

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - A Perfect Circle: Visual Argument Field And The Definition Of The Middle Class

✘ One of the great mysteries of argumentation theory is the construct of field.

While multiple attempts have been made to understand, categorize and essentialize the nature of field, it remains an elusive concept; one that appears central but has yet to be fully actualized. Despite early theorizing from some of the most important theorists in argumentation, little attention has been paid to field in the last 20 years.

Contemporary theorizing about visual argument is reminiscent of the treatment argument field received during the 1980s. Theorists know it is important; but they have had difficulty pinning down precisely the operations that visuals play in argument. Thankfully, theorists seem to have moved beyond the fundamental debate over whether visuals could perform any argumentative function. However, contemporary work in visual argument seems rooted in examining specific visuals in order to understand how they communicate. Additionally, theorizing on the physiological reactions of audiences to visual stimuli has been a central focus. While we find all this research useful to building a foundation for the study of visual argument, we are interested in understanding the larger role that visuals play in discourse.

In recent years, visual rhetorical theory and criticism has generated a vibrant and compelling body of literature. Taylor's (2003) essay finds "expanding engagement by communication critics with particular visual genres" (p. 3). No archetype theory or method for the analysis of visual argument has yet emerged from these writings, but it is clear that the visual turn in rhetoric has emerged as one of the dominant themes of contemporary theorizing.

Visual argument analysis has two dominant foci: one interested with the substance of the argument, the other with the interaction that the audience has with a visual argument. Shelly (1996) and Blair (1996) are both concerned with understanding the substance of visual argument. Blair and Goarke (1996) and Finnegan (2001) investigate the intersection of the visual form with audience assent. Blair and Goarke argue that in order to understand how a visual argument

works on an audience, a critic must examine three types of context, “immediate visual context, immediate verbal context, and visual culture” (1996, 6). The first two contexts are read in relation to the visual; the third requires a critic to understand how the public reads the visual in relation to its interaction with other visuals. Blair and Goarke (1996) claim “The meaning of a visual claim or argument obviously depends on a complex set of relationships between a particular image/text and a given set of interpreters” (5). Mitchell (1994) and Finnegan (2002) both make very similar arguments; visuals cannot be separated from the surrounding symbol systems.

These theories of argument substance and argument assent imply an understanding of how audiences are primed to respond to visuals. Their focus is primarily on how visuals function as either claim or evidence. Toulmin’s (1958) classic treatise instructs argument critics that argument analysis must always consider the field in which the argument is taking place.

The arguments which we put forward, and the steps which occur in them, will be correspondingly various: depending on the logical types of the facts adduced and of the conclusions drawn from them,, the steps we take—the transitions of logical type—will be different (p. 13).

Argument fields serve to direct audiences to the appropriate realm in which to analyze the strength of a particular argument. Each field has a different set of criteria for the worth of an argument based on the expectations of members of that field. Fields control the quality of evidence, the type of reasoning statements being used and even the claims that may be advanced.

1. A very brief history of argument field

Field was introduced by Toulmin as a way to explain how arguments that did not meet the strictures of formal logic could still be considered as valid. Toulmin’s goal was simple: he wanted to understand how “to characterize what may be called ‘the rational’ process, the procedures and categories by using which claims-in-general can be argued and settled” (1959, p. 7). Toulmin chose to define field without a great deal of precision:

Two arguments will be said to belong to the same field when the data and conclusion in each of the two arguments, are respectively, or the same logical type: they will be said to come from different fields when the backing or the conclusions in each of the two arguments are not of the same logical type (1959, p. 14).

Toulmin's lack of conceptual clarity has plagued research on argument field. Most of the literature devoted to the construct has attempted to define the limits of field; theorists grappled with the appropriate use of field in the discipline. Indicative of early writings on argument field is Willard's and McKerrow's on going debate over whether logical types should be a defining characteristic of field. While the debate raged, the construct of field withered. We would note however, a particularly compelling passage penned by Willard in his 1981 article, "I am assuming here that fields are not things, but living breathing social enterprises that take their existence from the defining practices of people in them" (1981, p. 140). Willard's insistence that field not be constrained by static definitions provides a foundation for understanding the flexibility of the construct.

