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Types of Visual Arguments

Abstract: This article focuses on the visually-rendered components of an argument. I am interested in the conditions that must be fulfilled for visuals to successfully perform an argumentative function. I am trying to find out which aspects of an argument are amenable to visualization: is it only the factual aspects that can be effectively captured in a visual? What about abstract claims? Are visuals not capable of providing support for them? In the attempt to answer these questions, I delineate two types of arguments that may be supported by visual material, and try to show the differences and the similarities between their argumentative regimes. Although the concept of visual argument is not uncontroversial, I do not intend to make a new contribution to the twenty-year debate surrounding the question *whether* there are any visual arguments. My wish is to build on the literature that is already established in the field, with the hope of taking further our understanding of the argumentative action that visuals may perform. My approach is inspired by the authors who believe that visuals can participate substantially in the creation of a well-developed argument, by providing *reasons* in support of claims. To do this successfully, they usually need words in their immediate closeness, but their action is not reducible to that of the surrounding words. Most of the times, they function as distinct components of *hybrid* arguments (as Anthony Blair suggests) – those arguments that are composed of visuals *and* words. Going with the general trend in argumentation studies, I use the term *visual arguments* to refer to the visually-rendered components of hybrid arguments.

Keywords: visual argumentation, hybrid arguments, visually-rendered reasons, factual claims, axiological claims, visually-rendered social proof

1. Can the pictorial elements of a discourse contain *reasons*?

It is commonplace in contemporary communication studies to interpret visual materials as rhetorical devices that contribute to the meaning and the persuasive effects of a given discourse. Visual elements can emphasize, explain, narrate, illustrate, or give an emotional touch to the ideas contained in the verbal component of a discourse.

Going further in the investigation of visuals' role, some argumentation theorists have proposed that images can contain the premise(s) or the conclusion of an argument. Supporters of this view believe that visuals are capable of contributing in a substantial manner to the argumentative content of a discourse.

In answer to the emerging *visual-argument enthusiasm*, some authors recommended higher selectivity in qualifying a visual as *an argument*. For a visual to be understood as (part of) an argument, it needs to contain reasons that support a claim. Moreover, the role of the visual should be essential to the argument, meaning that its absence would leave the argument with a different meaning, scope, or force. David Godden (2013) is one of the researchers who accept the possibility for an argument to be expressed (at least in part) by means of visual material. Yet, he draws attention to the fact that pictures can be seen as parts of an argument only when they contain *reasons* that are meant to support a claim. If no reasons can be identified in the content of the visual itself, then it makes no sense to use argumentation terminology and corresponding normative standards in that particular case. In this context, Godden writes that:

“Finally, whatever the manner by which arguments may be presented, expressed or recorded, what is so presented, expressed or recorded must include reasons. If reasons are not among *what* is presented, then – no matter *how* it is presented – it is not an argument. The methodological focus of argument identification, then, must include a search for reasons”. (Godden 2013, 6 – author’s emphasis).

Godden proposes two distinct directions of research that can develop the results of the initial debate on the existence of visual arguments. One concerns the manner in which we should approach or treat visual material that is used in an argumentative context; the other one is whether we need to revise current normative theories or standards in argumentation, together with the ‘discovery’ that there can be visually-rendered reasons (Godden 2013, 2).

In his work, Godden deals mostly with the second issue, supporting the idea that the same normative standards are to be applied to verbal and visual components of an argument – a conclusion echoed by Blair (2015, 232). The view shared by Godden and Blair can be summarized as follows: the quality of the argumentative content does not depend on the semiotic mode in which it is expressed. Therefore, good visual arguments are simply good arguments, rendered visually. And the other way around: fallacies remain fallacies, whether rendered verbally, visually or in any other mode.

My own interest is this: how are we to deal with visual media that (attempt to) perform an argumentative function? What are the virtues and the limits of visuals in this respect? What *types of reasons* are amenable to visualization and in what way can visuals participate in the expression of those types of reasons?

