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Trischa Goodnow

The current debate over the possibility of visual argument is rooted in the idea that, to many, argument is strictly a verbal art of communication in which visual images do not apply. Others note a significant value that images have on argumentation and suggest that denying the scope of argument to include these visual tools would cost us a larger understanding of this art as a whole. To explore this highly contested conversation regarding visual argument, I have presented a discussion of the varying sides of the debate. In forming the literature review, I compiled a set of criteria for what is required of argument to test if they could also include visual images. With these criteria in mind, I created a visual project of my own with the intention of proving whether or not visual argument can exist. I then analyzed the project based on the given criteria for argument. In finding that my project shows evidence of visual argument, the final discussion I present is in what might be the most beneficial response to the current conversation. I suggest three different options as to how we might continue with or cease the discussion and then examine which option would promote the most effective communication overall.

Key Words: visual argument, visual rhetoric, visual communication, persuasion

Corresponding e-mail address: E.Chamberlain22@gmail.com

Arguing without Words:

An Exploration of Visual Argument

by

Erica A. Chamberlain

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APPROVED:

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Mentor, representing Speech Communication

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Committee Member, representing Speech Communication

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Committee Member, representing Honors

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Dean, University Honors College

I understand that my project will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University, University Honors College. My signature below authorizes release of my project to any reader upon request.

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Erica A. Chamberlain, Author

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Arguing without Words: An Exploration of Visual Argument

In recent years, much conversation has arisen in the academic world surrounding the term *visual argument.* This concept represents a category within the realm of argument where, instead of making claims verbally as argumentation has historically been characterized, an argument is presented using visual images, cues, and symbolism. Visual argument exists where the main argumentative work is accomplished using visual images (Johnson, 2004). In general, the contentions people have with allowing for a theory of visual argument are rooted in the fact that the fundamental nature of argument within the field of communication is historically constructed as an art of language. Clearly, visual expression is a form of art, but visuals generally lack significant linguistic substance. The conversation over this topic has continued for a number of years, never seeming to settle on one satisfactory conclusion. Opposing views debate the existence of visual argument, its scope, as well as its general necessity in the realm of communication. What is visual argument and is it in fact a relevant topic to explore? Due to the fact that visuals are increasingly inundating our society as a valuable and necessary form of communication, I would argue that this conversation surrounding visual argument is extremely significant. I will begin this discussion in this literature review by first defining terms. I will then address the question of why this is an important area of study, and finally I will present the varying views on the topic of visual argument present in current literature.

Literature Review

Defining Key Terms

Before diving into the varying opinions on this topic, it would be beneficial to define terms to solidify a general understanding first. To begin, what is an argument? Daniel J. O'Keefe (1982) provides a widely accepted definition of an argument as involving "the

communication of both a linguistically explicable claim and one or more overtly expressed reasons which are linguistically explicable" (p. 17). Stephen Toulmin (2003) offers another set of criteria for what constitutes an argument. In his model, an argument must have three key components: claim, data, and warrant. In this, data refers to supporting evidence in favor of the claim, and the warrant is the assumption that the claim and data hinge on explaining why the data supports the claim. For example, the claim that you shouldn't smoke can be supported by data given about the number of premature deaths we experience in this nation due to smoking. In this argument, a warrant would be the assumption that people want to live the longest and healthiest lives possible. A diagram of the combination of these two definitions of argument is below.
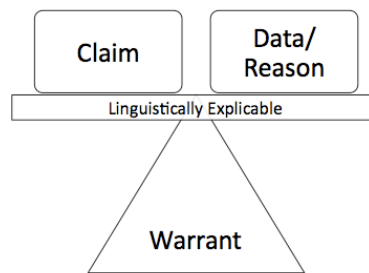
Figure 1: Visual depiction definitions of argument. This figure illustrates the relationship between the key components of an argument.

In another view of argument, David Fleming (1996) interprets claims by Hesse to suggest that, "All discourse is argumentative because all discourse is productive of belief" (p. 11). Here, Fleming presents Hesse's position that no matter the situation or context of a communication event, argument is present due to the fact that we are either consciously or subconsciously using discourse or nonverbal communication to influence another person's beliefs, decisions, or actions. According to this view, everything is, in fact, argument.

Just because an image may influence beliefs and attitudes, Blair (1996) argues it does not then suggest that those images or statements are always arguments. "There is any number of ways of influencing attitudes and beliefs besides arguing" (p. 23). This is where we must identify the distinction between argument and persuasion. As O'Keefe (2002) describes, persuasion is, "A successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication in a circumstance in which the persuadee has some measure of freedom" (p. 5). From this, we see that persuasion is a strategic art of communication that influences a person's "mental state" which could include emotions, opinions, or beliefs. It is clear that this definition differs from the common definition of argument as rhetorical discourse containing claims and reasons (Blair, 1996) or claim, support, and warrant (Toulmin, 2003). Blair (1996) explains the distinction between argument and persuasion in the following way: "The act of argument is a species of persuasion," but it is not the only means by which persuasion takes place (p. 37). The intention of argument is to relay information from sender to receiver. Persuasion, on the other hand, not only intends to relay information but also includes the result of changed beliefs, emotions, or actions. As seen here, there is a clear difference between the two, which will be an important distinction to maintain as we continue.

Another important term to define for this discussion is rhetoric. From Aristotle (1991), we learn that rhetoric is, "The faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion" (p. 36). Here we discover a distinct connection between rhetoric and persuasion. It is also important to point out that not all persuasion is rhetorical, though. Because Aristotle includes the detail of discovery in his definition of rhetoric, this implies intentional action. Thus, this reading of the definition would suggest that if persuasion is unintentional, it is not necessarily always rhetorical. All rhetoric is persuasion, but not all persuasion is rhetorical.

