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Visual Argument Reconsidered: 'Objective' Theory and a Classical Rhetorical Approach

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Visual Argument Reconsidered:
“Objective” Theory and a Classical
Rhetorical Approach

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
Professional Communication

by
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Accepted by:
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Abstract

Visual argument is a relatively new discipline within the field of visual rhetorics. Consequently, visual rhetoricians have presented new theories of visual argumentation without fully considering the possibilities of existing textual methodologies as explanatory tools—especially classical rhetorical devices. This thesis presents a methodology for examining and creating visual arguments based on the concepts of *topoi* and figures of speech. I contend that these classical rhetorical devices embody an “objective” understanding of visual communication that shows one way of bridging the empiricism/rationalism debate in epistemology. By demonstrating that knowledge comes from the necessary interplay of perception and conception, I attempt to show that *topoi* and figures create visual arguments by means of conceptualization based on information gathered from an objective reality—a process that mimics the act of cognition and, therefore, provides a wide-reaching communicative methodology.

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Preface

The scope of this thesis is not as broad as the first chapter and literature review might make it seem. The discussion of epistemological philosophy comes not from a desire to settle a debate thousands of years old but as historical and ideological context for the alternative philosophy on which my analytical methodology is based. I do not intend the discussion of empiricism and rationalism to be an overarching argument against either philosophy in their entirety. Nor do I claim that their entirety is herein discussed. A complete survey of epistemological philosophy is hardly suitable for a dissertation let alone a master's thesis. The theories discussed in this thesis should be considered a generalization of the available literature and not an all-encompassing examination.

Nonetheless, I thought it was important to include this general discussion of epistemology to begin to show the philosophical roots of the question, "Can images make arguments?" Early on in my academic career, I noticed two very general answers to this question in the literature I was reading—either it was asserted that arguments were solely textual concepts or that any persuasive element in an image could be considered argumentative. I was not satisfied with

either answer perhaps because I did not see the scholars addressing the epistemological issues from which their arguments appeared to derive. It seemed to me that the question of whether or not visuals can argue is necessarily epistemological—since answering “yes,” as many scholars have, begs the question, “On what grounds can we claim to know a visual argument?”

For me, it seemed that any methodology for examining visual argumentation had to follow from an epistemology that allowed for such claims. When I began reviewing the epistemological literature that appeared to be the genesis of these competing claims about visual arguments, I found several issues with two prominent theories—empiricism and rationalism—that seemed at least problematic for creating a theory and methodology of visual argumentation. I want to clarify that my discussion of empiricism and rationalism is not intended to suggest that these are the only epistemological philosophies on which visual argument theories have been based. Nor do I claim that the issues addressed in this thesis are universally problematic for the philosophies in general. I address only the issues that I see for visual argument and only *as they relate to* visual argument. I chose to examine empiricism and rationalism because it appeared to me that a great deal of visual rhetorical theory could find their epistemological roots in them.

Additionally, the alternative philosophy presented—called “objective” theory¹ throughout—is intended to show only *one* alternative for discussing visual argument—based on the problems I see with methodologies grounded in empiricism or rationalism. The theory and methodology I present should not be considered as an argument for a one, “true” way of examining visual argument.

Ultimately, I acknowledge that this thesis only examines a small portion of visual rhetorical theories in relation to what I see as their epistemological roots. Future studies might examine different theories and different relationships, perhaps providing even more methods for explaining and creating visual arguments.

¹ Though based on the epistemological philosophy of Ayn Rand, creator of Objectivism, the theory as it applies in this thesis cannot be called Objectivist theory since it leans more toward a deductive methodology than an inductive process. Therefore, I use the term “objective” theory in this essay not only to distinguish it from conceptual and perceptual theories but also to show that it is *influenced* by Objectivist philosophy without being directly identified as such.

CHAPTER ONE

The new, old *paragone*: An introduction to the perception/conception debate and its implications for visual argument

Words and images seem inevitably to become implicated in a “war of signs” (what Leonardo called a *paragone*) in which the stakes are things like nature, truth, reality, and the human spirit.

W. J. T. Mitchell, 1987
Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology

One of the most important and longest lasting debates in philosophical history concerns the nature of knowledge. Indeed, an entire branch of philosophy, epistemology, is dedicated to the topic with thousands of scholars adding their voice to the conversation. Rhetoricians, too, dating back to their Sophist roots, have concerned themselves with what is and what is not epistemic, how we can know, and whether or not our knowledge matters. Mostly, philosophers and rhetoricians have been arguing over epistemic methodology—the question of equal validity. That is, are there multiple, valid ways of understanding reality and meaning (Boghossian 2)? Epistemology has been

significantly influenced by two opposing claims on the question: 1) that knowledge is *a posteriori*—after experiencing reality—or 2) that knowledge is *a priori*—before experiencing reality (Peikoff 46). The former, known herein as perceptual theory, suggests that objects in reality have meaning independent of the viewer that is simply *in* the object, and the latter, known herein as conceptual theory, suggests that objects have no meaning except that which the viewer applies *to* them. Historically, the debate is known as empiricism v. rationalism and, as Peter Markie succinctly states, “concerns the extent to which we are dependent upon sense experience in our effort to gain knowledge” (Markie).

To say simply that there have been two sides to the study of epistemology, however, would be a grave injustice to field—nor does it properly express the extent to which both perceptual and conceptual theories have been discussed and debated. Indeed, the nuanced versions of these philosophies have provided thousands of texts with numerous opinions, producing a multitude of epistemological theories and methodologies. It would be impossible to review even a fraction of epistemological theory in this thesis. Instead, I chose to limit my examination to perceptual and conceptual theories particularly because they appear to have been quite influential on the study of visual rhetorics—and especially visual argument. Nonetheless, this overview of perceptual and

conceptual theories is only meant to give historical and philosophical context for the discussion of epistemologically as it relates to visual argument. It cannot be considered an exhaustive examination.

Perceptualists—or empiricists—may trace their origins as far back as Aristotle, whose scientific theories held experience as the originating factor in all knowledge. For Aristotle, all knowledge had to be demonstrated—that is, deduced “with premises revealing the causal structures of the world” (Shields). The only knowledge that cannot be demonstrated is an “immediate premise” (Shields)—also known as an *axiom*, defined as knowledge validated by the act of perception (Peikoff 8). From Aristotle’s premise, perceptualists like John Locke, David Hume, and A. J. Ayers continued to argue that reason, devoid of sensory content, had no way of providing us “superior” knowledge of reality (Markie). Therefore, the senses, not the mind, are the ultimate source of knowledge.

One empiricist whose work is especially relevant to visual communication and deserving of special note is Rudolph Arnheim. In *Visual Thinking*, Arnheim addresses the issues of perception and cognitive activity, arguing that his predecessors incorrectly separate the two faculties. He contends that “cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself” (13). For

Arnheim, perception *is* cognition. He argues for what he calls “intelligent” perception. He states, “Visual perception...is not a passive recording of stimulus material but an active concern of the mind. The sense of sight operates selectively” (37). At first glance, it may seem difficult to classify Arnheim as an empiricist. Indeed, his particular version of empiricism attempts to transcend the debate by eliminating the dichotomy. Perhaps it is best, then, to acknowledge Arnheim’s empiricism, since he acknowledges that all knowledge originates with perception, but to classify it as a special case worthy of additional examination. It will become clear when I discuss problems with perceptualism that Arnheim’s theory in particular complicates and enriches the debate.

It might seem that conceptual theories formed as a response to empiricism, but, in fact, conceptualists—or rationalists—may trace their origin as far back as Plato. Markie explains that Plato believed that “what we know by reason alone, a Platonic form, say, is superior in an important metaphysical way, e.g. unchanging, eternal, perfect, a higher degree of being, to what are aware of through sense experience” (Markie). For Plato, what we experienced through perception was merely a “shadow” of reality. He expressed his viewpoint famously in the allegory of the cave, retold here by Allan Silverman:

Seated prisoners, chained so that they cannot move their heads, stare at a cave wall on which are projected images. These images are cast from carved figures illuminated by a fire and carried by people on a parapet above and behind the prisoners. A prisoner is loosed from his chains. First he sees the carved images and the fire. Then he is led out of the cave into “real” world. Blinded by the light of the sun, he cannot look at the trees, rocks and animals around him, but instead looks at the shadows and reflections (in water) cast by those objects. As he becomes acclimatized, he turns his gaze to those objects and finally, fully acclimatized, he looks to the source of illumination, the sun itself. (Silverman)

This acclimation, and how we eventually comprehend “reality,” comes not through a greater understanding of sense perception but through philosophy and reason. Immanuel Kant later built on Plato’s notion of forms by arguing, in *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, that humans have “sensory intuition” that allows us to “intuit things *a priori*” (Kant 34). He contends that concepts such as time and space are not learned through sensory experience but in our minds at birth, allowing us to intuit more complex concepts like geometry and pure mathematics (Kant 34-35). Paul K. Feyerabend famously affirms *a priori*

knowledge in his article, "Science Without Experience," for *The Journal of Philosophy*. He writes, "Knowledge can enter our brain without touching our senses. And some knowledge resides in the individual brain without ever having entered it. Nor is observational knowledge the most reliable knowledge we possess" (Feyerabend 794). He goes on to denounce empiricism—the dominant scientific philosophy for hundreds of years (794).

Implications for visual communication

Any theoretical discipline that considers its methodologies epistemic must deal with the perception/conception debate. Rhetoric is no exception. Perhaps without even realizing its influence, rhetoric has adopted the perception/conception dichotomy and reified it—not, on the surface, as a struggle between reality and the mind but as a struggle between text and image. The divide, though unfortunate, seems to occur because of our reluctance to reconcile empiricism and rationalism. Mitchell explains, "The *paragone* or debate of poetry and painting is never just a contest between two kinds of signs, but a struggle between body and soul, world and mind, nature and culture" (49). As I will demonstrate in the literature review, rhetoricians, because of the influence of the

perception/conception dilemma and debate prior to it², have created a body of theoretical knowledge that separates what we know about textual rhetorics from what we know about visual rhetorics. As Mitchell warned, words and images have become mixed up in the heated debate over knowledge and truth. I contend that as a result of this arbitrary separation, visual rhetoricians—pushed wholeheartedly by some philosophers—have inadvertently created a new dichotomy between argument and persuasion that limits the discussion of the one of the newest studies of visual communication: visual argument.

Before moving on, though, I would like to clarify that I do not mean to suggest that text and images operate exactly the same way. There are, undoubtedly, a myriad ways that text and images communicate differently, but that does not mean we should discount their similarities. Donis Dondis writes, in her seminal book, *A Primer of Visual Literacy*, “Language is a means of expression and communication and, therefore, is a parallel system to visual communication. We cannot slavishly copy the methods that are used to teach reading and writing, but we can observe and acknowledge them” (Dondis 182-3). Indeed, it is neither my desire to promote theories that simply mimic existing textual methodologies nor to present an alternative that ignores them. More so I am

² I am referring here to the pre-Aristotelian arguments about rhetoric best exemplified by Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen* and the counter-arguments by Isocrates in *Against the Sophists*.

searching for what Mary Hocks and Michelle Kendrick call “hybridization” of the textual/visual cultures, the unification of theories instead of separation (4). By integrating theories from different sub-genres of rhetoric and philosophy, the study of visual argument will hopefully follow the same path as the general study of visual rhetorics by becoming an “indiscipline” with few ideological boundaries (Hill and Helmers 21). Carolyn Handa notes that visual rhetorics draws scholars “from fields as diverse as art history, design, philosophy, ... graphic arts ... ethnography, cultural studies, typography, and architecture, to name just a few” (3). To deny certain aspects of visual rhetorics in regards to specific sub-genres—like visual argument—would stifle a relatively new and developing discipline, keeping it from its full theoretical and practical potential. This notion means including existing textual theories as well.

As I will show in my literature review, it is imperative that rhetoricians find multiple ways to rejoin text and image in order to better understand the concept of visual argument and answer the criticisms of some of our biggest opponents. But before we look at one way of bypassing this perception v. conception roadblock, we must properly consider potential problems that both perceptual and conceptual theories pose for for visual argument.

