ISSA Proceedings 2002 – Image Vernaculars: Photography, Anxiety, And Public Argument

1. Introduction: Visual Argument as Discourse About Images

There exists the assumption in rhetorical studies that visuality (often described in terms of "surveillance" or "spectacle") is inherently antithetical to the goals of rational discourse in the public sphere. Indeed, John Dewey's infamous charge in *The Public and Its Problems* that "vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator" seems to suggest no positive place for the visual in the practice of deliberation (1928/1954: 219). And Dewey is not alone; as Martin Jay (1993), David Michael Levin (1993), and others have observed, suspicion of the power of visuality dominates political theory and philosophy in both the European and American traditions. One goal of my research is to challenge such conceptions by encouraging us to think more productively about how visual images function as inventional resources in the public sphere.

Of course, one need not turn to theory to find examples of anxiety about the relationship of images to deliberation. The presence of visual images in public argument tends to produce a certain amount of anxiety in the general public as well. Part of that anxiety stems from fear that images can be "manipulated," in often undetectable ways, and thus pollute the apparent "purity" of public deliberation. In our increasingly digital age, the litany of notorious examples is by now quite familiar: the digitally "altered" O.J. Simpson mug shot in *Time magazine*, for example, or *National Geographic's* publication of a photograph in which the pyramids of Giza were moved closer together to facilitate production of the image on a vertical cover (Ritchin, 1990: 17). Indeed, "exposing" such "faked" photographs has become something of a cottage industry in recent years.

But such charges are not unique to digital culture, and of course, photographs could be manipulated long before computers came along. In working on a book about documentary photographs produced by the U. S. government during the 1930s (Finnegan, in press), I encountered several instances in which public actors charged the government with lying, staging, or manipulating its photographs. In

my study of one of these controversies (Finnegan, 2001a) I became fascinated not with the question of whether the photographs had been manipulated, but with the *rhetorical resources that the argument about manipulation afforded the arguers*. One of the ontological foundations of photography is, of course, its apparent transparency or "realism"; Bryson (1983) calls this the "natural attitude," Barthes (1977) refers to it as the "message without a code." The assumption of the inherent truth of the photograph grounds many controversies about visual images.

Recent, important work in argumentation studies has helped us begin to challenge suspicion of the visual and systematize our thinking regarding the rhetorical and argumentative features of visual practices. Willard (1978, 1981) explored the implications of argument as "non-discursive symbolism." Goodnight (1991) and Olson and Goodnight (1994) allowed space for the visual or non-discursive in the study of controversy. Birdsell and Groarke (1996) opened the door wide for scholarship on visual argument in their two-volume special issue of *Argumentation and Advocacy*. In those issues and elsewhere since, scholars of argument have explored and sought to articulate the possibilities of a theory of visual argument (Birdsell and Groarke, 1996; Blair 1996; Fleming, 1996; Groarke 1996). Other critics have used the case study approach to explore specific moments in which visual practices intersected with instances of argumentation (Shelley, 1996; Barbatsis, 1996; LaWare, 1998; Deluca and Delicath, 1999; Finnegan, 1999; Pickering and Lake, 1999; Finnegan, 2001a). Thus far most research on visual argument has tended to focus upon definitional questions (i.e., *do visual arguments exist? How are they defined?*) or instances of visual argument (i.e., *visual argument X produces Y effects*). Most recently, in her 2001 Alta keynote address, Catherine Palczewski argued that we must explore what she calls "the productive limits of argument." Defining argument as "a mobile, almost living creature," Palczewski called upon argumentation scholars to explore "moments in which argument plays out its productive limits, in which its identity opens and destabilizes" (2002: 3). For Palczewski, these moments include the continued theoretical exploration of the visual argument.

My project contributes to these recent conversations and extends them to suggest that we may benefit from paying attention not only to the discourse of images, but also to discourse *about* images. That is, I am interested in exploring the grounds of visual argument: how and why are people able to make particular kinds of

arguments about visual images? Using examples from controversies involving photographs and image-making practices, I posit the existence of "image vernaculars" that ground claims made about photographs – in particular in this essay, claims about photographs' relationship to truth or nature. If "vernacular" may be taken to mean colloquial, everyday ways of communicating, and "vernacular argument" may be defined as the use of relatively intuitive, everyday, enthymematic modes of reasoning based upon social and cultural norms in a given context, then we may define "image vernaculars" as *relatively stable, culturally- and historically-situated topoi available to public actors who wish to make arguments about visual images*. While the focus of this particular essay is on only one of these so-called image vernaculars, in what follows I speculate more generally about the nature and function of image vernaculars in public argument, with three very brief case studies as critical touchstones.

