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CHAPTER TWO

The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments

J. Anthony Blair

This book is about visual rhetoric, and this chapter is about visual arguments. I take it as part of my task, then, to address the relationships among these three: rhetoric, argument, and the visual. How can there be visual arguments when arguments as we usually know them are verbal? And if there can be visual arguments, what is their rhetorical aspect? Because arguments are supposed to be tools of persuasion and rhetoric is often thought of as including (but not exhausted by) the study and use of the instruments of persuasion, I begin by exploring the relationships among rhetoric, argument and persuasion. Then I turn to the difficulties and opportunities that present themselves when considering visual argument in particular. The chapter ends by taking up the question: What does being visual add to arguments?

Rhetoric and argument have been associated since antiquity, and in that connection arguments have traditionally been thought of as verbal phenomena. Aristotle, one of the earliest in European culture to study rhetoric systematically, identified the art of rhetoric with knowledge of modes of persuasion (*Rhetoric* 1354^a 13-14). The method of persuasion, he held, is "demonstration," and demonstration's instrument is the *enthymeme*, which is a form of argument (*Rhetoric* 1355^a 5-6). An Aristotelian *enthymeme* is an argument in which the arguer deliberately leaves unstated a premise that is essential to its reasoning. Doing so has the effect of drawing the audience to participate in its own persuasion by filling in that unexpressed premise. This connecting of the audience to the argument is what makes the *enthymeme* a rhetorical form of argument.¹ But next, Aristotle took it for granted that the agent of persuasion is the orator, and from that it follows on his conception that the principal tool of persuasion must be the orator's medium, namely, language. So, according to one of the earliest and most influential accounts, the material to which rhetoric is to be applied is verbal argument.

The conception of rhetoric as essentially about speech has remained with us to this day, although it has become more and more contested. As recently as

a decade ago, the French rhetoric scholar, Olivier Reboul, restricted rhetoric to the use of language to persuade: "Here, then, is the definition we propose: rhetoric is the art of persuading by means of speech."² Because non-argumentative speech, or non-argumentative properties of speech, can be persuasive, Reboul's definition does not make a necessary connection between rhetoric and argument, but it certainly does envisage speech as essential to rhetoric. In the introductory chapter of their book on contemporary perspectives on rhetoric, Sonja Foss, Karen Foss and Robert Trapp urge a broader conception, proposing to "define rhetoric broadly as the uniquely human ability to use symbols to communicate with one another," and they explicitly mention as one possible instance, "an artist presenting an image on canvas"—in other words, visual rhetoric (11). Even so, on the very next page they make this concession to the tradition: "We believe that the paradigm case of rhetoric is the use of the spoken word to persuade an audience" (12).

One task, then, is to explain how rhetoric may be conceived as extending beyond the boundaries of the verbal, its *terra cognita* since antiquity, so as to include as well the visual; in other words, to show how there can be *visual persuasion*. That task is taken up in the other chapters of this book, so I do not need to address it in detail. A second task, assuming there can be a rhetoric of the visual, is to make the connection between visual persuasion and argument—to see how there can be visual arguments.

PERSUASION

This might seem to be a simple matter. In the first place, the power of things visual to persuade us, to shape our attitudes, and even our beliefs and actions, seems obvious. However, from this perspective a lot hinges on how "persuasion" is understood. It was Reboul's view that rhetorical persuasion consists in *causing* someone to believe ("*faire croire*,") by means of speech (5). Now, if we drop the connection with speech in order to allow for the possibility of visual rhetoric, but retain the understanding of persuasion as a cause of changes in belief (and let's add changes in attitude, or in conduct), then what sorts of causal instruments will we allow to count as persuasion?

Persuasion cannot be just any manner of influencing a person. Imagine (what might already be possible, for all I know) that by manipulating neurons or implanting electronic circuits in a human brain, neurosurgeons could produce changes in the beliefs, attitudes, and behavior of the person whose brain is modified in this way. The rapist loses his anger and misogyny; the pedophile no longer has erotic interest in children; the self-sealing unreason of the Holocaust denier and of the conspiracy theorist disappears. Would we then classify such brain surgery as persuasion? As rhetoric? Surely not, but if not, then—assuming persuasion is a kind of cause—what marks persuasion off from other kinds of causal factors affecting beliefs, attitudes

or conduct? If rhetoric is to retain its connection with persuasion, the concept of persuasion requires attention.

We have just seen that not all causes of behavior count as persuasion. What seems to be a necessary ingredient in persuasion as a kind of cause of behavior change is that the person persuaded assents to the pressure of the vector of influence. The person consciously assents, and that implies that he or she is free to resist the causal influences. We do not consider the neurosurgeon's implant to be persuasion because going along with its influence is not subject to the agent's control. Other examples reinforce this point. The robber's gun is persuasive, just because we can choose to comply with his demand under its threat or, foolishly, to resist. There was a time when if a woman stuck her tongue in my ear, she could pretty well do with me as she would. Her seduction was persuasive, because it was possible to resist it; my assent was under my control. In both cases of persuasion, the assent was not compelled, precisely because the capacity to resist the influences was present.

The narratives we formulate for ourselves from visual images can easily shape our attitudes. Think of scenes of midtown Manhattan during rush hour. The energy and excitement will be hugely attractive for many; the disorder and cacophony will be repulsive to others. And presumably messages expressed visually can be resisted no less than other kinds. Your heart goes out to the grief-stricken parents of children killed in war or terrorist attacks, shown on TV news video clips, but you can also ask hard questions about whether those parents might have put their children in harm's way. Also there will be borderline cases. We learn from color specialists that rooms painted in different colors tend to cause different reactions. Certain blues are cool, certain greens are relaxing, certain reds are warm and comforting. Shall we then speak of the rhetoric of wall paint? On one hand, the colors have their effects unconsciously; on the other hand, once we know about their effects, can't we resist or compensate for them? So perhaps the rhetoric of color is a legitimate subfield; it's not a clear call either way. Visual persuasion, then, is clearly a growing concern.