If, as we have just discussed, "Argument is a species of persuasion," (Blair, 1996, p. 37) and rhetoric is an art of persuasion, then it would follow that argument is also a species of rhetoric. By this we learn that not all rhetoric is argumentative, but all argument is rhetorical in nature.

Rhetoric has also been described as, "rooted in an essential function of language itself" by Kenneth Burke (1950, p. 43). From Burke's perspective, we understand rhetoric as a language-based art, which, as we see presently, complicates the opinion that visuals could be rhetorical. With this, if images cannot be rhetorical, it would follow that they cannot contain arguments either. This debate will be further discussed as we progress.

The understanding of the relationship between argument, rhetoric, and persuasion is extremely significant to continuing this discussion. As I have explained, all argument is rhetorical, and all rhetoric is persuasive. On the other hand though, not all persuasion is rhetorical, and not all rhetoric is considered argument. Figure 2 below visually depicts this set of relationships.
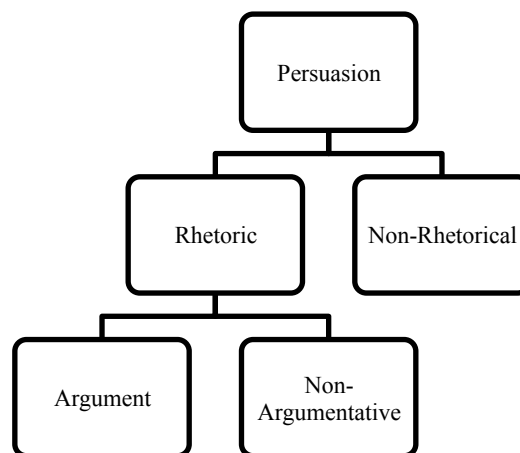
Figure 2: Relationship between persuasion, rhetoric, and argument. This figure illustrates how persuasion, rhetoric, and argument correspond with one another.

Despite complications with past definitions of rhetoric, a number of scholars have included visuals within the frame of rhetoric and have outlined their requirements for what an artifact of visual rhetoric must include. First, in her essay on visual rhetoric, Foss (2005) identifies three characteristics necessary to visual rhetoric: symbolic action, human intervention, and the presence of an audience to purposefully communicate with. She identifies symbolic action to be present in an image if it "goes beyond serving as a sign…and be symbolic, with that image only indirectly connected to its referent" (p. 144). Human intervention refers to the conscious decision to communicate and use symbols in the process. The presence of an audience is important as well due to the fact that rhetoric involves relaying information from one point to another. Also, Foss offers that what makes the perspective of an image a rhetorical perspective "is its focus on a rhetorical response to an image rather than an aesthetic one" (p. 145). In this, emotional impact is not the primary intent, but instead the focus of a rhetorical image is on the rhetorical influence it has on the audience.

As we have discussed, although rhetoric and argument are two separate entities, they overlap fairly often because, as we have seen, all argument is rhetorical. The discussions of whether or not visuals can be rhetorical and/or contain an argument are two distinct debates. Now we will move from the discussion of visual rhetoric to what constitutes a visual argument. In Johnson's (2004) work, he examines a claim by Groarke that visual argument is where the essential argumentative work is done by images, just as verbal claims are the essential basis of verbal argumentation. For example, in a speech given to argue a position, language is the major tool used to communicate the argument; therefore this is identified as a verbal argument. Likewise, Johnson interprets Groarke's claim as suggesting that if a video or series of visual images are used to argue a position and the majority of the argumentative work is done using

visuals, this would be seen as an example of visual rhetoric. Blair (1996) echoes Groarke's

opinion suggesting, "Visual arguments are propositional arguments where propositional and

argumentative functions and roles are expressed visually" (p. 26).   In response to this, Johnson

disagrees with Groarke's claim, arguing that the assumed parallel is invalid. He suggests that to

test this, one should be able to remove any text from a visual argument and still identify the

argument. If not, the assumption will fall apart and no real visual argument exists.

The Importance of this Field of Study

Moving on from the definitional foundation of this debate, one must ask: What is the

value of studying visual rhetoric in the first place? As Blair (1996) notes in his article, "The

Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments," we have currently reached "a time when

technological and cultural developments are increasingly enhancing visual communication."

And because of this, "It behooves us to consider whether argument can partake of visual

expression" (p. 23). Although Blair wrote these words over 15 years ago, this concept is only

more relevant in today's society. Blair is suggesting here that because of the fact that technology

is increasingly stimulating our visual senses, it is appropriate that we direct our attention to the

topic of visual communication and better understand its functions. Much of our culture has

evolved since the early concepts of rhetoric and communication were initially framed, and

because of these cultural shifts, Blair proposes it is necessary to analyze these changes with

regard to communication and specifically in the realm of the visual.

Similar to this, Sonja Foss (2005) discusses the prevalence of symbol-use in our society.

As she comments, "To restrict the study of symbol-use only to verbal discourse means studying a

miniscule portion of the symbols that affect individuals daily" (p. 142). Images influence our

lives so significantly that eliminating this portion of study would greatly limit our scope in the understanding of rhetoric and, on a greater scale, communication as a whole.

Groarke (1996) agrees with Blair and Foss suggesting that as we are becoming increasingly dependent on visuals in everyday interactions, we are inversely becoming less aware of our need for visual literacy. As he discusses, including visual images in the study of argumentation would greatly boost visual literacy. Not all opinions support the perceived necessity of including visuals into the realm of discourse, though, and Johnson disagrees with Groarke's above argument. Although Johnson recognizes the importance of visual images in our culture, he disagrees with the relation Groarke makes between promoting the existence of visual arguments and increased visual literacy. In his opinion, teaching informal logic and argument would not effectively impact visual literacy to the extent Groarke suggests it will. For example, Johnson (2004) comments that, "If you want to instill in students the ability to appreciate a painting, then you will need to teach them about how to observe a work of art, what to look for. Informal logic is not going to be of help much there" (p. 2). In this, Johnson expresses that Groarke's arguments toward studying and expanding the body of knowledge surrounding visual rhetoric are invalid, therefore deeming a theory of visual argument as unnecessary.