In 1982 a special issue of the *Journal of the American Forensic Association* featured a theoretical debate over the concept of field. Zarefsky found that the construct was messy but useful; he viewed fields as being capable of having multiple meanings that were dependent on the purpose of the critic examining argument. Rather than expressing dismay at the imprecision with which fields were used in argument research, he applauded field's potential in "explaining what happens in argumentative encounters, to classifying argument products, and to deriving evaluative standards" (1982, p.203).

Four years later, *JAJA* dedicated another special issue to field theory. McKerrow introduced the journal with the admonition that there was no real definition of field. This appears to be a criticism of the construct. Dunbar, however, argues that fields are useful without a clear definition. She notes that we can use "field of economics, field of wheat and Wrigley field" without causing any conceptual confusion (1986, p. 196).

Prosise, Mills and Miller's (1996) work reframes fields as discursive battlegrounds where power authority and linguistic aptitude define those arguments that are accepted as credible. This essay is a through application of Bourdieu's social theory to argument structures, with a careful consideration of how arguers and audiences read argument within the realm of symbolic power. Of particular relevance to our argument, we would highlight these authors' claim that:

Rather than having clear defined boundaries, fields can be conceptualized as overlapping and dynamic arenas, consisting of social agents who negotiate daily activities in relation to their own subjective perceptions of the objective social realities of particular fields (1996, par 44).

In other words, arguments are granted legitimacy not only because they meet the criteria established within a particular field, but because they originate from a source that has authority and because the originator of the argument knows how to use those criteria appropriately.

Admittedly, our tour of argument field theory has glossed over important theoretical and definitional developments. Much more has been written on the theory of field than we have the space or inclination to summarize in this article. Instead, we have found those elements of field theorizing that illustrate fields as tools to understand argument practices; especially those practices that are privileged over others. We highlight three relevant portions of this argument:

- 1) Fields are a method by which arguments are either excluded or included in the public sphere;
- 2) Fields serve to include or exclude participants and
- 3) Fields have standards that discipline both participants in the arguments as well as recipients of argument. Visual argument is enacted against cultural and social norms that direct audiences to a preferred reading of that argument; we use the concept of field to understand those limits.

Our study of visual argument practices has led us to view visuals as performing as cues to field. In other words, visuals prompt viewers to examine a particular argument within the frame of the visual. Our previous work argued that the photograph of the fence associated with the death of Matthew Shepard directed the discourse surrounding Shepard's murder away from the legal field and onto the place of his death (Balter-Reitz and Stewart, 2006). We also found that Cody, Wyoming was able to define itself as the epitome of the Western experience through its use of visuals associated with the culture's understanding of the mythic American West (Stewart and Balter-Reitz, 2004). In both of these cases, we found that the use of particular visuals eliminated discursive options that might have been possible points of stasis for the issues in question. The visuals directed audiences to understand arguments being offered about these events to a particular set of circumstances. We are particularly interested in understanding why discourse surrounding some issues takes directions that appear to be illogical. Why, in the case of Matthew Shepard, did the media and public focus their attention on the place of his murder rather than the traditional issues of crime?

How is it that visuals constrain the available means of understanding, evaluating

and critiquing arguments? In order to answer this question, we decided to investigate the visuals that are used to define the construct “middle class” We wondered what compels middle income individuals to consumption when faced with the realities of immense debt, extreme mortgage or rent payments and ever increasing daily living bills. What drives the middle class to order coffee from Starbucks, kitchen appliances from Wolf and furniture from Pottery Barn?

2. Constructing the middle class

What does it mean to be a member of the middle class? While this question appears to beg a categorical answer, in practice the term middle class is decidedly rhetorical. In 1969 Time proudly proclaimed, “Above all, Middle America is a state of mind” (Ehrenreich, 1989). Most Americans describe themselves as middle class, regardless of their income level. Middle class life is a complex construct, one that includes economic, political, social, gender issues. Multiple academic disciplines have examined what it means to be a member of the middle class. Certainly, there are economic boundaries that can be established to refer to mean income levels. Economic research refers to middle income as between \$25,000 and \$75,000 per year (Measuring, 2006, p. 10). Even by quantitative measures, the definition of middle class is imprecise. The buying power differential between the high and low end of this range is enormous; especially when taking geographic location and family size into account. Even faced with the realities of their paycheck, most Americans still identify themselves as middle class, whether they are making minimum wage or a member of the top 5% wealthiest in the United States (Kacapyr, Fancese & Crispell, 1996). It seems that only the very rich and the very poor consider themselves outside the middle class.

