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We Have Yet to See the “Visual Argument”

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Abstract: In this paper, I defend two skeptical claims regarding current research on visual arguments and I explain how these claims reflect upon past and future research. The first claim is that qualifying an argument as being visual amounts to a category mistake; the second claim is that past analyses of visual arguments fault on both end of the “production line” in that the input is not visual and the output is not an argument. Based on the developed critique, I discuss how the study of images in communicative events can be carried out without the concept of “visual argument” and I illustrate this with two new directions of interdisciplinary research.

Keywords: images, argumentation, analysis of communicative behavior, communicative event, reconstruction

Introduction

The study of visual argumentation has certainly gained momentum.¹ This development is anything but surprising since the study of images has succeeded in bringing to surface essential questions regarding argumentative interactions and the use of visuals in such interactions. One of the many merits of the scholars engaged in this project is to have drawn attention to a number of received views that require further examination.

Proponents of “visual argumentation” criticized the traditional viewpoint according to which arguments are necessarily verbal entities.² This critique was first articulated by Groarke (1996) and Birdsell and Groarke (1996). The traditional viewpoint, labeled by Roque as a form of “verbal imperialism” (2009, p. 6), was seen as an outdated and unnecessarily restrictive point of view. In Birdsell and Groarke’s words, it was a “dogma that has outlived its usefulness” (1996, p. 2). Responding to this gain in momentum, some scholars have pleaded caution, calling attention to both methodological and practical issues connected with the concept of “visual argument”. According to a standard case that can be found in the papers of Fleming (1996), Johnson (2003), Patterson (2010), and Dove (2012), the putative visual argument is, upon closer examination, neither really visual nor really an argument.³

However, for all its initial acerbity, the discussion between the proponents of visual argumentation and the skeptics has nowadays come to something like an academic armistice. The latest special issue on this topic (*Journal of Argumentation*, vol. 29, issue 2) is virtually free of truly skeptical accounts. The proponents of the project continue with its development, careful to mention problematic aspects in passing, while the skeptics are generally regarded as having lost the discussion. It seems that the philosophical skirmishes have passed and it is now a time of peaceful case studies and applications.

¹ The historical development of the study of visual argumentation is very well documented in Birdsell and Groarke (2007), Tseronis (2013) and Kjeldsen (2015).

² Some predecessors of this line of argument are to be found in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969, pp. 7–14) and Kneupper (1978). A review of these traditional accounts appears in Fleming (1996).

³ Dove agrees with the proponents of visual argumentation on many points, but he rejects the idea that visuals, in the kind of examples typically discussed in the literature on this subject, are arguments (2012, p. 229). For this reason, I place him alongside the skeptics.

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In this paper, I want to defend two skeptical claims regarding the study of visual argumentation and to explore the consequences of these claims. First, I defend the claim that qualifying an argument as being visual is committing a category mistake (Section 2). Second, I defend the claim that visuals cannot be reconstructed as arguments (Section 3). While I am well aware that these claims have a certain implausible ring to them, especially given the aforementioned momentum of the field, I think they are not only correct, but they can in fact be useful for future research. Thus, as a result of discussing these two claims, I propose two new directions of interdisciplinary research in the argumentation-theoretical study of visuals. This research, I argue, avoids the discussed methodological issues and can lead to a fruitful interdisciplinary discussion between argumentation theorists and scholars of multimodality (Section 4).

The concept of “visual argument”

I begin my case by arguing that the concept of “visual argument” is a category mistake. Now category mistakes can always be justified as figurative or loose uses of language, but when they have methodological consequences and appear as the foundation of new lines of research, one is entitled to extra caution.

Let us first look at the existential claims regarding visual arguments. Groarke announces that “a growing body of argumentation literature recognizes ‘visual arguments’ as an important ingredient of public discourse and debate” (2002, p. 229). Roque refers to the existence of visual arguments as having been “well documented” by “giving many examples, most of them convincing, of visual arguments” (Roque 2012, p. 273). In a similar vein, Kjeldsen notes that “several works have accounted for the existence and nature of visual argumentation in general” (2012, p. 239). And with some reservations as to their frequency, Blair accepts the existence of a “rarer, but in principle possible, ‘purely’ visual argument” (2015, p. 218). The visual argument is thus out there. Those who oppose this existential claim are referred to as “verbal imperialists” (Roque 2015, p. 181) or are described as adherents to a “verbal paradigm” (Groarke 1996, p. 125) and “dogma” (Groarke 2007). Understandably, since the existence of visual argument has been well documented, the only legitimate question remains, as Groarke puts it, “why do argumentation theorists find it so difficult to recognize visual arguments?” (2003, p. 1).

The claim regarding the existence of visual arguments cannot be directly refuted. Even if one were to go case-by-case and show that the discussed examples are entities that are apparently visual yet, on reflection, non-visual (or apparently arguments, yet, on reflection, non-arguments) this would not exclude the possibility of finding an ideal, clear-cut case of visual argumentation. Counter-examples will also not work, for no particular predictions can be derived from an existential claim of this sort. As such, the only real way of examining the usefulness of the claim is to examine its theoretical consistency within its methodological environment – to check, as it were, whether its adoption upsets some other part of the system.