The Debate

Continuing on from a discussion of definitions and the validity of this area of study, the remainder of this literature review will discuss two overarching themes found in the debate of whether or not visual argument is logical and possible. The first debate attends to the components that go into a visual that do or do not make it an argument. The second discusses the result of these elements, or the audience's response to the visual following audience exposure to it.

Components of a Visual.

Rhetoric Inherently Verbal. The first question to ask in examining a potential visual argument is if it contains all necessary requirements to be considered an argument to begin with. The first problem arises in that, historically, argument has only been framed to include verbal communication. Birdsell and Groarke (1996) reference Fleming as arguing, "Argumentation theory lacks a well-developed account of distinction between visual premises and conclusion" (p. 5). In other words, since theories have not been historically written to encompass visuals in the realm of argument, it makes for a very difficult transition and application. Also, Fleming (1996) suggests that we could really only consider a picture an argument if we stretched the meaning of an argument beyond recognition, which would call into question all the previous literature and understanding that are the building blocks of this field of study.

Also, Foss shares that on the scale of rhetoric in general, "Rhetoricians lack knowledge about visual images" altogether, which would create confusion and ineptness to properly expand the current body of knowledge surrounding rhetoric. This, in turn, directly affects discussions of argument as well. Beyond this, Foss (2005) comments on claims made by John H. Patton that suggest that to redefine rhetoric from its current state to include visual nuances would create a "rhetorical dislocation" from the theoretical core of what rhetoric is (p. 142). Clearly, the debate of definitions is a significant problem both in the realms of argument and rhetoric as scholars are examining where visuals could realistically fit in.

It is important to comment that these scholars recognize the value of the visual on rhetorical situation but Foss (2005) brings up the common opinion that visuals represent a polluted, truncated, or devalued version of rhetoric if it can be considered rhetoric at all. There is also a debate over the value of a visual once translated into written language. As Blair (1996)

discusses this, he suggests that since O'Keefe's distinction of an argument requires that "reasons be overtly expressed and that reasons and claim be linguistically explicable…we have to be able to state or restate them in language." He adds though, that they do "not…have to be expressed in language in the first place" (p. 25). One concern is that by translating an argument from its original form, the inherent value and meaning of the argument is reduced. If, then, visual arguments must depend on verbal translations in order to exist at all, "verbal arguments retain their position of primacy (Blair, 1996, p. 34). Similarly Johnson (2004) argues that the effectiveness of a visual argument is "heavily dependent on verbal reasoning and…on our ability to 'translate' them into words, " lessening the inherent value of the argument altogether (p. 6). Fleming (1996) goes so far as to suggest, "Argumentation without the use of language is impossible" (p. 12). Ultimately, this is the basis of the entire debate over visual images as a part of the field of argument.

  Structural Shortcomings. The debate over definitions carries into another area of conflict over visuals being included in the study of argument—there are a number of structural shortcomings within a visual that hinder a clear acceptance into the realm of argumentation. This includes the debate that visuals lack fundamental components of what makes up an argument. They lack syntactic arrangement and linear process of thought as well as the ability to be negated or criticized.

  Johnson's (2004) opinion is that there is a significant issue with how one converts images into reasons that lead to a conclusion. The structural formatting of a visual image communicates very differently than the written or spoken word. Along with this, Fleming (1996) suggests that although a visual should not be able to stand alone as argument, it can definitely serve as support for a linguistic claim as long as its argument is "anchored" by a verbal caption (p. 19). In this,

Fleming is valuing images to a certain extent but does not give it equal weight with verbal language; images can support, but never anchor an argument according to Fleming.

One distinct difference between written language and visuals is that language develops in a linear manner from start to finish. There is strong debate that because visuals don't maintain a syntactic order, they are significantly limited in their ability to express complex arguments (Johnson, 2004). Fleming supports this suggesting that a visual can state an idea but lacks the ability to express or present an idea in an argumentative manner. Due to the fact that visuals are a "simultaneous whole instead of a sequence of bits" its claims and purpose are read differently than the structure of a verbal argument (Fleming, 1996, p. 14).

A third area of discussion on structural shortcomings resides in the issue of negation and whether or not a visual can be criticized in the same way language can. Susan Sontag (1990) notes the great importance of negation and suggests, "All possibility of understanding is in the ability to say no," in "not accepting the world as it looks" (p. 23). If we did not have the ability to criticize, question, or disagree with information we are presented with, knowledge, technology, and civilization would not exist as it presently does. There is a vast benefit to the ability to disagree and a necessity for it in argument. What these scholars suggest is that without the availability of negation towards visuals, visual images cannot therefore be full and complete arguments. As Blair (1996) contends, visual arguments tend to be one-dimensional as they can only present one side of an argument. They fail in the capacity to continue on from arguing for something to address arguments against it and the defects existing in them (p. 38). For example, photography can be viewed as extremely artistic and emotionally moving, but it does not follow that the image is argumentative; it is what it is as a fixed entity to be experienced. We would find difficulty to disagree with a photograph, as it is merely just a snapshot of a moment in time.

Audience Responses.

Beyond what goes into an argument to make it what it is, outcomes and responses are equally important. This next section will move from the components or "ingredients" of an argument, to what can possibly come out at the end as a result. Ideally, a successful argument would produce changed beliefs, opinions or actions. In this discussion, we will look at the larger picture of an argument as a whole and how it may or may not leave a lasting impression on the audience based on effectiveness and clarity of understanding.