Persuasion and Argument

However, just as not all influences that result in changes of behavior count as persuasion, visual or otherwise, so too not all cases of persuasion count as arguments. Consider the examples just used. To speak of the robber's gun as an "argument" is to make a joke or use a metaphor, even though it is persuasive (or for a sensible unarmed person, it ought to be persuasive). It is reasonable to hand over your wallet or purse, but the robber has not presented an *argument* for doing so just by pointing his gun at you. My fantasy woman's seduction might have been persuasive, but stimulating an erogenous zone does not constitute an *argument*. Such a stance might puzzle rhetoricians because, as Scott

Jacobs has put it, “rhetorical theorists have … tended to think of *any* mode of communication as argument if it functions to gain assent” (263). But Jacobs continues: “And that just will not do … not all symbolic inducements are arguments, and arguments are not the only way of gaining assent” (263). What distinguishes arguments from other kinds of “symbolic inducement”? It has to do with how they function. Arguments supply us with *reasons* for accepting a point of view. The fact that certain propositions are deemed true, probable, plausible or otherwise worthy of acceptance, is considered to provide a reason, or a set of reasons, for thinking that some claim is true, some attitude is appropriate, some policy is worthy of implementation, or some action is best done. Here is Jacobs again: “Arguments are fundamentally linguistic entities that express with a special pragmatic force propositions where those propositions stand in particular inferential relationships to one another” (264); and he continues, in a note appended to this sentence:

The canonical form that I have in mind here is captured in the speech act of assertion. Among other things, in making an argument one commits to defending the truth of a complex of propositions and to undertaking to get the hearer to accept the truth of one proposition (call it the standpoint) as being justified by the truth of other propositions (call those the arguments). (Jacobs, note 4)

Arguments are traditionally associated with speech, either written or oral, for a couple of linked reasons. First, because the reasons they use are propositions. Second, because propositions are standardly expressed by sentences in languages. A proposition is what is expressed by a sentence that has a *truth value*, which is to say that it is either true or false (unlike, say, a command, a request, a promise or a question). In presenting an argument (of the simplest possible form), someone *asserts* that some proposition, B, is true (1) because some other proposition, A, is true and (2) because B follows from or is supported by A. *Asserting* is a kind of action, paradigmatically a speech act, whereby the assertor takes responsibility for the truth of the sentence she or he asserts. Just as when you promise you take responsibility for doing what your promise commits you to do, so when you assert or make a claim (for example: “The AIDS epidemic is over.” or “Democratic administrations are, historically, as likely to go to war as Republican administrations.”), you take responsibility for its truth, and may legitimately be asked to produce your evidence for your claim. But photographs or paintings or cinematic images or video images do not seem, on the face of it, to be capable of being true or false. They might be moving, funny, clever, or beautiful (or their opposites), but to call them “true” or “false” seems to be, at best, using a metaphor, and at worst, just inappropriate. “Visual argument,” then, seems to be a solecism.

Visual Argument?

To be sure, no one owns the word *argument*. It is entirely possible to use the word to refer to any form of persuasion whatever and thus simply to reject outright Jacob’s ruling: “But that just will not do.” After all, who is *he* to say? However, such a dismissal of Jacob’s point carries a cost. If you use the word *argument* in a different way, so that it is not tied down to reason having and reason giving, or to propositions with their truth values, then you lose contact not only with argumentation scholarship but also with the way the concept of argument has functioned historically and the way it works in standard English, or in any corresponding language. You are then really talking about something different from argument in anything but a stipulated sense of the concept.

This is an important theoretical point. Words and concepts have meanings in historical contexts; they are situated in the conventions of their usage communities. To be sure, community conventions, including conceptual and linguistic ones, can change, and often should. But if words are stretched too radically, they break their connection to their anchorage and drift anywhere, meaning anything. A good example is *democracy*. The former Soviet Union called itself a democracy because its government claimed to represent the best interests of its people. But if a totalitarian dictatorship or oligarchy can count as a democracy by self-definition, then the concept of democracy has lost its connection to rule by (as well as for) the people. Almost any system of government can then count as a democracy, and the word *democracy* has lost its value as designating a distinctive type of political system. The theoretical point I am making can also be used equally to justify the introduction of new terminology. In trying to remove the sexism that is built into the language, why not, for example, just get used to thinking of postmen and stewardesses as *both* female and male? The answer many feminists gave was that it was important to make the break from conventions that needed changing, and so completely new terms were needed, “letter carrier” and “flight attendant,” that had none of the old associations of being exclusively male, or exclusively female, occupations. With respect to the concept of “visual argument,” I am trying to urge that we be cautious about stretching the concept of argument too far, for similar reasons. We might like the idea of calling any kind of visual persuasion an argument, but unless we can make a connection to the traditional concept, it would be best not to stretch the term *argument* to that extent. If there is no real connection, let’s just use a new term, and leave *argument* to the domain of the verbal.

So the issue of whether there can be visual arguments is uninterestingly settled by simply declaring any instance of visual persuasion to be an argument. It is much more interesting if it turns out that, in spite of their historical association with language, arguments *in the traditional sense* can be visual as well as

verbal. It is much more interesting if it can be shown that visual communications can be a legitimate tool of rational persuasion. Now, some hold that there can be no visual arguments or visual uses of arguments in the traditional sense of *argument*,³ and if they are right, then visual rhetoric cannot include visual arguments and there is no place, in this book or anywhere else, for a discussion of the rhetoric of visual arguments.

