

Images as arguments: Progress and problems, a brief commentary

DAVID GODDEN

*Philosophy Department
Old Dominion University
Norfolk, Virginia
USA 23529
dgodden@odu.edu
www.davidgodden.ca*

Godden, D. (2015). Images as arguments: Progress and problems, a brief commentary. *Argumentation: An International Journal on Reasoning*, 29, 235-238.
doi: 10.1007/s10503-015-9345-7

The final publication is available at link.springer.com.
<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10503-015-9345-7>

Abstract This brief editorial considers a special issue of *Argumentation* edited by Jens Kjeldsen on visual, multimodal argumentation. It provides a commentary on important advances on interpretative problems such as the propositionality of argument, the reducibility of images to words, whether argument products are primarily cognitive artifacts, and the nature of a modality of argument. Concerning the project of argument appraisal, it considers whether visual arguments call for a revision of our normative, evaluative apparatus.

Keywords Argument evaluation; Argumentative content; Entitlement-preserving inference; Multimodal argument; Normative revisionism; Visual arguments

We operate in a culture whose cognitive and social environments, both public and private, are increasingly saturated with visual images deployed for persuasive ends. While images have always been discursive formations of the argumentative terrain, their appearance in the theoretical cartography of that space was quite recent. It was not two decades ago, in 1996, that Groarke's paper "Logic, art and argument" in *Informal Logic*, together with his and Birdsell's special, double issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, brought visual arguments to the attention of argumentation scholars. Since then, the study of images within argumentation theory has brought together scholars from disciplines as disparate and complementary as aesthetics and fine arts, cultural and media theory, semiotics, communication theory, rhetoric, philosophy, formal and informal logic, computer science, and mathematics.

This confluence of scholarship has produced noticeable progress with, if not resolution to, some of the questions and controversies that initially surrounded the issue.

At first, the very possibility and existence of visual arguments was disputed. Yet, as Blair notes (2014), the intervening twenty years has seen the burden of proof shift from the proponents of visual argument to its deniers. Once this conceptual (or ontological) question is settled, there are two major projects for argumentation theory: analysis (an interpretative, or reconstructive project) and appraisal (a normative, or evaluative project). Until now, the theoretical efforts and controversies relating to visual arguments have been directed exclusively at interpretive issues, while the evaluative project has gone unaddressed.

The present volume offers several important advances in interpretive issues. Interpretatively, the oldest and most basic question concerns the propositionality of argument. As Roque's contribution (2014) demonstrates, this issue remains significant and contentious. Need the components of arguments be truth-apt, such that they are capable of conveying truth from premises to conclusions (in the case of demonstrative argument or entailment) or making the truth of conclusions more likely (in the case of probative or dialectical argument)? Insisting that the components of arguments be truth-apt seems to require that they be propositional. This, in turn, seems to give primacy to verbal argument, since statements (declarative sentences) express propositions. One alternative is to treat arguments, and their constituents of reasons and claims, as *entitlement-apt*, rather than *truth-apt* (Pinto 2006, 2009). On such a view, while the constituents of arguments still function, and are explained, inferentially (e.g., as entitlement-establishing, entitlement-preserving, and entitlement-defeating), they needn't be propositional in nature.

Related to the question of the propositionality of argument is the question of reducibility – whether non-verbal arguments must be translatable, or reducible, to verbal ones, and whether any such translation adequately captures the expressive content of the original image. Kjeldsen's contribution (2014) argues that images are resistant to a complete reduction to the verbal, since they provide presence and thick representations to issues such that our experience of the force of reasons is qualitatively different from, and more visceral than, any verbal experience might offer, even in cases where the verbal is somehow able to capture the content of the image. Groarke's contribution (2014b) takes the position that arguments can occur in a variety of different, independent modes, of which the visual is but one. He further claims that there is no general, theoretical requirement for inter-modal translatability, especially since inter-modal translation is not involved in many actual argumentative exchanges.

Granting these points, it should also be noted that even if the *expressive* content of an image is not verbally expressed or translated, its *argumentative* content can be, using of Finocchiaro's (2013) notion of *meta-argumentation* (cf. Blair 2014). Even if the object language is an imagistic one of pictures, the meta-linguistic rules governing the inferential use of images as entitlement-establishing, entitlement-preserving, and entitlement-defeating are expressible in natural languages. Indeed these meta-linguistic rules often constitute the warranting principles that arguers must invoke when justifying their argumentative moves if challenged. As such, if the inferential use of images cannot be specified or codified in a more-or-less rigorous manner adequate to the communicative and rational needs of arguers, significant doubt is cast on whether the images really are functioning argumentatively.

The issue of reducibility raises the further question: what kind of artifact is an argument¹ (O’Keefe 1977)? The contributions of Kjeldsen (2014), Roque (2014), and most explicitly Van den Hoven (2014) each claim that arguments are, primarily, *cognitive* artifacts. On such views, though the visual needn’t be translated into the verbal, nevertheless the visual elements of arguments must, ultimately, be translated into primitively meaningful, cognitive constructs. An alternative is to view arguments¹ as *linguistic* constructs. Granting that there is an ineliminable cognitive dimension to argumentation (Godden 2010), it does not follow that we require a theory of meaning such that external languages, be they verbal or visual, become meaningful only because they represent or express some mentalese, or primitively mentalistic dimension of meaning. Instead, on a pragmatic, use-based theory the meaningfulness and argumentative operation of images is explained in just the same way as the meaningfulness and argumentative operation of words (Groarke 2014a). Images become (argumentatively) meaningful functionally, when used in the right sorts of ways, such as when embedded in an appropriate system of practice, involving the giving and asking for reasons, and governed by meta-linguistic rules of the sort described above.