Ambiguity. No matter how intelligently crafted an argument might be, it is completely useless unless it makes an impact on an audience. Ambiguity, vagueness, and confusion are highly negative outcomes of a display of an argument. This is one area of concern for many scholars including Fleming, Johnson, and others: because images cannot be explicitly read and interpreted, they are inherently "arbitrary, vague, and ambiguous" (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 1). In their 1996 *Argumentation and Advocacy* article on the topic, Birdsell and Groarke counter this claim about ambiguity passionately. To them, this creates a hierarchy ordering words above visuals in importance, precision, and effectiveness. They do not deny that visual images can be vague and ambiguous, but they also suggest that words themselves can be just as vague. How else could one explain the endless debate historians go through in interpreting historical documents to determine what was said and what was actually meant? When used effectively, words can be very direct and concrete, but the use of language is not inherently succinct in itself nor has it ever historically proven to be so. With this, Birdsell and Groarke add that just because words might be concrete, it does not therefore follow that they are always objective, which is precisely what Fleming and Johnson try to accuse images of lacking.

In this debate over ambiguity of images, Blair (1996) acknowledges and weighs each side. While he recognizes that visual communication can be vague and ambiguous at times, it can also be "concrete and particular" as well (p. 38). He does not continue on to judge which is better or more beneficial in comparison to verbal communication but recognizes there are both strengths and weaknesses to the form in which visual communication is expressed. At a time when suggestiveness is the aim, vagueness is valued, but the effectiveness of communication does break down when clarity is the goal and is not successfully achieved.

Necessity of Context. Another area of concern for those disagreeing with the possibility of visual argument is that visual images often require context in order to discover where the argument lies. Context can involve a range of associations. In general, Birdsell and Groarke argue that any argument, whether verbal or not, essentially needs context in order to achieve relevance. Words themselves do not convey meaning and argumentation, but certain words, phrases, or sentences in connection to one another frame an argument as a whole. It is in the interaction between expressed thoughts that contextual cues are brought together to create meaning. With this, many argue that it would be unreasonable to expect an image to stand completely alone without any outside context, captions, or related images and elicit its full meaning. As Birdsell and Groarke (1996) argue,

> It would make no sense to take single words as units of argumentation unless they were clearly understandable as truncated references to more complete propositions. Why then would we assume that photographs should be examined in isolation from one another, or from verbal statements with which they are juxtaposed? (p. 5)

Essentially, Birdsell and Groarke are suggesting that visual images and verbal language are approached and perceived very differently from one another, and it is unnecessary to do so.

Context is relevant in all communication situations regardless of the tools used to express that communication.

     Power of Imagery. Another topic of conversation regarding audience response to arguments includes the debated power of the written word versus visual images on an individual's emotions. Another *Argumentation and Advocacy* article comments on the "significant rhetorical advantages" visual images often have over verbal assertions when appealing to pathos (Birdsell & Groarke, 2007, p. 108). Of course there is a time and place where words are the most powerful means of communication, but Birdsell and Groarke suggest that there is a benefit to image use in certain instances as well. For example, often the only thing an animal shelter needs to do to convince someone to adopt an abandoned animal is by showing a picture of a sad and lonely dog on our TV screen. The horrors of war and poverty are also often communicated most effectively through visual images as well. On a related note, Blair (1996) comments that by allowing us to experience or witness a sense of what exploitation or discrimination would look like in our own lives, marketers can follow up with powerfully convincing arguments to elicit a reaction.

     A fundamental error is made though in believing that the most emotionally provoking images are, by default, examples of argument. In instances of appeals to pathos, there is a debate as to where argument actually resides and whether or not using images to appeal to pathos to produce an audience response is just persuasion at its finest. As discussed previously, there is a difference between argumentative and non-argumentative persuasion that is often overlooked. Blair (1996) attempts to explain it in the following way: when visual communication causes us to change our beliefs and "the choice light flashes, persuasion is occurring." Then when we reach our own expressible conclusions as to why we chose to press one button over the other,

persuasion by argument has occurred (p. 36). In Blair's words, "Persuasion by argument entails the making explicit of propositions and their alleged illative relations" (p. 37).

We must remember that there are a great number of ways to influence attitudes and beliefs beyond argumentation, and an appeal to pathos is just one. As Blair concludes his essay, he comes to find that visual arguments can exist in art, but we must not automatically assume that a powerful image is, by default, engaging in argument. Non-argumentative persuasion exists quite regularly. Also, when visual images contain powerful messages, emotions, attitudes and viewpoints, it is often the case that a visual assertion is being made instead of an argument. Blair does not disregard visuals as unable to argue, but in his view it is not as common as many think. Fleming (1996), on the other hand, sees the value of the visual image and its capability for persuasion, but he does not conclude that there is an overlap of visuals to persuade argumentatively. To Fleming, the structural and historically supported requirements of an argument cannot, by definition, be nonverbal (visual) in nature.

Concluding Thoughts on the Current Conversation

Much of the debate against the possibility of visual argument is entirely rooted in the historical constructs of what we have perceived these communication tools to entail. It is not to say that we should uproot this core knowledge and reframe the entire structure of communication that we have built, but due to the highly relative and subjective nature of this area of study, we would be limiting ourselves by refusing to explore broader perspectives of communication. Clearly, many scholars have detailed reasons for and examples of why visual rhetoric and visual argument are not possible, but we would be naïve to assume that the limited number of examples discussed fully represent the whole.

As an ending note to the current literary conversation regarding visuals and their place in the realm of communication, the fundamental functional nature of visual image versus verbal language is important to address. Through all the debate and disagreement, Foss (2005) points out a reminder to readers that these two means of communication *are* different. This may sound elementary and unnecessary to note, but by reminding us of this, Foss is suggesting we make sure not to go so far in this debate as to try putting a square peg in a round hole. All the knowledge we have built around each of these forms of communication will never entirely mesh together due to the simple fact that visuals images and verbal language are different. Johnson (2004) echoes this idea and adds that it would be beneficial to "preserve boundaries" between the realms of communication, reasoning and argument (p. 11). To a certain extent, Johnson questions even the necessity of trying to figure out how to classify visuals as persuasive, argumentative, or assertive in nature, among other functions of an image because each is inherently different.