There are two central reasons offered against the very possibility of arguments being visual. One is that the visual is inescapably ambiguous or vague.⁴ The other is related to the fact that arguments must have propositional content, and the apparent fact that visual communications do not. Both of these objections have been answered.⁵

The vagueness objection runs as follows. Arguments aim to move us by appealing to considerations that we grant and then by showing that the point of view at issue follows from those concessions. If it is not at all clear, because of vagueness or ambiguity, what considerations we are granting, or what is supposed to follow from what we grant, then we cannot tell what we are being asked to concede, and we cannot decide whether to agree or whether the alleged conclusion follows. The process is impossible if the appeal is vague or ambiguous. Thus vagueness or ambiguity makes argument impossible.

The answer to the vagueness or ambiguity objection is simply that these features inhabit spoken and written arguments as well as visual communication, if not to the same extent. Indeed, they are common enough in verbal arguments that we have identified as fallacies with their own names—*equivocation* and *vagueness*—such moves if they impede the goals of argument. However, not every case of ambiguity or vagueness is considered a flaw in a verbal argument or in communication in general. So long as everyone can tell from the context what is really meant by such potentially ambiguous communications as an advertisement stating, “Bathing suits 40% off” (*amphiboly*), a sign saying “Slow School” (*accent*), a notice stating, “All donors have contributed \$1,000” (*division*),⁶ there is no mis-communication whatsoever. Then the use of such statements in arguments would not be fallacious. Similarly, vagueness, far from always being fallacious, is necessary for efficient communication. We do not expect a speaker or writer to be more precise than is needed for the purposes of his or her communication in any context. If someone asks what the population of Canada is in order to compare it to that of the Netherlands, a number rounded off to the nearest million is precise enough. But such a degree of vagueness about population size would be unacceptable in a census report. When you are asked your age, you are not expected to answer to the minute, the hour, the day, or the week—just to the year, which is pretty vague but entirely precise enough for most purposes. It is relevant that children often identify their age to the half-year. That is because at a young age, with freedoms and other perceived advantages increasing with age, half a year makes a big difference, and so there is a (perceived) point to the greater precision. Vagueness in diplomatic lan-

guage is essential to maintaining good relations between states: The vagueness of statements made by the Secretary of State in news conferences is studied and necessary. So, on one hand, although either vagueness or ambiguity can in some circumstances be a flaw in an argument, they are risks that verbal argument manages to negotiate. Their presence in visual arguments, therefore, does not constitute an in-principle objection to arguments communicated visually. Moreover, because many so-called “visual” arguments are in fact mixtures of visual and verbal communication, their verbal content can (and often does) function to disambiguate them or make them sufficiently precise. (More will be offered on this point that “visual” arguments are usually mixed “visual plus verbal” arguments.) On the other hand, the presence of ambiguity and vagueness in verbal arguments is very far from always being objectionable, so once again, their presence in visual arguments cannot be a reason for rejecting the possibility of such arguments in principle. And finally, as we will see in a moment, it is simply not true that all visual arguments are vague or ambiguous. The visual is not inexorably vague or ambiguous.

The other principal objection to the possibility of visual arguments is that visual communication does not have truth values, and so cannot convey propositions, whereas argument requires propositions in order to perform its role. I have already alluded to this point.

Typically, arguments have as their primary purpose to influence people to change their beliefs, other attitudes or conduct. Arguers do this, first, by appealing to commitments their audience already has, and, second, by showing (or alleging) that these beliefs, attitudes or behavior also commit that audience to accept the modified or new belief, attitude or conduct being advanced. The “object” of a commitment will be a sentence or proposition that is capable of being true or false. My belief (in 2003) that India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons is a cognitive attitude I have toward the proposition expressed by the sentence “India and Pakistan possess nuclear weapons.” If those countries don’t have nuclear weapons at the time, my belief is false; if they do, it’s true. And it’s got to be one or the other. For it to be possible for visual arguments to occur, it would have to be possible for visual images to be true or false—to have truth value. But a photograph or photographic collage, or a piece of film or a series of visual images (as in a TV commercial), or a painting or sculpture, are not “true” or “false.” The meaning conveyed is not propositional. Therefore such visual communications, however they work, cannot express arguments. In whatever manner they achieve their rhetorical effects, it cannot be by the use of visual *arguments* because the essential components or arguments—propositions—cannot be expressed visually.

There are at least two replies to this “no-propositions” objection. One is to grant that for arguments aimed at changing beliefs, propositions are essential, but then to show that it is possible to express propositions visually. To establish this possibility, all that is needed is one actual case. Here is one. There is a fa-

mous pre-World War II cartoon by the British cartoonist David Low in which an evidently complacent Englishman is depicted in a lawn chair reading a newspaper, sitting directly beneath a jumble of precariously balanced boulders rising steeply above him. The bottom boulder, sticking out but wedged under and holding up the rest, is marked, "Czecho." Sitting directly on it are boulders marked "Rumania" and "Poland" and together they support a large boulder labeled "French Alliances," which in turn supports a huge boulder labeled "Anglo-French Security." A thick rope is attached to the out-thrust end of the "Czecho" boulder and pulled up overhead and out of sight. Clearly a strong pull on that rope would dislodge the "Czecho" boulder, causing the rest to come crashing down on the Englishman below. The cartoon's caption reads, "What's Czechoslovakia to me, anyway?"