The concept of argument *modality* has helped to allay claims of verbal-priority, by allowing theorists to understand each of the visual and verbal alike as but one among many argumentative modalities, none of which need be primary or primitive. Yet, it also raises the question: what kind of thing is a mode? According to Gilbert (1997) the modality of argument corresponds to its manner of presentation such that the same informational content can be expressed in a variety of different modes. By contrast, Groarke’s contribution (2014b) defines modes as “the ingredients used in constructing arguments,” where ingredients are likened to the “material” or “stuff” out of which arguments are built. The important idea here is that arguments need not be built with words; rather, they can also be built from images, or from a variety of different components. Functionally, though, all arguments are built from the same stuff: claims and reasons. Things lacking these functional components, no matter what they are composed of (whether words, images, or what-have-you), are not arguments. Hence, I recommend a functional account of the components of arguments, with the admission that, when used in the right sorts of ways, non-verbal items can satisfy these functional roles just as well, if not better, than verbal items can. Such a view permits distinguishing the function, content, and mode of an argument’s components (as Groarke (2014b) proposes with his *key component tables*), and retains the idea that the same content can be presented in a variety of different ways. It also preserves the idea that argument appraisal involves evaluating reasons, rather than collections of words or images.

While questions surrounding the proper interpretation of visual arguments remain prominent, pressing and unanswered, Blair’s contribution (2014) addresses the equally important, and hitherto unaddressed, problem of the evaluation of visual arguments. What are the proper methods and standards required to evaluate the cogency of visual arguments? Specifically, do visual arguments call for the revision of existing methods and standards of argument evaluation (Godden 2013)? Previously, Gilbert (1997) has advanced a trans-modal normative revisionism. By contrast, Blair (2014) makes the non-revisionist case that “there is no distinctive visual logic” with a series of cases, while Groarke (2014b) remains neutral claiming, “the account of modes proposed here leaves open the question of whether instances of different modes must be judged on the basis of

different criteria of assessment.” I suggest that understanding arguments as composed of reasons, rather than either words or images, results in normative non-revisionism, on the grounds that our existing methods, standards, and norms of argument appraisal evaluate reasons, not merely verbal reasons.

The preeminent theme unifying the papers collected in this volume, and the argumentation-theoretic approach to images generally, is the methodological insistence on a rational approach to the visually argumentative – that persuasive images be treated as offering reasons. Others would have us navigate the visual culture in which we are situated by other, non-rational means, abandoning our rational sensibilities as somehow antiquated. I find this to be profoundly ill-advised, for it is only by paying attention to reasons, and knowing how to work with them, that we will be sensitive to, and immunize ourselves against, the irrational and non-rational means of influence that permeate the persuasive visual environments of everyday life.

Acknowledgements I extend my sincere thanks to Jens Kjeldsen for the invitation and opportunity to contribute this brief editorial commentary to an important and timely volume.

References

- Birdsell, D., and L. Groarke. 1996. Toward a theory of visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33: 1-10.
- Blair, J.A. 2014. Probative norms for multimodal visual arguments *Argumentation*. doi: 10.1007/s10503-014-9333-3
- Finocchiaro, M. 2013. *Meta-argumentation*. London: College Publications.
- Gilbert, M. 1997. *Coalescent argumentation*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Godden, D. 2010. The importance of belief in argumentation: Belief, commitment and the effective resolution of a difference of opinion. *Synthese* 172: 397-414. doi: 10.1007/s11229-008-9398-3
- Godden, D. 2013. On the norms of visual argument. In D. Mohammed and M. Lewiński (Eds.), *Virtues of argumentation. Proceedings of the 10th international conference of the Ontario Society for the Study of Argumentation (OSSA), 22-26 May 2013* (pp. 1-13). Windsor, ON: OSSA.
- Groarke, L. 1996. Logic, art and argument. *Informal Logic* 18: 105-129.
- Groarke, L. 2014a. Visual argument, Wittgenstein and Patterson: How to do things without words. International Society for the Study of Argumentation (ISSA), 8th International Conference on Argumentation, at the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, July 1-4, 2014.
- Groarke, L. 2014b. Going multimodal: What is a mode of arguing and why does it matter? *Argumentation*. doi: 10.1007/s10503-014-9336-0
- Kjeldsen, J.E. 2014. The rhetoric of thick representation: How pictures render the importance and strength of an argument salient. *Argumentation*. doi: 10.1007/s10503-014-9342-2
- O’Keefe, D. 1977. Two concepts of argument. *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 13: 121-128.
- Pinto, R.C. 2006. Evaluating inferences: The nature and role of warrants. *Informal Logic* 26: 287-317.
- Pinto, R.C. 2009. Argumentation and the force of reasons. *Informal Logic* 29: 268-295.
- Roque, G. 2014. Should visual arguments be propositional in order to be arguments? *Argumentation*. doi: 10.1007/s10503-014-9341-3
- Van den Hoven, P. 2014. Cognitive semiotics in argumentation: A theoretical exploration. *Argumentation*. doi: 10.1007/s10503-014-9330-6