The question remains as to what should be done in response to this debate. If we choose to hold the value of definitions highly, we would want to consider reformatting the language of the definitions so that visual images could fit in. If we value the historical structure of this field of study over all else, we might decide to keep these definitions in tact and continue the debate over how images can or cannot fit within the established boundaries. The only other option is to remain neutral in the debate accepting the subjective nature of the field as a whole. We must ask whether or not there even is a beneficial purpose to "solving" this debate at all or if we could remain in the tension between visual images and verbal language and use them both to our greatest advantage.

Figure 49: The Unreality of Beauty: Full View

Figure 50: The Unreality of Beauty: Ideal World
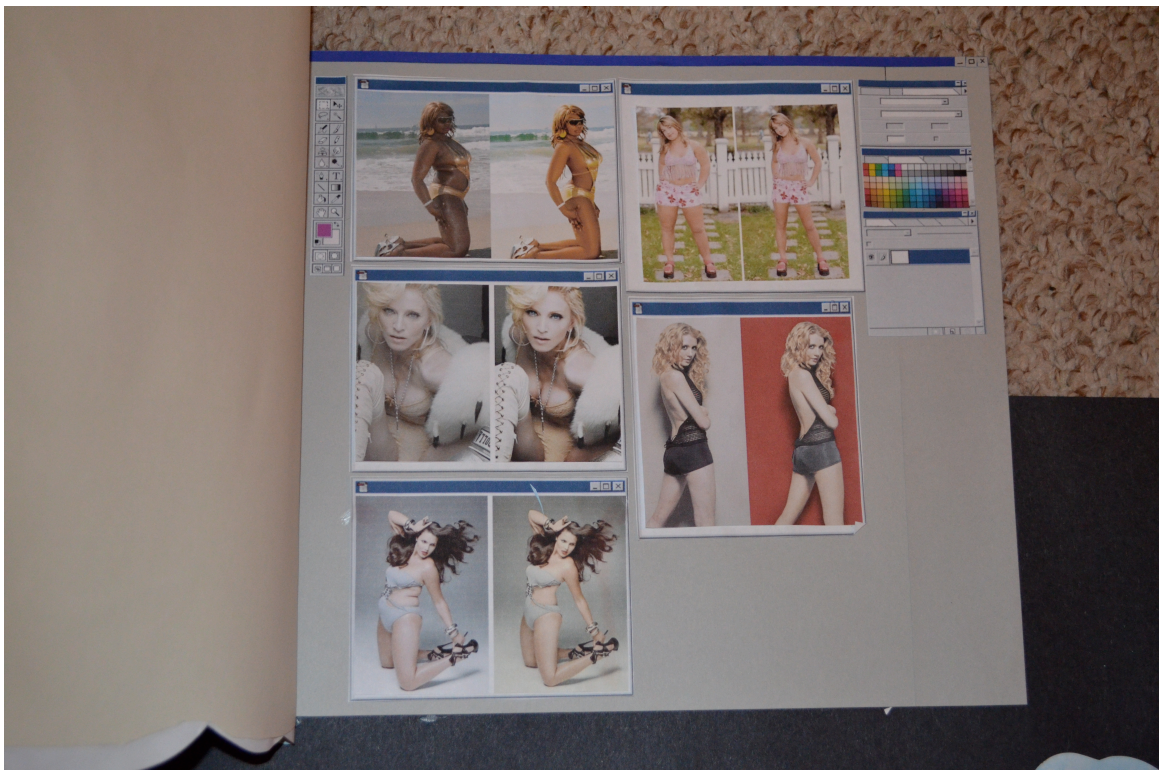
Figure 51: The Unreality of Beauty: Real World

Method of Analysis

After thorough research in the field of visual argument, I see no better way to continue this discussion than to directly apply the opinions and concerns present in the current academic conversation to a specific artifact. Instead of searching out a previously crafted example to analyze, I chose to create a visual argument myself and then analyze it based on the relevant field-specific criteria discussed in the literature review. My intentions for creating this visual were to communicate a structured argument with only the use of visual images. From here, I will proceed by testing the relevance of the varying perspectives of the debated existence of visual argumentation. I chose a topic of my own personal interest related to influences of female body image and then conducted research to formulate an argument on the topic. I then took this research and crafted the presented argument in an entirely visual manner. No words are used—only images and colored paper. To aid in clarity, the visual artifact will be referred to in this discussion as "The Unreality of Beauty" (Figures 49-51).

Because I made very deliberate choices in the design of "The Unreality of Beauty", I believe I will find that although visual arguments are not relatively common, it does in fact exist in this example. If, in fact, my conclusions do not confirm this prediction, I believe the visual will still be rhetorical in nature. In this discussion, I will first explain the details of the "The Unreality of Beauty" and my thought process while crafting it, and then I will analyze the visual based on the criteria discussed in the literature review regarding debates over definitions, structural shortcomings, and audience responses to visual argument.

An Explanation of "The Unreality of Beauty"

The main argument that "The Unreality of Beauty" is intended to present is that the media create an unrealistic image of beauty that impacts female body image and consumption at

every stage of life. This argument is presented in visual form displayed on black poster board.

There is a large gray block in the middle in the shape of steps progressing upwards to the right.

The five gray steps each have a woman at a different stage of life placed at the edge of each step

to represent the following stages of life: childhood, teen years, young adult, middle aged, and

elderly. The life progression is represented in a left-to-right development up the steps. Beneath

each female, there is a green box containing different images representing different

manifestations of body image insecurity and the actions we as females take to alter the

imperfections we see in ourselves.

Above each female portrait is a light blue cloud-shaped bubble containing images of

different models and celebrities in the media that correspond with each respective age group.