Problems with perceptual theory for visual communication

While perceptual communication theory provides several interesting avenues to discuss visual rhetorics, it also presents some seemingly insurmountable hurdles for visual argumentation. Applied to a visual argument, perceptual theory asks the viewer to examine arguments based on a sort of visual alphabet. It suggests that if we learn the meaning inherent in certain lines, shapes, colors, etc. then we might successfully communicate our meaning. A visual alphabet, though, would be immense—each nuanced shades of color, line thickness, and composition adding new meanings *ad infinitum*. This approach poses an even bigger problem for intercultural communication. If the visual alphabet for one language seems immense, it becomes infinitely more so when considering thousands, if not millions, of distinct cultures and sub-cultures.

Nonetheless, even if it was possible to catalog visual meaning in that way, most perceptual theories alone could fully support a complete theory of visual argumentation since they seem, on closer examination, to be a form of naïve realism—the idea that the validation of our senses comes from the fact that objects have an “essence” independent of our perception (Peikoff 48). In other words, reality becomes a sort of “what you see is what you get” experience. This theory is problematic in a few ways. Foremost, when I examine a table, I do not

perceive that it is made up of atomic particles. Does that mean I am not seeing the purest form of reality? It would appear that from the lens of perceptual theory there are multiple tables: The table as perceived by human senses and the table as perceived by any aid to human senses.

Again it seems prudent to examine Arnheim's empiricism since his theory does not falter under the previous critiques. For Arnheim, the act of cognition occurs simultaneously with perception. They are, in fact, one faculty instead of two. He writes, "There is no basic difference...between what happens when a person looks at the world directly and when he sits with his eyes closed and 'thinks'" (13). Although Arnheim presents important arguments for visual communication his theory seems problematic for visual communication in two ways: the "intelligence" of senses and the idea of abstracting from abstraction.

Arnheim's argument appears to rest on his notion of intelligent perception. He notes, however, that the idea of sensory organs having intelligence seems "risky" and perhaps even counterintuitive. He argues that, perhaps, a different understanding of intelligence seems appropriate for his undertaking. It may be best to quote him at length here:

It may be permissible to say, for example, that the use of information about the environment makes for more intelligent

conduct than does total insensitivity. In this simplest sense, an inbuilt tropism by which an insect seeks or avoids light has something in common with a person who watchfully observes the happenings in the world around him. The vigilance of a lively human mind is the latest display of the struggle for survival that made primitive organisms responsive to changes in the environment. (17-18)

He goes on to argue that this “intelligence” derives not from “cognition for cognition’s sake” but as an evolutionary tool for survival (19). In this sense, sensory perception learns to focus, notice, or background entities as a means of keeping the perceiver alive—a fascinatingly complex method of problem solving for what seems at first to be a rudimentary biological process (25).

Yet the intelligent perception theory poses an interesting epistemological problem. If perception is cognition then the concepts humans form necessarily affect how they perceive—since Arnheim claims to be speaking about one faculty with an arbitrary split. Arnheim concedes this point outright, stating, “Our thoughts influence what we see, and vice versa” (15). This point calls into question the validity of our senses as epistemic organs. If our perceptions are transformed by the concepts they themselves create, then it appears difficult to

trust future perceptual data as being representative of a consistent, objective reality. Without making the point metaphysical, it seems sufficient to say that perceptual data influenced by previous perceptual data—both in terms of *actual* perception and interpretation, since Arnheim’s theory does not allow for a separation of the two—does not hold to a standard of validity necessary for a complete theory of visual argumentation. That is, if perception *is* cognition and the data perceived is necessarily influenced by the act of perception, on what grounds could a rhetor claim to make a visual argument? Any referents used by the rhetor could immediately be called into question as a product of the rhetor’s perceptual experiences. This position seems to leave little room for a rhetor to say that his or claims about an argument are more or less valid than any others.

In addition to the problem with intelligent perception, Arnheim’s theory poses an interesting problem for the idea of abstracting from an abstraction. That is, deriving one abstract concept by means of conceptualizing and integrating one or more different abstract concepts. Arnheim defines abstraction as “the art of drawing essentials from a given kind of entity” (173). For him, abstraction happens on the structural level (174) with perception acting to identify common traits within given entities (178). Ultimately, these abstractions lead to a concept,

which he suggests is not so much a fixed, universal attribute but “a kind of highspot within a sweep of continuous transformations” (178).

This idea of abstraction leads me to wonder about abstract ideas based on abstract ideas. In other words, Arnheim’s explanation of abstract concepts based on first hand perception seems reasonable enough, but his perception as cognition theory seems insufficient to explain how concepts are derived from other concepts and *not* from immediate experiential knowledge. For example, humans perceiving a table may abstract its structural elements and create the concept “table” as a referent to all entities of this sort. They do the same for the concept “chair.” Even if they store these concepts in their memory, it seems impossible in Arnheim’s view for humans to ever develop the concept of “furniture.” This concept is a special relationship that cannot necessarily be observed. Even if humans view a chair and a table together, they cannot observe the categorical relationship implicit in the concept “furniture.” They could observe/abstract spatial relationships like “behind,” “next to,” or “in front of,” but the categorical relationship represented by “furniture” cannot be pointed to in reality. It can only be understood by abstracting the abstractions based on the perceptual data presented by observing a table and a chair. This double abstraction is one level removed from direct perception and, therefore, seems

implausible under Arnheim's theory of perception as cognition. Similarly, in "The Psycho-Epistemology of Art," Rand points out that conceptual units such as light-years are abstractions beyond the realm of perception. Humans are only able to deal with such concepts by means of reason and conceptual faculties (17).

Again, I want to make clear that perceptual theories provide an excellent base for epistemological examinations—especially the work of Rudolph Arnheim. This thesis is sympathetic to the idea that all knowledge *originates* with the senses. Empiricists were right to argue that the conceptual faculties would have nothing to conceptualize without sensory experiences, but simply because data about reality comes from the senses does mean that the senses themselves are epistemic. Therefore, it appears that perceptual theory *on its own* does not provide an adequate basis for a theory of visual argument since it downplays or even discounts the role of conceptual faculties and their ability to abstract from abstractions.

Problems with conceptual theory for visual communication

Conceptualists' critique of perception, though mostly valid, necessarily leads to constructivism—the idea that reality is unknowable apart from society or language (Thralls and Blyler 3)—in one form or another. Constructivists

contend that individuals and groups create reality, knowledge, and meaning through language and ideology. Charlotte Thralls and Nancy Roundy Blyer clarify the theory in their essay, "The Social Perspective and Professional Communication: Diversity and Directions in Research," by stating, "Communications are invested with meaning only through the interactions of writers and readers in [specific social] groups. In short, socially mediated meaning—or, to use an alternate term, *interpretation*—is central to the social perspective" (4). They contend that because we cannot know objective characteristics of reality, the only means of knowledge is what we agree upon (4). It is important to note that constructivism goes beyond acknowledging that there are certain human creations that are not found in nature—e.g. government, dress codes, dating rituals, etc. Constructivists like Thomas Kuhn, Greg Myers, Bruno Latour, and Steve Woolgar argue that even scientific "facts" are socially constructed (Kuhn 170-171; Myers 627; Latour and Woolgar 21, 40). It is important, therefore, to distinguish between fact-constructivism and language-constructivism. The former claims that we literally build our existence by agreeing on scientific principles and laws of reality, making objective truth impossible. The latter claims that even if there is an objective reality it is unknowable apart from language, making *knowing* objective truth impossible.

There seem to be some issues with constructivism that are difficult to overcome for a comprehensive theory of visual argumentation.

In his book, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Paul Boghossian poses three major problems with fact-constructivism. Foremost is what he calls the problem of “causation.” He states that many facts we discuss predate our existence—fossils for example—so it seems impossible to have constructed their existence (38). Similarly, his second critique points out that some concepts, like electrons, are defined as being independent of us. How could we have constructed the entities that construct us, entities that are, by definition, independent of us (39)? Finally, Boghossian presents what he calls “the problem of disagreement” (39). He poses a hypothetical wherein two communities construct two facts that contradict each other. It would seem that in this example, if fact-constructivism was true, the construction would violate of the Law of Non-Contradiction. That is, “Necessarily: It is not the case both that P and that not-P” (40-41).

While the argument might be made that all forms of constructivism necessarily lead to fact-constructivism, it is not fair to other rationalist philosophies to simply address their arguments by what might be seen as the most naïve version of constructivism. Indeed, social constructivists concerned

with how language influences our perceptions might concede that reality exists independently of the mind, but it would be impossible to know reality directly since our thoughts are mediated by language. Social construction in this sense does not mean a literal construction of reality but the construction of an understanding of reality based on the relative needs, interests, and ideologies of a given culture (Boghossian 17). Under this theory, discussions about what we “know” are more so discussions about the social, cultural factors that guide our beliefs. Consequently, there may be multiple ways of “knowing” reality. The argument becomes about knowing the “objective” *characteristics* of an object and not about the metaphysical existence—or *essence*—of the object.

Like with empiricism, this thesis is sympathetic to some rationalist ideas—namely that language is an integral part of understanding reality. Similarly, to claim that the characteristics of an object are unknowable apart from language is true, but constructivists appear to discount the creation of language *as it relates to* those characteristics in reality. For example, the idea of scientific measurement is often cited as an example of social construction in science. In *Engineering Writing/Writing Engineering*, Dorothy A. Winsor explains, “Textual mediation of knowledge is difficult for engineers to accept because they seem themselves as working directly on physical objects” (59). Winsor calls into question the

reliability of lab instruments used by engineers—like temperature gauges—since these items are providing arbitrary units, derived by other humans, as a means of “inscribing” the information in a useful, language-based form (60).

Again, Winsor’s claim that measurements are made in terms of socially constructed units is not under dispute but only in the most arbitrary of ways Rand contends, “It makes no difference whether one measures length in terms of feet or meters; the standard provides only the form of notation, not the substance nor the result of the process of measuring” (*Introduction* 7). That is, specific terms may be linguistically arbitrary, but their referent is not metaphysically arbitrary. For instance, this necessity of language still does not denote an arbitrary referent for the concept “atom” since it is abstracted from perceptual knowledge. Though it is impossible to point to an atom without additionally scientific equipment, it does not follow that the word “atom” and the concept “atom” does not have a concrete referent in reality.³ To state this argument differently, words are, indeed, vital for conceptualization but only because they allow us a way to abstract from concrete references in an objective reality.

³ Engineers would simply need to show the progression of perceptual evidence that led them to “atom.” In this manner, engineers are showing “proof” of “atom.” Peikoff defines proof as “the derivation of a conclusion from antecedent knowledge” (8).

This counter-argument has implications for constructivists' definition of knowledge. Winsor states, "Knowledge may be defined as that which most people in a discourse community are convinced of" (60). Winsor's definition makes sense granted the constructivist view of language as shaping perception, but since language necessarily refers to something in reality then knowledge becomes independent of agreement. A fact of the matter is a fact of the matter whether or not people are convinced of it. A law of physics, for example, either applies to reality or it does not. Planes do not fly because we agree on the principles of aerodynamics; we agree on the principles of aerodynamics because planes fly. Knowledge is necessarily an integration of concepts based on perceptual data (Rand, *Introduction* 35).

In order to hypothesize a theory of visual argument that has a basis in reality and definite standards for determining validity, it seems problematic to rely on conceptual theory *alone*. What, then, are some alternatives for understanding visual argumentation if not through perceptual or conceptual theories independently?⁴

⁴ I wish to reiterate that it is not my intent to invalidate these theories outright. Each epistemological theory provides a substantial contribution to the fields of philosophy and rhetoric and holds explanatory power for nuanced aspects of visual rhetorics and even for some aspects of visual argument. Indeed, what I contend is that no perceptual or conceptual theory is *fully* adequate to explain and provide a methodology or theory for visual arguments.

One way of bridging the perception/conception gap

As with many dichotomies, the perception/conception split only leaves philosophers and rhetoricians with more questions. Separately, they provide important pieces to a complex puzzle, but it will take a different approach to construct and comprehend the greater picture. Given these two epistemological theories as individual entities, it seems as if we're forced to concede that sensory experience is the only epistemic faculty or that the senses are invalid or that all constructed concepts hold equal validity. One approach for visual argument theory is to explore different ways of bridging the gap between our perception and conception of reality as many philosophies have attempted to do. The method examined here presents just one more alternative for examining connections between empiricism and rationalism.