The concept of “visual argument” does in fact lead to conceptual problems. For in identifying something as a visual argument, the analyst qualifies an act performed within an episode of communicative interaction (with all the social and cognitive dimensions implied by the term “communicative”) according to the way in which part of that communicative interaction has been recorded and reproduced. Of course, the existence of communicative episodes from which some elements can be recorded and reproduced visually is both trivially true and academically uninteresting. No one ever claimed, I suppose, that all communicative episodes can only be recorded/reproduced in one particular mode, be it the verbal or the visual one. Street signs, political cartoons, symbols on electronic devices, seductive winks, paintings—these are all communicative episodes that include visuals, meaning that they can, in part, be recorded and reproduced visually. But attributing to an *act* the properties of the *recording of that act* is committing a category mistake for it involves placing oneself simultaneously at two different levels of analysis. This category mistake can be further brought to surface by looking at several real-life situations, for I think that the kind of misapplication it involves would strike us as odd in almost any non-academic context.

A 1. e4 e5
2. Nf3 Nc6

B 1. e4 e5
2. ♖f3 ♜c6

Figure 1: Different modes of recording/reproducing chess moves.

Consider the different means through which a series of chess moves are recorded and reproduced as A, B and C in Figure 1.

Faced with such a variation, I think normal language users would say that A, B and C are not different chess moves “in different modes”. We would definitely not say that in A we are dealing with fully verbal chess moves, in B with multimodal chess moves and in C with fully visual chess moves. Rather, a normal language user would say that A, B, and C are different modes in which the same moves are *recorded and reproduced* and that the means of recording and reproduction have nothing to do with the chess moves as such. It is then a category mistake to place oneself at the level of chess playing (where something is distinguished as a move, an opening move, a bad move, an original move etc.) and at the level of chess recording (where something is distinguished as algebraic notation, figurine algebraic notation, diagram notation etc.)

The same considerations apply to episodes of communicative interaction, i. e., episodes in which participants aim to bring about perlocutionary effects by getting the other party to recognize one’s illocutionary intentions. Let us examine one such example. Let v be the commonly recognized play/pause button on an electronic device (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The play/pause symbol as part of a communicative episode.

As part of a larger episode of communicative interaction between the manufacturer of the device on which v is imprinted and the customer who buys that device, v is without a doubt a visual element. It is “a visual”. I know this because visually is how I chose to reproduce that particular “bit” of the interaction between the manufacturer the customer. I am also aware that the entire event contains other elements that are not captured by the visual I reproduced, elements such as the instruction manual in which v is probably defined. But never mind these other elements, I can still describe v as being “a visual”, because v is a visually reproduced slice of a communicative episode between a manufacturer and a customer.

Yet nothing that has been said thus far regarding v implies that the manufacturer performs a “visual communicative act” or that v is *itself* such an act. Should I want to reconstruct this episode of

communicative interaction between the manufacturer and the customer, that is, should I want to analyze this piece of interaction from a certain theoretical perspective, then *v* will remain a visual while the communicative act will have to be qualified in the “mode-neutral” language of the theory I have selected. For example, in a Gricean-Searlean theoretical framework, we would perhaps start by noting that the manufacturer and the customer agree or think they agree upon some mutual goal. We would then describe the manufacturer as “explaining” how to make the electronic device produce the desired sounds and we would describe the customer as understanding and accepting the manufacturer’s act in view of the commonly recognized goal as well as the fulfillment of various felicity conditions. When making these analytical claims, there is no mode to speak of, for we are now at the level of analytically distinguished acts. We are now in the realm of explaining, understanding, interpreting, accepting – or, had we chosen a different framework of analysis, in the realm of first-pair parts, terminating economic exchanges, fulfilling one’s economical duties, or contributing to a capitalist society.

This distinction between the recording of a communicative episode and the analysis of a communicative act applies of course also when there is disagreement between the parties involved. The recording of an act performed in order to resolve this disagreement – an act of argumentation – can always be described in terms of its most salient modality, but this description does not concern the thus-recorded act. You can distinguish good arguments from bad ones, analogy arguments from symptomatic ones, simple arguments from complex ones, scientific arguments from political ones. “Visual” is just not a costume an argument can get into.

To all this, the proponent of visual argument might reply that if “visual argument” is a category mistake, then, by parity of reason, “verbal argument” is also a category mistake.⁴ After all, the qualifier “visual” in “visual argument” fulfills the same function as “verbal” in “verbal argument” does. This is, I think, correct. If we understand argument as a certain form of human communicative interaction, one which is identified by the speakers’ expression of particular illocutionary intentions in a particular institutional context, then we would have to maintain with regard to “verbal argument” the same conclusions we drew with regard to “visual argument”.

However, this is anything but a calamitous consequence. The idea of a purely verbal argument was never central to argumentation theory nor was it central to related fields such as rhetoric and dialectics. It is true that some authors might have suggested, through their multimodally naïve definitions of argumentation, that arguments are necessarily verbal. Yet such mishaps were sufficiently compensated by the numerous examples in which the verbal (“what is said”) was but a part, and a small one for that matter, of what was employed in order to arrive at the participants’ acts (“what is argued”). For that reason, the verbal nature of argument, while indeed affirmed, was never really a cornerstone of research into the nature and uses of argumentation. Neither “pre-modern” theories of argumentation such as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s *New Rhetoric* (1959) nor “modern” ones such as pragma-dialectics of van Eemeren and Grootendorst (1984, 2004) are committed to the view that when it comes to argumentation the verbal is the only dimension that counts or the even more absurd view that the verbal is the only dimension that is possible.

