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Commentary on: Jens Kjeldsen's "Virtues of visual argumentation"

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Jens Kjeldsen's paper, "Virtues of visual argumentation," there is much to agree with; indeed, his paper contains an illuminating account of the nature of the visual mode in visual arguments. However, on some points I have misgivings. Let me emphasize first what I think is important and helpful about the paper, then later try to explain why I hesitate to accept a couple of its claims.

2. COMMENDATIONS

One of the things that need to be explained about visual arguments is what the visual brings to the argument and how that occurs. It is clear that visual elements can be forceful, but in what does that forcefulness consist and how is it accomplished? Professor Kjeldsen notes the difference between the precision of words or verbal communication and their informational or semantic thinness or paucity, and the one hand, and the imprecision of pictures or visual communication and their informational or semantic thickness or abundance, on the other. This combination of imprecision—which leaves meanings unarticulated—and informational richness—which supplies a plethora of suggestions about how the viewer might supply this lacuna, makes visual argument classically enthymematic. The visual can argue by leaving premises and or claims unexpressed while simultaneously engaging the viewer in the task of supplying them and thereby constructing an argument. Essential to this process is a context of interpersonal communication, with an attempt at persuasion taking place and with the parties sharing an understanding of the situation that makes this attempt meaningful. Moreover, the semantic thickness of pictures can lend what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca called "presence": a sense of immediacy and realism, to the argument being conveyed. They can evoke an historical situation, for instance, including the feelings and values attached to it. They can thereby communicate what might be called salience to a particular argument. As Professor Kjeldsen puts it, they can communicate that an argument is important and has weight.

Professor Kjeldsen spells out these features of visual argument in detail and illustrates them with an example of a photographic visual argument used in a North

Carolina debate in 2006 over a constitutional amendment effectively to prohibit same-sex marriage in that state. (The amendment passed, with 78% voting to restrict legally recognized marriage in North Carolina to that between one man and one woman.) He describes the message of the storefront photo as follows:

Aesthetically, the dark, closed front of the window, covering the entire picture frame, creates this blocking. We see no door that we might enter though; there is no opening of any kind into the cafeteria, and no contact can be made with the man sitting inside. He is in; we are out. The darkness of the windowpane signals dark times, while simultaneously making the white letters stand out. Even though the reflexions of the cars in the window make us aware that this is present time, the letters on the window have a font reminiscent of the 50'ies, thereby fusing the segregation of the past with the world of the present.

I do agree that the photograph is consistent with this interpretation, although I don't think it requires all of it. The lettering, with its message of segregation, is the feature most evocative of the 1950s. But maybe there's no door in the photo only because the door is to the left, just outside the frame. Maybe the background is dark so that the white letters will stand out, evoking the analogy of white and black segregation in the 1950s, but not dark days ahead. Maybe the cars are contemporary just because it's a contemporary picture; and that's all. We need to distinguish possible symbolism from undeniable symbolism. I think Prof. Kjeldsen is right that, "In fact, it is the aesthetic elements of the picture that establish the argumentative comparison between the historical then and now. Without these elements, there would be no comparison, and hence no argument." However, I also believe that the words, "On May 8th make history, don't repeat it," printed in the lower right-hand corner of the window are equally essential to the meaning communicated by the picture. For otherwise, it would be a puzzling window sign, or it would be an example of a humorous window sign, for it would mean that the restaurant doesn't serve single people, or groups of unmarried friends, or couples on a date, which is hardly a way to make a business out of a restaurant. The argumentative comparison is established by the information provided by the words, which supply the context and various unexpressed assumptions, in combination with the evocation of the feelings and attitudes attached to the racial segregation of the 1950s conveyed by the photograph.

Prof. Kjeldsen notes that "context is essential in determining the meaning and rhetorical agency of images." It occurs to me that he might enrich his example by making reference to its probable audience, namely the significant numbers of African American voters in North Carolina. While African Americans (who are predominantly practicing Protestants) tend to condemn homosexuality on religious grounds, they also tend to be more supportive of civil rights than other groups in America. Thus arguments like this one that framed the issue of gay marriage in civil rights terms (and not in religious terms) addressed both a need and an opportunity for the "No" campaign.

Besides supplying innumerable details to the eye, arguments using pictures have other noteworthy features. Prof. Kjeldsen emphasizes that they can powerfully evoke historical experiences and feelings, but more than that, they can give the

argument presence, in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's sense. At this point in his paper Prof. Kjeldsen introduces some concepts that don't get sorted out in the paper, and whose conceptual relationships it would be helpful to have clarified: 'realism,' 'urgency,' 'importance' and 'strength.' He does say that "realism and urgency are elements of presence," so we may think of presence as a general property comprised of particular components. Is importance another component of presence? And what is the relation between importance and strength? One might speculate that its importance would be one contributor to an argument's strength (among others, such as the quantity and quality of its evidence).

