

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Mobile Argument: An Investigation Of Bumper Stickers In The United States



What does an argument look like and how does one define argument? At first glance, these two questions appear manageable. Arguments after all, are what occur around the family dinner table or between politicians on the floor of Congress. In today's rapidly changing environment, however, the look of an argument and how one defines this particular rhetorical device is not so clean-cut. In the United States, for example, the average citizen is bombarded every day with a healthy diet of mediated messages ranging from television advertisements to the Internet. Conversations (and instances of argument) have even gone virtual with a number of Americans maintaining their relationships in a virtual environment.

Given the complexity of how we find information and ultimately engage in argument, this paper explores one dimension of argument: the automobile bumper sticker. This paper suggests that Americans use bumper stickers to put forth arguments that otherwise would go unheard or noticed by others. Bumper stickers represent a medium available to any automobile owner who wishes to have his/her voice heard. To demonstrate this phenomenon, we illustrate the point with the "most pro-life car in the U.S.A", according to its owner, Pirate Pete. Furthermore, we draw distinctions between verbal arguments and visual arguments and contend that this particular vehicle is both argumentative and a moving piece of art. We begin with a review of the literature surrounding both verbal and visual argument, as well as previous scholarship on bumper stickers as a communicative form. *1. Literature Review*

The study of argument has maintained a focus primarily on language that has caused a number of other important arenas of argumentative possibility to be ignored. This failure of communication studies to acknowledge areas outside of language is reflected in the difficulty of applying communication theory to areas such as art (Morgan and Welton, xi). The distinction between language and other

types of symbols has resulted in a structure that generates knowledge through discourse. Foss and Griffin (1995) note:

Knowledge is generated by the *discursive* practices of a *discursive* formation so that those individuals who are not 'heard' or allowed to participate in the dominant discourse do not have their knowledge incorporated into common cultural knowledge (p. 9).

While our ability to use language is a unique characteristic, making language an absolute is problematic. Miles (1985) writes "not only does this view of reality as verbally constituted unjustly exclude all people some of the time, and some of the people all of the time, but it also forces discourse to entertain and respond only to itself" (p. xi).

Despite these insights, argument theory has virtually ignored the possibilities of visual communication as a form of argument. Argument as two parted such as Fleming's (1996) argument structure and O'Keefe's (1977) Argument1 and Argument2 are typically held as discursive definitions and do not reach beyond to include visual forms of communication. Field theory offers some opportunity to make room for the study of visual communication, if one believes that argument should be studied in terms of its context.

Field theory opened the way for new metaphors to describe argument that appeal to those who study visual communication. McKerrow's "argument communities" and Goodnight's "spheres" of argument both incorporate a measure of context in the study of argument and move away from more traditional approaches that favor discursive communication (Zarefsky, 1991, p. 39). O'Keefe (1977) encourages students of argument to "undertake the task of seeing and describing the arguments in each field as they are, recognizing how they work; not setting oneself up to explain why, or to demonstrate that they necessarily must work" (p. 127). In the spirit of O'Keefe and Zarefsky, then, a field approach to argument is one not overly concerned with proving how an argument operates, but instead it is an approach that seeks to better understand the characteristics of the field.

In his critique of field theory, Rowland (1982) advances the idea that a field can best be understood in terms of its purposes (p. 228). He writes, "the view that fields are energized by shared *purposes* also suggests that the search for a single paradigm to explain all communicative behavior is fruitless" (p. 241). Those who study fields of argument understand argument as a phenomenon that is not held

to universal rules but instead is a dynamic form of rhetoric that has great depth and breadth.

On a larger scale, other communication scholars apply a more hermeneutical approach to the study of argument by considering all forms of communication as argumentative. Willard (1982), for example, suggests, “any attempt to distinguish it (argument) from other forms of persuasive communication is driven by a bureaucratic rationale” (p. 109). Likewise Zarefsky (1980) notes, “our object of study would not be some part of the natural world but all communicative behavior. The concept of argument would be hermeneutic; that is, it would be a way to interpret communication” (p. 234). Perhaps a hermeneutical approach to the study of argument is advantageous. Such an approach moves away from structured and ultimately limiting definitions of argument that set up a system for determining good arguments over bad ones. A hermeneutical approach is not occupied with judging arguments but in understanding the argumentative nature of communication. In the end, all people are able to make arguments, not just those who are well educated in the art of argumentation.