It is very important to emphasize the *argumentative function* in the question I pose. Although visuals may be widespread as add-ons to verbal discourse, I do not agree with treating them as arguments ‘by default’ just in virtue of their presence in an argumentative sequence (Kjeldsen 2012, 241). Some of these visuals may produce aesthetic pleasure, amusement or other rhetorical effects on the audience. But in many of these cases, their function is not argumentative, but expressive. It goes without saying that apart from arguments, any deliberative sequence (be it written or oral) may include other rhetorical devices that help clarify or increase the attractiveness of an author’s point of view, and some of these devices may be rendered visually. Yet, they are not all arguments in themselves. It is not by mere participation in argumentative discourse that a visual becomes an argument.

I propose the following test in order to make a correct diagnosis: imagine removing the pictorial element out of the respective context, and leave the verbal part on its own - if the meaning of the message remains the same and the argumentative content is not changed, then (no matter what is lost on an expressive-emotional level), it is most likely not a case of visual argumentation (cf. Birdsell and Groarke 1996, 2 and Blair 2015, 218).

2. The challenging endeavor of *reading* premises and conclusions from visual material

David Godden seems to take for granted that there is a suitable way of ‘identifying’ or ‘extracting’ the argumentative content of visuals (Godden 2013, 3). He does not go into details, because his interest is in the bigger picture. But Trudy Govier has a set of useful observations in this respect.

Govier sees as a major problem the fact that, in the case of visuals, one would have to *add* both premises and a conclusion to the argument (supposing both of them are implied or suggested by the image). She does not see how one is to justify such supplementation (Govier 2010, 49).

The obvious danger, here, is that one would end up constructing a completely different argument than that of the author of the respective discourse. The inherent freedom in the interpretation of visuals poses a high risk of losing accuracy in argument-reconstruction. In short, one may add too much to what is really *there*, often with the risk of misconstruing the author's intentions or the contextual *use* that is given to the respective visual material.

Yet, she accepts that – under certain conditions – visuals could be *interpreted* as arguments. One condition is for the image to be used in a highly specific context that would enable the audience to legitimately attribute an argumentative intention to the author. Another condition is for visuals to be completed by verbal components of the discourse that would help orient the audience in choosing among competing interpretations that could be given to a visual material. Words are seen as being superior in narrowing the semantic territory that can be occupied: less freedom in interpretation, more clarity and precision. Trudy Govier exemplifies these cases as situations in which she would tend to accept an *argumentative interpretation* of the images.

Of course, one must admit that these two conditions also apply to verbally-rendered sequences of claims-and-reasons (Birdsell and Groarke 1996, 5-7 and Blair 2015, 219). A sentence cannot be interpreted as a premise or a conclusion in an argument unless it is advanced in a highly-specific context that would enable the audience to understand the sense in which it is uttered. For example, if one takes the sentence 'Some women get pregnant at an early age and feel unprepared to become mothers' out of (any) context, can it function as the premise or the conclusion of an argument? Whether expressed verbally or suggested visually, this sentence can only derive an argumentative function in a larger context that can clarify its *use*. It may be used as a premise in a pro-life context, being completed by the assertion 'They take the courage to have the baby and turn out to be exceptional mothers' and then supported by factual data, examples, testimonies, expert opinions explaining hormonal changes within a mother's body, and other support to advance towards the conclusion 'Feeling unprepared to become a mother is not a good enough reason to have an abortion'. Yet, the same sentence can be used to support a pro-choice debate, if completed by statements emphasizing a mother's

freedom to end the life growing inside her because she momentarily feels unprepared to take care of it. In both cases, it can function as a premise.

In other words, background knowledge and immediate context are equally essential for the meaning and argumentative function of a verbally-expressed idea to become clear to an audience. Having said that, one must acknowledge that visuals are not *just like* words, with respect to their argumentative ‘behavior’. There is an unquestionable asymmetry between the visual and the verbal: visual elements do not need other visuals providing the context; in most cases, it is verbal elements that they need in order to clarify their contextual mission and scope.