3. RESERVATIONS

I now turn to two worries I have about some claims made in the paper.

Prof. Kjeldsen proposes that there can occur situations in which there can be a valid argument on both sides of an issue. He can't be meaning good and 'valid' in the logician's sense, according to which an argument is valid just in case, if its premises are true, then its conclusion cannot possibly be false, and good (or "sound") if its premises are also true. For, on that definition, two arguments with true premises and contradictory conclusions cannot possibly both be valid.¹

Assuredly, reasonable advocates on either side of any of these issues would have to concede that there can be arguments that deserve to be taken seriously on both sides: none of these controversies is a case of all unreason on one side. Perhaps the point can be expressed by noting that there are truths on both sides of all these issues that deserve to be taken into account when trying to decide what policies are best. If that is what it means to have good and valid arguments on both sides, I agree.

However, that is not equivalent to the claim that two arguments on different sides of an issue can have equal acceptability, relevance and sufficiency (ARS)—assuming with Kjeldsen that these are the criteria of a logically good argument. This claim could be true for the acceptability and relevance of the reasons on both sides, but it cannot be true for their sufficiency. Here is why. In order for the conclusion of any argument (A1) to be sufficiently supported, there cannot be an argument (A2) against its conclusion that has *not* been successfully refuted. This requirement follows if one understands a logically cogent argument to be one the relevant reasons of which entitle those entitled to accept them to accept the claim on the basis of those reasons. For one cannot be entitled to accept a claim against which there is a logically cogent argument. So if there is a logically good argument (A2) for the contrary of a position on an issue like the ones Prof. Kjeldsen lists, then that (A2) is an argument that the argument in support of that position (A1) has failed to refute. In such a case, the first argument (A1) has not satisfied the sufficiency criterion. Therefore it cannot be true that two arguments on different sides of an issue may have equal acceptability, relevance *and* sufficiency.

¹ Thanks to Gilbert Plumer and Ian Dove for noticing an elementary logical blunder in an earlier version of this paragraph.

I think that the kinds of contested public policy issues that Prof. Kjeldsen has in mind are in fact ones in which acceptable and relevant reasons can be given (and often acknowledged) on both sides, but neither side is able to convince the other that its reasons—even if granted, as some might be—are sufficient.

This last point brings me to my second worry. Prof. Kjeldsen contends that the sense of importance that visual images, in this case, photographs, bring to the argument, strengthen it: the argument is made more forceful and better. He says:

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

Two things concern me about this suggestion. One is the implication that by bringing to the forefront the civil rights dimension of North Carolina's "marriage equality" issue, the photograph used to make the argument makes it a "better" and a more ethical argument. If to refuse to recognize gay marriages is to deny individuals their civil rights, then a mode of argument that makes this fact salient in the debate over the proposed state constitutional amendment is important. However, I take it that the controversy is precisely over whether marriage equality *is* a civil right—that is, *should* be treated as one. So rather than *establishing* that ethics requires the defeat of the proposed amendment, the argument *frames the debate* as one in which ethics requires its defeat. An obvious alternative framing of the issue is the religious one, which would presumably make it out to be one in which religious ethics (citing respect for God's teaching and the truth of the Bible) requires that marriage equality *should not* be treated as a civil right. So while I agree that the visual properties of the argument conveyed by the photograph make the civil rights argument against the amendment salient, I can't see that they make that framing of the issue *more* salient, or stronger and *more* ethical, than the alternative, religious, framing of the issue. If gay marriage ought to be a civil right, then the amendment should be (or should have been) defeated, but the visual argument does not establish that gay marriage ought to be a civil right; it assumes it is one. Thus it doesn't make the civil rights argument the better argument.

So while I agree that the "presence" which the visual establishes can help to frame an issue in favour of a particular point of view or argument, I am not convinced that it makes an argument better in the sense that one is thereby more entitled to accept its conclusion.

The other thing that concerns me about what's suggested in the passage that I quoted (and a few others like it in the paper), is the slippery ground occupied by phrases such as, "...and hence are provided a better and more persuasive argument." The persuasiveness of an argument is an empirical matter; the "betterness" of an argument as measured by such things as acceptability, relevance and sufficiency, is a normative matter. I think Prof. Kjeldsen's orientation in the paper has been

normative. If he turns to the descriptive issue of what makes one mode of argument more persuasive than another, he needs to supply empirical evidence to back up his claims. So I think there's a need to delineate more clearly which claims are normative and which are descriptive.

4. CONCLUSION

Despite the reservations just noted, I find Prof. Kjeldsen's paper enlightening. I think it significantly advances our understanding of how visual, and especially pictorial, arguments work.