One final perspective worthy of consideration is Foss and Griffin’s (1995) concept of an “invitational rhetoric” which recognizes “equality, imminent value, and self-determination” for all people (p. 4). Such an approach conceptualizes argument from a more feminist perspective in that it de-emphasizes the competitive nature of argument and instead creates a rhetorical ground where anyone’s voice has merit.

While this overview of argument theory is brief, it provides an idea of the different approaches available for the study of argument. What is missing from the puzzle, however, is commentary on the issue of visual argument. What follows then, is a discussion of this important, and often overlooked, communication variable.

2. Visual Argument

The power of the visual in communicating has been considered primarily within the context of rhetoric. In developing a rhetorical schema for evaluating visual imagery, Foss (1994) notes, “the study of visual imagery from a rhetorical perspective may make contributions beyond providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of rhetorical processes” (p. 213). Foss’ insight certainly provides room for the study of visual communication from an argument perspective. One area of interest that has received some attention is that of visual

art as a rhetorical form. Throughout time, art has functioned as a form of individual expression and an important communicative vehicle. According to Kenneth Burke (1964) “for when an art object engages our attention, by the sheer nature of the case, we are involved in at least as much of a communicative relationship as prevails between a pitchman and a prospective customer” (p. 106). Most people, if asked, could describe a work of art that has stirred their emotions. Foss (1994) maintains that the relationship between an audience and a work of art is ultimately a rhetorical one. This, however, does not help to reach the point of formulating a grounded understanding in how visual images may function as arguments.

Perhaps the first step in arriving at such an understanding is to establish that visual meaning, like discursive communication, is not arbitrary (Birdsell & Groarke, 1996, p. 5). According to Blair (1996), visual argument is akin to O’Keefe’s argument¹ in that visual arguments “are more plausibly akin to reasons for claims” (p. 24). Blair (1996) points out that argument¹ is not necessarily linguistic or verbal arguments. He writes, “O’Keefe’s account ... is that reasons be *overtly expressed*, and that reason and claims be linguistically *explicable*. That means we have to be able to state or restate them in language, not that they have to be expressed in language in the first place” (p. 25). Visual images are often translated by an audience into language, making it plausible that the visual can function as an argument. Blair (1996) warns that approaching visual argument from this perspective does not discount the visual because it can be explained through language, “the visual stands on its own feet” (p. 25).

In the end, the debate over whether visual forms of communication can function as argument remains unsettled. This is not problematic as it allows for the continued inquiry into an energizing topic that deserves further attention. What follows is a consideration of one unique form of visual communication: the automobile bumper sticker and previous studies into this modern form of communication.

3. *Bumper Stickers*

Over a decade ago, Fiske (1989) described the automobile as “not just transport, but a speech act” (p. 34). Since then, the vocabulary to describe bumper stickers as a communicative form are varied and each provide an interesting perspective in understanding their meaning, function, and importance. Endersby and Towle (1996) refer to bumper stickers as the “most significant avenue of personal

political expression” during presidential elections (p. 310). Bloch (2000) describes bumper stickers as a form of political discourse, a type of mobile rhetoric, and a protest medium (in press). Salamon (2001) refers to the use of bumper stickers in Israel as a type of folk politics. Newhagen and Ancell (1995) describe bumper stickers as an important form of self-identity in an ever-growing world where individuals feel alienated and detached from the public sphere. In like fashion, Case (1992) considers the aspect of self-identity in the use of bumper stickers as well and suggests that investigating bumper stickers yield a better understanding of what is important to “common folks” (p. 118).

To date, these scholarly endeavors to explore the medium of bumper stickers as a form of communication lack any insight into understanding the function of bumper stickers as a form of argument. In her comprehensive analysis of Israeli bumper stickers, Bloch (2000) comes closest to describing bumper stickers as a form of argument. She refers to the use of bumper stickers as a “protest medium” and concludes that bumper stickers perform two functions: “voicing a message and championing its cause” (p. 448).

These elements lend themselves nicely to the position that bumper stickers can indeed function as an argument.

In the case of Israeli bumper stickers, Bloch (2000) notes “some messages trigger other bumper stickers, resulting in a very stylized form of argument” (p. 438). Other studies on the communicative value of bumper stickers are less insightful for our purposes. Newhagen and Ancell’s (1995) study of bumper stickers analyzed the emotional tone of bumper stickers in a suburban neighborhood as it relates to issues of economic status and race. Endersby and Towle (1996) looked at political bumper stickers during a presidential campaign to understand the organizational aspects of these messages. Case (1992) considered how bumper stickers function as an expression of one’s self-identity.