Any argumentation student that learns about the indispensability of context (broadly construed) in carrying out a reconstruction of an argumentative interaction has thereby acquired the assumption that argumentative interactions are multimodal. A certain “slice” or “bit” of an interaction cannot be analyzed unless various elements of contextual information are taken into account. Two language users exchanging speech acts in a linguistic code see each other; they interpret face expression and tone; they associate what they hear with what they see; they supply particular knowledge regarding the social situation in which the interaction occurs as well as general knowledge regarding human communication. While some of these aspects might be significantly more salient than others, the argumentation scholar who slips the word “verbal” in his or her definitions does not intend to reduce all these aspects to the ones that are

⁴ I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to this possible reply.

incidentally salient.⁵ The commonplace argument "Socrates is mortal because Socrates is a man and all men are mortal" is only an argument if the person uttering these words is not clearly insane or clearly joking or clearly exercising pronunciation etc. All this information is retrieved through modes other than the verbal one, which makes this standard argument irreducibly multimodal.

The term "verbal argument" may thus be dislodged. It is always the totality of the multimodal event that must be taken into consideration in identifying and reconstructing acts – acts of arguing or otherwise. In past theories of argumentation, the modality of the recorded event was not a point of focus, which explains the rather sloppy definitions that suggest all arguments are verbal.

Let me summarize the case advanced in this section. I have claimed that the concept of "visual argument" rests on a category mistake: it disregards the distinction between recording and reproducing (parts of) a communicative event and analyzing that episode through analytical instruments. In using a concept such as "visual argument" the scholar is fusing these two viewpoints with regard to the episode, thus leaving the impression that a new, hitherto ignored species has been discovered. Far from being a "stimulating discovery" (Roque 2012, p.273), the concept of visual argument brings with it not only conceptual problems regarding the analysis of communicative events but also the allusion that modes can be separated, studied independently and categorized based on the venerable division between the five senses.

The reconstruction of visual arguments

The case advanced in the previous section leaves an important question unanswered. If "visual argument" is a category mistake, what are we to say of past analyses of visual arguments, the ones that "have accounted for the existence and nature of visual argumentation in general" (Kjeldsen 2012, p. 239)? In the present section, I will attempt to answer this question by discussing several examples.

My claim will be that past reconstructions fault on both ends of the production line: (1) the input of the reconstruction is not the visual, even when linguistic symbols are completely absent from the recording, and (2) the output is never an argument, even when one party aims to change the other party's beliefs during the interaction. I will discuss (1) and (2) separately for the sake of clarity. However, what is said of the examples discussed in relation to (1) applies to those discussed in relation to (2) and vice versa.

The input of the reconstruction is not a visual

Past reconstructions of visual arguments follow a certain pattern. Few scholars deviate from this pattern and even those who have expressed doubts regarding this procedure's reliability have ended up following it. First, the analyst starts by classifying a certain episode of communicative interaction under a general label such as "political discussion", "medical consultation", and "academic debate". Second, the analyst reproduces one or more visual bits of that episode, reducing the episode to what is referred to as "the visual" or "the image". Third, the analyst proceeds to show that the isolated visual can be processed analytically in such a way that the result of this process is an argument. The visual bit, we are then told, has been reconstructed as an argument.

Consider the cartoon reproduced in Figure 3 below. Shelley (2001) as well as Feteris et al. (2011) have analyzed this cartoon as a visual argument according to the aforementioned procedure. In their analysis of

⁵ Ironically, then, those theories that were pigeon-holed as verbal imperialisms were significantly more open to the idea of multimodality simply because for them it just did not matter whether, under some assumptions, you can qualify your example or corpus as containing 'visuals' or 'verbal'. At no point in the analysis of an argumentative interaction did such categorization of the corpus make a difference. For proponents of 'visual argument', such a reduction to the essential mode is crucial. I further elaborate this point in Section 3.2.

Figure 3: The Andrew Toos cartoon.

the Toos-cartoon, Feteris, Plug and Groarke begin with a brief description of the type of communicative activity instantiated by the Toos-cartoon. Political cartoons are characterized as communicative activity types in which “cartoonists try to convince the reader to share their view on a particular political situation” (Feteris et al. 2011, p. 59). This type of event is further described as one in which “the cartoonist selects a particular image from the common cultural heritage that can be used to depict a particular politician in such a way that the audience understands which person and which aspects of his behavior or policy in a particular political situation the cartoonist refers to and what his critical stance is with respect to this behavior” (2011, p. 59). Various other general statements about cartoons are made (pp. 59–63), after which we are brought to the particular case under study.

The authors describe this cartoon as “a comment on the structure of professorial employment in the university” (2011, p. 68). The way in which the three academic statuses are depicted “suggest[s] that there is, in academic employment, a ‘march of progress’ as one moves from the one to the other” (*ibid.*). The authors claim that this cartoon “obviously advocates a negative evaluation of this policy; it raises questions about a very stratified system of employment which is characterized by large differences in status and pay” (*ibid.*). All this is eventually put together in an argumentation structure, that is, a structured representation of the assertives performed by the cartoonist in his attempt to convince the audience of that the structure of professorial employment “must be evaluated negatively”. Figure 4 reproduces this argumentation structure.