Precision, accuracy and completeness are not among the built-in features of the argumentative content delivered in visual materials. And indeed, we can dare say that visuals *do not have to be* just like words to work properly in an argumentative context. If we connect argumentation exclusively to verbal practices involving the exact expression of certain ideas, we risk slipping into circular reasoning: what can count as the successful performance of an argumentative function is somehow considered to be verbal by definition (Roque 2009, 2-5) and thus we lose sight of the cases when visuals actually convey a valuable semantic content that makes a substantial contribution to an argumentative sequence (Kjeldsen 2013, 6-9, Blair 2015, 222, Kenney and Scott 2003, 22-24).

By dealing with real cases of argument-construction or argument-analysis, one can easily see that – in order to properly convey an argumentative content, visuals need verbal ‘surroundings’. But this does not mean that their action is limited to decorating the verbal part of the discourse. Anthony Blair is one of the clearest authors on this issue:

“A visual argument is then an argument at least some of the essential elements of which are not expressed or communicated in a natural language, but instead or expressed or communicated pictorially, by images and/or nonverbal signs or symbols. So the ‘visual’ and the ‘verbal’ of visual argument and verbal argument here denote the manner in which the argument is expressed or communicated. By this definition, most of what count as visual arguments are actually hybrids or ‘multimodal’: they will include verbal components, but their successful expression depends also on their visual components. They can be understood only by taking the visual into account; some visual component is essential to the expression of the argument” (Blair 2015, 218).

The emphasis of the fragment above seems to be placed on the dependence of meaning on the pictorial element. Yet, Anthony Blair’s

inclusion of words in the definition of visual arguments shows how difficult it is to imagine purely visual sequences of argumentation (although he says that, in principle, purely visual sequences of claims-and-reasons are possible). I believe that the definition above can also be read as Blair's implicit agreement with Govier: in most cases, words are necessary to help discern the argumentative content of a visual discursive sequence.

In (re)constructing a visual reason, one has to start with a rigorous understanding of context and a close inspection of the relationship between the claim that is advanced (be it implicitly or explicitly) and its supporting premises. In doing so, one may discover that the visual is restating the claim in a creative manner, or that it provides a reason in support of the claim, or that it simply performs a rhetorical function, thus embellishing the discourse from a stylistic or an emotional point of view.

In this manner, one can avoid the danger that Trudy Govier was warning about: offering an argumentative interpretation of visuals that takes meaning much further than the context justifies thus reconstructing a whole new argument, different from that of the author.

3. Conditions for visuals to perform an argumentative function

For visuals to be considered components of an argument, they need to convey a semantic content that can be construed as rationally meaningful support for the verbal part of the respective argument (Blair 2015, 220). As I have already suggested in the end of the first section, the relationship between the visual and the verbal part of the argument needs to be based on complementarity and synergy, not redundancy. The visual that only re-affirms (in another semiotic mode) what the words already expressed, is not – in my opinion – a visual component of an argument, but an illustration.

Important as it may be, the condition of non-redundancy between the verbal and the visual components of the argument is not sufficient to consider the visual a component of an argument in its own right. What the visual brings to the overarching argument has to be new and important for the cognitive route that leads the audiences from premises to conclusions. These are – from my point of view – the few cases where we can speak of visually-rendered *reasons*. Visual-verbal synergy in itself will not guarantee that we are in the presence of a visual argument. An example can illustrate this point.

One and the same image of a pregnant woman can be accompanied by two distinct headlines, with radically different axiological assumptions underlying them. For example, the sentence

'It should be the safest place on Earth'

argues for a woman's responsibility to protect the life growing inside her, her womb being a *chosen* place of maximum safety.