Low is arguing that to regard the fate of Czechoslovakia as having no consequences for England is mistaken. The reason Low offers for this proposition is the conditional proposition that if Czechoslovakia were to fall to Germany, that would initiate a chain of events (the fall of Poland and Rumania), which would result in the fall of the French alliances and eventuate in the collapse of Anglo-French security and that would have disastrous consequences for England.⁷ I have just expressed Low's visual argument in English and in doing so have expressed two propositions—his conclusion and his premise. It was, at the time, either true or false that "to regard the fate of Czechoslovakia as having no consequences for England is mistaken," and that "if Czechoslovakia were to fall to Germany, that would initiate a chain of events (the fall of Poland and Rumania), which would result in the fall of the French alliances and eventuate in the collapse of Anglo-French security." (The argument has the unexpressed premise that "the collapse of Anglo-French security would have a major impact on England.") In short, to the objection that propositions cannot be expressed visually the reply is that because it has been done in Low's cartoon, it is possible. (Notice that there is no ambiguity or vagueness whatsoever about Low's meaning.)

A second reply to the "no-propositions" objection is to point out that arguments are used for primary purposes other than to cause belief change. We also use arguments with the intention of changing the attitudes, or the intentions, or the behavior of our audience. The structure of the arguing process is the same. The arguer appeals to attitude-, intention- or behavior-commitments of the audience, and tries to show that they commit the audience to the new attitude, intention or behavior at issue. But attitudes, intentions and conduct do not have truth value. My preference for the Democrats over the Republicans isn't true or false; I just have it. Perhaps it is ill-advised, perhaps I have no good reason for it ("we've always been Democrats"); what it is *not* is false (or true). Yet because we do offer reasons to people to change their attitudes, intentions and behavior, it is clear that there can be (even) verbal arguments in which not all the components are propositions. Not all arguments must be

propositional. Hence, even if it is true that (some) visual images do not express propositions, it does not follow that they cannot figure in arguments.

If these two replies to the "no-propositions" objection do not lay it to rest, I will take it that at least they shift the burden of proof. And combined with the replies to the "vague or ambiguous" objection, they clear from our path the general theoretical objection that visual arguments are not possible, and leave us free to consider the rhetorical properties of visual arguments.

Here let me add a stipulation. Although there can exist purely visual arguments, most communications that are candidates for visual arguments are combinations of the verbal and the visual. The words might be in print (as in cartoons), or voiced (in the case of television or film). When I refer to "visual" arguments in what follows, I mean to include these combinations of verbal and visual communication. By "verbal" arguments I will mean exclusively verbal arguments, with no visual element.

Visual Arguments Versus Other Types of Persuasion

If it is correct to distinguish visual persuasion from visual argument, presumably visual argument is one type of visual persuasion among others. The question then becomes, what distinguishes visual argument from other types of visual persuasion?

My suggestion is that what differentiates visual argument is the same as what differentiates argument in general. To be an argument, what is communicated by one party to another or others, whatever the medium of communication might be, must constitute some factor that can be considered a reason for accepting or believing some proposition, for taking some other attitude⁸ or for performing some action. A test of whether such a factor is present is whether it would be possible to construct from what is communicated visually a verbal argument that is consistent with the visual presentation. This verbal construction would in no way be the equivalent of the visual argument, precisely because it could never adequately capture the evocative power of the visual element in the original presentation of the argument. However, it would abstract from the visual presentation the component that constitutes a reason for the claim being advanced.

Some of the best examples of visual arguments are the political advertisements made for television. One of the classics is the Democrats' anti-Goldwater spot run during the Presidential race between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater in 1964. Here is a description of what became known as "The Daisy Ad" (available on the Internet at www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1996/candidates/ad.archive/daisy_long.mov).

This chilling ad begins with a little girl in a field picking petals off a daisy, counting. When the count reaches ten, her image is frozen and a male voice

commences a militaristic countdown. Upon the countdown reaching zero, we see a nuclear explosion and hear President Johnson's voice: "These are the stakes, to make a world in which all God's children can live, or to go into the darkness. Either we must love each other or we must die." Fade to black. White lettering. "On November 3rd vote for President Johnson."

The purpose of the ad—remember, this was at the height of the Cold War—was to suggest that Goldwater was trigger-happy about the use of the H-bomb, and thus that to elect him would be to place the nation in grave peril. The ad did not mention Goldwater. It was thus a kind of visual enthymeme, requiring the viewing public to supply Goldwater as the alternative to Johnson. Never mind that the ad was an indefensible slur on Goldwater; it was brilliant. It conveyed the impression that Goldwater might, on something as arbitrary as a whim (the mere chance of which petal was plucked last), engage the nation in a nuclear holocaust, thus causing the destruction of everyone, including the innocent children who pluck daisies playing "s/he loves me; s/he loves me not." The inference that it would be a danger to the national interest to elect Goldwater follows straightforwardly.

I have just expressed in verbal form the *reasoning* of the ad, but to be clear let me set it out even more explicitly.

Goldwater might, on something as arbitrary as a whim, launch a nuclear holocaust.

Such a holocaust would cause unspeakable horror for everyone, including innocent children.

Hence, it would endanger the national interest to elect Goldwater.

To repeat, I do not for a minute suggest that this verbal expression of the argument is equivalent to the visual argument. For one thing, a number of equally plausible alternative verbal renditions of the argument are available. For another, and more importantly, this verbal extraction leaves out completely the enormously evocative power of the visual imagery and symbolism of the actual visuals making up the ad. For instance, the juxtaposition of the child in its innocence and the nuclear mushroom cloud has huge pathetic force that words cannot capture. However, what the verbal construction does succeed in doing is identifying how the visual ad contained within it a reason for not voting for Goldwater. And that, I contend, is what made the Democrats' attack ad an argument.