It is not relevant for the present discussion to consider this reconstruction in all its details. The point of introducing this example was to examine the input employed in the reconstruction, i. e., to examine thesis (1) with regard to it. I will thus assume that the reconstruction is correct in all respects and warranted within the authors’ chosen methodological perspective. That is, I assume that anybody who had access to the same

1. The policy regarding the structure of professorial employment in the university (X) must be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1a The policy regarding the structure of professorial employment in the university (X) should be characterized as being not up to standard (or underdeveloped, or primitive).
 - 1.1a.1a With regard to the development of payment and status of part-timers and associates in the university the policy (X) *is like* the very first stages in the March of progress (Z)
 - 1.1a.1b the very first stages in the March of progress (Z) can be characterized as a primitive stage in the evolution.
 - 1.1b A structure of professorial employment in the university that is primitive must be evaluated negatively
 - 1.1b.1 The situation with regard to the structure of professorial employment in the university should not be lagging behind the structure of employment in other sectors (or the evolution of modern western society as a whole).

Figure 4: The reconstruction of Toos’ cartoon in Feteris et al. (2011, p. 69).

visual bit and would have attempted to pragma-dialectically reconstruct Toos' argumentation would have arrived at the same argumentation structure as the one reproduced in Figure 4. In fact, I propose to do away with the text in the reproduced visual bit and assume that the words "PART-TIME," "ASSOCIATE," and "PROFESSOR" were not there to begin with. (We might easily imagine a context in which the three "animals" can represent academic statuses without the need for textual indication). By assuming all this, we can now focus on the signal that enters the reconstruction process.

True, there is a lot of drawing and showing in the Toos-cartoon. One party, Andrew Toos, wishes to send some message by (*inter alia*) drawing the three "specimens" reproduced in Figure 3. It cannot be doubted, thus, that the communicative episode between Toos and his audience has a very salient visual component. However, the selected "bit" is but a small part of the interaction and it is accordingly but a small part of the ingredients Feteris, Plug and Groarke employ in their reconstruction. The authors explicitly take into consideration various statements regarding the historical context in which the Toos-cartoon appeared. For example, they explicitly base the reconstruction on the claim that "In United States of America, the United Kingdom and many other countries, universities have tried to balance their books and deal with the financial crisis by drastically increasing their reliance on part-time professors." (2011, p. 68). In addition, they take it that the cartoonist has "the ambition to provide dialectically adequate contribution to a discussion on the structure of employment in universities", and the intention to "amuse [the] audience" (2011, p. 69). All this information is not contained in the cartoon itself; it is not something Toos expresses *via* the cartoon. And yet it is a part of the interaction, a part that makes the visual intelligible and without which the Toos-cartoon is just a rather curious sketch. But the authors employ much more information aside from that which they make explicit. For example, they assume that the cartoonist is aware of the described situation in the universities; that he is a skilled communicator and that his intention is to advance a normative rather than descriptive standpoint with regard to that situation.⁶ These and many other assumptions play a role in our understanding of the interaction between Toos and his audiences and, as such, they play a role in the reconstruction. Turn any of these "knobs" and you will obtain a different interaction and consequently a different reconstruction. We are thus justified in concluding that the visual does not exhaust the input of the reconstruction even when linguistic symbols are completely absent.

Several scholars have acknowledged that the visual is but a small "bit" of the communicative episode and that, strictly speaking, the episode as a whole functions as an input. But notice the predicament. Once the *multimodality* of the episode is accepted, the *unimodality* of the input is inconceivable. It is therefore difficult for the proponents of visual argument to characterize the results of their reconstructions as *visual* acts. As a way out of this predicament, some scholars maintain that the visual is in some sense essential to the interaction and therefore essential to the reconstruction. For example, Blair's visual arguments are those in which the "essential elements" of the argumentative interaction are expressed visually (Blair 2015, p. 218). Groarke (2015) subtly introduces a similar stipulation when he writes:

In the case of verbal arguing, words and sentences are the *semantically significant* components we assemble to create an act of arguing. In the case of pictures and other non-verbal elements, we may similarly say that it is semantically relevant elements that *are the ingredients that matter*, and that it is these that define a mode. (Groarke 2015, p. 140, emphasis added)

Based on such stipulations, Groarke can admit that the interaction is multimodal and still maintain that the interactants are performing visual acts (e. g., 2015, p. 137). But this strategy is inexpedient. It gives rise to the irksome problem that any written argument will be classifiable as a visual argument one – after all, written

⁶ In listing such assumptions, we might even take a look at the more general context surrounding this communicative episode and note other elements that influence the interaction and, as such, the reconstruction. The Toos-cartoon originally appeared in a newspaper and it is as such subject to a wide variety of conventions regarding the author-audience relationship assumed in mass media. We assume, for example, that Toos drew the cartoon specifically for that newspaper, that the cartoon is addressed (indirectly via the newspaper) to a certain audience, that the cartoon concerns relatively recent events etc.

sentences are visual symbols. Groarke notices this unwanted side effect, but responds with a new stipulation: “written arguments are made up of visual signs, but they are not instances of the visual mode, which recognizes arguments constructed from other kinds of visuals” (2015, p. 144).

