

# ISSA Proceedings 2002 - “I See Your Point” - On Visual Arguments



## *1. Can a visual object be an argument?*

The prevailing assumption in analyzing arguments is that the form of an argument is linguistically expressed as a set of propositions. However, Willard, for instance, has argued that argument diagrams based on Toulmin's model, which presuppose the linguistic expression of propositions in arguments, cannot describe other forms of arguments that are conveyed by various media, as television commercials (Willard, 1976: 315). The question is not whether such criticism as Willard's is correct. Instead, the question must be extended: What is the range of the concept of argument or what sorts of things may be considered as arguments?

The medium in which an argument is formulated does not usually get the same focus as its structure. The implicit assumption is usually that language is the medium and, thus, the possibility that visual objects can be considered as a type of argument faces the position that will disqualify them as real arguments. For instance, when Daniel O'Keefe tries to clarify the difference between an argument and argument-making, he says that a paradigm case of argument-making must not be merely linguistically explicable but indeed linguistically explicit (O'Keefe, 1982).

However, another reading of O'Keefe's account would focus on his structural analysis of making an argument and not on the final medium in which argument-making must be described. O'Keefe argues that an argument as an entity has to be part of being engaged in an act of making an argument. Thus, identifying what is the argument and its analysis or reconstruction should be done by identifying the circumstances in which that argument was argued. The distinction between the way in which an argument is actually made or communicated, and the abstract object of "argument" is theoretically important for the possibility of a visual argument: while the visual argument is an object, its reconstruction as a linguistically explicit argument is part of analyzing the case of its making. Thus, the possibility of visual arguments is based on the distinction between its being a visual object and the ability to reformulate it as a linguistically explicit case of making an argument. In this way, the issue of the medium of the argument

becomes a central part of an argumentation theory in addition to its analysis and reconstruction.

In order to make the distinction between the visual argument as an object and its final linguistic reconstruction as a case of making an argument, there is a need to reject a common assumption regarding the nature of an argument. The paradigm characterization of the concept of argument is by describing it as a type of speech act. However, such a characterization might jeopardize the possibility of visual arguments, since, strictly speaking, they are not speech acts. O'Keefe rejects this characterization and bases his claim on analyzing the concept of *Argument-making* (O'Keefe, 1982: 12f). According to O'Keefe, an argument is not a speech act but a notion, while "arguing" is the speech act that conveys an argument.

This distinction can be the starting point for the possibility of a visual argument, for it illuminates an important difference between two things: First, what sorts of things would be classified as arguments, which is part of the meaning and application of the concept of *argument*, and, second, what sorts of circumstances would entitle making an *argument*, which is part of argument-making. Therefore, a visual argument is an object, an instance of the notion of argument. It is neither a speech act nor an instance of the notion of *argument-making*. As a visual instance of the notion of an *argument*, both the claim and the reasons are not fully linguistically explicit. Nevertheless, they are both overtly expressed via other mediums than language. However, when a visual argument is part of a communication process of making an argument, then the need to reconstruct the visual argument in a linguistically explicit way emerges.

## 2. *What kind of an argumentation theory is needed for visual arguments?*

The question now is, do visual arguments need a special theory of argumentation of their own, or are existing theories of argumentation sufficient. The key to this question is to specify what are the special theoretical tools needed for handling the special kind of visual arguments.

If an argumentative discourse contains visual objects in some essential way, the goal is to be able to describe the argument apart from the particulars of its occurrence and of the utterances of the argument in the act of making the argument. In other words, to be able to abstract the argument from its particular medium of communication and to turn it into a linguistically explicit form. For this end, theoretical tools are needed for isolating what linguistically explicable claims and reasons are involved in the act of making the argument, and then to

reconstruct the argument itself in a linguistically explicit form. Thus, the theoretical tools needed are those that enable the decoding and the interpretation of the argument that is given in a non-linguistically form by the visual object. However, the important point is that from the moment the visual object was decoded and reconstructed in a linguistically explicit form, the existing theories of argumentation can be used from this point onward. Therefore, what is needed is a theoretical extension to the existing theories of argumentation that will be able to deal with mediums of arguments other than the linguistically explicit ones.