Dondis seems to have anticipated the problem of bridging perception and conception for visual scholars. She writes, "In the pursuit of visual literacy we must concern ourselves with...the structural forces that exist in the interactive relationship between the visual stimuli and the human organism functionally, both physically and psychologically; the character of the visual elements; and the forming power of the techniques" (17). Dondis asks scholars to concern themselves both with reality—the external "stimuli" that are perceived by the

sensory organs—and with the human mind—in terms of psychological and conceptual “techniques.” It seems to me that Dondis makes a good point. Meaning making does not occur independently on either the perceptual or conceptual level. Knowing reality is necessarily interplay between the senses and the mind. Peikoff explains this principle using the notion of color. He writes:

Such a quality...is not a dream or hallucination; it is not “in the mind” apart from the object; it is man’s *form* of grasping the object. Nor is the quality “in the object” apart from man; it is *man’s* form of grasping the object. [...] Since it is the product of an interaction...between two entities, object and apparatus, it cannot be identified exclusively with either. (46)

This concept of “object-as-perceived” supports the principle of *tabula rasa*—that humans are born without *a priori* knowledge—and, therefore, does not fall victim to the counter-arguments against conceptual theory. The object-as-perceived concept recognizes that the human faculty of perception does not presuppose conceptual knowledge just as the human faculty of conception does not presuppose knowledge of perceptual knowledge. In her essay, “Kant Versus Sullivan,” Rand writes, “Concepts are the products of a mental process that integrates and organizes the evidence provided by man’s senses” (121). But, at

the same time, we have the capacity to know reality through abstraction, the ability given to us by our rational faculties (Peikoff 48). Rand explains this process and in her essay, "The Objectivist Ethics." It seems important to quote her at some length:

Man's sense organs function automatically; man's brain integrates his sense data into percepts automatically; but the process of integrating percepts into concepts—the process of abstraction and of concept-formation—is not automatic.

The process of concept-formation...consists of a method of using one's consciousness, best designated by the term "conceptualizing." It is not a passive state of registering random impressions. It is an actively sustained process of identifying one's impressions in conceptual terms, of integrating every event and every observation into a conceptual context, of grasping relationships, differences, similarities in one's perceptual material and of abstracting them into new concepts, of drawing inferences, of making deductions, of reaching conclusions, of asking new questions and discovering new answers and expanding one's

knowledge into an ever-growing sum. The faculty that directs this process, the faculty that works by means of concepts, is: reason.

The process is thinking. (20)

Rand best demonstrates the object-as-perceived principle—known hereafter as “objective”⁵ theory—and the process of concept formation by citing the cognitive development of Helen Keller, a woman born blind, deaf, and mute. Rand points out, in her argument against Feyerabend’s famous article, that knowledge did not just “enter” Keller’s mind apart from her senses. Keller could not function on the most basic level, let alone develop enough theoretical knowledge to abstract science (“Kant Versus Sullivan” 123). Only by learning to connect the physical sensation of touching water to the concept of water—through letters drawn on her hand—was Keller able to successfully abstract other concepts and eventually learn to communicate (“Kant Versus Sullivan” 124). It was necessarily the interaction of reality and language, senses and reason, perception and conception that allowed Keller to understand herself and the world. The integration of the sensory experience of touching water and the abstract concept of “water” led Keller to knowledge. Neither perception alone nor conception alone gave her a way knowing reality.

⁵ Unless otherwise explicitly stated, throughout this thesis the term “objective” in quotes refers to the alternative epistemology philosophy and methodology being discussed in this section.

The purpose of this thesis

Leonardo's *paragone*, to which Mitchell referred, was between painting and poetry, the question of which medium better presented reality. The *paragone* modern rhetoricians face has a new name—text versus image—but represents a similar “dilemma” with stakes equally as high. Consequently, visual argument presents a particularly difficult challenge for visual rhetoricians. Though rhetoricians typically accept that visuals are argumentative—the word “argument” being equivalent with “persuasion”—philosophers, logicians, and argument scholars generally see argument as a text-only phenomenon.

Therefore, this thesis hopes to serve two main purposes. Foremost, I hope to elevate the status of visual arguments by showing that argumentation in images occurs in a similar manner to text. This point should, consequently, ease the unnecessary and widening gap between argument and persuasion—i.e., logic and emotion, philosophy and rhetoric. Additionally, I want to show that existing rhetorical principles traditionally reserved for textual communication can play a valuable role in understanding visual communication—especially argumentation—if examined through an “objective” lens like the alternative philosophy suggested herein. By combining this epistemological approach with classical rhetoric, I hope to provide one more possible methodology for

explaining how images might makes arguments. This attempt is my way of showing the positive effects of integrating different disciplines, revisiting sub-genres within one field, and exploring new uses for existing theories and practices in visual communication.

Structure and organization

The next chapter evaluates important literature on visual communication, focusing on existing perceptual and conceptual theories of meaning making. Additionally, I review the argument/persuasion debate in an attempt to reconcile the two and eventually discuss the major arguments about visual communication. My literature review ends with a discussion of the necessary criteria for an image to be considered argumentative.

From those criteria, I move on to discuss the classical rhetorical principles of *topoi* and figures of speech historically and how they can be used as modern, “objective” methodological tools for analyzing visual arguments. An applied analysis follows this section with implications and a call for future empirical and theoretical research to bring perception and conception schools closer together in the field of visual communication.

CHAPTER TWO

Painting the complete picture: A review of relevant literature

There is so much to be said about visual rhetorics, visual communication, and visual argumentation that it seems almost impossible to begin writing—to find an adequate starting point among a nearly infinite palette of relevant and important literature. Perhaps more important than where or with whom I start is how I start. The common denominator of visual rhetorics, visual communication, and visual argument seems simply to be the visual element. Let me begin, then, with a definition of “image” and what it means “to image.”

Defining image: A word is worth 1000 images (or vice versa)

Tens of thousands of years before the invention of PHOTOSHOP, ink, or even paper, humans with whom you or I would have seemingly little in common cautiously entered what we now call Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche valley in Southern France. Figure 1 on the next page shows one of the hundreds of cave paintings from Chauvet—a pride of lions hunting bison. Radiocarbon dating estimates the origin of some of the oldest paintings around 30,000 B.C. with more



Figure 1 – A painting from the Chauvet Cave in the Ardèche valley in Southern France. It is estimated to originate from roughly 30,000 B.C.

developing over the next 5,000 years (Clottes). The Chauvet paintings demonstrate a seemingly remarkable understanding of compositional technique. I imagine the artist observing the fascinating ritual of the lionesses meticulously stalking then savagely eviscerating their bison prey.

The artist(s) may have been fascinated by the violence, deeply saddened by a realization of the fleeting nature of life, or any number of motivating factors. Regardless, he or she took some “interest” in the event, enough, in fact, to create a catalyst for his painting. Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen contend in

Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design that “interest is the source of the selection of what is seen as the criterial aspect of the object, and this criterial aspect is then regarded as adequately representative of the object in a given context” (7). In other words, the artist could not recreate the occurrence *qua* occurrence. He or she could only share it by oral, aural, or visual “imaging.” Kress and van Leeuwen explain, “Communication requires that participants make their messages maximally understandable in a particular context. They therefore choose forms of expression which they believe to be maximally transparent to other participants” (13). Before the artist decided on an interest, he or she had to perform one of the most basic human actions: perception.

“Primarily, the act of seeing involves a response to light,” writes Dondis. “What light reveals and offers us is the substance by which man fashions and devises what he recognizes and identifies in the environment, namely all the other visual elements: line, color, shape, direction, texture, scale, dimension, motion” (21). These elements are the palette from which the artist chooses his or her “representation” — that is, the choice of words and images used “to understand, describe, and define the world as we see it” (Sturken and Cartwright 12). By what means does the artist choose interest? And how does he or she develop, conjure, find, or otherwise invoke/evoke elements to fulfill the chosen

representation? Here we find ourselves back at the debate of perception versus conception. Let's now examine how visual scholars have answered the question: By what means do we create visual messages and, ultimately, visual arguments?

Perceptual theories of visual communication

Generally speaking, perceptual theorists⁶ tend to focus mainly on the applied art of visual rhetorics. That is, they encompass what I would call a “handbook tradition” of meaning making. They often concern themselves with graphic design—print, web, video—and do not write heavily theoretical works. Their books and articles are often filled with analytical breakdowns of images’ “parts,” attempting to explain how certain lines dictate certain meanings or how colors correspond with emotions. Perceptual theorists tend to argue that by memorizing the components of visual design, the reader also synthesizes the ability to communicate with those components. Nonetheless, whether these theorists claim to find meaning in lines, shapes, or compositional relationship, they find it *in the perceived*.

⁶ I should clarify the works I address in the following sections should not be considered exhaustive examples of their representative scholar’s work. Ellen Lupton, for instance, has written many theoretical works worthy of consideration that I simply did not have the time or space to include. Generally speaking, I included more methodological texts if, like Lupton, the author’s epistemological philosophy was already discussed via other authors in the first chapter.

Jim Krause, for instance, contends that all graphic design is made up of components, composition, and concept. Components, he says, are the elements of design. They include icons, photographs, type, textures, backgrounds, and shapes (Krause 10). Composition, then, is the arrangement of such elements, and concept is the “theme” or message of the overall design (10). The rest of his book, *Design Basics Index*, is dedicated to explaining the three parts and how they communicate. Similarly, Robin Williams, author of *The Non-Designer’s Design Book*, explains how the design principles of contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity can evoke visual *pathos*, relationships, *ethos*, and unity respectively (13). Krause and Williams’s argument is, essentially, that principles and components have inherent meaning that the viewer comprehends through the act of seeing—and that these principles and components can be easily taught.

Paul Zelanski and Mary Pat Fisher, both prolific authors of design theory, address the rhetorical nature of design components in their book, *Design Principles and Problems*. For instance, they write, “The way a line is drawn out from a point give it a certain character, a unique expressive quality” (62). They continue, displaying drawings of several types of lines and associating the stroke with an emotional response—horizontal means calmness, wide means bold, etc. (63). Later in the book, they examine how value—the degree of lightness or

darkness on a surface (189)—can have an emotional affect on the viewer. Light value, according to Zelanski and Fisher, evoke feelings of happiness while black is normally associated with sadness (209–211). In fact, they have so much to say about color in general that they dedicate an entire book, *Color*, to the discussion of that one component. They write, “Color is perhaps the most powerful tool at the artist’s disposal. It affects our emotions beyond thought and can convey any mood, from delight to despair. It can be subtle or dramatic, capture attention or stimulate desire” (11). The authors challenge the readers to learn about the uses of color through experience, noting that an exact science may be impossible but that the best color education comes from perceiving how colors work in many different images (13).

Typography, too, serves as a crucial component in recent visual design theories. In *Thinking with Type*, for instance, Ellen Lupton provides a detailed account of effective typography, addressing issues of structure as well as concept. Interestingly, she defends the importance of typography and text by diminishing the communicative nature of other visuals. She writes, “Text can often provide a more specific and understandable cue than a picture. Icons don’t actually simplify translation of content into multiple languages, because they require explanation in multiple languages” (74). Nonetheless, she somewhat

redeems the power of visuals—in conjunction with text—in a later chapter, stating:

Universal design systems can no longer be dismissed as the irrelevant musings of a small, localized design community. A second modernism has emerged, reinvigorating the utopian search for universal forms that marked the birth of design as a discourse and a discipline nearly a century earlier. (134)

Lupton refers, perhaps, to information design scholars like Edward Tufte, William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, Jill Butler, Jim Krause, Paul Zelanski, and Mary Pat Fisher all of whom believe that principles of design, as well as their communicative abilities, can transcend time and cultural boundaries (Tufte; Lidwell et al.; Krause; Zelanski and Fisher).

Kevin LaGrandeur takes a much different approach in his essay, one that nears the boundaries of perceptual theory. He advocates for a classical interpretation of images in his essay, “Digital Images and Classical Persuasion,” arguing that “classical notions provide us with excellent, codified ways to think about the persuasive efficacy of images and words as interdependent and interactive things” (119). He then uses the concepts of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* to evaluate the persuasive impact of digital images (125). His theory is perceptual

since it finds rhetorical meaning in the image—by means of Aristotelian appeals—but the meaning LaGrandeur suggests is much more complex than the meaning suggested by Krause, Williams, etc.

It seems much more difficult to “find” an emotion like love ready-made in a visual argument, and it almost seems counter-intuitive since love is an emotional relationship between two people. How could that specific relationship be *in* the image? Unless authors have specific context for each of their viewers, it seems impossible that images could communicate complex relational messages such as the ones suggested by LaGrandeur. Here we see the problem with perceptual theories for visual argumentation: complexity and universality.