If this account is correct, then visual arguments constitute the species of visual persuasion in which the visual elements overlie, accentuate, render vivid and immediate, and otherwise elevate in forcefulness a reason or set of reasons offered for modifying a belief, an attitude or one's conduct. What distinguishes visual arguments from other forms of visual persuasion is that in the case of the

former it is possible to enunciate reasons given to support a claim, whereas in the case of the latter no such element is present. Thus we can see that the "Daisy" ad was conveying an argument against supporting Goldwater.

The Visual Difference

The advantage of visual arguments over print or spoken arguments lies in their evocative power. Part of this power is due to the enormously high number of images that can be conveyed in a short time. Television commercials today show between one and four *dozen* different moving visual images in a 30-second spot. We have no trouble processing that much visual information, whereas it would be impossible to express 30 different propositions verbally in 30 seconds, and even if it were not, it would be far beyond normal human capacity to process them. Visual images can thus be used to convey a narrative in a short time. Recall the Coca Cola commercial shown during the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah, in which an awkward youth wins the heart of an elegant female figure skater against the competition of several older handsome young men by giving her a Coke at the end of her program. The story is told with ingredients of poignancy, sexiness and humor—all in 30 seconds—and although (I would argue) this commercial is not an argument, it does illustrate the narrative capacity of the visual.

Another factor is the sense of realism that the visual conveys. My students, for example, year in and year out tell me that television news is better than print news in the respect that with television news they can see for themselves what happened whereas with print news they are told by a reporter, and so have only second-hand access to the events depicted. I believe that this impression is quite mistaken. A lot of TV news pictures are file footage, but even video of the actual event being reported is limited to a small number of camera vantage points and angles, and a very few seconds of footage, and the video is packaged with voice over and cut aways. Besides that, each TV news "item" on network news programs, and often on local news programs too, is a carefully crafted "story." It is deliberately assembled with a beginning (a problem or question), a middle (information, opinions) and an end (resolution of the problem or answer to the question, followed by dénouement, the outcome). The result is that the "reality" is a selected perspective presented in a highly structured or filtered way. Nevertheless, my students are under the impression that the visual gives them direct access to what is visually portrayed in a way that print does not, and their impressions are what matter so far as the power of the visual is concerned.

The visual element in visual arguments is most significantly a *rhetorical* dimension, rather than *logical* or *dialectical*. Understanding the dialectical dimension of arguments to be the process of interaction between the arguer and interlocutors who raise questions or objections, we can see that visual arguments lack this dia-

lectical aspect. The visual makes an argument in the sense of adducing a few reasons in a forceful way. It might contain or present a *didactic narrative*—a story that supports a point. But it does not permit the complexity of such dialectical moves as the raising of objections in order to refute or otherwise answer them. This is a serious deficiency in what Ralph H. Johnson has called the “manifest rationality” that ought, ideally, to characterize argumentation. Johnson’s suggestion is that when we try to convince others using arguments, we ought to mention the objections to our views that we know about and explain how we would answer these objections. There should be no suppressed problems with our case. Johnson is calling for a kind of “truth in arguing”—a “full disclosure” policy. If his ideal is one we ought to try to meet, and if visual arguments cannot, as it seems they cannot, incorporate this “dialectical” dimension of challenge and response, then visual arguments will always fall short of dialectical rationality.

Understanding the logical dimension of arguments to be the support that the reason(s) offered provide for the viewpoint that is supported by them, we can see that visual arguments supply simple, minimalist support. The verbal expression of the argument will have one or two premises, tending to be more or less syllogistic in structure. The logic of the argument will not be complicated or subtle.

Understanding the rhetorical dimension of arguments to consist of the various facets of its situatedness, it is plain that the visual is above all rhetorical. To be effective, the visual properties of a visual argument must resonate with the audience on the occasion and in the circumstances. The visual symbolism must register immediately, whether consciously or not. The arguer must know and relate not only to the beliefs and attitudes of the intended audience, but also to the visual imagery that is meaningful to it. The arguer needs also to be sensitive to the surrounding argumentative “space” of the audience, because so much of the argument must remain tacit or unexpressed. Visual arguments are typically *enthymemes*—arguments with gaps left to be filled in by the participation of the audience. The anti-Goldwater “Daisy” ad is a clear example, with Goldwater the clear target of the ad but never mentioned in it. So the arguer has to be able to predict the nature of the audience’s participation. Given the vagueness of much visual imagery, the visual arguer must be particular astute in reading the audience. Thus in a variety of ways, visual arguments rely particularly on the rhetorical astuteness of the arguer for their success. We may say, then, that visual arguments are distinguished by their rhetorical power. What makes visual arguments distinctive is how much greater is their potential for rhetorical power than that of purely verbal arguments.

Why Argue Visually?

One reason for using visual arguments is that there is no alternative way of giving the argument permanence. In a largely oral culture with little literacy,

verbal arguments have only as much endurance as their currency in the oral tradition. Thus we see the didactic visual arguments chiseled in the granite “decorations” of the great European medieval cathedrals. A striking example is the sculpture of the damned going to hell and the saved going to heaven to be found in the tympanum over the south transept door of the high gothic cathedral. The damned are depicted in graphic detail, being led or herded naked down to the right, their bodies twisted in grotesque contortions, their faces distorted and their open mouths screaming in pain. They are shackled, flames lick at them, devils prod them with pitchforks, and some are tossed into great cauldrons of boiling liquid. The saved, on the other hand, troupe triumphantly upward to the left, clad in gowns, their faces smiling with delight, with those at the top being welcomed to heaven. The message is clear: These are the fates awaiting the virtuous and the vicious upon their respective deaths. The obvious implicit premise is that no one would want the fate of the damned and anyone would want the fate of the saved. The tacit conclusion follows straightforwardly: Be virtuous and refrain from vice. Many of these depictions of the argument have so far lasted, unmodified except by the weather, for over 700 years. They are fixed in stone no less effectively than had they been fixed in print.