### *3. Nelson Goodman's theory of symbols as part of knowing and understanding art*

The needed theoretical extension can be identified by the following problem: There is no actual moment where an argument is given as an argument, since it is part of making that argument. The distinction between the argument as an abstract object and the act of making that argument is an important theoretical distinction, but one which is never realized in actual argumentative discourse. Thus, what is needed is a theoretical tool that is able to extricate the abstract argument from actual instances of acts of argument-making. Furthermore, this theoretical tool must be part of a cognitive theory of visuality that will enable the reconstruction of a visual object in a linguistically explicit form. The most similar area of research that deals with such circumstances related to visuality is the philosophy of art. And one such philosophical theory that deals extensively with questions of the interpretation of works of art and their place in knowledge and understanding is that of Nelson Goodman.

Goodman grounds his theory of art on his theory of symbols, as laid out in his *Languages of Art* (1968). Underlying his approach is his belief in the cognitive nature of art, which invites consideration of the arts as partners with the sciences in the pursuit of understanding. The various kinds of works of art shape our experiences, just as do linguistic and scientific representations. Within this formulation, representational, expressive and exemplificational forms of symbols govern the features and functions of the arts. Goodman's approach restores art as involving a definite type of knowledge claim, since for him art employs certain clusters of symbolic features that evoke understanding characteristic of art works. Thus, Goodman rejects the prevalent distinctions between scientific understanding and aesthetics; for him they are but two complementary means for making and understanding our worlds.

Goodman's analysis of symbol systems contains some features that constitute the

needed theoretical extension.

1. *Art and images in general are symbol systems; they are a mode and mean of symbolization; they depict, describe or exemplify a world*

Images denote or apply as labels to what they represent or name or describe. Goodman makes clear the difference between linguistic and pictorial symbol systems, but he shows how images may present facts or make statements. Although images are nonlinguistic symbol systems, they depict, describe or exemplify a world in a visual way. Even if the product of science, unlike that of art, is a literal, verbal and mathematical denotational theory, science and art produce a description of a world.

2. *Symbols are extrinsic to the image itself and are part of the image's subject*

Works of art represent something, where to represent is to refer, to stand for, and to symbolize. Thus, every work of art, as being a representational work, is a symbol. There is no art without symbols as there is no art without subject, no matter how prosaically or abstract. Any image depicts something - it refers to something extraneous to the image as a work of art - either in a straightforward way without mysterious allusions or as purely symbolic. Any work of art has a subject - its reference - which can be subtle or obvious, occult or overt, and which lies outside it.

3. *Interpreting a work of art goes beyond the immediate meaning of the work*

Since art is understood as a symbol system, the act of *interpretation* becomes crucial to the understanding of a work of art. The meaning of the symbols, the decoding of the referential or denotational relations and the specification of what the work expresses are all parts of the act of interpretation. However, interpretation is not just a decoding of a given meaning. Goodman points out that interpretation in the arts is essentially the perceiving of the subtle but significant features of a work, that are not obvious on first examination. Interpretation is different from description since the act of interpretation goes beyond the immediate references of the work and focuses on the aesthetically interesting relations between the object and others with which it is not usually associated.

4. *Art is cognitive in nature*

By understanding art as a symbol system, Goodman argues that art is cognitive in nature. Although there is a significant distinction between paragraphs and pictures or between linguistic and pictorial symbols, pictures are read in the sense that pictures are interpreted. Thus, art and science are both symbol

systems that convey meaning and describe a world.