There are three blue circles tracing a connection from each female portrait's head up to the blue

bubble to distinguish these as thought bubbles. Above this is a larger cloud-shaped section from

the same light blue paper. Within this bubble are five images of females. Each one of these is a

copy of a female represented in each of the five individual age-specific thought bubbles. In the

lower right-hand corner of this large blue bubble are small but noticeable crack lines revealing

gray underneath. When one pulls back the large bubble to reveal what is beneath, there remains

a gray square of the same color as the steps at the base of the poster. This gray square contains a

representation of a Photoshop toolbar on the left side, five computer windows with images inside

of them, and another column of Photoshop toolbars on the right-hand side. At the top of the

square is a blue stripe with the "minimize," "expand," and "close" buttons on the right side as

characteristic of a Microsoft Windows computer screen. There are five individual blocks of

images containing the images of the models from the blue layer above it. Placed to the left of

these images are nearly identical images of the same women but with fat rolls, imperfect skin, less vivid makeup, and wrinkles. These images represent pre- and post- Photoshop[1] editing.

With a verbal description of "The Unreality of Beauty" in mind, I will now consider the visual implications of the design choices. First of all, the black background was deliberately chosen for the underlying associations of the color black. In western cultures, black is often associated with power, control, and intimidation. Villains are often depicted in black. Also, a number of world cultures heavily associate black with evil, negativity, and darkness ("Cultural Color", 2010). This color choice implies and plays to the corruption and tension present in the continuous media influence on female body image over a lifetime. Because the steps represent, at the most basic level, the natural progression of life, I found it suitable to represent it with a neutral color with as few emotional associations as possible. The color gray is commonly associated with the practical, the timeless, and naturally solid (Precision Intermedia, n.d.). As gray is a common color of rock, a natural building material, it is easy to understand this connection. In this project, this color gray represents reality.

The green boxes were chosen for two specific reasons. In the United States, two strong associations with the color green are money and jealousy, which are precisely what these green boxes represent ("Cultural Color", 2010). Over half of the images in the green boxes represent different consumption choices we make as we attempt to attain "ideal" beauty. Things such as makeup, tanning beds, exercise machines, plastic surgery, skin and hair care products and much more are represented. The other images in the green boxes directly reference parts of our bodies we are insecure about, like weight and breast size. There is a relationship between our

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[1] The computer program "Photoshop" is used in this discussion to represent any computer program that digitally alters images. The term "Photoshopped," which will be used in this discussion as well, refers to a computer-modified image altered in Photoshop or any other image alteration software.

insecurities and the consumption choices we make to cover up our insecurities, which is why they are included together. Insecurities arise when we compare ourselves to others and feel inadequate. To a certain extent we could also assume that envy or jealousy is present when we desire features that are different or perceived as "better" than our own. Overall, in "The Unreality of Beauty," green represents the actions we take out of insecurity and jealousy to try to alter our body images.

Each of the females are placed on the top of their step in the progression completely cut out of the background in which they were situated when the original photograph was taken. This isolates them from any barrier between their bodies and the black background of the poster. This represents the fact that if we are exposed to media, we are all directly impacted by the overall corruption of the process represented in "The Unreality of Beauty." Also, without the background in the portraits, this could represent that our backgrounds don't matter; we are all directly impacted by the media influence on beauty.

The thought bubbles are placed just above the portraits. They are each cut out of blue and white marbled paper in cloud-like shapes. This connection to clouds is very important due to their correspondence with heaven and things higher, better, or "ideal." When the images of celebrities and models are placed in a heaven-like context, they can be read as a type of higher perfection, happiness, or beauty among other things. The light blue color of the clouds is also significant in that it represents things such as peace, serenity, and the ethereal (Color Matters, n.d.). This idea, especially ethereal, corresponds closely with the relationship between the celebrity images and ideal perfection to be attained. Because this blue bubble is connected to each girl by small blue circles, it shows that these are the direct thoughts, goals, or motivations for each of the individual females. It can be assumed that these celebrities are whom these

females daydream about becoming. The dots are also very important because they make this thought process explicit. Without the dots, this concept would not otherwise be clear to the viewer.

The repetition of the blue and white marble paper above these individual thought bubbles shows that this is also a representation of an ideal world. Because there is one image from each individual bubble represented in the large bubble, this represents the combined ideals of beauty for women of all ages. Each model is different but they all portray features such as flawless skin, slim figures, perfect hair, flat stomachs, and full breasts. The small but noticeable cracks in the corner of this large "ideal" world represent a sort of imperfection in this seemingly perfect world. The imperfection is not in the images of the models, but in the larger world surrounding them. The visibility of something underneath this blue cloud sparks curiosity to reveal what is behind this perfect world.

When we notice a small inconsistency like the cracks in the cloud, curiosity drives us to lift up and reveal what lies beyond the cloud. What is revealed underneath is another gray square. This viewer interaction to lift the cloud represents our desire to discover the truth behind the perfect images we see in the media. The gray color of the box directly parallels the steps below that represent reality. This gray also happens to be the background color of a Photoshop screen, a connection which is further enforced by noticing Photoshop toolbars and five computer windows open containing more images of the models. We also get a side-by-side comparison of what turns out to be the "before" image of the perfect model images. It is clear that the "after" images are identical to the "ideal" images present on the large cloud as well as on each of the individual females' motivation thought bubbles. From this, we see that the images the females perceive as their idea of "perfection" are not actually real, but Photoshopped. We come to

discover that the women have based their insecurities and consumption patterns off an unrealistic image. What reality reveals is that the images raised up as perfect are really just Photoshopped, and the real women in the photos are now visibly imperfect.

All in all, this shows that the motivations we as women have throughout every stage of life are computer-generated motivations. When examined in reality, they do not exist to the level of perfection we think they do. Therefore, this also suggests that no matter how hard we try to alter our appearances to become perfect, that perfection does not exist. In the end all our efforts will be in vain.