The origin, basis, and need for such stipulation remain thus unclear. But I propose to take them seriously. Is the visual really the essential part or the one that does the essential “work” or constitutes, as Groarke puts it, the ingredient that matters? Not in the least. It is not difficult to imagine a situation in which exactly the same visual leads to a completely different reconstruction or a situation in which a different visual leads to exactly the same reconstruction. Such examples can show that the visual is not in any usual sense the essential element in the reconstruction.

Imagine, for example, that after you have finally obtained your tenure at the university, you receive a postcard from your colleagues with the Toos-cartoon on the cover. You would have to reconstruct the message as a complimentary pat on the back regarding your achievement. So although nothing in the visual changed, everything in the context changed and the reconstruction must change accordingly. The other way around, imagine that everything in the described communicative event remains the same while the Toos-cartoon appears modified as in Figure 5 below, viz. the stripes on the tenured professor’s suit are removed. The modifications, while giving rise to a new visual, will not give rise to a new reconstruction. Such cases force us to conclude that the visual is not essential to the interaction and thus not essential to the reconstruction. The visual is but a slice; the slice is not the whole and it does not lend its properties to the whole.

Figure 5: The Toos-cartoon modified.

In sum, the visual is neither the only signal employed in the reconstruction of an argumentative interaction nor is it in some sense the kernel of that interaction. The visual can of course steer the reconstruction one way or the other, but the same can be said of other elements that together constitute that event. Thorough reductions and stipulations, a scholar may attribute exclusivity to the visual and brush aside the rest of the communicative event, but that will not change the fact that it is the event as a whole that constitutes the input. And one cannot in one breath affirm the multimodality of interactions and the existence of *visual* arguments. Thus, quite separate from the conceptual problems discussed in the previous section, concluding that a visual argument has been successfully identified and reconstructed because the event under reconstruction contained a visual means ignoring both the complexity of the event and the complexity of the reconstruction process.

The output of the reconstruction is not an argument

Even if we agree that the visual is not the input of the reconstruction, we might still wonder whether the output is an argument. Can the showing of a visual be placed in the same basket with the advancing of the proverbial “Socrates is mortal because Socrates is a man and all men are mortal”? For the purpose of

tackling this question, I will examine Groarke's (2015) paper in which various examples of visual and other unimodal arguments are identified. The following situation is said to contain "a clear act of arguing" (2015, p. 136).

Imagine that we are standing in line at the Amsterdam airport, Schiphol, having debated the question whether the foremost proponent of pragma-dialectics, Frans van Eemeren, is in Brazil. I have adamantly maintained that he is still in Amsterdam, and you have disagreed. In the wake of our unresolved disagreement, I happen to see him standing in a line in front of us. In attempting to settle our disagreement silently, I open a book and display a photo of van Eemeren, nudge you with my elbow, and point at the elegantly dressed man a few meters in front of us, raising my eyebrows as I do. You look and nod resignedly when I ask you "Was I right?" (Groarke 2015, p. 136)

Let me introduce some notation so as to avoid wordiness. Let p be the claim at issue, viz. "Frans is in Amsterdam"; let L stand for Leo Groarke displaying the photo, V for the "viewer" seeing the photo, and F for Frans van Eemeren. It is clear that, in the story, L 's displaying of the picture is intended to bring V to accept p . It is obvious, for instance, that seeing the picture of F and comparing it with the "elegantly dressed man" can make V discard $\neg p$ as false. In short, this form of interaction is in many ways similar to an argumentative discussion. But is L advancing argumentation?

The condition based on which Groarke categorizes L 's photograph-showing behavior as argumentation is this: the behavior is an intentional attempt to change V 's mind, bringing V from an initial belief "It is not the case that p " to a revision of that belief and the adoption of a new belief "It is the case that p ". In other words, the picture of F is a visual *argument* because the speaker intentionally brings V from the incorrect belief that F is in Brazil to the correct belief that F is in Amsterdam. In referring to this imaginary situation, Groarke writes:

I just show you the photograph. *In deciding whether you will accept my conclusion* you don't consider some verbal counterpart – you just compare the photograph and the man in front of us (and then assent). Your eyes and brain do the work without relying on words. (Groarke 2015, p. 138, emphasis added).

The same condition is quoted in the case of other examples considered by Groarke in the same article.⁷ Looking at these examples, one might note, pre-theoretically, that it is rather unnatural to describe the behavior as argumentation. As a speaker of English, I am inclined to say: "It is not *as* a way of arguing that L is showing the picture, but rather *instead* of arguing that he is doing that. As a matter of fact, arguing would be pointless if L can just show V that F is right there in front of them." Indeed, in Groarke's own words, L is "attempting to *settle* [the] disagreement silently." This intuitive difference between settling a dispute and resolving it by means of argumentation has been made part and parcel of some theories of argumentation such as pragma-dialectics (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 58). Within the framework of such a theory, we would say that, if indeed V ceases to oppose p after the picture of F is shown, L has settled the dispute through a gesture rather than resolve it through argumentation.