Besides giving this moral argument a permanence, its visual expression communicates something unavailable to the verbal version, whether it is communicated orally or in writing. No words can convey the horrible fate of the damned or the ecstatic beatitude of the saved as dramatically, forcefully and realistically as do the stone carvings. It is one thing to hear a description of these respective fates; it is quite another, far more vivid and immediate, to see them with your own eyes. So here is another reason for conveying an argument visually: one can communicate visually with much more force and immediacy than verbal communication allows.

I think there are two related reasons for the greater force and immediacy of the visual. First, visual communication can be more efficient than verbal communication. In order to convey and evoke emotions or attitudes, the verbal arguer must rely on his or her oratorical powers to cause the audience to exercise its sympathetic imagination. There are three opportunities for failure in such communications: The arguer can fail to be effectively evocative, the audience can refuse to cooperate in the imaginative exercise, and the audience can, even if trying, fail in its imaginative task. In the case of visual arguments, these three chances to misfire reduce to one. The creator of the visual expression of the argument can fail to give adequate or appropriate visual expression to the feelings or attitudes to be conveyed, and in that case, the advantages of the visual expression of the argument are lost. However, should the visual expression succeed—as the medieval cathedral tympanum sculptures do so marvelously—then the audience cannot help but become involved, and in just the way the arguer intends. Hence the arguer does not have to rely on either

the cooperation of the audience or its powers of sympathetic imagination. In this respect, then, visual argument is likely to be more efficient than its verbal counterpart.

What takes the need for the cooperation and competence of the audience out of the visual argument equation—and this is the second reason for the greater force and immediacy of the visual—is the power of visual imagery to evoke involuntary reactions—reactions that must be consciously countered by the recipient if their power is to be at all defused. Evidence of this power is today found most pervasively in movies and in television commercials. The power of visual imagery in commercials is actually confirmed empirically, at least for national TV advertising campaigns, though movies are increasingly also tested on focus groups prior to their release. The effects of various symbols are well-known and much exploited. For instance, images of young children and young animals evoke immediate sympathy in adults. Several years ago Pepsi ran a commercial that consisted of nothing else than two little boys (clearly twins, maybe 3-year-olds) and three or four puppies from the same litter at their ungainly stage of locomotion, frolicking together across a slightly sloping lawn. The puppies were jumping up to lick the boys' faces, the little boys were giggling with delight, and both the boys and puppies were tumbling together and getting up and running down the slope. The kids and the puppies were utterly adorable, and any adult viewer who wasn't a sociopath couldn't help smiling and responding, "Ohhh, they're so cute!" What the commercial had to do with choosing Pepsi is not my point at the moment. The point is that this imagery, however it might be explained, evoked a powerful involuntary response in the normal viewer.

It seems plausible that there is an evolutionary advantage to having the caring and protective responses of the adults of most species that are triggered by the young of their own or even other species biologically hard-wired in them. The hard-wiring seems indisputable. I have seen a pair of robins hatch and feed a starling nestling along with their own, and cowbirds are notorious for taking advantage of this response by laying their eggs in other birds' nests and having them raised by those other birds. We have all heard of nursing mothers of various mammal species taking on the nurture and care either of other offspring of their own species or the offspring of other species. Notice how advertisers often rely on this response by showing cute babies, both human and those of other animals, in commercials in which there is no plausible connection between the baby and the product. (Such appeals are *pathetic appeals*—appeals to the sympathy or emotional responses of an audience.)

Other kinds of symbolism, such as the authority of the physician or scientists used in pain-killer or indigestion-remedy commercials that is conveyed by actors dressed in white lab coats with a stethoscope around their necks, clearly have learned, conventional associations. (This is an *appeal to ethos*—an appeal to the character or stature of a person or a role to lend credibility to what is

portrayed.) Yet others are mixtures of learned and biological responses, such as heterosexual responses to the appearance of members of the opposite sex considered beautiful. Sexual attraction is presumably at least partly hard-wired, although there are clearly social factors in sexual attraction that are culturally variable. Lean or stout, short or tall, tattooed or clear-skinned, pierced or unadorned—these are variations in sexual attractiveness that any student of other cultures, or indeed of our own, are bound to notice. The point is that our responses—learned, innate, or a combination of the two—are used by advertisers, and their effectiveness in advertising is well tested.

Thus, the use of such symbolism in visual arguments can almost guarantee the ethotic and pathetic rhetorical influences that the arguer intends. And all it takes to accomplish these rhetorical effects is the flash of a series of visual images.

For as long as we have had near-universal literacy and a tradition of print, verbal arguments have been as permanent as we might wish them to be, and in fact have greater permanency than the evanescent television screen or the movie. So the motivation for visual arguments has not in our time been the advantage of fixing the argument in a stable medium. The evocative power of visual means of communication, especially television (but also movies, pictures in magazines, and posters or billboards) is what has recommended the visual as a medium of argument.

Genres of Visual Argument

Traditional rhetoric as applied to arguments was concerned with the means of giving the greatest possible persuasive power to the written or spoken word. It did not seek to replace the propositional content of argument, but to position it so as to be maximally forceful. The same goes for rhetoric as applied to visual arguments. My contention is that visual persuasive communication cannot ignore or set aside prepositional content and continue to count as argument. Argument requires the giving and receiving of reasons. However, visual media offer rich means for generating forcefulness for arguments expressed visually. Let us consider briefly some of the different genres of visual argument, and some of their tools and deficiencies.