Analysis

Now that the details and implications of "The Unreality of Beauty" have been discussed, an analysis will be done to determine whether or not an argument truly exists within the visual. Based on debates in recent literature, I will determine whether or not this project is a true representation of visual argument. First, I will analyze the project based on field-accepted definitions. Next, I will address the structural issues that have been debated to cause conflict in allowing visuals to be accepted into the realm of argument. Finally, I will examine the debated issues related to the impact the argument has on the audience as a whole.

Analysis of Definitions.

The first area of investigation is in O'Keefe's (1982) definition that an argument must be "the communication of both a linguistically explicable claim and one or more overtly expressed reasons which are linguistically explicable" (p. 17). First of all, is a linguistically explicable claim present in the visual? Because of the structured format of the visual, I feel that the connection between females' ideal goals for beauty and the revelation that they are unrealistic is very clear. The primary claim that can be elicited from the visual is that, "Due to media

exposure of celebrities and models, women are presented with unrealistic ideals of beauty to aspire to." Although this may not be the only claim that could be identified from the poster, I feel that this is most evident based on the parallels between the real and the ideals world and the fact that the idealism is uncovered and proven invalid. Next, is there a linguistically explicable reason to support this claim? According to my interpretation of the visual, I would suggest that the reasoning is revealed within the Photoshop box. To put this reason into linguistically explicable terms, "We know media-induced female ideals of beauty are unrealistic because the flaws of the individuals are removed, and they are made flawless through computer alterations in programs like Photoshop." The flawless features that we are trying to live up to don't actually exists beyond the computer screen. Although words are not explicitly used in the presentation of the argument to identify claim and reason, the fact that this claim and reason are identified and interpreted linguistically in the brain of the viewer shows that O'Keefe's condition of "linguistically explicable" is met for both the claim and reason.

Next, the visual will be examined based on the Toulmin (2003) model of argumentation. This includes three components: claim, data, and warrant. In this, the claim and reason are represented in the same way that O'Keefe's claim and data are presented. "The Unreality of Beauty" presents the claim that, "Due to media exposure of celebrities and models, women are presented with unrealistic ideals of beauty to aspire to." Following this, the data (or reason) to support this can be interpreted as, "We know media-induced female ideals of beauty are unrealistic because the flaws of the individuals are removed, and they are made flawless through computer alterations in programs like Photoshop." Next, the warrant explains why the data supports the claim. This asks how we come to understand that, because of the fact that model photographs are Photoshopped, the media image of beauty is unrealistic yet, nonetheless,

negatively impacts women. This is somewhat less clear than the first two elements of Toulmin's model, but one such warrant to support this would be the understanding that women look up to those (unknowingly) Photoshopped images as aspirations of beauty in their own lives. We can reason that this warrant is explicit due to the causal connection between the images in the "desire" bubbles and our actions taken in the green boxes in response to the celebrities' representations of beauty. The actions we take to alter our body image validate and reinforce the assumption that we desire to attain the beauty represented by women in the media. We aspire to this ideal image of beauty, and we respond by taking action to alter our own imperfect images and mask our insecurities. If the desire to become these perfect images were not evident, the argument as characterized by Toulmin would fall apart.

Next, we can examine "The Unreality of Beauty" in terms of persuasion. Persuasion, according to O'Keefe (2002), is, "A successful intentional effort at influencing another's mental state through communication" (p. 5). Three key pieces of this definition are intentionality, effort to influence, and successfulness. First of all, the pairing of the before-and-after pictures shows intentionality in the claim. The effort at influencing another's mental state would be the purposeful placement of the images within the context of this visual project. The final key piece to this definition is whether or not it is successful. I would argue that the direct comparison of images of the same woman both before and after Photoshop editing is, if nothing else, a very persuasive depiction of the power of Photoshop's image manipulation. I realize this opinion is subjective as I have both created the project and am interpreting audience response myself. But despite this bias, I would suggest persuasion exists here nonetheless due to the clear depiction of the concept that celebrity images are computer-edited.

Also, as we have discussed previously, all argument is rhetorical and all rhetoric is persuasive. If our example proves to be argumentative, then it would also follow that it is rhetorical as well. If, in the end though, it is not clear that an argument is present, "The Unreality of Beauty" could still potentially be rhetorical. Aristotle (1991) characterizes rhetoric as, "The faculty of discovering in any particular case all of the available means of persuasion" (p. 36). I would argue that even just the comparison of before and after photographs is persuasive to the audience. This side-by-side comparison makes the unrealistic perfection of models in the media explicitly visible.

Now we must examine "The Unreality of Beauty" based on the proposed definitions of visual argumentation. As discussed in the literature review, this term is identified as the presentation of an argument primarily using images as opposed to verbal language (Johnson, 2004). In the case of this project, no words are used. Therefore, it is understood that if an argument is present at all in this example, it is expressed exclusively using visual images and therefore would qualify as a visual argument in pure form.

Analysis of Components of Visual.

After examining the visual project in relation to a number of important definitions, I will now discuss the structure of the proposed visual argument in comparison to the structural expectations of a classic example of argument. To begin, it is debated that visuals cannot express complex ideas due to their inability to maintain a syntactic structure (Johnson, 2004). The assumption seems to be that an argumentative structure is complex, meaning, therefore, that a simple structure cannot support an argument. To examine these claims with regard to the given project, I would argue that there is actually a clear structure to the visual despite the fact that it is all presented together in one image. First of all, the progression of aging from young to old up

the steps is evident upon first glance. Also I would argue that this progression becomes more complex in adding the clear representation of connection between the females' motivations for beauty with the real actions we take to achieve these goals over the years. Because the reality of Photoshop is not revealed until first examining the images on top, I would argue that this is further evidence of structural arrangement. No matter where on the poster the audience begins reading first, the revelation of the final reality must always come at the end. Clearly images cannot abide by rules of syntax in themselves, but from my interpretation of "The Unreality of Beauty," I do not find this to significantly hinder the argument's ability to influence and communicate with the audience. Structure and progression of claims are still present despite the fact that a majority of the images are visible all at the same time.