2. Images in Controversy: Three Cases of Naturalism at Work

Consider three images. The first: a photograph made of a steer's skull by a U. S. government photographer in 1936. Widely distributed as visual evidence of the devastating drought of that summer, the photograph generated controversy when a local newspaper editor in Fargo, North Dakota, declared it to be a "fake." Arguing that the steer in question could not have died as a result of the present drought, the editor claimed that the photographer had "staged" the image by using the steer's skull as a "moveable prop." He further argued that United States government was trying, for political purposes of course, to make the drought in the plains states look worse than it really was. The resulting controversy forced the government agency that sponsored the photography project to respond aggressively to the charges of propaganda, and almost ended the project altogether.

The second image is a more recent, and likely more familiar, one: *Time* magazine's digitally altered cover image of O.J. Simpson's mug shot. This image, too, produced intense controversy when it appeared in June 1994 – especially when placed against another news magazine's "unaltered" mug shot. While *Time* editors argued that the mug shot was altered merely to add drama to the story of the tragic downfall of a sports hero, others disagreed. Some argued that the new image, substantially darkened when compared to the original mug shot, constituted a visual judgment of guilt. Some charged *Time* with "lynching" Simpson on the cover of a national news magazine. Others, particularly those in

the journalistic community, argued that the digitally altered image wasn't altered *enough*, that norms of photojournalistic practice had been violated by visual artists who should have made the image look more like a painting and less like a photograph.

Finally, image three – an old photograph but a decidedly twenty-first century controversy. In 1998 a daguerreotype purported to be the earliest surviving photograph of Abraham Lincoln was put up for auction at Christie's in New York. Known as the "Hay Wadsworth daguerreotype," the controversial portrait featured a gangly young man with light-colored eyes and unruly hair. The photograph had been owned for many years by the family of Alice Hay Wadsworth, the daughter of Lincoln's private secretary John Hay. Yet its identity as Lincoln was far from conclusively established. The daguerreotype's owners put the image through a battery of tests, from the traditional authentication methods used by Lincoln scholars and photography experts to elaborate digital imaging tests and examination by forensic scientists. While some noted Lincoln scholars vociferously disputed the scientific findings, many information technology specialists and forensic scientists concluded that the image was indeed that of Abraham Lincoln. In the end, despite a range of evidence suggesting that the image might in fact be that of Lincoln, the daguerreotype failed to sell. No one at the auction, it appeared, wanted to take a chance on a face that was so strangely unrecognizable. For even those who argued that the image was conclusively that of Abraham Lincoln could not deny one thing: *it does not look like Lincoln*. (For detailed discussions of each of these controversies, see Finnegan (2001a), Finnegan (2000), and Finnegan (2001b), respectively).

In each of these three cases, the relation of the photograph to some notion of "truth" or "nature" was assumed by those who responded to the image. In the case of the skull photograph, the veracity of the image was challenged by those who believed that the skull did not legitimately represent the condition of the land it seemed to illustrate. If the photographer had moved the skull, then the drought conditions the images appeared to present were "faked." In the Simpson controversy, critics challenged *Time*'s alteration of visual evidence typically used in legal settings for identification purposes: the mug shot. Here, a genre of imaging presumed to be "truthful" and legally inviolable was manipulated by a journalistic organization in ways that appeared to make a biased judgment. And, in the Lincoln daguerreotype case, at issue was the very definition of authenticity

itself. Participants in that debate questioned whether the photograph could be a "real" Lincoln if it did not "look like" our culturally inherited image of the man.

The "image vernacular" in each of these three cases is grounded in a set of presumptions about the nature of photography; it is these presumptions that in turn made it possible for people to mobilize particular arguments about and with the images. Elsewhere, I have called this particular presumption the "naturalistic enthymeme," which I have defined as the capacity of a photograph to make an argument about its own realism (Finnegan, 2001a). In this sense, most photographs may be conceived of as visual arguments insofar as they are always making an argument about their "natural" relation to what they depict. Here I extend that definition to add that the naturalistic enthymeme may be one of several identifiable image vernaculars in operation at moments when and in places where visual images participate in public deliberation and, more specifically, controversy.

3. Speculative Thesis One
Image Vernaculars are not universal, but based upon codes of communication conditioned by visual culture.
In asserting that image vernaculars function as available topoi, I do not wish to suggest that they do so universally. Indeed, it may appear that way, for the power of image vernaculars lies precisely in their enthymematic nature as implicit, apparently given, norms of communication. But image vernaculars are not universal; they are, in fact, entirely dependent upon context, broadly conceived. In their exploration of the possibilities for a theory of visual argument, Birdsell and Groarke (1996) note the importance of having a relatively sophisticated understanding of the contexts in which images appear. One of the contexts they describe is that of "visual culture." The naturalistic enthymeme is an available image vernacular because it mobilizes cultural assumptions about the evidentiary force of the photograph; what is important to remember is that those assumptions, in turn, are not themselves natural, but they *appear* natural because they are the products of a visual culture that valorizes the apparent naturalism of visual images.