Income level is not the only, or even most important, explanation of what it means to be middle class. Middle class is a lifestyle, one that is beyond the reach of most of those who fall within the economic category. Austin cites an AARP study that found “one in three adults believes a family of four with an income under \$50,000 is poor—and one in five considered an annual income of \$200,000 as the bare minimum for wealth” (2000, p. 31). Americans are constantly bombarded with images that contextualize the types of housing, products and lifestyles that they are expected to acquire. Barbara Ehrenreich noted “Something is terribly wrong when the once modest expectations of the middle class can be met only with what is far from a middle income” (1989, p.245).

Austin (2000) blames media representations of American life, from the film *You've Got Mail* to *Real Simple Magazine*, for the unrealistic expectations that middle class Americans have placed on their own experiences. We believe that Austin's premise is strong: the visuals associated with what it means to be middle class have framed the arguments that are possible about the middle class experience. We are dismayed that the issues of income distribution, poverty, homelessness, and living wages are absent from discussions of the middle class. Instead, we find most discourse about middle class life framed in terms of consumption.

We do not claim that the media is the sole framework of middle class experience; however, we do see media frames as vital to how individuals make sense of the world. We decided to investigate how middle class life was presented in lifestyle magazines. We choose this category of media because these magazines both explicitly instruct readers how to live and implicitly create scenes of what constitutes a good middle class life. Certainly, our work is only a beginning; there are multiple sources that visually argue what it means to be middle class. Thus, we offer our observations as a starting point; we hope to understand the powerful field that is created by commercial photography in lifestyle magazines.

3. Commercial photography

Commercial photography is photography for hire; i.e. the conscious framing of images to create a market for either a product or for the photograph itself. There are several types of photography that may be considered commercial: stock, portrait, fashion, and food are the most common categories that are included in this genre.

Two conditions of commercial photography are important for our discussion. In the first condition, the photographer is a free lancer who sells photographs for a fee. These photographs are generally marketed by large organizations through catalogs (Frosh 2003). Photographers who work as freelancers are working within clearly definable tropes or concepts. Other photographs are commissioned for a particular event or story. These images are constructed by art directors, editors and others who ask photographers to create a specific photograph to compliment an article or event. Wedding photography serves as one exemplar of this type of commercial photography.

Whether the photograph is created before a story and used by an art director, or created for a specific event or story, photographers will be constrained by the marketability of the image. Wedding photography illustrates this point well. The

practice is disciplined by the culture's vision of acceptability. Strano (2006) found that "Although a wedding album may feel personal and individual to the bride and groom, albums are remarkably similar between couples, in part due to the work routines that professional photographers employ and in part due to the conventions wedding participants learn from looking at the wedding albums of friends and celebrity photographs in the mass media" (37-38). The field constrains the acceptable prints; photographers who are unwilling to conform to the power of the field will not find work.

Even more telling about the power of field within commercial photography is the way in which stock photographs are marketed. Frosh (2003) discovered that photographers could only sell their work when they were able to classify their photographs into clearly identifiable concepts. "Concept thereby helps to maintain the production-distribution-consumption process as an *intentionally coherent and rationalizable* system of pure communication without noise. At every stage, everyone—photographers, stock agents, advertising professionals, and ordinary consumers—seem to 'speak' the same language. Or rather, 'think' it" (Frosh, 2003, p. 253).

Inherent in the concept of the photograph is its function as representing reality; photographs must be recognizable. Sean Kernan, providing advice to commercial photographers on what makes a good photograph in the trade journal *Photography Annual*, opines, "it lets us see into reality in a way that nothing else quite does, and its goodness depends on how well it does that..." (2000, p. 216). In other words, photographs have the ability create a world that is simultaneously real and fantasy. The representational aspect of the photograph often overwhelms the audience's understanding of the photograph as a possible frame; photography masks its artistic elements. Commercial photography in particular, which is both artistic and representational, can present its substance as truth. What audiences see when they view a photograph in a magazine is given the presumption of reality.