Yet the very same image, accompanied by the headline

'If you're embarrassed by a pimple, try explaining this'

represents pregnancy as an embarrassing thing for a young woman (Fallon and Senn 2008, 193), thus trying to shape the perception of pregnancy as a sort of major physical flaw that can create an acute sense of discomfort among one's peer group.

There is, indeed, no redundancy between the visual and the verbal in any of these two cases. But the visual does not advance any argument. The argumentative core of the argument is contained only in the verbal part. It is a *verbal argument* all the way down, although it is creatively delivered by an interaction between the words and the image. The image helps define the context of the argument, but it is not a component of the argument – neither the premises, nor the conclusions of the argument are contained in the image. Therefore, the condition of non-redundancy can be taken as a necessary, but not a sufficient requirement for a hybrid construction (composed of words and visuals) to contain a visually-rendered *reason*.

In the end of this section, let us review the conditions for a visual to become an argumentative component:

(a) The visual needs to be accompanied by words that help clarify *the use* that is to be given to the image in the respective context. Without words, it is hard to establish whether the image is to be taken as an argument, or that such interpretation would actually do an injustice to the author of the image.

(b) There has to be a relationship of non-redundancy between the image and the accompanying words; the visual that only shows what the words already mentioned is probably an illustration and does not play an argumentative function in its own right, but a persuasive-emphatic function.

(c) The visual needs to bring something new and important to the premises supporting the conclusion of the overarching argument. The

cognitive route that takes the audience from premises to conclusion needs to be changed, or at least substantially enriched, by the content of the visual.

In what follows, I invite the reader to reflect on two types of claims that can be supported by visually-rendered reasons. I propose a distinction between visually-rendered factual claims and visually-rendered axiological claims, that can help us understand the types of argumentative functions visuals may (attempt to) perform.

4. Visually-rendered reasons as support for *factual data*

To introduce this type of reason, I invite the reader to take a look at Figure 1.



Figure 1. Example of a visually-rendered fact

The picture is part of a campaign that was trying to warn young employees about the serious consequences that can follow if they ignore safety regulations when being at work.

One of the biggest problems, in these cases, is that the youth tend to take too much initiative in solving situations that they are not familiar

with. With their desire to be perceived as autonomous and courageous, asking people around seemed like a childish behavior, not suitable to their new identity of serious, mature, independent people. The campaign wanted to show the major importance of asking the more experienced for help every time when dealing with a new situation. To make this point more convincing, the authors of the campaign decided to use images of young employees who have suffered terrible accidents that have left them impaired.

First, I propose the following re-construction of the overarching argument conveyed by this poster:

PREMISE 1: There are young people who suffer from serious physical impairments due to accidents at work. These accidents occur because they try to solve problems without asking the more experienced.

PREMISE 2: This can also happen to you, because work conditions make it necessary for recent employees to receive constant input from the more experienced.

CONCLUSION: You should speak up when dealing with new situations at work. Asking the more experienced can help you avoid a similar accident.

The strength of PREMISE 1 depends on the facts that can support its truth, thus making it convincing as a warning to be taken into account by the young (brave) audience. If it remains an undefended premise, it could be easily treated as an exaggeration. In these cases, a concrete example of somebody who has gone through this situation can help increase the credibility of the message, and can help the audience project more vividly the possible consequences of a similar accident happening to themselves. In other words, it is the *real* and *close* danger of this possibility.

*PREMISE 1.1.: This man suffers from a serious physical impairment.
(visually-rendered fact)*

*PREMISE 1.2: He was afraid to ask.
(verbally-rendered fact)*

*PREMISE 1.3.: As a consequence of being afraid to ask, he did something wrong at work and had a tragic accident.
(implied relation of causality between the two events)*

CONCLUSION (Support for Premise 1 in the overarching argument):

The danger of accidents at work is real. It is not a bedtime story. The reason for such accidents is young people's fear to ask the more experienced about the solution to a problem they encounter.