I have already given an example of a political cartoon used to make a visual argument. Cartoons are distinctive because they permit an explicitness and precision of meaning found in few other visual genres. The convention that allows for labeling, and the abilities of cartoonists to capture the distinctive visual traits of well-known public figures, and the opportunity that caricature provides for exaggeration, all enable their messages to be unambiguous. To be sure, a great deal more than that is going on in cartoons, as Janice Edwards in her chapter on the visual rhetoric of cartoons (chapter 8, this volume) makes clear. The multilayered meanings and associations of various visual cultural icons generate powerful resonances around simple pen-and-ink drawings.

When the cartoonist is making an argument (and not every cartoon is intended as an argument), the points asserted visually have a particular forcefulness and credibility when such iconic imagery is used, and the means used can be analytically identified, as Edwards (chapter 8, this volume) shows in applying Perlmutter's (1998) list of ten characteristics of photographs of outrage that can give them iconic status.

Films empower arguments visually largely by means of the construction of credible narratives. When a movie is making an argument (and by no means is every film intended as an argument), it tells a story that makes the argument's cogency seem inevitable. Oliver Stone's *JFK* made the case that there was a conspiracy to assassinate President Kennedy and to cover up the conspiracy. In telling that story, it made the characters who believed in a conspiracy highly credible, and those who denied it highly unbelievable. The film made the argument forcefully by presenting a narrative in which that conclusion was the most plausible interpretation of the events portrayed. *Black Hawk Down* is a more current example. It makes the case that the U.S. attempt to capture a local warlord in Mogadishu during the Somalia intervention was an ill-conceived plan by portraying dramatically the horrible consequences that snowballed from just one thing going wrong (a soldier falling out of a helicopter during the initial attack). The idea of narratives functioning as arguments is familiar to us all. To give just one example, our countries often justify their foreign policies in terms of narratives, the only plausible resolution of which is the policy being defended. Thus the "Communist conspiracy" was a narrative that justified Cold War policies. More recently, the Muslim fundamentalist threat epitomized by the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001, were woven into a narrative that justified the Bush administration's "war on terrorism." To call these arguments narratives is not to call them fictions or to challenge their legitimacy, although they might be open to such challenges. The point is, rather, that as narratives they tell stories that have "logical" resolutions, and hence function as arguments. Because pictures, and especially films, both fictional and documentary, are wonderfully suited to telling believable stories, they provide an excellent medium for visual argument by means of narrative construction.

What the visual element adds to film or video, over, say, a novel or short story, or over documentary prose alone, is that with film or video, we don't just imagine the narrative, we "see" it unfolding before our eyes. Seeing is believing, even if what we are watching is invented, exaggerated, half-truths or lies.

The third and last type of visual argument that I want to discuss is advertising, and television advertising in particular. For the most part, we watch TV to relax, as a diversion from our working lives. Television commercials thus invade our private space and time and reach us when we tend not to be alert and vigilant. Although we can control which programs we view, we cannot control which advertisements accompany those programs and it takes an effort to

"mute" the commercials. Moreover, advertisers can and do predict with a high degree of accuracy the demographics of the audiences of any program, and so they design their messages to exploit the vulnerabilities of the members of that demographic group. Combine with these factors the huge influence of repetition, and the attraction of the visual as the medium of influencing choice becomes obvious.

My view of whether TV ads are visual arguments is not widely shared. My initial point was to emphasize the evocative power of visual communication. This power is thus available for visual arguments, whether static (print) or dynamic (television). But that does not imply that all uses of visuals in persuasion are cases of visual arguments. It strikes me that although magazine and television visual advertising often presents itself as more or less rational persuasion aimed at influencing our preferences and actions, what is in fact going on in the most effective ads is that the actual influence is accomplished behind this façade of rationality.

Whether or not even to call it persuasion strikes me as moot, because it is not clear that we have the capacity to reject the influence. When I think of a rich custard cream sauce or creamy chocolate mousse, foods I adore, I cannot help but salivate. (I am salivating as I write this description! Try thinking about tastes you love without having your mouth water.) The only way to avoid it is not to think of these foods. It might be that especially television advertising is for most of us what chocolate mousse is for me—something whose influence can be avoided only if we avoid exposure to it. If that is true, it is more like the surgeon's brain implant than even the robber's gun. And then it is not persuasion, but unconscious causation, and so not rational persuasion, and so not argument, visual or otherwise.⁹

The Pepsi commercial with the giggling children and frolicking puppies was, I want to argue, not a visual argument at all. It merely evoked feelings of warmth and empathy, which were then associated with the brand. The objective of the advertiser, I expect, was to cause the audience to feel good about the commercial, and then transfer that good feeling to the brand. Presumably the hope (and probably it was an empirically confirmed conviction) was that the good feeling about the brand would cause shoppers to reach for Pepsi on the supermarket shelf when buying soda for their families. There was no reason of any kind offered for preferring Pepsi to alternative colas or other types of soda. To insist that this commercial be understood as an argument strikes me as to be in the grip of a dogma, the dogma that all influence on attitudes or action *must* be at least persuasion if not its subspecies, argumentation. What premises could possibly be reconstructed from the advertisement? That drinking Pepsi causes little kids and puppies to be cute? Absurd. That Pepsi, like you and I, thinks little kids and puppies are cute and so we, the consumers, should favor Pepsi over other cola brands or types of soda, which don't think kids and puppies are cute? Far-fetched. Stupid as we consumers might be, we are not com-

plete idiots. Given the choice between interpreting this commercial as a completely stupid argument, on one hand, and as not an argument at all but an attempt to influence us via our psychological associations with young children and puppies, on the other, any principle of interpretive charity points to the second alternative as by far the more plausible.