Nevertheless, intuitions and pragma-dialectics aside, Groarke might respond that, technically speaking, L 's behavior does count as an argument because it fulfills the aforementioned sufficient condition. The problem with this decision is that, as it stands, it opens a Pandora's box of extreme cases that we would have to recognize as arguments in virtue of their fulfilling the same sufficient condition. For example, L might show V a 100€ and, through a myriad of inferences analogous to the ones triggered by the photograph, V might arrive at the same conclusion p that that F is not in Brazil.⁸ The showing of the 100€ bill is

⁷ Thus, when a tasty glass of wine is offered in support of the quality of that wine, the same sufficient condition is mentioned: "This is a case in which [the person offering the glass of wine] is forwarding an argument, *offering you reasons why you should accept her point of view* [that the wine is good]. One of the reasons [...] is the tasting of the wine in question, which is supposed to provide evidence for her standpoint" (Groarke 2015, p. 137, emphasis added). This is called 'argument by taste'.

⁸ Say V reasons as follows: (a_1) L is a very cautious better, (a_2) 100 EUR is quite a sum, (a_3) L wouldn't risk 100 EUR unless he saw F , (a_4) L 's showing me 100 EUR as a proposal to bet [...], therefore (a_n) F is in Amsterdam etc." These inferences, of course, need not be valid.

then the argument against p because *it* (not “some verbal counterpart”) led you to dismiss p . And why stop at visual stimuli and why stop at “normal” stimuli? A photograph of Thelonious Monk (instead of Frans van Eemeren), a mystical dance, and a two-hour session of psychoanalysis might, practically speaking, have the same effect and L might put them into practice with the intention of producing this effect. In short, they can all fulfill Groarke’s sufficient condition. Yet we would not readily catalogue these situations under the heading of argument. In all these situations, V accepts p as a result of an act performed by the other party, but we need not throw this in the same bag as the situation in which has been convinced of p by an act of argumentation.⁹ A theory of argumentation starts with the assumption that slapping someone in the face and advancing “ $q \ \& \ q \rightarrow p$ ” are two fundamentally different ways of getting that person to discard $\neg p$ and accept p . If one’s analyses lead to a muddling of this distinction, it is the analyst that needs to discharge a rather hefty burden of proof.

I think Groarke is well aware of this danger of opening Pandora’s box, for he later adds the supplementary condition that the given reasons (the photo, the glass of wine etc.) must be “rational” ones (2015, p.135; p.143). Thus, a session of psychoanalysis and a photograph of Thelonious Monk would presumably not count as an argument in that situation (even though they meet the first condition of leading one from p to $\neg p$) because, presumably, they are not rational. Unfortunately, the question of distinguishing between rational and irrational reasons is first avoided (e.g. “what counts as ‘rational’ in this context is a complex and controversial question which lies beyond the scope of the present paper.” p.135), then shifted towards other normative-sounding yet equally vague concepts such as “strong” and “significant” (“For our purposes, it will suffice to say that the premises of a strong argument are acceptable and provide significant evidence in support of the argument’s conclusion” p.135). Towards the end, the distinction is simply taken for granted (“It goes without saying that it may be possible to resolve a disagreement in some other way – by hitting someone or kissing them or making a joke or distracting them in some way – but I have not categorized this as argument”, p.143).

Now this second condition does not sort out the trouble created by the first one. An act is now an argument only if it is a good (“rational”) defense of the standpoint. In other words, if we evaluate an argument and discover that it is bad (not strong, not rational), we are then forced to conclude that it was not an argument after all. Aside from the conflation of normative and descriptive considerations, this second condition can give rise to ridiculous analyses. Let’s go back to the Schiphol situation. L shows a picture of F to V and as a result V accepts that F is in Amsterdam. According to Groarke’s definition, we must check whether showing a picture in this situation is rational, i.e., whether the act “rationally establish [es]” (Groarke 2015, p.135) the conclusion that F is in Amsterdam. Say we look into the situation and discover that Schiphol is not in Amsterdam. (Indeed, as a matter of fact, Schiphol is not in Amsterdam. It is located in a different province, called Haarlemmermeer). For this reason, arriving at p based on the relationship between F -in-the-picture and F is quite weak. Are we then to conclude that the act is not an argument after all because the support it offers is weak? This seems like putting normative considerations before descriptive ones. One would expect the question of whether we are looking at an argument to be prior to the question of whether the argument is good or bad.

⁹ In commenting on an earlier draft of this paper, [name deleted by the author] accused me of a slippery slope here. I thank him for the comment, but this is precisely the point, namely to show that one is given free pass to jump to these extreme cases. Groarke’s example asks for such counter-examples. The defect in the sufficient condition employed by him is precisely that it allows for such situations to be described as arguments. Blair points to a similar peril when he writes: “From the fact that images influence beliefs and attitudes it does not follow that such images are arguments, for there is any number of other ways of influencing attitudes and beliefs besides arguing. Indeed, it would be a mistake to assimilate all means of cognitive and affective influence to argument, or even to assimilate all persuasion to argument. In that case, shock therapy becomes indistinguishable from a syllogism; crowd mania merges with a carefully crafted case for a conclusion; and fear mongering or appeals to blind loyalty cannot be separated from clear-eyed appeals to interests or to evidence!” (2012, p.205). Blair turns to cases in which such ‘influence’ occurs by visual means concludes, inexplicably to my mind, that “visual arguments are not distinct in essence from verbal arguments” (2012, p.223).