Valorization of the evidentiary force of photographs predates the medium itself. The ocularcentrism, or eye-centeredness, of Western culture has been well-documented (Jay, 1993; Jenks, 1995; Levin, 1993). The development of pictorial perspective is typically offered as a key moment in the history of Western

representation, important in part because it constructed our belief that vision itself is pictorial and hence, that pictures are "natural" (Snyder, 1980). The dominance of pictorial perspective after the Renaissance intensified with the Enlightenment's faith in rationality, giving rise to what Martin Jay (1993) has called "Cartesian perspectivalism," a "constellation of social, political, aesthetic, and technical innovations in the early modern era, which combined to produce what has in retrospect been called 'the rationalization of sight'" (49). Cartesian perspectivalism valorized the visual orders of science, giving visual representations the aura of "truth." In addition, it used the visual convention of the "monocular, unblinking fixed eye" to put the viewer in a position of authority over the representation (53-55). From these longitudinal developments came two key elements of Western beliefs about vision: first, that what is pictured somehow represents what one would see if one had "been there," and furthermore, that what is pictured is somehow more "true" because it has the appearance of naturalness.

Photography was a technology perfectly matched to the demands of Cartesian perspectivalism and a viewing public becoming increasingly comfortable with the norms of naturalistic representation. Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, writing a monograph on photography in 1857, argued that photography was not an art (a hotly debated question of the time) because it does not create, but merely reproduces that which is before the camera. The camera was, for Eastlake, important not for its aesthetic force but for its evidentiary force; it was "the sworn witness of everything presented to her view" (1857/1980: 65).

Even in more visually sophisticated times, the link between the photograph and nature has remained strong. When Barthes (1977) discussed the "message without a code, " he did not mean to suggest that photographs present reality objectively. But, he did observe that because the photograph constitutes a "perfect analogon" to reality (17), its "demonstrative status" masks its "connotative" one (19). In other words, for Barthes the unique property of the photograph is that our interpretation of its connoted message depends in good part on *our acceptance of the photographic message as denotative* – that is, objectively neutral or "true." Given that the photograph is assumed to be "true" until we are given reason to believe otherwise, the photograph derives its peculiar evidentiary force in large part from the viewer's acceptance and perpetuation of the naturalistic enthymeme. The naturalistic enthymeme grounds the photograph's evidentiary force, and hence constitutes a powerful – in Western culture, perhaps the most powerful – image vernacular.

4. Speculative Thesis Two

Image vernaculars become particularly salient and explicit in moments of controversy, when the usually implicit norms of visual communication are challenged.

As Olson and Goodnight observe, controversy challenges accepted norms of communication and functions to "block enthymematic associations and [. . .] disrupt the taken-for-granted realm of the uncontested and commonplace" (1994: 250). In each of the three cases discussed above, it was in the moment of controversy that assumptions about the nature of visual imagery as evidence were laid bare and contested. In the skull controversy, the newspaper's editors offered concrete facts to challenge the apparent naturalism of the photograph as an illustration of the effects of the drought. They argued that not only was it impossible for the skull to have died as a result of the recent drought, they also explained that the parched land on which the skull stood was in fact not drought land to begin with, but an alkali flat, common terrain in the region. In the case of the so-called Lincoln daguerreotype, the ways in which the norms of communication were challenged were in fact more profound than those participating in the controversy may have believed. Bogged down in the mire of the technical sphere, scientists and historians argued about the minutiae of detail in the Lincoln photograph; they even measured the vein patterns on his hands and ran the image through software used to "age" missing children. They debated intensely about the use of digital methods of authentication. In the end, the controversy was at heart a debate about the meaning of *authenticity* in digital culture, a fundamental conflict between the dichotomous processes of *recognitio*n and *identification*. Those who disputed that the image was Lincoln invoked a rhetoric of recognition by basing their arguments upon the age-old assumption that "seeing is believing," that what we must trust best are, as one Lincoln photography scholar put it, "the judgments of [our] eyes" (Barber, 1995: 78). In contrast, those who contended that the daguerreotype was a representation of Lincoln relied not on a rhetoric of recognition, but rather on a rhetoric of identification which valorized the possibility of digital imaging to move us beyond what our eyes can see, and as a result beyond the boundaries of the viewing subject. In the end, the controversy challenged the continued relevance of the naturalistic enthymeme to visual culture.What it suggested is that if our methods of analyzing visual evidence shift from those of recognition (think driver's licenses and mug shots) to identification (think digital analysis), then it is possible that the very definition of authenticity may itself be transformed.