By the way, this sort of visual influence through association and the power of visual symbols is not restricted to advertising. Consider another, more mundane, example. Every evening on network television news broadcasts, when the broadcast turns to federal political news from Washington, a reporter stands against the backdrop of the White House or the Capitol and reads his or her report (with cutaways edited in, to be sure). The White House and the Capitol are not just buildings. They are powerful symbols, conveying the immense authority and prestige of the institutions of the Presidency and the Congress. Thus these visual images lend to the television reporter, by association, some of the authority of those political institutions, thereby adding to his or her credibility. These backdrops are visual rhetorical devices that render the message conveyed more believable or persuasive. They lend *ethos* to the reporter. However they are not arguments. No argument is offered to show that the reporter is credible or authoritative. If the reporter were to say, "I am standing in front of the White House, and it follows from this fact that you should take my report or opinions seriously," we would on that basis *not* take him or her seriously. The symbols do their work precisely by making contact with our unconsciously held, symbol-interpreting apparatus, not by engaging our capacity to assess reasons and their implications.

What typically happens in TV commercials and other visual advertising is that there is a surface "argument," usually supplied by the accompanying verbal text or voiceover. This argument is usually thin, offering little by way of reasons for preferring the product in question to similar products sold by competitors, or for liking that brand name. What does the influencing is the psychological appeal. Charles Revson, the founder of Revlon, is reported to have once said, "I don't sell cosmetics; I sell dreams." Advertising agencies use social science research (or do their own) into the current values and aspirations, the dreams and fantasies, of *their target markets*. What's hip? What's cool? What's bad? Their ads then use actors or celebrities dressed and behaving in ways that embody those values, aspirations, dreams and fantasies. We viewers transfer our identifications with the commercials to the brand or product. We want this brand or product because we think of ourselves as like the person in the commercial, doing the kinds of things done in the commercial. No reasoning occurs here at all. Think of the old Marlboro cigarette ads. A billboard with a picture of a cowboy with a tattoo on a horse smoking a cigarette. Visual influence? Absolutely. Visual argument? None.

So my view is that although TV commercials and other kinds of visual advertising might seem to represent the epitome of visual argument, in reality they

constitute a poor case for their existence. I cannot claim that no TV commercial can reasonably be construed as an argument. On the contrary, I construed the Democrats' "Daisy" political ad against Goldwater as a visual argument. But "visual" plus "influence" does not add up to "argument" in every case.

CONCLUSION

It is time to sum up. Are visual arguments possible? It might seem not, since argument is paradigmatically verbal and essentially propositional, and visual images are often vague or ambiguous. However, we saw that vagueness and ambiguity can be managed in verbal argument, and so are in principle manageable in visual communication; moreover not all visual communication is vague or ambiguous. As well, propositions can be expressed visually no less than verbally. Argument in the traditional sense consists of supplying grounds for beliefs, attitudes or actions, and we saw that pictures can equally be the medium for such communication. Argument, in the traditional sense, can readily be visual.

It does not follow that visual argument is a mere substitute for verbal argument. The spoken word can be far more dramatic and compelling than the written word, but the visual brings to arguments another dimension entirely. It adds drama and force of a much greater order. Beyond that it can use such devices as references to cultural icons and other kinds of symbolism, dramatization and narrative to make a powerfully compelling case for its conclusion. The visual has an immediacy, a verisimilitude, and a concreteness that help influence acceptance and that are not available to the verbal.

While granting the persuasiveness of visual argument, we saw that in logical terms, its structure and content tends to be relatively simple. The complications of the dialectical perspective are not easily conveyed visually, and the result is that visual argument tends to be one-sided, presenting the case for or the case against, but not both together. Qualifications and objections are not readily expressed. Where visual argument excels is in the rhetorical dimension.

Rhetoric as related to argument, we saw, is the use of the best means available to make the logic of the argument persuasive to its audience. In communicating arguments visually, we need to attend particularly to the situation of the audience. What is the setting, and how does it introduce constraints and opportunities? What visual imagery will the audience understand and respond to? What historical and cultural modes of visual understanding does the audience bring to the situation? Visual arguers will answer these questions in creating their visual enthymemes, thus drawing the viewer to participate in completing the construction of the argument and so in its own persuasion. When argument is visual, it is, above all, visual rhetoric.

NOTES

1. For a recent, insightful discussion of the rhetorical role of the enthymeme, see Christopher W. Tindale.
2. "Voici donc la définition que nous proposons: la rhétorique est l'art de persuader par le discours." Olivier Reboul, *Introduction à la Rhétoric* 4.
3. For example, David Fleming, in "Can Pictures be Arguments?"
4. Strictly speaking, ambiguity exists when there are two possible meanings, and the context makes it impossible to determine which the author (or image creator) intended. The difficulty with visual images is more often that there is any number of possible interpretations, and there is no way to determine which of them was intended or indeed if any particular one of them was intended, and this phenomenon is properly termed *vagueness*, not *ambiguity*. The headline, "Lawyers offer poor free advice" is ambiguous, absent further contextual specification; "Coke is it!" is vague.
5. See David S. Birdsell and Leo Groake, "Toward a Theory of Visual Argument," and J. Anthony Blair, "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments," for fuller discussions of these points.
6. These examples come from S. Morris Engel, *Analyzing Informal Fallacies*, a book whose treatment of fallacies is now out of date.
7. I borrow the example from Leo Groarke, "Logic, Art and Argument."
8. I say, some "other" attitude, because it has become widely agreed among philosophers analyzing the concept of *belief* that beliefs are a kind of attitude themselves (a type of "propositional attitude").
9. I am setting aside for purposes of this discussion the enormous influence of music in television advertising. From the perspective of a study of persuasion, the role of music must be given a central place.

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