In terms of visual argumentation, it would be impossible for a purely perceptual theory to account for the number of nuanced elements that could affect the premises and conclusions. Additionally, it seems unproductive to dismiss contextual influences—be they societal, cultural, personal, or physiological—for the sake of universality.⁷ These issues both pose problems for possible criteria for visual argument. How, then, do rhetorical theorists account

⁷ I do not have enough space to explore the question, “Is universal visual communication possible?” For the sake of my thesis, I simply acknowledge that given the problems with both perceptual and conceptual theories, it is at least *impractical* to argue for universal visual communication *at this time*. For more in-depth examinations of this issue, I would suggest Charles Kostelnick’s article “Cultural Adaptation and Information Design: Two Contrasting Views” and Edward Tufte’s book *Envisioning Information*.

for the important role of context in visual communication and argumentation?

Many theorists who have shied away from any sort of naïve realism have turned to some sort of conceptual theory in hopes that rationalism can properly explain how we obtain or, rather, create meaning in images.

Conceptual theories of visual communication

In response to the problems of perceptual theory, visual conceptualists have attempted to demonstrate that meaning comes from somewhere other than the perceived image. An increasing body of literature suggests that meaning comes from the social constructions of various groups and cultures. For these scholars, meaning and knowledge is determined by consensus rather than by strict rationality or adherence to logical rules. On more rare occasions, conceptual visual theories contend that meaning comes from the individual, stemming from each person's unique life experiences. Regardless, conceptual theory holds that meaning—whether individual or social—is applied *to* an image rather than taken *from* an image.

Cara A. Finnegan, for example, notes the “naturalistic enthymeme” presented by photographs and interpreted by viewers (Finnegan 135). Finnegan uses the classical rhetorical concept of enthymeme to analyze photographs’

argumentative potential. She contends that photographs require the viewer to “fill in the blanks” about three arguments: that the representation of the world is real, that the event in the picture is occurring in front of the camera during a specific time at a specific place, and that the photographer has not interfered with captured image (143).

In “From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing,” Diana George discusses the disconnect between visual communication and education. She does so by examining an assignment in which her students were asked to make a visual argument in response to Adam Hochschild’s *King Leopold’s Ghost*, a novel about colonial Africa (George 11-12). Through her examination, she hopes to address what she sees as the subjugation of visual rhetoric as an “attendant to the verbal” and bring more visual communication, as its own literacy, to the classroom (13-14). By doing so, George asserts that we make visual meaning similar to the way we make textual meaning—and that it was easier for students to understand visual argument by relating it to text. To explain her definition of visual argument, she calls on the idea of visual parody: “Visual parody, like verbal parody, does make an overt claim, assertion, or proposition that draws particularly on comparison, juxtaposition, and intertextuality to offer the assertion to an audience for acceptance” (29).

Nonetheless, visual arguments, she contends, do not necessarily have to be parody. She notes, like Blair, that many visuals can assert a point and support that point with visual reasons (29). In what seems to be a slight concession to Blair, George acknowledges that visual arguments must be primarily visual, though she does not want to rule out the possibility of including text (30).

Eva R. Brumberger wrote a series of articles for *Technical Communication* that dealt directly with the argumentative nature of typography. In “The Persona of Typeface and Text,” she studies exactly what the title suggests, the personalities attributed to particular passages of text and how those personalities are affected by competing font personalities. She concludes that her analytical, experimental study of the rhetorical impact of typography shows a direct correlation between font and persona and text and persona, though she notes that this particular study simply sets up articles to come (Brumberger 221). Indeed, her study of “The Awareness and Impact of Typeface Appropriateness” contends, “Participants in the study had strong opinions about the appropriateness of particular typefaces for particular text passages, and they were aware of typeface text mismatches” (“Appropriateness” 230). She concludes in her final article, “Effects on Reading Time, Reading Comprehension, and Perceptions of *Ethos*,” that her studies seem to suggest a strong interaction

between the reader and the typographical personality exuded by an individual font. This exchange, she writes, is not absolute. That is, type will not consistently represent the same persona. Instead, like most visuals, typography must be considered within textual and argumentative context (“Effects” 22).

Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett, in *Shaping Information*, contend that such rhetorical contexts come from what they call “social conventions” They write, “We interpret design with our accumulated knowledge of conventional forms...and we draw on these experiences to interpret new forms (12). They go on to contend that we, as visual communicators, rely heavily on social codes and social groups to help us determine the meaning of our images—like the specialized language of a cardiologist versus a brain surgeon (30-31).

In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen attempt to reconcile a visual grammar with conceptualist theory. They contend that meaning comes from interpreting the perceived through the lens of your cultural experience and ideologies. They write:

Visual structures do not simply reproduce the structures of “reality”. On the contrary, they produce images of reality which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions within which the images are produced, circulated and read. (44)

Although this theory may come close to a bridge between conception and perception, it does not seem entirely adequate because it puts ideological conditions on the senses. Senses cannot be ideological according to the “objective” theory argued for in this thesis. They are neutral faculties that deliver the effects of objects on a human’s body to his or her brain for conceptualization (Peikoff 47).

Conceptual theory, like its perceptual counterpart, provides a number of interesting and useful ways of looking at visual communication—especially when we consider how differing and sometimes oppressive ideologies influence our understanding of visual culture. But conceptual theory cannot give us an adequate methodology for examining and explaining visual argument any more than perceptual theory. Conceptual theory seems to ask us to background what we see in favor of what we feel, think, construct, or generally agree upon. It asserts that our perceptions are less helpful in determining the meaning of a visual message because it downplays the validity of perception. Even Kress and van Leeuwen, whose theory seems closest to a working bridge between perception and conception, make the argument that representations are necessarily influenced by ideology (47). For conceptual theorists, the act of

perceiving is not a passive process directed by our consciousness. Instead, it is the act of filtering information through the lenses of ideology.

It seems that conceptual theory *on its own* may not provide an adequate starting place to determine visual arguments. Using conceptual theory, it would be impossible to actually determine a meaningful argument. The “argumentative” image could, in fact, have an unlimited number of premises and conclusions since its argument is based not on any connection with what is actually perceived but on what the individual or the society agrees is perceived. This approach would lead to any number of “arguments” imposed on an image and would require that we accept all as valid—thereby eliminating any meaningful appeals to *logos*.

Defining argument and persuasion

This last point begs the question: Of what importance is *logos* to an argument? Subsequently, can images be arguments without logic? It now appears that the perception/conception dichotomy necessarily creates an argument versus persuasion debate. If there is only direct experiential knowledge, then humans should only concern themselves with facts, statistics, and logical appeals. Contrarily, if knowledge only originates from within an

individual or group, then there is no truth except what we convince other people of—through the most expedient measures available. It becomes imperative that this debate receives attention if there is any hope of reconciling it—with “objective” theory or otherwise—or ignoring it. Consider this hypothetical as a starting point for discussing the differences between argument and persuasion:

While leisurely walking to work, a stranger accosts you and asks for money. “My car just broke down,” he says, pointing to a nearby parking lot. “I need two quarters for the pay phone. Can you spare some change?” Whether or not you provide him with fifty cents, you recognize that his appeal is logically constructed. You apologize and walk away. He pleads, “I was just on my way from picking my daughter up from the hospital, and I forgot my wallet at home. Please, if you could just spare fifty cents, my wife, daughter, and I would be grateful.” Having noticed that his appeal to *logos* did not succeed, the stranger makes an appeal to *ethos* by showing that he is a caring father and, simultaneously, appeals to *pathos*. Reluctantly, you give in and hand the stranger two quarters, persuaded by his trifecta of rhetorical tactics.

But were his appeals to *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* arguments? Certainly, his original logical appeal was argumentative, at least in the traditional sense. He presented premises, a conclusion, and gave you the opportunity to refute or

outright reject his claim. But were his additional appeals argumentative or just persuasive? Is there a difference?

Let me further illustrate the point by amending the hypothetical situation. Instead of giving the stranger fifty cents, you again reject his plea. This time, instead of presenting more discourse, the man pulls out a gun and demands that you hand over your wallet. Fearful for your life, you give the man your wallet and he leaves without harming you. In this amended instance, I believe it is fair to say that you were persuaded to surrender your wallet not by an argument but by psychological force. The man did not harm you, but we can only assume that he would have if you had not complied.

This scenario makes it difficult to deny that there seem to be differences between argument and persuasion. In order to understand and reconcile those differences, it's important to first examine the formal criteria for traditional argumentation. Knowing what argument *is* presents a better sense of what argument *is not*. In *Arguing Well*, John Shand contends, simply, that an argument is comprised of reasons for a belief (conclusion) derived from premises (9). D. Q. McNery would concur, breaking arguments down into two important elements: premises and conclusions (47). Finally, in this introduction his book, *A Rulebook*

for Arguments, Anthony Weston clarifies that arguments do not merely state facts.

“Arguments are attempts to support certain views with reason,” he writes (xi).

J. Anthony Blair, an analytic philosopher, provides one of the first major discussions of visual arguments in “The possibility and actuality of visual arguments” by defining traditional arguments and asking if visual arguments satisfy the criteria. His discussion of traditional argumentative criteria provides an interesting clarification for differentiating between argument and persuasion. Paraphrasing D.J. O’Keefe, argumentation scholar, Blair says that “for something to count as an argument, we have to be able to say what the claim is and what the reasons are, and we have to be able to say so clearly enough that the claims or reasons can be accepted or rejected” (347). Even using Blair’s definition, the armed robbery scenario satisfies the first two criteria if we understand the gun as enthymeme. The claim is overtly stated by the robber—“hand over your wallet”—and the premises seem clear (though not overtly stated): If you don’t hand over your wallet, I will kill you and “being dead” is not a desirable state of being.

Nonetheless, accounting for Blair’s third criterion seems impossible considering the consequences for not complying with the robber. Certainly, you are “free” to reject the claim in the same sense that you are “free” to assassinate

the president or steal a car or run a red light. The consequence for rejecting the claim in this situation, though, may lead to the end of future free choices. In that sense, it seems that most philosophical schools—except, perhaps, some existential sects—would say that you are not free to reject the claim since doing so could potentially end your freedom—and doing so would be detrimental to your self interest.

Blair's third criterion is, in fact, the crux of almost most argumentative scholarship, and it remains a contentious point in the rhetorical community—as it should be. The necessity of free choice in argument calls into question two of the three rhetorical appeals as argumentative devices: *ethos* and *pathos*. Mind you, it is not just argumentation scholars and philosophers that point to the problems with *ethos* and *pathos*, though they do their fair share. Rhetoricians attempting to define persuasion have done an excellent job at stirring up controversy themselves.

Charles Hill, citing Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, argues that the ultimate goal of a rhetor is to fill the consciousness of an audience member, pushing other arguments almost literally out of the mind (29). Hill writes:

The rhetor's hope is that [rhetorical presence] will prompt the audience members to accept his or her claim based on one or two pieces of powerful, vivid evidence, and not stop to think about issues such as the relevance or actual importance of the evidence, or about what other arguments and opinions should be brought into the equation and weighted before making a decision. (29)

Hill's definition leaves little room for free choice on purpose. It has long been generally considered that some feelings, especially emotions, are just too powerful to overcome by reasoned thought. Logicians even consider appeals to emotion and appeals to popularity—among other associated appeals—to be logical fallacies, inadequate for rational debate.

It is not a stretch or even much of a concession to say that rhetorical appeals—*logos* included—are sometimes used to nefarious ends. More importantly, rhetoricians should be forthcoming about distinguishing good persuasion from bad—especially to prevent “weapons into the hands of madmen” (Cicero 45). If we concede this minor point—that rhetoric can be used to subvert logic instead of support or work alongside it—then we have effectively answered a major critique while simultaneously distinguishing persuasion from argumentation and persuasion from “bad” persuasion. I do not

wish to introduce a new term here since I believe there is a concept that best represents what I mean by “bad” persuasion: propaganda. Specifically, I refer to Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson’s definition, which exactly mirrors the thoughts I had about “bad” persuasion. In *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion*, they write:

The word propaganda has since evolved to mean mass “suggestion” or “influence” through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual. Propaganda involves the dexterous use of images, slogans, and symbols that play on our prejudices and emotions; it is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to “voluntarily” accept the position as if it were his own. (Aronson and Pratkanis 11)

In other words, the viewer is not necessarily persuaded by the logical reasoning—which, if any exists, is often based on fallacious facts—or by non-deceitful appeals to emotion and character. It is persuasion by purposeful manipulation.