To summarize. Despite claims to the contrary visuals are not and cannot be reconstructed as arguments. First, because the visual does not by itself enter the reconstruction process (3.1) and, second, because the acts thereby identified are not in the same class as argumentation (3.2). Let's go back to the question that motivated this discussion. If the species "visual argument" does not exist, what are we to say of past analyses of visual arguments? According to the cases advanced in 3.1 and 3.2, we can at most say that the authors have attempted to reconstruct a visual so that an argument comes at the other end of the production line. But they have failed. What they have produced are reconstructions in which the information that is not expressed visually yet that are nevertheless crucial to the reconstruction (the "knobs" which, if turned, would change the reconstruction) are suppressed and ignored. The end-result of the reconstruction is acts that, if classified as argumentation, would open a Pandora's box. Maybe there are good reasons to do away with the distinction between arguing and brain massage therapy but nothing in this direction has been offered.

Two new lines of research

The critique developed above is meant to encourage, first, a form of methodological upkeep in the argumentation-theoretical study of images, and, second, a more interdisciplinary approach to the study of visuals in social situations characterized by disagreement. In this section, I want to explain how I envisage further developments. By way of introducing these new lines of research, it will be useful to take a fresh look at the problem of defining the object of study. After criticizing the concept of "visual argument", the spot is vacant, as it were.

According to the standard definition, a visual argument is an argument that is expressed by visual means. This definition is adopted with almost no variation in Groarke (2002, p. 230), Dove (2012, p. 224), Roque (2012, p. 274), Kjeldsen (2015, p. 124), and Blair (1996, p. 26; 2015, p. 218). Conceptual problems aside, the conditions set by this definition are not satisfied by *any of the examples discussed in the literature*. In all these examples a participant contributes to an interaction by means of a visual symbol ("visuals"), yet the acts we identify in this form of behavior, it is not the visual alone but the whole of the interaction that makes up the participant's act. And once this whole (multimodal) interaction is taken into consideration, it is highly doubtful that anything advantageous arises from considering the participant's act as an act of argumentation. Under these circumstances, no act is purely visual – or purely verbal, for that matter – and the kinds of acts typically discussed in the literature are not arguments.

My suggestion is to simply renounce the label of "visual argument" and, as a corollary, renounce the ambition of slicing up multimodal interactions and attributing individual modes to the participants' acts. What can then be designated as the object of study of this interdisciplinary field? First, in order to highlight that the focus is on situations in which one or more parties find themselves in a state of explicit or implicit disagreement, we can conceive of this research as the study of persuasive communication. Second, in order to highlight that this research focuses on the interaction of modes within episodes of persuasive communication, we can refer to it, slightly pleonastically but nevertheless correctly, as the study of *multimodal persuasive communication* (MPC, henceforth). Although one can record and thus isolate individual modes, the acts performed are only interpretable and comprehensible within the multimodal whole. The object of study is not new, nor is there any "stimulating discovery" to announce. What characterizes the study of MPC is the focus on how interactants transmit content and illocutionary force – to put it speech-act theoretically – through all the modes involved and how these modes influence one another. The study of MPC is, in a nutshell, multimodal analysis of interactions triggered by and carried out in order to resolve disagreement. As I will show in what follows, at least two sets of very interesting questions can be asked regarding MPC, none of which presuppose the existence of visual arguments.

A first set of questions concerns what might be called *resistance to reconstruction* in MPC. It is a commonplace that both linguistic symbols and visual symbols can be employed in order to get a point

across while avoiding clear-cut commitments (and thus clear-cut responsibility). A direct and literal utterance such as “Please close the door!” is fairly open to reconstruction in that commitments can be fairly easily ascribed to the speaker uttering those words: the speaker believes that the door is open and that it can be closed, the speaker wants the door to be closed, the speaker believes that the hearer can and, under normal circumstances, will close the door etc. Slightly less responsible is the speaker making use of indirect language, e. g., by uttering something like “It’s rather cold in here, isn’t it?”. Moving further all the way to the end of the spectrum of created responsibility, we find allegorical and metaphorical uses of language. In such situations, the speaker avoids the kind of responsibility typically created through literal and direct language-use. Take dystopian literature as an extreme example. It is relatively straightforward to understand the message in Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” (a fictional story in which a society of perfectly equal individuals is described). A reader does not need a diploma in literary criticism in order to read this short story as a critique of naïve egalitarianism. At the same time, it is virtually impossible to pin Vonnegut down to a set of claims regarding naïve egalitarianism. The author can, in extremis, reject the best of our reconstructions. We can say then that Vonnegut’s short story, and dystopian literature in general, resists reconstruction.

The same spectrum of resistance to reconstruction can be observed in the case of visuals and other non-linguistic symbols. Some visuals are open to reconstruction just as literal language-use is. That is, the interactants are not aiming to avoiding commitment; they are aiming to be as clear as possible (for a more detailed discussion of such symbols, see Forceville and Clark 2014). The play/pause button discussed in Section 3 is an example of such visual. Other examples are street signs, symbols used in music notation and virtually any other conventional symbol introduced so as to avoid ambiguity as regards one’s communicative intentions. In reading music, the player needs to interpret the piece according to the indicated key and meter. The social situation is such that all the parties involved want to avoid ambiguity and misunderstanding.