The image of the young man, visibly affected by a physical impairment, gets us *acquainted* with the reality of this danger, and – simultaneously – with the reality of the unfortunate consequences that such accidents may have. While the possibility of an accident may sound remote and abstract, the image of a person who suffered this kind of accident and had his arm cut off in it, is quite something else.

We become *acquainted* with this particular event that happened to him by means of the hybrid discursive sequence, which is based on complementarity (non-redundancy) between the visual and the verbal: while the visual shows the man who suffers of a physical impairment, the verbal part constitutes his testimony on what caused this accident. It is the headline that places everything in the context of safe-work regulations. None of the components reiterates what has already been said in the other. Therefore, the factual part of the argument is substantially supported by the visual.

Acquaintance with concrete details of a problem is one of the main strengths that visuals have when they are brought in support of a factual claim (McGrath 2011, 274-277). Sarah McGrath speaks, for example, of situations in which people may change their mind about the legitimacy of a practice after following a documentary that shows explicit details of the procedures involved in the enactment of that practice (i.e., capital punishment). Upon seeing them, the audience comes to possess new *factual* information that may justify a radical change in their degree of acceptance of that practice as legal, useful, or desirable. A fact-based change of mind is fully rational and can be stimulated by exposure to visual material (McGrath 2011, 274).

In the example above, the visual does *not* provide a *new* piece of (generally applicable) factual information that may get the audience into a state of alarm. The fact that these accidents can occur is probably not a novelty to most of the people involved in this audience. Although the fact is known, it is not perceived as an *immediate* and *close-to-me* kind of danger. Nor are its possible consequences equally clear to all members of the audience. In this case, it is the perceived reality of the proximity of that danger that needs to be argumentatively supported in front of the audience.

Making present, bringing closer, giving *texture* to a certain portion of reality – these are important dimensions of *acquaintance* that visuals

are able to provide successfully (Kjeldsen 2012, 240-241, Grancea 2015, 170-176). The ‘portion of reality’ that is brought to mind may be something belonging to the past, may be a present state of affairs (in the sense that it represents a token of a certain situation-type), or it can be a projected state of affairs, something that can become reality in the future (see, for example, the experiment recounted in Hershfield et. al 2011, 24-32, as well as the campaign poster analyzed by Kotler and Lee 2008, 6).

In many contexts of public deliberation or public action, it is of maximum importance for the audience to feel the *reality* and the *urgency* of the problem itself before engaging into action for improving the situation and solving the problem. And becoming acquainted with concrete details of the problem is often an essential step in this process.

Now we must ask: what conditions should a visual fulfill in order to function properly as a reason supporting a factual claim?

First of all, the image should involve no photo doctoring or post-production that could alter its factual content or its significance. Secondly, it should be a faithful representation of the context it purports to describe: for example, if in reality this man had a different problem that caused his losing part of his arm, then the *use* given to the image would legitimately be considered deceptive. Even if, in fact, work accidents could lead to the same consequences, it would still be perceived as a blatant lie by the audience if it turned out that the man’s suffering has nothing to do with safety regulations at work. Having said that, I believe that images should always have enough accompanying explanations that would allow for truth conditions to be imposed on them: in our case, a mention of the man’s name, position, (perhaps even date and location of the accident), would be more convincing. Finally, the surrounding verbal context should not make of it something else than it originally represented. They, too, should be faithful to the original meaning of the action that is portrayed in the photograph or computer-rendered image.

5. The trouble with supporting factual claims with visuals

One of the most obvious weaknesses of using visual materials to express factual arguments is discussed by Giovanni Sartori (2006, 33): abstract notions such as unemployment, democratic participation, or life after death, are not amenable to visualization. Images, in this case, can only be struck by cognitive poverty: whatever they show, it will not be

informing for the audience in what concerns the essence of the subject to be represented.

Apart from this, another concern is that images do not simply present things as they are, but they create the false impression of doing so, precisely because of the particular features of this semiotic mode. Many people still perceive a sort of *built-in truth* of whatever they see presented in a photograph or a documentary, because it gives the false impression of constituting a window on a certain reality.