5. Speculative Thesis Three

Image vernaculars should not be imagined as a typology or genre category; rather, they are best explored as they emerge organically from the discourse of a given controversy.

In positing the existence of image vernaculars, I do not wish to construct a situation in which image vernaculars become a set of categories or a typology, where, for example, one would make one's goal the collecting of examples of naturalism. As Brockriede (1974) observed about similar approaches to rhetorical criticism, such an approach would merely reproduce the desire to describe and categorize, not to explain or analyze. Because they are grounded in the contingency of history and revealed in the play of discourse in a given controversy, image vernaculars are best studied, as Olson and Goodnight (1994) exhort, "from the ground up." We should think of image vernaculars as a kind of heuristic device that enables us to open up moments of controversy and visual argument – to test, as Palczewski encourages us to do, the productive limitations of argument.

6. Speculative Thesis Four

There are multiple image vernaculars, and more than one may be mobilized at the same time in a given controversy.

The three cases I discuss here suggest important justifications for the third thesis rejecting categorization, and in so doing move us toward consideration of a fourth. In each controversy, we may identify multiple image vernaculars mobilized in the discourse about the photographs. Though my primary focus up to this point has been on the evidentiary force of the naturalistic enthymeme, there are other image vernaculars at play when we engage photographs in controversy. One of these is association. The associative force of images is invoked by viewers who recognize, and associate, often implicitly, the ways in which particular images participate in complex histories of representation. These associations are inevitably tied to our collective understandings of history and memory. Barbie Zelizer (1998) uses the notion of "collective memory" to frame her discussion of the associative force of Holocaust photographs. She observes that visual images construct collective memory in complex ways, that while "images help stabilize and anchor collective memory's transient and fluctuating nature," at the same time, "images, particularly photographs, do not make obvious how they construct what we see and remember" (6). In addition, "images of collective memories are composites," often constructed from or making reference to other images (6). As a

result, photographs always and consistently speak to more than just the moment at hand, and to images other than themselves. John Berger (1982) writes, "An instant photographed can only acquire meaning insofar as the viewer can read into it a duration extending beyond itself. When we find a photograph meaningful, we are lending it a past and a future" (89). Embedded in the process by which viewers lend a photograph "a past and a future" is the photograph's associative force.

The Simpson controversy, for example, was about more than the ways in which the mug shot cover challenged the identity of the mug shot as evidence. Those who responded to Time's publication of the mug shot image with charges of racism read the photograph associatively, placing it in a context much broader than that of the mounting case against Simpson. Thus, for many African Americans the darkened mug shot was simply another in a long line of visual representations designed to oppress and demean blacks. In the case of the Lincoln daguerreotype controversy, responses were grounded not only in the question of the image's authenticity, but in the broader question of the associative force of "Lincoln" as a cultural icon. Because "we," as Americans, "know" Lincoln, we think we "know" what Lincoln "looked like."

7. Image Vernaculars, Visual Culture, and Public Argument

In this essay, I have defined the term "image vernaculars" and suggested four qualities of image vernaculars to consider if we are to understand how public actors mobilize their assumptions about photographs. Image vernaculars are relatively stable, culturally- and historically-situated topoi available to public actors who wish to make arguments about visual images. Using examples of three images in controversy, I posited four theses about image vernaculars:

1. image vernaculars are not universal, but based upon codes of communication conditioned by visual culture;
2. image vernaculars become particularly salient and most explicit in moments of controversy, when the usually implicit norms of visual communication are challenged;
3. image vernaculars should not be imagined as a typology or genre category; rather, they are best explored as they emerge organically from the discourse of a given controversy; and
4. there are multiple image vernaculars, and more than one may be mobilized at the same time in a given controversy.

What, then, is the utility of such an elastic concept, both to our understanding of visual culture and to argumentation theory? At this early stage in my project, it is difficult to speculate. I recognize that I have not necessarily identified anything particularly "new" here – but this is, in fact, precisely the point. Because image vernaculars are ubiquitous in that they ground our everyday ways of talking about images, they reflect the things we already know and believe about images. In the language of semiotics, what I call image vernaculars here might be described variously as "codes," "connotations," "icons," or "symbols." They may be seen to reflect "ideologies" or "dominant discourses" which viewers must "decode," "resist," or "appropriate." In linking familiar topoi such as naturalism and association to an argumentation framework, I am not reinventing the wheel so much as bringing a different set of assumptions to the investigation of visual practices. Such assumptions will, I hope, expand the limits of our investigation of visual practices in both argumentation and visual culture studies. The study of image vernaculars enables critics to lend apparently implicit, "natural" modes of reasoning a past and a future, as Berger says, and in doing so, become better able to understand not only how images make meaning, but also how we make meaning from and with images.

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