There seems, then, to be a distinct difference between what I may call “argument” and what I may call “persuasion.” But this distinction does not

require a dichotomy. Having argument and persuasion do not make either category mutually exclusive. For the sake of this examination, it was important to note that the difference exists and address a simple way to ease the tension between them. It seems that visuals can communicate persuasively—which was not something under debate but important to note nonetheless—but, using the strictest definitions, can visuals communicate as arguments? Several scholars have attempted to answer this question from many different perspectives.

Defining visual argument

I begin, again, with J. Anthony Blair and his treatment of visual arguments. Blair first wonders if visuals can make arguments in the traditional sense of the term. He ponders, “By analogy, knowing what a symphony is tells us that symphonies are auditory, not visual; so a ‘visual symphony’ must be a metaphor. Are visual arguments like visual symphonies” (Blair 345)? Blair claims that visual arguments, in order to be truly visual, must be only visual (347). With these two necessary criteria—that visual arguments must follow traditional rules of argument while remaining completely visual—Blair admits, with what seems to be resistance, that visual arguments are possible though not as prevalent as scholars previously expected (348-353).

Furthermore, he notes, “What makes visual messages influential...is not any argumentative function they may perform, but the unconscious identifications they invoke” (357). His final caution, one that seems to be the crux of his argument, is not to distinguish any persuasive device as an argument. Doing so, he says, relegates almost any mind-changing act to the category of argument—e.g. brain washing, behavior modification via surgery, etc. (359). He concludes:

The main point that I draw from these reflections is that visual arguments are not distinct in essence from verbal arguments. The argument is always a propositional entity, merely expressed differently in the two cases. Therefore visual arguments are not a particularly exciting conceptual novelty; they do not constitute a radically different realm of argumentation. (362)

At the end of his article, he does concede that visual arguments have “great advantages” —emotional power, mainly—but they are “gained at the cost of a loss of clarity and precision, which may not always be a price worth paying” (362). Here we see, again, a return to the notion that emotion does not constitute argument, a reoccurring theme worth noting.

In the same issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy* that contains Blair's article, David Fleming critiques visual arguments even more harshly, asserting that a traditional definition of argument does not allow for visuals at all. For Fleming, an argument is necessarily "reasonable." That is, it must provide evidence (premises) and support for a claim. It must also be refutable. Images, claim Fleming, cannot satisfy these criteria (Fleming).

Randall A. Lake and Barbara A. Pickering take issue with Fleming's second claim, defining the problem of visual refutation as one of propositions. They argue that images can refute in three unique ways: "dissection, in which an image is 'broken down' discursively ... substitution, in which one image is replaced within a larger visual frame by a different image with an opposing polarity ... and transformation, in which an image is recontextualized in a new visual frame" (emphasis added) (81–82). While Lake and Pickering's account does not "vindicate" the visual argument, their refutation theory, along with Blair's reluctant concession, provides a starting point for their possibility.

Advertising scholar Linda M. Scott seems even more optimistic about the possibility of visual argument. She claims that visuals, in order to be considered rhetorical, must invent, arrange, and deliver a distinct, symbolic argument using almost unlimited means—or at least not limited to purely visual devices as Blair

contends (Scott 253). Discussing the implications of these characteristics, she writes, “This new approach to visuals, therefore, would recast pictures as information in symbolic form—as messages that must be processed cognitively by means of complex combinations of learned pictorial schemata and that do not necessarily bear an analogy to nature” (253). She examines three lipstick ads—one seemingly based in reality, one metaphorical, and one abstract—and concludes that the ads, despite their differences in approach, require the viewer to fill in argumentative and experiential gaps—an important observation that provides a possible analytical approach discussed in the next section (256).

In “Toward a Theory of Visual Argument,” David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke attempt to refute Blair’s concluding remark that visuals are naturally ambiguous or less precise than text/speech. According to Birdsell and Groarke, visuals can be just as ambiguous as their verbal and spoken counterparts; however, they note that the “inherent indeterminacy of language” causes equally as many interpretive problems. They cite the judicial interpretation of historical documents like the Constitution as an example (Birdsell and Groarke 2). Similarly, they examine the supposed ambiguity of visual argument on the basis of contention—that visuals do not make specific claims and, therefore, remain ambiguous. Just like text, they argue, visuals may be interpreted in many

different ways on many different levels, but that makes them no more ambiguous than traditional arguments; it's all about context (3–7). Finally, the authors deal with Blair's claim that visuals are normally more persuasive than argumentative. Using an example from Blair's essay, they write:

The attempt to convince a dieter to eat a piece of cake by holding it under his or her nose is not, it seems [according to Blair], an argument. Or is it? Why not take the holding of the cake in front of the dieter's nose to be a particularly forceful way of expressing the argument that "Eating this cake would be wonderful, therefore you should forget your diet and eat it"? (8)

Of course, Birdsell and Groarke admit that their introduction can neither adequately refute the criticisms against visual argument nor place it within appropriate practical context. They call on future scholars to do so (9–10).

In a short section of his article, "Building Visual Communication Theory by Borrowing from Rhetoric," Keith Kenney, scholar of photojournalism, concisely examines the major critiques of visual argument and provides a counter-argument for each—by citing recent scholarship on the topic, a lot of which has been discussed herein. While his refutations are intriguing, for the sake of brevity, I will only examine his conclusions, which seem more pertinent

to this discussion. Foremost, he claims that visuals must give us the choice between two or more possible actions/items in order to be considered argumentative (Kenney 326). Furthermore, he writes, “Visuals must also: (1) provide reasons for choosing one way or another; (2) counter other arguments, perhaps via substitution or transformation; and (3) cause us to change our beliefs or to act” (326). Kenney offers the visual rhetorics community its first list of criteria that seem both plausible and unique to visual arguments.

In “The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments,” J. Anthony Blair updates and significantly changes his original criteria for visual arguments. Notably, he concedes that visuals, like their verbal and textual counterparts, are neither necessarily vague nor devoid of truth value, the two biggest criticisms from his previous essay (“The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments” 46–47). Additionally, Blair suggests a very simple test to determine if a visual is an argument or merely persuasive by simply restating the supposed visual argument in verbal form (49). Finally, he notes that visual arguments are naturally enthymematic, letting the viewer fill in the argumentative gaps (52).

Taking these arguments into consideration, it seems plausible, if not certain, that images can make arguments—though perhaps not as easily as we would like to believe. For the sake of this examination, though, it’s important to

narrow the criteria for what constitutes visual argumentation. Doing so necessarily limits what I can call a visual argument, but it also helps focus the discussion. For example, I concede that visuals communicate in a wide variety of ways—both traditionally “persuasive” and traditionally “argumentative”—but for the sake of brevity, I will concern myself only with the traditionally argumentative aspects. That is, I narrow my definition of visual argument to include primarily appeals to *logos* in terms of structure and content. *Ethos* and *pathos* may be considered for contextualization, but for the most part I will only be looking at logical structuring, relationships, and content. With this criterion in mind, I consider visual arguments to have the following characteristics, developed from the argumentation scholarship already presented:

1. The visual must have discernable premises.
2. The visual must have a discernable conclusion.
3. The premises and conclusions may function independently of the text or as a counterpart to it.
4. The premises and conclusions may be arranged in any number of ways, but, just like textual arguments, they must be able to be reformulated in a way that makes logical sense—be it syllogistically, enthymematically, or otherwise.

Understanding the characteristics of visual argument/persuasion, though crucial, does not necessarily provide us with a methodology for analyzing the ways visuals argue/persuade. It's imperative to understand how images make meaning in order to understand how they argue. Two methodological tools that have been largely overlooked are *topoi* and figures of speech—rhetorical principles typically associated with text. In the next chapter, I describe the uses of *topoi* and figures of speech historically, examine their potential as “objective” methodological tools, and describe how I will use them in my analyses.

CHAPTER THREE

A return to classical rhetoric: *Topoi*, figures of speech, and the “objective” bridge

In *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions*, Charles

Kostelnick and Michael Hassett write, “To function as a language that users can reliably make meaning with, visual language must embody codes that normalize its practices among both the designers who deploy it and the readers who interpret it” (Kostelnick and Hassett I). They go on to say, though, that visuals must be met on their “own terms,” that talking about visuals in terms of verbal communication is not helpful to creating this new codification (I). As I already mentioned, I do not necessarily agree that differentiating the visual and the verbal is helpful to visual study, but the authors do touch on an interesting concept with the codification of images as a means for making them “readable.” This is certainly what Kress and Van Leeuwen were attempting to do on a grand, conceptual level from a social semiotics perspective. And while these sorts of perceptual theories are important, as I’ve already pointed out, they can lead to an infinite number of visual “grammars” or alphabets.

Theorists from many disciplines have attempted to explain meaning making. From semiotics (Peirce, Saussure, Sebeok), to linguistics (Sapir, Chomsky, Bloomfield), to literary theories like reader-response (Fish, Gombrich, Jauss), and beyond, the theoretical tools to decipher communication are vast. Any number of these theories would provide an abundance of new information for visual communication. Nonetheless, I contend that existing principles of classical rhetoric can provide a wealth of theoretical information to help us examine visual argumentation from an “objective” viewpoint. I find exploring the rhetorical tools in our theoretical arsenal equally as valuable as coming up with a new theory or applying theories from another discipline. Therefore, the two rhetorical principles I want to explore in this thesis are *topoi* and figures of speech. I neither contend that these are the only classical rhetorical tools that need reexamination for visual argument nor that they are the best. I chose *topoi* and figures of speech because, as I will show, they seem to be examples of concepts—understood in terms of “objective” theory—that may have a propensity for communicating across vastly different audiences—though I dare not say universally.

Topoi and figures of speech—past and present

Aristotle first mentions *topoi*—also known as “common topics”—in “Book II” of his treatise, *Rhetoric*. Having explored the special topics, he addresses what he calls “the arguments common to all oratory” (129). For Aristotle, these *topoi* provide familiar places for orators to begin their arguments, places the audience can also understand without necessarily being familiar with the subject matter. In his classic textbook, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, P. J. Corbett clarifies the importance of *topoi* by comparing them to a checklist. He writes, “The term ‘checklist’ suggests that one goes through the list of topics, one by one, asking oneself whether this particular topic will turn up any material for the development of one’s subject” (96). He goes on to say that Quintilian hoped his students would eventually internalize the topics, able to recall that the moment they synthesize an argument (Corbett 96).

Indeed, the common topics—which include definition, comparison, cause and effect, possible and impossible, past and future fact, authority, etc.—are already so conceptually familiar to most people that they make excellent tools for persuasion and argumentation. Sharon Bracci Blinn and Mary Garrett even contend that the Aristotelian *topoi* “function as irreducible concepts from which reasoning proceeds” (94). The implication for this conclusion, which they back

with cognitive psychological research, is that *topoi* may serve as a cross-cultural, universal method for examining persuasion and argumentation strategies (95).

Similarly, J. P. Zompetti argues that argumentation scholars should return their attention to *topoi* but in a different way—by studying “what *topoi* can actually be used for” (15). For Zompetti, they are a great way to help rhetoricians, especially students, begin developing arguments and finding persuasive means (25).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca discuss the importance of *topoi* in their classic book, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. They spend a great deal of time discussing topics because of their perceived universal application and appeal—making them incredibly useful to rhetors of all experience levels and backgrounds (85).

While *topoi* seem to have a wide application that makes them great rhetorical tools, figures of speech, too, have a compelling appeal. Quintilian might have best addressed the meaning of the term “figures of speech” when he wrote: “Let the definition of a figure...be a form of speech artfully varied from common usage” (Corbett 425). Indeed, Corbett explains that figures can be considered “graces of language” or “dressing of thought” or “embellishment” (424). But these were not the only ways that classical rhetoricians viewed figures. Aristotle, for instance, saw figures as an excellent to provide clearness to the

rhetors and thought and helps the audience understand the argument quickly and happily (Corbett 424). In *On the Sublime*, Longinus describes the purpose of figures by asking, “What then is the effect of rhetorical visualization?” He answers: “There is much it can do to bring urgency and passion into our words; but it is when it is closely involved with factual arguments that it enslaves the hearer as well as persuading him” (357).

