however they are presented) necessarily involve (contain, express, convey) reasons.
P2. Assessing the rational quality of arguments involves assessing the probative qualities of their reasons.
P3. The probative qualities of reasons do not vary according to their manner of presentation or mode of expression.

C. Hence, visual arguments do not require any revision to our normative theories of argument.

Having already motivated my initial premise, let me say a few words to motivate the other two.

Concerning the second premise, it should be granted that there are a variety of ways that anything, arguments included, can be evaluated. Arguments can be evaluated aesthetically or morally, for example. More relevantly, arguments can be evaluated rhetorically, according to their effectiveness in persuading, or gaining the adherence of, an audience.

Yet, the rhetorical evaluation of *argument* – as opposed to the rhetorical evaluation of non-argument – involves evaluating the efficaciousness of the argument in gaining the adherence of an audience *by means of reasons*. If an argument is used to brow-beat an audience into acquiescence, or brainwash them by repetition, then persuasion is not achieved *by means of the argument*, and it is not the rhetorical effectiveness *of the argument* that is being evaluated. Instead, the rhetorical effectiveness of brow-beating or repetition should be evaluated. To be persuaded by a reason is to base one's acceptance of a claim or conclusion on the reason such that there is a causal and explanatory relationship between one's acceptance of the reason and one's acceptance of the claim. Indeed, this idea of basing our beliefs on reasons is at the very core of our notion of rationality. Siegel (1988, p. 32) puts it this way: "To be a rational person is to believe and act on the basis of reasons."

Next it must be recognized that the persuasiveness of reasons occurs in at least two dimensions which are not equivalent. First there is a descriptive dimension: is the audience persuaded by the reason? Second is a normative dimension: ought the audience to have been persuaded by the reason? These are manifestly different, since there can be clear cases where the audience is persuaded yet they ought not to have been, and others where they ought to have been persuaded but weren't. So there is no necessary or causal connection between the two dimensions of a reason's persuasiveness. (To preserve this distinction, we might call an argument which ought to be persuasive to some audience a *convincing*, or *cogent*, argument.)

The question now is, what should a normative theory of argument study or evaluate? From the audience's perspective, the answer to this question seems clear. As audience, I should be concerned with whether I ought to be persuaded by the reasons in the argument. I should want to avoid being persuaded by things which ought not to persuade me, just as I should want be persuaded by those things which ought to persuade me. More generally, I should want to be rational – I should want to be persuaded always and only by those things that ought to persuade me. That is to say, I should want to rightly respond to the reasons given in the argument. Thus, as audience, my interest should be in the normative dimension of persuasion.

What is it to respond rightly to reasons? Siegel (1997, p. 2) explains it this way: "to say that one is appropriately moved by reasons is to say that one believes, judges, and acts in accordance with the probative force with which one's reasons support one's beliefs, judgments and actions." Thus, insofar as my aim as audience is

to be rational – to be persuaded always and only by those things which ought to persuade me – I should be interested in according my beliefs with the probative strength of the reasons I have for them. Thus, the rational evaluation of arguments involves assessing the probative support their reasons provide their conclusions (i.e., Premise 2).

Concerning the third premise, there are many qualities of reasons that can vary according to their manner of presentation. Among these are many rhetorically significant qualities. Clearly, the pictorial (rather than sentential) presentation of reasons can affect both the comprehensibility and the visceral or ethotic qualities of the reason, and hence its persuasiveness. So, let's grant that visual arguments have rhetorical significance – an argument presented visually can differ in its persuasive effectiveness from the same argument presented non-visually.

By itself, though, this does not require any revision to our normative or evaluative theories of argument. An argument spoken in English will be persuasive (supposing it to be a convincing argument) to a completely different audience than the same argument spoken in Dutch or Spanish – depending on whether or not the audience comprehends the language in which the argument is delivered. Yet, the cogency of the argument does not depend on what language it is stated in, just as it does not depend on whether the argument is heard, let alone understood. Rather, the cogency of an argument is a function of how well its reasons support its claim. And this relationship between a reason and the claim it supports is not affected by the mode in which the reason is presented.

To see this, consider cases where *the same reason* is presented in several different ways.[6] Case 1: Suppose that the truth of the equation $y = 2x + 4$ is a good reason for concluding that the slope of the line described by the equation is 2, or that its y-intercept is 4. Now, suppose that the same reason is given visually; that is, suppose that the information given in the equation is presented visually in the form of a graph (see figure 1, below).[7]

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[6] Note that arguments like Gilbert's in favor of a multi-modal analysis accept – indeed rely upon – the premise that the same reason can be conveyed in a variety of different presentational modes (*op cit.*).