Clearly, the available literature on bumper stickers is sparse. Previous research offers little in the way of better understanding how the use of bumper stickers represents a unique form of argument. What might we gain from taking such a step? Bumper stickers as a form of argument opens up a new field of investigation and illustrate the ways people have created new forms of communication to put forth arguments. As Case (1992) notes over a decade ago “the modern urban society is characterized by interactions among anonymous strangers and communications received through mass media sources” (p. 107). Given the

dependence of Americans (and other highly industrialized societies) on both the media for information and automobile as their primary means of transportation, the bumper sticker represents a creative means for anyone who wants to make an argument.

4. The Most Pro Life Car in the USA

Driving the streets of West Virginia, it would be difficult to miss the 79' Dodge Diplomat covered in Pro-Life stickers. There are 104 stickers in all and according to its owner, Jack Voltz (whose alter-ego is known as Pirate Pete), he wants to "take a stand and make an undeniable statement about the right to life of all unborn children" (www.mountain.net).

Unlike most automobiles that have one or perhaps two bumper stickers (many have none at all), Pirate Pete's car is an unusual sight. He has taken the medium of bumper stickers and turned his car into a mobile work of art whose purpose is to make an argument.

The bumper stickers adorning Pirate Pete's car require little interpretation on the part of the onlooker. Generally, with works of art, the case of intentionality has been an issue. How does an audience interpret the intentions of the artist/author and more importantly how does the audience read the argument that resides in the work? In the case of Pirate Pete's automobile, intent and argument are clear: Abortion is wrong. His bumper stickers include "Abortion causes breast cancer", "Abortion is mean", "Abortion is not health care", and "Abortion: America's #1 Killer" and taken together, all 104 stickers turn this automobile into a piece of artwork. The artwork is both controversial and confrontational at the same time. It would be difficult to view the car without having an emotional reaction to these bumper stickers.

Pirate Pete, by all accounts, is the average citizen living in the United States, with one exception: he is passionate about the issue of abortion. To what end, however, can his passion be translated into a form of individual participation in the public sphere? In today's society, the opportunity for such participation is minimal. Letters to the editor have little impact. Calls to a talk-radio show, while entertaining, are fleeting and are generally aimed at an audience of like-minded persons. Pirate Pete has found a vehicle (literally) for making an argument about the issue of abortion. Automobiles, while common for most Americans, are still considered a valued possession. Most car owners are unlikely to cover their

automobiles in bumper stickers. Only someone who is passionate about an issue and sincerely desires to make a personal argument would use his or her automobile for more than mere transportation. To that end, Pirate Pete has found a rhetorical space that reaches perhaps thousands while moving along the streets of West Virginia.

5. Discussion

Those living in the United States live in a mediated world. From MTV to billboards for The Gap men, women, and children all come into contact with visual images throughout the day. When Habermas conceptualized his idea of the public sphere, he did not account for the changes that would take place over the next thirty years. Today, according to Thompson (1995) our conception of the public sphere “does not involve individuals coming together in a shared locale to discuss issues of common concern. Rather, it is a publicness of openness and visibility, of making available and making visible, and this visibility no longer involves the sharing of a common locale” (p. 236). And yet, for many Americans, there is a shared locale: the highways and interstates that link cities and states to one another. And on these roads are motorists, such as Pirate Pete, who have chosen this space to make an argument.

Bumper stickers do not represent the idealized form of argument, as conceived by traditional approaches to the study. But in today’s world that is literally fragmented along so many lines the perfect representation of argument is often only an imagined one. Bloch notes (2000) “a bumper sticker offers a one-sided, capsulized treatment of an issue. Its message is a synecdochic representation of the claims or conclusions of an argument frequently presented in hyperbolic style to emphasize the point” (p. 437).

Quite often, one bumper sticker may lead to another bumper sticker that is a response in kind. A debate of sorts can emerge between motorists over issues such as abortion or other controversial social issues. One excellent example is the popularity of the Christian fish seen on many automobiles. Several years ago, in response to the Christian fish, Darwinists adorned their cars with the same fish, only walking on legs. Inside the body of the fish is written “Darwin”. Clearly, this was a visual sort of response to the earlier Christian fish.

6. Conclusion

Must arguments be dialectical? If we are to move forward in the study of argumentation, and allow our study to remain fresh and energized, it is

imperative to include the aspects of visual argument in our studies. In the case of bumper stickers, further study is warranted. Given the popularity of bumper stickers among some motorists, it would be of interest to investigate the characteristics of those who adorn their automobiles with bumper stickers. Are these people more politically active in other aspects of their lives? Do they personally see their choice in bumper sticker as argumentative? Further investigation could compare how individuals in other countries (such as Bloch's analysis of Israeli bumper stickers) use bumper stickers on their automobiles.