Another structural debate regarding visual argument is whether or not an image can be contested or negated. As Blair (1996) argues, visuals can really only present one side of an argument. Essentially, he suggests that an argument is not fully complete unless it can argue an opposing side. Along with this is the idea that, in many cases, images themselves do not allow an audience to disagree with what they are presenting. For example, an image itself depicts a moment in time. It would be difficult to disagree with what it is presenting to argue that that moment in time did not exist in the way it is presented. There is a difference with this in "The Unreality of Beauty", though, in that it is not just one image, but a structure of images put together in relationship to one another. Although I would agree that this visual lacks the complexity of presenting arguments against itself, it maintains the option for the audience to disagree with or disapprove of the claims being made due to the fact that it is a combination of images put together to argue a larger claim.

Analysis of Audience Responses.

I will now continue on to the varying concerns over visual argumentation with respect to audience responses. I will examine the visual on a larger scale to see how the audience might interact with the images presented. First I will look at the question of ambiguity and then continue by exploring whether or not language is needed in order to explain and understand the intended argument presented in the visual.

It is well understood that in order for an argument to be successful in its purpose, the audience has to be able to understand and process the points made, and for this reason, ambiguity is looked down upon. Due to the subjective nature of my analysis of my own work, it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion on the level of ambiguity present in the visual project. In general, though, "The Unreality of Beauty" is well organized, consistent, simple, and all aspects are easily visible to the audience. Along with this, the argument being made is kept relatively basic and straightforward to avoid as much space for misinterpretation and complication as possible. For these reasons, I would argue that the poster is not in any way excessively ambiguous or confusing. At first glance, the point may not be explicitly evident, but, just as with any written paper, an argument must be read and examined. All the pieces must be noted and put together in the reading process. In one way, the visual project could even be seen as less ambiguous than a paper written about the same topic because it is experienced faster, and the big picture is easily visible.

It is possible that ambiguity could arise over which claim the audience perceives to be the most significant overall. Despite its relatively simple structure, there are still a number of connections for the viewer to make in order to come to the intended conclusion, which could lead to misinterpretation. Again though, it is difficult to determine this without direct audience

feedback, but I remain confident in my reasoning that "The Unreality of Beauty" is relatively straightforward and lacks excessive ambiguity.

Finally, I will discuss the question of whether or not language is needed to understand or explain the presented argument. From my perspective, I do not see the project requiring outside verbal explanation to understand the argument. Although there is no clear *necessity* for further explanation, I would contend that the use of language could still enhance the argument as a whole. This does not suggest that I do not find the argument incomplete without further explanation, though. In evaluating this idea, I would propose that there are a number of verbal arguments that would benefit from visual support of claims just as would be the opposite case here. This does not directly suggest weakness of the argument, but it more suggests the power of the combination of visual images and verbal discourse regardless of which maintains primacy in the argument. The only way we can actually understand this combination of images is when we process the images and interpret them in our brains in the form of words. This action in itself reminds us of the importance of language in our communication, but we must also remember the great value we place on symbols in our society as well. Both words and symbols are extremely influential, beneficial, and imperative to the way we communicate with one another.

Overall, this discussion hinges on whether or not a successful attempt at visual argument can be found in the example of "The Unreality of Beauty" as a whole. Following this thorough analysis of the visual project related to the criteria for visual argument, I find that although "The Unreality of Beauty" is not an explicit composition of verbal assertions, it does in fact contain obvious evidence of visual argument. Clearly visual argument is far more distinct and specific in its criteria than some initially think. In response to this, I would suggest that in implementing

the proper intentional actions and deliberate design decisions to use visuals to present an argument as I have done, visual argumentation is possible. It is not common, but it does exist.

Conclusion

In determining that "The Unreality of Beauty" is in fact a representation of visual argument, I find there to be three possible options for what the academic community can do to address and move forward with this debate. First, since there are clear disagreements related to definitions, we could alter the language of the definitions to allow for visuals to freely fit within them. Second, we could maintain distinct boundaries between visuals and the world of argument by refusing to recognize the visual's potential argumentative capability. Third, we could refrain from forcing this discussion too far in either direction. Implementing the first option might push visual images and verbal language much too closely together by attempting to evaluate two inherently unique elements of communication on identical scales of examination. Implementing the second option might result in creating a far too distinctive separation between two differing, but extremely interconnected, forms of communication. Ultimately, we must decide what is most beneficial to the field of communication as a whole.

Due to the fact that the intent of this examination was to see if I could create an artifact of visual argument myself, I recognize that a fair amount of bias may be present in the analysis. The next step to take in this discussion would be to present "The Unreality of Beauty" to others and record how it is received. Regardless of what public reception of the visual project would reveal, this step would be a beneficial extension of this current discussion.

Following this, I must ask the question: Why is this an important distinction to make? Ultimately, is there a benefit to coming to a concrete conclusion as to where visuals can or cannot fit into the world of argumentation? I would suggest that despite the fact that this is a

highly contested debate attracting the attention a wide variety of academic voices, making a final determination would likely do little to either positively or negatively impact the field. Ultimately a conclusion is insignificant. By attempting to decide whether or not visuals can be included in the realm of argument, we are seeking to place an objective box around a field that is inherently and infinitely subjective. The field of communication studies does not function on concrete truths and facts, but on the understanding that humans are emotional and unpredictable beings and therefore that our interactions with one another will be inherently subjective as well. We can put our effort in continuing to argue the debate, or we can move on to utilize the communication tools we have been given to their fullest potential both of themselves and in combination with one another. Perhaps the tension between the worlds of visual and verbal might foster far more effective communication than would result from eliminating that tension altogether.

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