But images are far from being axiologically-neutral representations of people and things. The choices regarding what to include and what to leave out in an image, as well as the mode of representation, are almost never value-free (Popp and Mendelson 2010, 207-215). The influence of underlying evaluative judgments is always there, in the creation and the reception of visually-rendered factual claims or reasons. Of course, this is true of all factual claims, be they expressed in words or images. Any representation of a thing is a representation of particular aspects of it (Searle 1980, 481), thus leaving room for rhetorical framing according to the interests of the author of the representation.

But in the case of words, the intervention of the author is more obvious than in the case of pictures, and this gives the audience more freedom to pose skeptical questions. The speaker's choice of words and perspectives on an event he recounts is openly subjective, and most of the audience is aware of that intervention: we all perceive the difference in substance between the events recounted, and the words that are used to recount them. Even when the story seems truthful to the events as they unfolded, we still know it is not the event *per se* that we come in contact with. But when it comes to images, especially realistic photographs, the line between *what is* and *what is presented as such* becomes increasingly blurred.

For example, Maria Martinez Lirola has performed a close analysis of Spanish newspaper images of immigrants and has found an impressively high number of dysphemistic representations (Martinez Lirola 2014, 410-421). Dysphemism, the opposite of euphemism, is a mode of representation that emphasizes the most pejorative traits of the people or things that are subjected to representation. The choice of situations to be represented, as well as the choice of camera angles, showed a clear attempt to induce fear and disgust towards the immigrant children coming to Spain. However, the audience that is not specialized in this type of analysis will most likely take these images to be informative about representative situations in which these children are.

In public deliberation, it is obvious that each party will frame *facts* in a way that supports its position. Any fact can be framed in a manner that is convenient to the author, and any fact (be it rendered verbally or visually) can be called into question in terms of truth and representativity. In the case of images, this is often a problem of degree – they can be closer or further from the truth, more or less representative of typical cases. And this degree is debatable as well, and it often depends on the criteria of the assessor, who will seldom be a disinterested part in the discussion.

6. Visually-rendered reasons in support of axiological claims

If in the previous section I have discussed how value-infused claims can be presented as objective facts, I now turn to a different kind of reason that can be expressed visually. In this case, the value itself becomes the center of attention, and visuals are brought in to support its status. By an axiological claim, I understand those claims of the form

*‘A deserves to be considered a value’
and
‘X, Y, Z, in virtue of having A value, need to be treasured, cherished, and
defended in our community’.*

Although the fact-value distinction has been questioned in high-level philosophical debates that managed to prove it is often difficult to separate the two, in the realm of practical argumentation, the kind of emphasis in a claim still matters. It matters for the arguer, because the kinds of reasons that a claim requires will differ according to its genre. Axiological claims have the VALUE as a subject in its own right. Factual claims often presuppose values or evaluative judgments, but their main purpose is to establish whether something has happened or not (in order to punish or reward the author, in a judicial context, for example). Factually-oriented deliberative claims address a different issue: given that something has happened in the past, what kinds of future action are most suitable for avoiding bad things from happening again, or for reiterating good outcomes of a certain course of action.

It might seem that visuals have nothing to do with the reasons that could support an axiological claim. As mentioned in the previous section, visuals seem to be intrinsically flawed in discussing abstract ideas, and values belong to the realm of abstract entities. There is nothing amenable

to visualization when it comes to values, nothing essential at least. So how could one use images in support of an axiological claim?

The research undertaken by John Delicath and Kevin DeLuca in the realm of *image events* may provide a clue in this direction. They coined the term *image events* to describe the use of dramatic visual demonstrations of activists, disseminated to the media and designed to be spectacular, shocking, and thus placing the issue on the public agenda (Delicath and DeLuca 2003, 315). Activists putting their life at risk in order to save a whale from being killed, or in order to prevent a rare tree from being taken down, are examples of such spectacular actions that work as staged protests: the team of activists not only includes those who participate in the spectacular demonstration itself, but it also includes other people who catch the entire action on camera and then send it to important media channels, thus producing a piece of newsworthy content that is hard to ignore.