Like *topoi*, figures of speech—including antithesis, anastrophe, ellipsis, alliteration, and many others—have a familiarity about them, in function if not in name, that make their use all the more powerful and appealing for rhetors. A 1993 study of *People* magazine ads by Edward F. McQuarrie and David Glen Mick demonstrated that even a small sampling of ads showed a propensity for using figures of speech. Of the 154 ads analyzed, 86 percent, or 132 ads, contained one or more figures of speech in their headlines or sub-heads (McQuarrie and Mick 310). Similarly, Craig and Carol Kallendorf argue that business communication has benefited greatly from figures of speech, citing numerous examples in successful company slogans and mottos (36-37). They contend that figures have a propensity for building ethos through and image and evening making logical arguments through structuring and organization (41-42).

It seems apparent that *topoi* and figures of speech have great persuasive and even argumentative potential in their expected textual use, but how might rhetoricians incorporate them visually? Two scholars have done research in the area of visual figures of speech. Robert Horn, in “Rhetorical Devices and Tight Integration,” provides examples of visual synecdoche, metonymy, and metaphor, noting that visual metaphors are especially “rich and expressive tools” (Horn 373). Likewise, Jeanne Fahnestock notices several important occurrences of visual figures of speech in her book, *Rhetorical Figures in Science*. In one instance, scientists used visual ploche, repetition, to argue that a virion remains the same as it enters and leaves a cell (Fahnestock 166). Additionally, she points out the use of visual polyptoton, repetition with change, in a study of hummingbirds to show that a new species had been discovered—when compared to previously discovered birds (175). She contends that the purpose of these figures, whether textual or visual, is to argue invisibly and soften the potential “shock” inherent in any claim. That is, the visuals are *comparable representations* of the textual arguments, but can be more persuasive since the audience is less adept at arguing against them. She writes, “Making a claim less surprising and therefore more convincing is precisely the work of a figure of

argument, illustrating once again that there are pervasive connections between linguistic structure and argumentative structure” (161).

All of this information leads up to the question: Why do *topoi* and figures of speech seem to have such wide-reaching communicative ability? Foremost, they tend to provide a sense of familiarity that makes the audience more comfortable with the argument. These rhetorical strategies bring a certain *ethos* that makes them more credible audiences. More importantly, though, *topoi* and figures are not concerned primarily with either the content of an argument or its structure. It seems that these rhetorical strategies exemplify the “objective” notion of a concept, defined in terms of “objective” theory as a “mental integration of two or more units which are isolated according to a specific characteristic(s) and united by a specific definition” (Rand, *Introduction* 10). Under this definition, a unit referred to by a concept must have attributes that exist in some quantity but that may exist in any quantity (Rand, *Introduction* 11). That is, *topoi* and figures of speech need not provide specific argumentative information, but they are contingent on the content and context provided by the rhetor.

For example, deciding to use a metaphor does not tell me what to say or even a *specific* structure for how to say it. The concept of metaphor denotes a

certain logical structuring, but tells me nothing else *a priori*. The success of the metaphor depends on the relationship between the content and its structure. Generally speaking, metaphors take a simple X is Y form—such as, “Love is a river.” Nevertheless, simply plugging in appropriate nouns does not guarantee a persuasive or argumentative metaphor. The success necessarily depends on interplay between content with its appropriate structure and the context in which it will be used—i.e., between the reality of the construed and the mind of the audience. The specific qualities of a metaphor must exist in some way but they may exist in any way—as determined by the rhetor. In that sense, *topoi* and figures seem to demonstrate, rather accurately, the “objective” theory of visual communication presented in this thesis. Since these classical rhetorical devices appear to serve as illustrations of “objective” concepts, it seems appropriate that their communicative ability is far reaching. They are methodological examples of the human thought process—a faculty that is, hopefully, very familiar to many audiences.

I do not contend that *topoi* and figures of speech are the only rhetorical elements that seem to function as examples of “objective” concepts nor do I contend that they may be the best examples. Indeed, there are probably many more devices that would exemplify this notion—perhaps even better than *topoi*

and figures. Nonetheless, the choice to examine *topoi* and figures ultimately came down to personal interest and limitations on time.

A methodology for examining visual topoi and figures

Using definitions and explanations collected quite effectively in Edward Corbett's book, *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, I examine the visual representations of *topoi* and figures of speech in three non-profit, anti-smoking ads. In order to successfully do so, I must first perform what Sonja K. Foss describes as a deductive method of rhetoricizing the visual. In "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory," Foss explains that this approach "suggests which aspects of rhetorical theory apply to both the visual and the verbal, thus marking areas of study where attention to the visual is likely to be less productive because, in those areas, verbal and visual rhetoric are functioning similarly" (311).

Though based on Horn and Fahnestock's innovative work, my analysis differs from their examinations in several distinct ways. Foremost, I address visual representation of *topoi* in addition to figures of speech as my main subject, and thus dedicate more time to discussing them. Furthermore, Fahnestock identifies visual figures but only as a side note on the topic of figures in scientific

rhetoric. Horn, on the other hand, directly addresses visual representations but spends only two pages presenting them—mainly by presenting examples.

Additionally, Horn creates his examples while this examination finds them in existing visuals. These distinctions are in no way meant to diminish Horn and Fahnestock's findings, only to demonstrate where my study fits into the conversation.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Making” the argument: Analyses of visual *topoi* and figures

Since most advertisements inherently make arguments, attempting, on some level, to persuade their audience to buy a product, support/stop supporting a cause, or otherwise act in a certain way, they seem to be an ideal medium for examples of visual argument. Indeed, many print and web advertisements use visual elements, often in addition to text, to draw attention to the ad and enhance the argument. Non-profit ads, especially, seem to provide excellent resources for this type of examination since they primarily “sell” messages/ideologies/ways of thinking instead of tangible products. This chapter examines three non-profit magazine advertisements that warn against the dangers of secondhand smoke. They are sponsored by the American Legacy Foundation and distributed by the Ad Council, “a private, non-profit organization that marshals volunteer talent from the advertising and communications industries...to deliver critical messages to the American public” (“About Ad Council”). Though a consistent message links the ads, they come from three distinct campaigns, each campaign with multiple variations of the same design. I chose three varying campaigns

instead of three posters from the same campaign in order to analyze the visual argumentative relationships between them.

But before I can add my voice to the conversation, I need to clarify two more things about this examination and the images being examined: (1) the extent to which I should include the text in my analyses and (2) the arguments as I see them in order to understand how I think they're being represented visually.

The accompanying text in each advertisement seems to play an important part in understanding the arguments being made, especially when first considering the purpose of the ads. Since it is my goal to examine visual representations of the argument and not to garner the argument from the visuals, it seems prudent to use the text to do so. Therefore, I purposely chose ads with varying amounts of text for this analysis. The relationship of text to image and image to text should help to determine my third premise for visual arguments—that the premises and conclusions of the visual argument either function independently of text or act as a strong supplement to it. That being said, I limit textual analysis to the minimum necessary to understand the ads' argumentation. It would seem counter-productive to examine the *topoi* and figures of speech *within the text* instead of using the text as argumentative context.

With that purpose in mind, it is important that I discuss what arguments the figures seem to make. Figures A and B appear to focus more on smoking during pregnancy, its effects, and how to get help quitting smoking. Their texts have similar messages, length, and images. These two ads seem to make the argument that smoking while pregnant can have devastating effects on a baby before and after birth. Contrarily, Figure C seems to focus on the effects of secondhand smoke—the first time the term “secondhand smoke” is actually mentioned—on children and other family members; it does not mention pregnancy.

The topoi analyses

FIGURE A – This advertisement contains, perhaps, the most obvious visual *topoi* of all the ads. There seems to be a visual comparison between the baby and the cigarette. It may be a visual representation of similarity, defined by Corbett as “the likeness of two or more things” (103), in terms of geometric angle on the page, relative “small” size, and color—the white of the cigarette shaft compared to the white of the baby’s clothes and the tan of the cigarette filter compared to the baby’s head and hands.



SEEMS SMALL BUT HAS A HUGE IMPACT



SEEMS SMALL BUT HAS A HUGE IMPACT

Just like a new baby can have a tremendous effect on your life, even a few cigarettes a day while pregnant can have an effect on your baby. Smoking while pregnant reduces the amount of oxygen your baby receives. And it can increase the risk of premature delivery, low birthweight, childhood asthma, SIDS and other problems. Quitting smoking is one of the most important things you can do for your baby's health. We can help you learn to quit for good. Call 1-866-66-START or visit www.greatstartbabies.org.



Figure A – “Baby/Cigarette: Secondhand Smoke & Kids”

The repetition of, “Seems small but has a huge impact,” suggests the beginning of an analogy.⁸ Corbett writes, “Analogy argues that if two things are alike in one or two characteristics, they are probably alike in another characteristic” (103). It would seem that the visual analogy of angle, size, and color sets up the textual analogy of similar influence on a mother and baby’s lives—baby to the mother and smoking to the baby. The ad states, “Just like a new baby can have a tremendous effect on your life, even a few cigarettes a day while pregnant can have an effect on your baby.”

Although the visual analogy supports the claim of similar influence, the ad seems to imply that the influences, though equally great, are of different kinds—that the impact of the baby is good and the impact of the cigarette is bad. This comparison of difference highlights, as Corbett suggests, the contrast between the two dissimilar things (106). Since the ad does not seem to imply that the influences are both good or bad, I cannot classify their difference as one of degree (Corbett 108). The influence produced by smoking during pregnancy is illustrated by the cause and effect arguments located in the textual part of the ad.

⁸ Kress and van Leeuwen provide an interesting way to conceptualize the analogy. They note that certain visual relationships mimic logical structuring in text. They contend that vectors, for instance, play the role of action verbs (46). In the baby and cigarette images, many of the visual elements signify an analogy—size, angle, and color specifically. These distinctions, of course, depend heavily on contextual information whether—cultural, societal, etc.



L is for Low birthweight

Smoking while you're pregnant can increase the chances of your baby being born smaller than he should be and not being able to go home with you from the hospital right away. Deciding not to smoke while pregnant is the first step you can take to increase the likelihood that your baby will be born strong and healthy. Quitting smoking also helps reduce the chances of premature delivery, childhood asthma, SIDS and other problems. Learning how to quit when you're pregnant can prevent learning how to live with the consequences. We can help you quit for good. Call 1-866-66-START or visit www.greatstartbabies.org.



Figure B – “L is for Low Birthweight: Secondhand Smoke & Kids”

FIGURE B – Unlike the visuals in the previous figure, these visuals may be more than context for the argument; they may be a visual representation of the argument itself. Consider the first line of the accompanying text, which seems to be the primary argument, “Smoking while you’re pregnant can increase the chances of your baby being born smaller than he should be and not being able to go home with you from the hospital right away.” If the viewers share an understanding of the cultural elements embedded in the drawing⁹, this cause and effect argument can stand by itself. The smoking cigarettes literally outweigh the baby, tipping the scale in their favor.¹⁰ Adding more cigarettes would, logically, tip the scale further. Of course, adding more cigarettes on a real scale would not make the baby weigh less, so to supplement the point, the visual depicts the baby as being nearly the same physical size as the cigarettes. Smoking, in this visual, seems to have decreased the physical size of the baby – and, as a result, the cigarettes outweigh the infant.

⁹ It’s important to note that the image can only stand as an argument within a certain context – namely the cultural context of the dangers of smoking. No argument, whether visual or text, can exist outside of context, and conceding that this visual argument requires context does not mean that visuals cannot argue. It was never my intent to show that visual arguments have a methodology that make them universally applicable, and I hope I have not done so.

¹⁰ It may be that the scale itself, outside of the specific context of smoking, may act as a visual argument for cause and effect in general – that is, if the audience shares the understanding of how a scale works. I cannot make this claim here, though, since the scale image is necessarily intertwined with the anti-smoking context.