[7] Although I am stipulating that the same reason is presented in both the equation and the graph, I trust that this is acceptable, since the equation describes the line on the graph, and the line instantiates the equation.
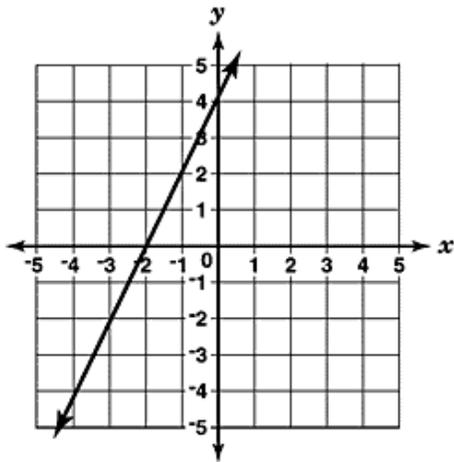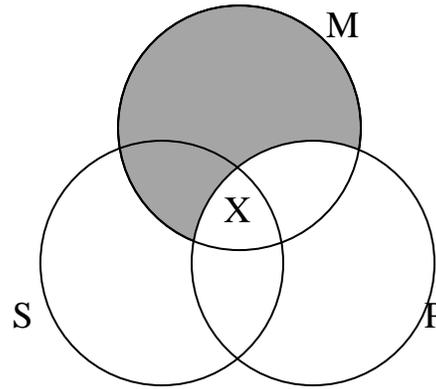
Figure 1[8]



Figure 2

So long as it genuinely is the case that the graph and the equation provide the same reason for concluding the line's slope or y-intercept, then no change in its probative or evidentiary merits has occurred merely because of how it is presented. Whether the reason is presented visually or algebraically, its merits as a reason remain unchanged.

Consider a second case, Case 2. Suppose that an S's being an M is a good reason for its being a P because all M are P (i.e., according to the syllogistic form Darii). Now suppose that the same reason is given visually, in the form of a Venn diagram, as in Figure 2 (above). Once again, the probative qualities of the reason are not different merely because of how the reason is presented. If the syllogism is a good reason for the conclusion then so is the Venn diagram, and vice-versa.

More generally, so long as the content of the reason remains the same, its rational or probative merits will not vary merely because it is presented one way rather than another. So long as the reason itself remains the same, so do its probative qualities. A reason which is irrelevant when presented textually does not become relevant if it is presented visually. And, a reason which is positively relevant when written or spoken in a sentence does not lose this relevance when it is drawn in a picture. While the rhetorical qualities of reasons vary considerably according to their manner of presentation, their probative qualities do not. Rather, the probative qualities of reasons are a function of their content not their mode of presentation.

The kinds of cases which incline us against this point – which incline us to think that reasons work differently in images than they do in words – are, it seems to me, ones where we find that *what is expressed* in the image is somehow different from *what is expressed* with the words. Somehow, the picture says something more, or less, than the sentences which attempt, albeit imperfectly, to capture the expressive content of the image. (Or, the picture somehow fails to capture the full import, with the same degree of precision, as the words.) And it is on these grounds

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[8] This line graph was copied from http://ancastermath.wikispaces.com/Linear+Relations [accessed April 29, 2013], Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 License

that the image must be evaluated differently from the set of sentences or collection of utterances.

This point is, I grant, often well-taken. Yet, it does not support the normative independence of the visual. If the reasons presented in an image are not the same as the reasons presented by a set of sentences, then we should not expect their probative merits, and hence their rational assessment, to be the same. How, though, should we respond to such cases? We should respond as we normally do when presented with two different sets of reasons, assess each of them individually and independently. Yet notice, the fact that one of the sets of reasons is presented visually rather than verbally has entirely dropped out of the assessment procedure. Once the content of the reasons is settled, their manner of presentation ceases to play a role in their assessment. More importantly, notice what this often well-taken point concedes. It concedes the point that the same reason, whether expressed visually or verbally, has the same probative merits. And this, I submit, is the very point at issue. What is needed to accommodate the intuition which inclines us to want to assess images differently is not new evaluative methods and metrics, but rather an effort to correctly articulate the reasons expressed by images. Once we're settled on the reasons, we've already got the tools to evaluate them.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

### 4.1 The medium is not the message

To conclude, arguments are comprised of reasons, and the rational evaluation of argument involves the evaluation of those reasons. The rational merits of a reason are independent of the manner in which the reason is presented. If a reason is a good reason when presented by one means (e.g., sententially) then, *ceteris paribus*, it remains a good reason when it is presented by a different means (e.g., pictorially). Similarly, presenting a bad reason pictorially cannot somehow, magically transform it into a good reason.