There is a double function of these films. One is that they present the cases of environmental harm to a larger audience. They offer an occasion for people to talk about these topics, and indeed provide a powerful stimulus for them to consider the gravity of these issues. They widen the range of ideas that can be raised in the public discussion of that issue (Delicath and DeLuca 2003, 322). They give these problems a chance to be noticed by a public that is regularly fed with well-crafted expressions of the dominant point of view that cherishes technological progress and ignores the value of nature. They (temporarily) interrupt, or at least disturb, the flow of 'authorized' discourses belonging to mainstream actors that pull all strings in terms of media content and approach. In other words, their spectacular character is not only an expression of intense involvement, but – once caught on camera – it also functions as a strategic tool to gain a voice in the overcrowded media context.

The second function performed by this type of visual materials is that of a *social proof* by showing how far people are willing to go in support of a cause, these films offer a *reason* for other people to reconsider their own attitude towards that cause. It presents the cause as being worthy-of-devotion.

The concept of *social proof* is used in social psychology to refer to our tendency to accept other people's choices as a proof that the given choice is worthy of attention. It is considered an important source of self-regulation when it comes to choosing a standpoint or adopting a behavior under conditions of low-information. When uncertain of the right approach on a problem, people tend to look around them, and see what

other people are doing - although most of them will not admit this is what they are doing. Research shows that, when asked about their reasons, they offer post-factum rationalizations, but their effective choices in controlled experimental conditions show an immense influence of having seen others perform that action (cf. Martin, Goldstein and Cialdini 2015, 31-49).

If people feel they do not possess enough information to make a reasonable decision, they use the behavior of the (seemingly) more informed people around them, in order to shape their own attitude and behavior towards the respective problem. In our case, the fact that a human being is willing to go that far in the name of the protection of nature (even putting his own life at risk), can constitute a powerful reason for the corresponding axiological claim regarding nature.

The reasoning would go something like this:

Premise 1 (visually-rendered):

Some people believe it is worth getting hurt, arrested or even killed for defending nature.

Premise 2 (implied, social proof):

When somebody is ready to get hurt, arrested or killed for a cause, it means that the cause is worthy of such devotion.

Conclusion:

There must be serious reasons for reconsidering my position towards the value of nature. Perhaps it is more valuable than I had previously thought. Perhaps it is worthy of being protected.

Delicath and DeLuca's own proposal for the reconstruction of the argument advanced is this: the claim "There should be no more roads built into wilderness areas" is supported by the reason (not only uttered, but also confirmed performatively) that "it is worth getting hurt or arrested for it" (Delicath and DeLuca 2003, 323).

I was more interested in the argument formed in the mind of the audience attending these image events, and I formulated the argumentative route in rather mild terms, because I believe that what can happen in such cases is not a sudden change of mind on the part of the audience. I believe somebody else's passion and capacity to sacrifice in the name of a cause can raise other people's interest in the cause, or can get them wondering what it is about that cause that can motivate such high degree of involvement. But it will not directly produce a fundamental trust in the truth or usefulness of the claims advanced by the respective activists.

This example points to an interesting argumentative resource of visuals: judging by these cases, we can say that – although values are not amenable to visualization themselves – visual materials can participate in the development of a reason that supports an axiological claim. Visuals can point to an inner reality that is not possible to catch on camera, and is generally not available to sight. They do not offer accurate representations of these values, but they focus on exterior manifestations of them. These manifestations prove that such values are underlying the behavior of those people. Yet, in doing this, visuals are not only an expression of pathos. They contribute to the cognitive architecture of the axiological argument, as I have shown above: because these things are so important to this people, perhaps it is worth reconsidering our own understanding regarding them. Of course, this is not the end of the story. Further pro-s and con-s can be advanced, and the battle can be won by either side: social proof is only one of the factors shaping choices of human attitudes and behaviors.