On a smaller, almost unnoticeable level, the ad design might be setting up a visual contrary between smoking and baby. Contrary terms, according to Corbett, “involve opposite or incompatible things of the same kind” (116). In accordance with this definition, the ad sets cigarette and baby as contraries not through direct statement but through a clever visual analogy. Foremost, the cigarettes smolder in a baby blue ashtray and the baby rests in light pink bundle. The two colors, typically associated with male and female respectively, work as contraries. Just as cold is the contrary of hot, or loud of quiet, blue—at least in Western culture—signifies the contrary of pink—more so male (blue) and female (pink). Similarly, the image of the scale sets up its own contrary system supported by the textual argument. In the advertisement’s scale, either the cigarettes outweigh the baby or the baby outweighs the cigarettes. Balance does not seem to be an option. The text never refers to a situation in which the amount of smoking is directly related to the chances of a baby being born premature. It seems to suggest that if you smoke at all, the chances will increase. Additionally, the ad is careful not to conclude that quitting smoking will eliminate the chance of premature birth. The ad states, “Deciding not to smoke while pregnant is the first step you can take to increase the likelihood that your baby will be born strong and healthy.” These two messages—that smoking “can

increase the chances of your baby being born smaller” and that quitting smoking “helps reduce the chances of premature delivery” — seem to exemplify what we can know about contraries *a priori*: “(1) If one of the propositions is true, the other is false... (2) If one of the propositions is false, the other one is not necessarily true” (Corbett 117). In other words, if you smoke, the chances for premature delivery increase, but if you do not smoke, you may still deliver prematurely.

FIGURE C – In this advertisement, I observe the first outright use of testimony, a topic that gathers its argumentative material not from the discussed question but from outside of the discussion (Corbett 124). In this case, the external source is a maxim, a general statement “about human actions, about things that are to be chosen or avoided in human action” (Corbett 129). According to Corbett, maxims are also necessarily universal and often seem self-evident (129). This particular maxim, embedded in a needlepoint sampler, states, “Thank you for not passing gas in our home.” The statement, while not necessarily written in the form of a maxim, implies a universal truth about human action. In maxim form, the sampler might say, “A courteous person never passes gas in someone else’s home.” In this case, we can assume that “passing gas” is an understood term for smoking.

THANK YOU
FOR NOT
PASSING
GAS
IN OUR HOME

Ad Council.org
Secondhand smoke contains deadly gases like hydrogen cyanide that can be especially harmful to your kids sweet kids. Don't pass gas. Take it outside. Dontpassgas.org 1 888-NO-PASS-GAS
Legacy
American Legacy Foundation

Figure C – “Needlepoint: Secondhand Smoke & Kids”

That being said, I notice a second, seemingly more powerful *topoi* at work within the maxim: definition. Corbett seems to acknowledge the importance of definition when he puts it first among the common topics and gives it the longest explanation. In this instance, the ad defines secondhand smoke as “passing gas” not to clarify the issue being discussed but to present an argument against it—a sub-topic of definition that Corbett calls “genus” (99). To rewrite the statement in definitional form, it might state, “Smoking is passing gas.” The sampler seems to be playing on the colloquial definition for “passing gas” while the text refers to literal deadly gases “like hydrogen cyanide” that it warns “can be especially harmful to your kids sweet kids.”

I mention these textual elements only to draw attention to the sampler itself as visual argument. The invocation of the image of the sampler necessarily brings with it the cultural context of the genre. Only if the audience has some context—referenced enthymematically—will they understand the significance of the maxim-like information provided by it. Even devoid of text, the cultural context of “sampler as genre” would provide the viewers some basis for knowing the *type* of argument—that the argument will be presented in the form of a “folksy” truism. Consequently, the sampler genre asks the reader to consider who authored the information and in what situation. The sampler itself, then,

seems to be an example of authority, a sub-topic of testimony that relies on expert opinion to help make a point (Corbett 124). While the authors of the samplers may not be “experts” in a modern sense, Corbett explains that before the age of technology facts could not be readily verified, so it was imperative that declarations of truth carried also carried the *ethos* of the speaker (125). This visual *topoi* asks the reader to consider the author’s prejudices, assumptions, and ultimate knowledge on the subject at hand (Corbett 125)—even though the subject seems difficult to determine outside the context provided by the text.

Relationships between topoi

The *logos* for the Ad Council, American Legacy Foundation, and Great Start Babies may be the most visible relationship between the figures. These tiny symbols at the bottom of each ad could be seen as appeals to authority. Since the advertisements do not use many other sub-topics of testimony like statistics, law, or precedents, these appeals to authority—stamps of approval by authoritative, noble groups—seem to be important factors for the audience to determine the truth value of the claims being made. Upon closer inspection, the ads seem to supplement the external authority by presenting the arguments themselves as authority. They do so in two ways: (1) by appealing to the maxim-like

assumption that secondhand smoke is unhealthy and (2) by relying on the non-profit status of their distributor, Ad Council, to present the image of altruistic authority—a testimonial, of sorts, that calls on the distributor's *ethos* to convince the audience (Corbett 126).

In addition to the commonalities among the advertisements, I would like to note one of the major differences—since difference is a sub-topic of comparison. Interestingly, cause and effect arguments exist in each ad, but they are treated quite differently. Figure A uses the visuals to set up the cause and effect argument in the text through analogy. The visuals in Figure B, on the other hand, actually depict the cause and effect argument, which is restated in the text. Contrarily, Figure C visuals do not seem to deal with the textual cause and effect argument at all—except to invoke a definition for smoking that relates to the textual argument about deadly gases. I will evaluate this visual diversity in my conclusion.

Rhetorical implications for visual topoi

The visual *topoi* in these ads seem to act mainly as supplements to the textual arguments. It would appear that most of the visuals could not stand as arguments on their own without a significant amount of context to put them in

logical perspective. Whether these specific images were designed as supplements or whether images in general have a difficult time making independent logical assertions, I do not know. Nonetheless, this examination has uncovered what appears to be one counter example to this trend. The images in Figure B might be able to stand as independent arguments without the context-giving text.

Assuming a shared community and cultural codes, as suggested by Kostelnick and Hassett, the image of the tilting scale and miniature baby seem to embody enough of the necessary characteristics of a cause and effect argument to exist successfully outside of the textual supplement. The image of the scale in context with the anti-smoking message seems to suggest a conceptual relationship between the structure of the cause and effect argument and the elements that evoke it. In other words, there is logical interplay between what viewers know about cause and effect relationships and the visual elements used to represent the cause and effect relationship of smoking to low birthweight. This finding has potentially wide-reaching implications that I will discuss more in my conclusion.

I think it is also important to address the topics that were not readily apparent in the advertisements that, just considering my personal experience with newspaper ads, I expected to be present. None of the advertisements, for instance, used statistics to strengthen their arguments, nor did they use personal

testimony from parents of children affected by secondhand smoke—either through testimonial or precedent, the use of past examples to make a judgment about the future (Corbett 131). Additionally, though perhaps not surprisingly, I did not find an instance of antecedent and consequence or argument by circumstance—though this lack of example does not mean they are not present. Regardless, what are the implications of these missing *topoi*?

Foremost, it does not follow that because these *topoi* may be missing from these specific ads that they cannot be represented visually. Just as written arguments do not necessarily contain every logical topic, visual arguments do not necessarily contain them either. This ad campaign does not seem to lend itself to arguments made via the missing *topoi*. It may be that statistics, for instance, have become such a cliché topic that they have lost their appeal, especially in advertisements dealing with secondhand smoke. It has almost become common knowledge that smoking and secondhand smoke are bad for you, so the ads do not need address this issue through testimonial or precedent. Concerning the lack of antecedent/consequence and arguments by circumstance, their absence simply seems to imply that the ads' author(s) did not have a need for such arguments. I cannot think of a specific reason why they could not be represented visually if there was need to do so.

Finally, it seems important to note that the *topoi* of authority places a significant part in visual argument. Although the authority is referenced enthymematically – whether based on external *ethos* like the logos or cultural context like the sampler in Figure C—it still seems as if visuals have a certain propensity for drawing attention to the integrity of their creator(s).

Having considered the ways in which *topoi* may be visually represented, I now turn to visual figures of speech and their rhetorical implications.

The figures of speech analyses

FIGURE A – In this design, the adjacent images of sleeping baby and cigarette seem to create a “similarity of structure” that Corbett defines as “parallelism” (428). Indeed, the text, “Seems small but has a huge impact,” accompanies both visuals, establishing a seemingly unmistakable structural unity much like the *topoi* of similarity discussed in the previous section. More so than parallel, though, the ad appears to create “isocolon,” a form of parallelism resulting when “parallel elements are similar not only in structure but in length (that is, the same number of words, even the same number of syllables)” (Corbett 429). The bottom paragraph fosters this idea of parallelism, stating, “Just like a new baby can have a tremendous effect on your life, even a few cigarettes a day

while pregnant can have an effect on your baby.” Baby and cigarette seem parallel in their equally important influence—again, baby to the mother and smoking to the baby.

Upon further review, however, it appears that the concurrent images and text move beyond isocolon, using the parallel structure to set up “antithesis,” that is “the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas, often in parallel structure” (Corbett 429). The advertisement’s argument does not lend itself to merely establishing a parallel relationship between baby and cigarette. Consequently, while the isocolonic structure demonstrates a similarity of influence on the mother and child, it furthermore suggests dissimilarity of importance—thus, antithesis. The dissimilarity sets up the negative medical impacts of smoking listed in the paragraph, and, moreover, shows the importance of the baby in contrast to the cigarette. Subsequently, the image of the single cigarette seems to represent the entire act of smoking, a figure of speech known as “synecdoche” wherein “a part stands for the whole” (Corbett 445).

FIGURE B – More so than the other two designs, the overall appearance of Figure B—as if it was taken from a child’s alphabet book—seems to invoke parallelism with documents and information outside of itself, asking the audience to recall familiar structural concepts in order to understand the given

visuals. This ellipsis-like parallelism—“ellipsis” meaning the “deliberate omission of a word or of words which are readily implied by the context” (Corbett 433)—seems to require the audience to associate the advertisement’s structure with external children’s books. Subsequently, this parallelism sets up the cartoon scale—otherwise known as a balance—and resulting antithesis, the baby on one end and an ashtray on the other.

In this design, though, the antithesis seems to act in accordance with another figure of speech: “anastrophe” or the “inversion of the natural or usual word order” (Corbett 431). Just as words have a “natural” order, it seems images do as well—at least in terms of perceived importance. The cartoon scale leans heavily toward the ashtray, seemingly giving the cigarettes a weighted value. It would appear that the usual order, both physically in pounds and ethically in importance, would tip the scale toward the baby.

Indeed, the accompanying paragraph seems to play on this idea of the cigarettes “outweighing” the baby, stating, “Smoking while pregnant can increase the chances of your baby being born smaller than he should be...Deciding not to smoke while pregnant is the first step you can take to increase the likelihood that your baby will be born strong and healthy” (emphasis mine). Considering the text, the image of the “small” baby seems to be

a “syllepsis” pun, that is “a word understood differently in relation to two or more other words, which it modifies or governs” (Corbett 448). In this instance, the text seems to make the image a pun—on weight—and not vice versa.

FIGURE C – Needlepoint samplers often have a witty saying, word of advice, or general rule of thumb, and the sampler in Figure C is no exception. The sampler reads, “Thank you for not passing gas in our home.” In this case, the words may be interpreted as a “maxim.” In *The Rhetorical Tradition*, editors Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg define maxims, in Aristotelian terms, as appeals to example to make an argument (172). Using that definition, this maxim may act as a figure of speech, enhancing the overall effectiveness of the visual argument. It appeals to advice the audience may already know—“waste not, want not” for example. Furthermore, the term “passing gas,” introduced by the maxim, could act as a syllepsis pun, on the type of gas; consider the bottom of the ad, which states, “Secondhand smoke contains deadly gases like hydrogen cyanide...” It would also seem that even the word “gas” in the sampler represents the larger act of smoking and may be called synecdoche. These three figures in conjunction may act to enhance the visual argument more so than any could on its own.

Just visually speaking, Figure C appears to contain two major figures. Foremost, the visual elements leave out any definitive reference to smoking or cigarettes. This ellipsis requires the audience to read the text in order to understand the visual. Without that paragraph to give context, the visual may actually detract from the argument. Additionally, the needlepoint house and trees toward the bottom of the sampler break up the maxim, acting as “parenthesis” by inserting a “unit in a position that interrupts the normal syntactical flow of the sentence” (431). This break in flow seemingly gives emphasis to the first part of the text (Thank you for not passing gas)—which is also in larger type than the latter—and allows the second part (in our home) only as an afterthought, a figure that calls attention to importance of not “passing gas” at all let alone “in our home.”