Hence whether or not visual arguments exist, they require no revision to our existing normative theories of argument. Because the standards for the evaluation of reasons do not change when those reasons are presented pictorially rather than textually, visual arguments do not require a special set of evaluative norms.

A consequence of my position is that a convincing visual argument is a convincing argument. While this is indeed small praise, there's a moral in the story. We ought never to arrive at a result on which a visual argument receives one rational evaluation, while the same argument presented verbally receives a different evaluation. Yet, this is a consequence which the normative revisionists invite, and it is one which I think we should be deeply suspicious of.

### 4.2 Corollary: Multi-modal argumentation and normative non-revisionism

If the conclusions of this paper are correctly drawn with respect to the visual, then analogous arguments can be composed for any putative mode. If modes are distinguished only according to manner of presentation, such that the same content

can be expressed in a variety of different modes, then normative pluralism does not follow as a consequence of multi-modalism. Instead, since the rational merits of a reason are a function of the content of that reason, not the manner by which it is delivered, multi-modalism of the sort discussed here should not require any revision to our normative theories of argument.

*4.3 Pedagogy: Visual literacy and critical thinking*

One final point. When I began the paper, I said that I did not want to discuss the methods by which images should properly be interpreted as arguments. Yet, if the conclusions of this paper are correct, then I suggest that there are important consequences for the argumentative interpretation of visual images, especially when it comes to pedagogy.

The veritable ubiquity of persuasive images in our social environments has quite rightly prompted educators to try to equip their students with the wherewithal – the concepts, skills and dispositions – required to successfully and strategically navigate these environments, or at least to inoculate themselves from their cognitively noxious effects. Typically, attempts to do this have involved imparting to students a cumbersome repertoire of recondite theories, methods and perspectives. To pick just one example, Gillian Rose's *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials*, 2nd ed. (2007) includes chapters on semiology, psychoanalysis and discourse analysis, and discusses theorists from Barthes to Baudrillard.

If I am correct, then all of this apparatus only serves to help students to correctly interpret visual images, i.e., to determine their argumentative content, since assessing reasons given visually requires no such specialized apparatus. This leads me to wonder: is all of this theoretical apparatus really necessary to successfully navigate visually persuasive environments? More particularly, what is the big worry that students, as consumers of persuasive images, get the persuasive content of the images 'right'?

The fact is, if visual literacy actually requires a mastery of this burdensome repertoire of abstruse theories, then at best very few will qualify as literate. (Indeed it strikes me that I, let alone my students, am far less likely to grasp Baudrillard than begging the question, systemic isomorphism than straw man, intertextuality than equivocation, and consubstantiality than circular reasoning.) Yet all of us must regularly navigate environments that are overwhelmingly littered with persuasive images.

As an alternative to this pedagogical approach, I suggest that a better way of teaching visual literacy is to train students to view persuasive images as arguments. This involves a two-step process. First, when confronted with persuasive images, train students to undertake a search for reasons. Having identified the reasons they see as operating in the image, the second step involves training students to apply ordinary critical-thinking skills in situations of visual persuasion. The aim here is to have students engage their system-two reasoning and to begin to think critically about the image and the reasons it offers them, rather than to be uncritically and

perhaps even unconsciously affected by the various non-rational means of persuasion deployed through the image.

Importantly, once the search for reasons is engaged there is no need that students get the reasons 'right.' Rather, they need only identify the reasons in the image as it speaks to them. More important than that they 'correctly' identify all of the reasons offered in the image, is that they are able to think critically about image and the reasons they detect in it. So long as our students base their judgments and decisions on a sound assessment of reasons rather than non-rational factors, why worry about whether the 'actual' reasons presented through the image are different? The worst outcome possible on this approach is that visual critical thinkers will not be persuaded by a cogent argument which they failed to detect but which actually is present in an image. Yet, so long as they are correctly assessing the argument they detect in the image, they are being rational, and are being persuaded always and only by those reasons which ought to persuade them. Among the possible alternatives, this seems to minimize harm. Surely our first goal should be that our students engage and deploy their critical thinking skills in persuasive situations, and that they be persuaded by good arguments, and un-persuaded by bad arguments.

Admittedly, this will not teach students all of the ways that they are affected by visual imagery, but it will prevent them from being manipulated by fallacious reasoning presented in a flashy media. After all, rational persuasion occurs by means of reasons, so what is important is that the non-rational means of persuasion deployed through the image be curtailed or circumvented, and this is exactly what approaching persuasive images as arguments offering reasons is intended to accomplish.

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