Beyond the bumper sticker, there are a number of potential areas in the study of visual communication. The study of art as visual argument deserves continued exploration as well as other forms of visual communication such as advertisements. These forms of communication offer critical insights into our cultural values and beliefs and how we argue. The average citizen has few opportunities to reach a mass number of people to express his/her opinions. There are mediums, such as art, artifacts, etc. that do allow one to put forth an argument.

Discursive communication should not remain the narrow focus of our study. Perhaps this study of Pirate Pete and his automobile bumper stickers will spark new ideas for future research. Visual communication is powerful and deserves equal attention.

REFERENCES

- Birdsell, D. S., & Groarke, L. (1996). Toward a theory of visual argument. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 33, 1-10.
- Blair, J. A. (1996). The possibility and actuality of visual arguments. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 33, 23-39.
- Bloch, L. R. (2000) Setting the public sphere in motion: The rhetoric of political bumper stickers in Israel. *Political Communication*, 17, 433-456.
- Bloch, L. R. (in press). Rhetoric on the roads: The assassination and political bumperstickers. In Y. Peri (Ed.), *The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin* (pp. 257-279). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press
- Burke, K. (1964) On Form. *Hudson Review*, 17, 106.
- Case, C. E. (1992) Bumper stickers and car signs: Ideology and identity. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 26, 107-119.
- Cox, J. R., & Willard, C. A. (1982). Introduction: The field of argumentation. *Advances in Argumentation Theory and Research*. Carbondale: U of Southern

Illinois Press.

Endersby, J. W. & Towle, M. J. (1996) Tailgate partisanship: Political and social expression through bumper stickers. *The Social Science Journal*, 33, 307-319.

Fiske, J. (1989) *Understanding Popular Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Fleming, D. (1996). Can pictures be arguments? *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 33, 11-22.

Foss, S. K. (1994). A rhetorical schema for the evaluation of visual imagery. *Communication Studies*, 45, 213-224.

Foss, S. K. & Griffin, C. (1995). Beyond persuasion: A proposal for an invitational rhetoric. *Communication Monographs*, 62, 2-18.

Fulkerson, R. (1996). Transcending our conception of argument in light of feminist critiques. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 32, 199-217.

Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press.

Miles, M. (1985). *Image as insight: Visual understanding in western christianity and secular culture*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Newhagen, J. E. & Ancell, M. (1995). The expression of emotion and social status in the language of bumper stickers. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 14,312-323.

O'Keefe, D. J. (1977). Two concepts of argument. *Journal of the American Forensic Association*, 13, 121-128.

O'Keefe, D. J. (1982). The concepts of argument and arguing. In J. R. Cox & C. A. Willard (Eds.), *Advances in argumentation theory in research* (pp. 3-23). Carbondale: U of Southern Illinois.

Palczewski, C. H. (1996). Special issue: Argumentation and feminisms. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 32, 161-169.

Perelman, C. & Olbrechts-Tyteca, L. (1969). *The new rhetoric: A treatise on argumentation*. Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P.

Rowland, R. C. (1982). The influence of purpose on fields of argument. *The Journal of the American Forensics Association*, 18, 228-245.

Salamon, H. (2001) Political bumper stickers in contemporary Israel: Folklore as an emotional battleground. *Journal of American Folklore*, 114, 277-308.

Willard, C. A. (1982). *Advances in argumentation theory and research*. Carbondale: U of Southern Illinois P.

Willard, C. A. (1989). *A theory of argumentation*. Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P.

Willard, C. A. (1995). Good centers do not hold: They rebound. In S. Jackson (Ed.), *Argumentation and Values: Proceedings of the Ninth SCA/AFA Conference*

on Argumentation, Annandale: Speech Communication Association, 60-62.

Zarefsky, D. (1980). Product, process, or point of view. In J. Rhodes & S. Newell (Eds.), *Proceeding of the Summer Conference on Argumentation*, 228-238.

Zarefsky, D. (1991). Argumentation in the tradition of speech communication studies. *Proceedings of the Second International Conferences on Argumenation*, Amsterdam, 32-49.

Zarefsky, D. (1995). Coherence in argumentation studies: Can the center hold? In S.

Jackson (Ed.), *Argumentation and Values: Proceedings of the Ninth SCA./AFA Conference on Argumentation*, Annandale: Speech Communication Association, 54-59.