Relationships between figures of speech

It appears that, for the most part, the designs can stand alone, effectively making arguments without help from the others. That being said, several figures do seem to permeate the page boundaries. Perhaps one of the more noticeable figures occurs with the babies in Figures A and B. Although the baby in Figure A comes from a stock image of a real baby, the baby in Figure B is a cartoon. The

change in infants, whether from A to B or B to A, represents a “repetition of words derived from the same root,” a visual “polyptoton” (Corbett 443).

Similarly, though perhaps less noticeably, the babies in A and B make another derivation in Figure C. Where as Figures A and B speak of and show infants, Figure C mentions “kids sweet kids” in its paragraph. From A and B to C, the babies change to kids, and, accordingly, the argument changes as well.

This change in argument may also be interpreted as a “climax” in the ads, the “arrangement of words phrases, or clauses in an order of increasing importance” (Corbett 441). Granted, the advertisements have no given arrangement and may be viewed out of my order of analysis. Nonetheless, viewed in an A, B, C sequence—a possible random viewing pattern—Figure C may seem to be the climactic ad of the series, not only in terms of subject age (“kid” versus “baby) but also according to the seemingly more sophisticated argument—i.e., it is not an argument against smoking in general, but against smoking around others.

Finally, each ad, in a similar manner, demonstrates “litotes,” or “the deliberate use of understatement” (Corbett 452), to enhance the argument—possibly the most dramatic and effective relationship between them. In each instance, the visuals seem to downplay the severity of secondhand smoke, often

through passive images or visual puns, to add shock value to the paragraphs' lists of risks: "premature delivery," "SIDS," and cigarette ingredients like "hydrogen cyanide."

Rhetorical implications for visual figures of speech

Admittedly, the instances of visual figures of speech seem too numerous to herein discuss individually, but several major figures deserve extended examination of their rhetorical implications. Foremost, I shall begin with my last observation in the "Figures of Speech Analyses" section: the use of litotes in each advertisement. I am naturally weary of advertisements, and I would imagine that a general audience may be equally as cautious—*caveat emptor*. Consequently, advertisers must find some way to lower everyone's guard, to ease the audience into considering the advertisement. Indeed, the use of litotes in these ads may entice the audience, summoned by the cleverness of the ads, to "stay a while" and be compelled by the visually enhanced arguments at hand.

The use of ellipsis in the visuals is another figure that deserves further exploration. Upon first glance, it appears that the visuals use ellipsis only to get the audience to read the text—since without it some visuals makes no sense. Consider, though, Finnegan's notion of naturalistic enthymeme, "that

photographic images...carry with them a profoundly influential but often unrecognized argumentative source: their perceived relationship to nature” (Finnegan 135). Finnegan contends that her argument applies solely to photographs because, if nothing else, they always make an argument about their own realism (143)—i.e., the audience must decide if the photograph is an accurate representation of reality. While Finnegan may argue that her naturalistic enthymeme only applies to photographs, the visuals in these ads seem to make an argument about their own realism as well. If the audience does not believe the visuals are true representations—whether they are photographs or cartoons—then they will probably discount the message outright. This enthymematic principle seems to relate directly to an ad’s *ethos*. Visuals seem to call on the viewers’ previous experiences, cultural background, and other contextual information to help fulfill the concept being shown. This interplay between image and viewers creates the interaction necessary for visual communication to occur—whether or not the communication is argumentative—as suggested by “objective” theory. Nevertheless, the ways in which visuals use/are enthymemes, like many elements of visual argument, deserve more research and discussion than I can provide here.

CHAPTER FIVE

Concluding remarks: Implications of “objective” theory, future research, and the long road ahead for visual argument

Interestingly, though the overall designs—text and visuals—and the text alone may act as individual, argument-making entities, most of the visuals viewed without the text do not seem to have this rhetorical prowess. Most of the visuals, taken off the page and made solitary, appear to be unable to act in an argumentative manner; the visual ellipsis employed to create an enthymeme and get the audience to read the text also, unfortunately, removes significant context. In this manner, most images do not create a strong enough conceptual relationship between the context and the argumentative structure to stand alone as argumentative elements.

The baby and ashtray scale cartoon, considered within the context of *topoi* and figures of speech, seems to be the only visual that can argue on its own. Even this single case, though, seems to reaffirm the importance and validity of visuals. It provides a possible example of a completely visual argument, an example that,

for me, elevates the status of visuals from accompanying rhetorical material to potentially independent devices worthy of equal rhetorical rank and study.

Nonetheless, even the visuals that seem rhetorically reliant on the accompanying texts provide argumentative enhancements. They include not only nearly invisible stylistic arguments but also distraction from rhetorical flaws or ineffective textual arguments (Fahnestock 175). Consequently, visual representation—because it does not showcase textual clues like “if...then” statements, for example—may be an effective way to mask an argument and, thus, make the audience more open to persuasion. Indeed, it seems to be visual *topoi* and visual figures’ invisibility that makes them such powerful rhetorical tools for enhancing an argument—even if they have difficulty on their own. When an argument can embed itself so well within the context that it virtually disappears, “the signs of special authorial intention diminish” (Fahnestock 158). This diminished “authorial intention” may be especially handy for advertisers and an equally powerful tool for rhetoricians, professional communicators, and others interested in visual argument.

In undertaking this study of visual *topoi* and figures of speech, I wanted to observe how arguments, logical structure and style, manifest themselves visually and how those visuals were used within an argumentative context—like an

advertisement. If nothing else, these ads seem to illustrate the diverse ways in which a visual may support, embody, or act in addition to a strong argument. It seems that even arguments as complex as analogy (Figure A) and cause and effect (Figure B) can be visually represented. This is not to say, of course, that visuals should replace text or that they are, in some way, superior to a textual argument. Visual representations, too, have their limitations. I am not willing to say that the purely visual argument would be equally as effective as the text and images combined or even the text alone—since I have no evidence to support this notion—but it would seem that well-constructed, purposeful visuals have some argumentative effectiveness. Reasoning out the possibilities of finding meaning and argumentation in imagery falls under the purview of theory—as an example of our conceptual faculties. By integrating what is known about epistemology, argumentation, persuasion, visual communication, topoi and figures of speech, it appears possible to theorize about new avenues for visual argumentation.

Nonetheless, the validity of this theory will be tested both by the conceptualizations of other theorists as well as, I hope, the perceptual observations of empiricists. This thesis, especially, lends itself to empirical testing—a combination of perceptual and conceptual knowledge.

Suggestions for future research

There is still a lot to discuss about visual arguments: visual enthymemes, the role of ellipsis, the role of typography, etc. It would be fascinating, for instance, to do a sort of “usability test” on the visuals from these ads—or any visual arguments, actually—and see what the viewers decide are the arguments. This type of empirical research could potentially corroborate or debunk *topoi*/figure analyses like this one and, possibly, assess the effectiveness of purely visual arguments. From the standpoint of “objective” theory, it would seem possible to use empirical research in an attempt to determine where exactly meaning making happens—i.e., more toward the perceptual level or more toward the conceptual level.

With time as a major consideration, I could not implement a full-scale, quantitative empirical study for this thesis. It would seem prudent, though, to suggest empirical studies for future consideration. Perhaps the best way to initially approach this topic empirically would be through a qualitative case study of three to five interviewees—something small and manageable. For instance, in “A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing,” Linda Flower and John R.

Hayes use a talk-aloud¹¹ protocol to assess the writing process of a writer in action. That is, they asked participants to compose an article about their job for readers of *Seventeen* magazine. During the entire process, Flower and Hayes asked the participants to “think out loud”—i.e., talk about what their essay and the choices they made. This interaction helped the researchers draw conclusions about the writing processes of their participants (Flower and Hayes 368). A similar procedure could be used to address the construct validity of my conclusions from the rhetorical analyses and perform what Foss calls an “inductive, artifact-based approach” (312). Foss describes this method as a study that “begins with the characteristics of artifacts and builds rhetorical theory on the basis of those characteristics, [offering] the most opportunities for rhetorical expansion” (312). Similar to the study in Flower *et al*, participants might talk aloud as they view the images I analyzed, describing how specific elements present a message or if a message is presented at all. This methodology could help demonstrate the connection between perception and conception by showing how viewers connect what they see with what they think is communicated. This sort of approach would be especially when analyzing concepts like *topoi* and

¹¹ Dr. Tharon Howard suggested the term “talk-aloud” instead of “think-aloud” since it more accurately describes what the participants are actually doing.

figures of speech to see if they are as widely applicable to argument as they appear to be.¹²

Another empirical methodology that might yield interesting results about visual argumentation comes from Bill Buxton's book, *Sketching User Experiences*. Buxton explains that participants often cannot express themselves accurately when asked to discuss a design because they feel restrained by the discourse and embarrassed by their lack of vocabulary—design vocabulary especially. Providing participants with as many available means of communication as possible gives them multiple opportunities to “tell” the researcher what they mean (Buxton 393-94). In his given example, he asked participants to draw an ideal thermostat. The results of the sketches allowed him to salvage what he thought was a bad hypothesis, which, instead, turned out to be poor communication between participant and observer (393).

I can imagine a scenario in which participants are asked to consider themselves designers for an anti-smoking campaign. They might be instructed to design an advertisement that persuades people not to smoke. During the entire

¹² I concede that this method draws upon a constructivist approach that might seem counter-intuitive to the methodology presented in this thesis. Nonetheless, I think this sort of empirical work provides a good starting point for future inductive studies. I do not claim that this sort of talk-aloud protocol provides sufficient evidence for a theory of visual argument. Nor do I claim that case studies of this sort give strong enough results to make causal relationships about visual argumentation. They simply provide possible starting points.

process, they would be encouraged to talk aloud—in very relaxed terms—about the design choices they were making. This sort of study would provide a wealth of information about what participants conceive as argumentative elements compared to the ones I perceived in my analyses.

Even though I do not have time to complete an empirical examination, I specifically wanted to note the importance of this methodology for visual rhetorics within the context of “objective” theory. Currently, there is little empirical research being conducted in academia about visual communication and especially visual argumentation. I do not mean to discount the work that is being done, but it seems as if the discipline is ripe for new scholarship, new theories, and new methodologies—especially when approaching the empirical research from an “object-as-perceived” philosophy. Certainly, the methodology and “objective” principle presented herein are only two of the multitudes of visual communication practices and theories that need empirical testing, but “objective” theory lends itself nicely to empirical verification. It is a theory that has no dependency on any one realm of knowledge—since it necessarily advocates an interaction. Therefore, it seems to provide a multitude of avenues to explore different argumentative strategies within different contexts—be they cultural, interpersonal, etc.—without limiting the research to any one specific

meaning—except that which is reached through reasoned perception. Personally, I look forward to conducting more empirical examinations of visual argument methodologies in the near future.

Implications and final words

There seems to be an unnerving trend in the visual rhetorics discourse community—one that admonishes text for its oppressive grip on communication and, as a result, seeks to abandon existing theory as a way of explaining visual communication. In a visual studies feature for *Afterimage* media magazine, Professor Johanna Drucker wrote that our new media-rich society is “primed for a paradigm shift” away from an era of textuality and into an era of visuality—if only we had the trainers to do so (Drucker). Unlike Drucker, I don’t believe that “Text is dead” in a pseudo-Nietzschian sense. I do concede that visuals are a unique form of communication, deserving of separate, intensive study. Nonetheless, I believe we can learn from existing theory—especially classical rhetorical theory—on our way to establishing a comprehensive study (and language) of/for visual rhetorics. Indeed, this thesis examines the applicability of traditional rhetorical principles, classical argumentative strategy, and a new approach to visual communication theory to help explain the concept of visual

argument—an introductory study that may help establish a comprehensive visual methodology and provide greater explanatory power for visual rhetoricians.

The undeniable trend in modern communication is toward the visual. This observation is certainly not meant to diminish the importance of the verbal and written word. Indeed, the convergence of media still plays a significant and constant part in our media rich lives. Regardless, as the prevalence of visuals increases and the integration of rhetorics occurs, professional communicators need theoretical and practical tools to stay academically current and competitive in the job market. The theories and methodologies discussed herein should be analyzed in greater detail in future theoretical and empirical studies. Hopefully this study shows that, as rhetorical strategies, they are just a few of the important tools that visual communicators need to understand and be able to apply. I also hope that this demonstrates that visuals have rhetorical powers once considered solely textual and that those powers, rendered visually, can be equally or even more effective than their textual counterparts.

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