It is worth noting one more thing about the visual materials analyzed by Delicath and DeLuca. Their argumentative function is different from the classical environmental visuals that show the extent of the harm done to nature and wildlife by human action. It is distinct, in that it does not focus on the object of the axiological claim itself, but on other people's devotion to that object. Without the visual component, the degree to which people perceive that devotion as a *social proof* would most likely be dramatically lower. After all, the perceived reality and importance of that which meets the eye on a public screen is hard to be rivaled by other semiotic modes.

Can this kind of visual reason contribute to a misguided conclusion? Can social proof misinform us? Of course, and this is one of the troubles with visuals that support axiological claims by means of showing how far their supporters are willing to go. History has shown that people's passion for a subject is not necessarily a safe indicator of that subject's pointing us in a redemptive direction. That being said, it must be noticed that these problems are placed on the ground-level reasoning stimulated by the films (that concerning the proper value that is to be attributed to nature, in our case, comparative to technological progress or short-term economic benefit), while the visually-rendered component of the argument is meant to work on a meta-level reasoning, in the sense that it gets us reasoning about somebody else's reasoning on the topic (for the original use of these terms, see Finocchiaro 2013, 34, cited in Blair 2015, 220).

7. Concluding thoughts

My inquiry started from a feeling of dissatisfaction with the level of generality with which our talk of *visual reasons* is held in the contemporary scholarship that deals with the status of visuals in argumentative contexts. It seemed to me that two extreme stands had been taken: the case-by-case approach, on the one hand, and – at the opposite end of the spectrum – the super-general, philosophical approach that programmatically refused to engage in analyses of examples. I feel we have a lot to gain if we tried to discover some patterns in the wide variety of visuals that are used in argumentation. What I am proposing here is not a fully-fledged taxonomy, but a beginning in this direction: a few significant distinctions between difference *argumentative regimes* that visuals can be engaged in.

My own investigations brought me in the face of two major types of visual reasons, according to the kind of claim that they are meant to support.

The first category of visual reasons that I discussed is meant to support facts-oriented claims, by showing that something has indeed happened, or that something can indeed happen, and getting the audience acquainted with what it means for that something to happen (including concrete details of how this happening might directly affect them). Such visually-rendered factual information can be considered an argument component only in the cases in which the verbal component does not include (equally vivid) descriptions of the very same facts. Otherwise, the respective visuals are only informative illustrations or pieces of evidence offering additional support for one of the verbally-expressed premises. I have shown the strengths and the weaknesses of visuals in developing reasons in support of a factual claim. The most important concern, here, is their appearance as impartial windows on a given reality, when – in fact – their choice of content, their mode of representation, as well as their contextual framing can do a lot to reshape the meaning of the people or the objects subjected to representation.

The other function that visuals may perform may seem paradoxical, because it involves cases where visuals support axiological claims. At first glance, it seems obvious that visuals could only build reasons in those situations where there is ‘cognitive material’ available for visualization. In the case of abstract values, visuals seem to be struck by cognitive poverty. Yet, research undertaken in the realm of *image events* provides an interesting counterexample to this theory. Images of activists

risking their lives for the sake of defending nature can perform an argumentative function as reasons in support of *axiological claims*. They work as a *social proof*, inviting the audience to reconsider the value of nature in light of these people's devotion. This (implicit) invitation to question previously held beliefs is one of the few routes that can lead to the acceptance of axiological claims. If spelled out in so many words, this social proof would probably lose its impact. It is its implicit and non-intrusive character that gives its persuasive power.

Beyond their differences, there is an important similarity between the two types of arguments that I want to draw attention to. In both cases, we find the non-redundancy condition to work in validating the argumentative character of a visual: the visual needs surrounding words to fully express its argumentative use, but these words need not reiterate the semantic content carried in the visual. When they do, the visual's argumentative scope and force is radically reduced.

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