#### *4. A paradigm case of Argument-Making: Christiano Banti's 'Galileo before the Inquisition'*

One of O'Keefe's proposals is that the research in argumentation should be done through analyzing paradigm cases of arguments. Giving the above theoretical idea of Goodman's symbol theory, I propose the following case analysis of a visual argument as an example of a paradigm case of argument-making. The case of argument-making I chose is the work *Galileo before the Inquisition* by the Tuscan painter Cristiano Banti (Redondi, 1987: 321f)(i). The work depicts Galileo in a very realistic way standing in a room at the Palace of the Holy Office, before his judges: Father Commissary Maculano and his two assistants.

What I want to show in the following case of argument-making is that the visual object is linguistically explicable as an argument and that it can be reconstructed as a linguistically explicit argument. The point is that mediums other than language can express an argument, even though nothing is linguistically explicit in these cases. What is needed is not that every case of making an argument would be linguistically explicit, but that it should be linguistically explicable and then only eventually need it be explicit.

Furthermore, I use in this analysis the Pragma-Dialectics' analytical model of argumentative discourse, the ideal model of a critical discussion. The reason for adopting this model is because such a model emphasizes the argumentative nature of the visual object. Alternatively, if it can be shown that a visual object corresponds to the ideal model of a critical discussion, it provides evidence for the basic feeling that visuality plays a crucial part in argumentative discourse.

#### *5. The analysis of the case according to the Pragma-Dialectics' model of argumentative discourse*

The Pragma-Dialectics' analytical model of argumentative discourse has four stages in the process of resolving a difference of opinion through a critical discussion. Banti's 'Galileo before the Inquisition' corresponds only to part of this process, since it is an argument-making on the part of Banti, on behalf of the protagonist. The stage where the antagonist defends his standpoint against Banti's critical response is not present.

##### *The confrontation stage*

The work describes Galileo in front of the Inquisition. The father commissary, standing next to a large crucifix, his finger threateningly pointed at the page of a

volume lying open on the table, probably Galileo's Dialogue. There is also a page protocol, which may be the famous record of Cardinal Bellarmino's controversial injunction. On the left sits a Dominican priest, visibly alarmed, clutching the collar of his cape in anguish. Meanwhile, on the right is another Dominican with a hood down to his eyes, who seems to be entirely bored. Opposite the inquisitors, as to defy them, stands Galileo. The scene alludes to the scientific discovery of Galileo that contradicted the orthodoxy of state and religion. The scientists, the carriers of modernity and Enlightenment were the "sinners" and the "heretics", who were obliged to confess on their "sins" (Redondi, 1987: 151f and 312f)(ii).

The work seems to affect a historical realism with the appearance of historical reliability. However, the scene depicted in this work is nothing but fake; for one, Galileo is represented as rather a strong and youthful person for a seventy-year old man suffering from arthritis. It would be a mistake to even suppose that this work was intended to be historically reliable, since Banti was actually advancing an argument here and not a historical account.

The Roman Catholic Church is the clear antagonist here. The Church rejected the scientific discoveries of Galileo and only in 1992 did the Church formally admit to having erred. However, it is clear that the work does not refer to the dry judicial falsity made by the Church in the trial of Galileo. The antagonist here is only personified by the Tribunal of the Holy Office and the Roman Church. It is the dispute between humanism and liberalism against religion and superstition, modernity against tradition.

### *The Opening Stage*

The work is part of the well-known myth of Galileo as a symbol of the free human mind and humanism. His personal fate turned him into a symbol of the man that defied the darkness of religious and political oppression. Several symbols in this work represent this myth of Galileo, but it seems that the central symbol in this work, and which depicts the difference of opinion between the humanist protagonist and the religious antagonist, is the light.

Light symbolizes truth. The play of light in this work depicts the epistemological debate over the source of truth and its nature. In the work, light from an unseen window illuminated the inquisitorial intentions of the father commissary. On the other hand, Galileo is circumfused by truth's luminous halo. These symbols represent the epistemological debate about truth between religion and the Enlightenment, namely that the source of truth is either external to the human mind or internal to his human rationality.