At the other end of the spectrum, and thus analogous to the allegorical use of language, some non-linguistic symbols are designed to communicate while avoiding responsibility. Cartoons, political or otherwise, constitute a good example. Compare again Toos’ cartoon (Figure 3) and the reconstruction offered by Feteris, Plug and Groarke (Figure 4). It should be clear, as it probably is to the authors, that there are many other ways in which the cartoon can be reconstructed even within the same pragma-dialectical approach. The cartoon, for instance, might be read as a *positive* comment on the sharp stratification between different academic titles – after all, the part-time teacher is portrayed as a beast while the tenured professor is a tall and tranquil gentleman. The sharp separation between the beast and the intellectual is desirable and very practical. Other reconstructions are possible. For example, the cartoon might be reconstructed as an argument to simplify the current stratification to a three-fold division. With many labels cropping up in order to capture the complexities of academic organizations (assistant professor, associate professor, distinguished professor, instructor, lecturer, teacher, reader etc.), the cartoon can be reconstructed as an appeal to simplification. The list of possible reconstructions can continue because the Toos cartoon, and cartoons in general, are not designed to create a clear set of commitments that can be ascribed to the author. Cartoons, then, resists reconstruction.

This resistance interests both argumentation theorists and scholars working within the field of multimodality (if perhaps for different reasons). How do symbols employed in MPC contribute to creating such resistance? How exactly is this resistance created? Under what conditions does this resistance cease to function so that we can ascribe clear-cut commitments to the author? These are self-reflective questions for multimodality scholars and argumentation scholars alike. They are, indirectly, questions about what we can hope as regards the scope of our analytical tools and, ultimately, the utility of our textbooks. But these questions also touch upon important practical dimension. The recent history of controversies created by political cartoons (e. g., Jyllands-Posten in 2005, Charlie Hebdo in 2015) has brought to surface ethical, legal and moral problems connected to the responsibility created in political cartoons. A deeper understanding of these problems can ensue only as a result of an interdisciplinary approach to MPC, one that focuses on resistance to reconstruction *pace* the visual character of the acts concerned.

A second direction of research can approach MPC from the opposite viewpoint – not the viewpoint of the analyst equipped with a set of ready-made instruments, but from the viewpoint of the participants themselves. We may note at the outset that such research will not require delineating something as a “visual argument” or, in general, assigning any singular modes to acts. In this approach, the analyst asks empirical questions, both qualitative and quantitative, regarding the participants’ experience during in MPC. How does the “average” image-consumers interpret each other’s acts in MPC? How does the average image-producer conceive of his or her communicative intentions? How does the image-producer delineate his role and commitment in making use of visuals in communication? What are the rights and obligations they take into consideration in designing and delivering the message? How does this interpretation change in accuracy, depth, speed etc. according to the situation in which MPC occurs, according to the participants’ age, sex and education? Consider again the Toos cartoon discussed in Section 3. Assuming, as I did above, that the authors’ reconstruction is correct within the chosen paradigm, the reconstruction still says little or nothing about how the interpretation is carried out by the actual participants in the interaction. It would be both informative and methodologically relevant to investigate the differences between the “specialized” reconstruction and the participants “lay” interpretations. Because if specialized analysts are to claim a point of attack into MPC, that is, if the specialized reconstruction serves any purpose besides the application of pre-defined analytical instruments, it cannot be completely independent of the lay reconstructions.

To my mind these two lines of research cannot be approached either with argumentation-theoretical or with multimodality tools separately. Argumentation theory proper does not provide the tools for understanding multimodal communication and multimodality proper does not provide the tools for understanding persuasive communication. In bringing these two fields together, progress and new insights regarding MPC can be achieved on both a theoretical and an empirical level.

Conclusion

The first main claim I have made is that the concept “visual argument” is a category mistake. The term “argument” refers to an etically reconstructed communicative act, while the qualifier “visual” pertains to the recorded/reproduced episode of communicative behavior. Modality is not a dimension of argumentation just as it is not a dimension of playing chess; it is a dimension of how “slices” of such forms of interactions are recorded/reproduced. If rejecting the concept of “verbal argument” is necessary in order to drive this point home, I see no reason to resist that.

The second main claim I have made is that, in the reconstruction of communicative events, visuals are not reconstructed as arguments. Visuals are not the only input of the reconstruction even when the “bit” selected from the recorded episode is entirely visual. Arguments are not the output of the reconstruction even though the episode might lead one participant to change his or her mind. The only real claim that can be made regarding the specificity of reconstruction visuals is that an episode whose “bits” can be reproduced visually (but is itself not fully visual) has been reconstructed into something that resembles the putting forward of argumentation. It remains to be seen whether this resemblance is sufficient and whether an author can ever be pinned down to having expressed a concrete communicative intention.

Finally, in order to show that these skeptical remarks do not hinder, but rather further, the finding of new ways of researching visuals, I have sketched two new lines of research. These two lines of research concern what I have termed multimodal persuasive communication (MPC). The first one consists of trying to understand how and why our argumentation-theoretical tools fail in case of MPC – how visuals in MPC resist reconstruction. The second one consists of scrutinizing practices in which visuals play a role empirically, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Neither of these two forms of research depend on the concept of “visual argument.”

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