### *The Argumentation Stage*

In this case of argument-making only the protagonist's argument is present. Banti argues for the humanist concept of truth by two further symbols present in the work. First, is the mutual play between the three figures of the judges: the father commissary and the two Dominicans to his sides. They symbolize the three deadly vices of ignorance: from right to left, fear fanaticism and sloth. The dependence on scriptural and divine sources of the truth is characterized by Banti as ignorance. Second, the image of Galileo symbolizes the superiority of the humanist concept of truth. Galileo stands as to challenge the inquisitors and is represented erect with features and stance that are extremely powerful and youthful. He symbolizes the confidence in the human mind.

Furthermore, the image of Galileo symbolizes the conviction in the inferiority of religion and superstition. Galileo's hand is resting on the folds of a mantle, which confers on this posture the elegance of a bullfighter in the arena. He has the exact posture of the bullfighter when he is preparing to give the deadly strike to the bull; his right hand beside his hip, as if holding the sword, and his left hand stretched as to invite the bull to his death.

But more than these symbols, it is Galileo's look that symbolizes the triumph of the humanist truth. Galileo looks disdainfully past his judges, toward the future, knowing that the truth is on his side and that these signs of power are going to vanish in the face of scientific truth. The image of Galileo is the image of a scientist who does not know dissimulation and fear, and wants to live in the discovered truth at all costs, always. He is the martyr of the spirit of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, where the Church is the enemy of truth and its executioner.

### *6. Conclusion*

Banti's case of argument-making shows that the crucial point is not whether the argument itself is linguistically explicit, but rather if it is linguistically explicable. The key to its being linguistically explicable is that the visual object was created as part of an argumentative discourse centered around a disagreement or debate. Giving that the visual object was part of a case of argument-making, Goodman's symbol theory gives the tools for its reconstructing as a linguistically explicit argument. A theoretical tool like Goodman's symbol theory is the supplement to the existing theories of argumentation needed for dealing with mediums other than the verbal or linguistic medium. This supplement will transform the visual object from its nonlinguistic form into a linguistically explicit form, for which the

existing theories of argumentation are sufficient.

## NOTES

**i.** Cristiano Banti, *Galileo before the Inquisition* (106 x 140.5), Florence 1857. For a digital scanning of the work, see <[http://www.ash-college.ac.il/schwed/my\\_courses/science/Banti Cristiano - Galileo in front of the Roman Inquisition.gif](http://www.ash-college.ac.il/schwed/my_courses/science/Banti_Cristiano_-_Galileo_in_front_of_the_Roman_Inquisition.gif)>. Cristiano Banti was a university professor of the Academy of Florence and painted for himself. The work was awarded the silver medal at the 1857 Florentine Exposition of the Society for Promotion of the Fine Arts. The image is a reproduction from the catalogue, *La città degli Uffizi*, Florence 1982, p. 302. On the Florentine exhibition of 1857 and the figure Cristiano Banti, see G. Matteucci's catalog and monograph, *Cristiano Banti*, Florence 1982.

**ii.** The Internet is rich in information about Galileo's life, scientific work and trial, which is a beautiful example of integrating text with images. For instance, see, *The Galileo Project* <<http://es.rice.edu/ES/humsoc/Galileo/>>; *HAO Education Pages* <<http://www.hao.ucar.edu/public/education/sp/images/galileo.html>>.

For more sites, see *Yahoo Home > Science > Astronomy > Astronomers > Galilei, Galileo*

<[http://dir.yahoo.com/Science/Astronomy/Astronomers/Galilei\\_\\_Galileo\\_\\_1564\\_1642\\_/](http://dir.yahoo.com/Science/Astronomy/Astronomers/Galilei__Galileo__1564_1642_/>)>. Any search with the other searching engines will generate many more sites. For the church's point of view in this conflict, see *Catholic Encyclopedia: Galileo Galilei* <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06342b.htm>>; *Catholic Educator's Resource Center* <<http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/history/world/wh0006.html>>.

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