4. *Visualizing the middle class*

We examined the category of lifestyle magazines to understand how the middle class was portrayed by commercial photography. We understand the tautology inherent in our choice of visuals; commercial photography is intended to sell—whether its subject is food, clothes or simply a concept. Lifestyle magazines are selling a lifestyle—they are aspirational more than actual. Very few will ever

achieve the visions being offered as representational. Audiences for these publications tend to be female and upper middle class. We choose a convenience sample of lifestyle magazines: *Real Simple*, *O* (Oprah's magazine), and *Martha Stewart Living*. We chose these publications because they consciously provide guidance on how to achieve a specific lifestyle. Both Oprah and Martha Stewart would, and should, be considered part of the wealthy class; however, their magazines are aimed at middle class women. *Real Simple* is a magazine targeted to working women, its intent is to "make busy women's life's easier" (about Real Simple, 2006). At its inception, *Real Simple* was intended to be the anecdote to *Martha Stewart Living*. Our analysis, however, reveals that these three magazines present similar visual frames of what it means to be middle class. [i]

Three themes emerged from our readings of these texts:

- 1) Middle class involves the creation and consumption of expensive, complex foods that must be perfectly displayed,
- 2) there is a narrative that must be followed to achieve the middle class lifestyle that requires a particular form and
- 3) the homes of the middle class are artfully created, but empty of both persons and their possessions.

Food and its consumption are the most prevalent themes visualized in the magazines. Frederick Kaufman of *Harper's* coined the term "gastroporn" to describe the types of photographs of food that are featured. He describes these images as "building to an unending succession of physical ecstasies, never a pile of dirty dishes" (2005, p. 56). The images offered in lifestyle magazines portray food that is intricate; the ingredients are delicate and arranged artfully. The July 2006 issues of both *Real Simple* and *Martha Stewart Living* featured lovingly presented desserts consisting of berries topped with layers of whipped cream. Each display was created by hand placing berries into exacting patterns and plating each item on the appropriate serving dish. The food was pictured in excruciating close up, each drop of moisture, the plumpness of the berries, and the froth of the whipped cream was vividly shown. Desserts are not the only food so painstakingly created for and by the middle class; even vegetables are presented as perfectly cooked and arranged. Middle class food is not easy, not cheap, nor is it lonely. The narrative presents a preferred position for the type of consumption typical of a fine restaurant. Even the "simple" or "30 minute" meals promised by the magazines are illustrated with visuals of elaborate presentation

and display.

Food is also part of the narrative of what it means to be middle class. All three magazines we examined created the narrative of the party; the longest and most heavily illustrated story in each issue. In every story, the opening visual was a table placed against a natural backdrop. The table was intricately set; each place included full settings of cutlery, glasses and napkins. The opening shot inevitably has an absence of people; instead the focus is on the preparation that has gone into the party. Following the opening visual, each magazine presented a series of vignettes; smaller square photos that included a variety of images. In these photographs the preparations were made visible; there were pictures of people preparing food, of the food itself, of the scene or the home where the party was set, and sometimes of dogs watching the festivities. These squares were always followed by a large photograph of the party in full as well as several large photographs of the food served by the hosts.

The homes of the middle class are as elaborate as the food. The settings and accessories of the homes are framed as everyday living, although the featured homes are often vacation houses. We were struck by the feature in the July issue of *O* that introduced readers to Oprah's Hawaiian retreat. In particular, the audience is given a peak into Oprah's kitchen. One full page photograph takes the point of view of a visitor sitting at Oprah's breakfast bar, looking directly at a professional stove. Enormous windows frame the stove, while on the bar is a large flower arrangement placed next to a bowl of exotic fruit. On the top right of the page is Oprah's invocation. "It's a gem, so sweet and exquisite. Such a real normal house." On the pages that follow, readers are taken on a tour of her sprawling estate decorated with expensive furniture and art.

While we would like to believe that readers would be able to distinguish between Oprah's home and their own, the magazines erase those differences. A photo essay on how to clean house in the Spring 2006 issue of *Real Simple* exacerbates the line between celebrity and middle class home. The multi-page article consists primarily of pictures of a woman in a white t-shirt and jeans dusting, polishing and refreshing a house that glistens in white. The kitchen counter is marble, the bed frames are brass, and flowers decorate every room. The room sizes are enormous; the bathtub the woman is cleaning is a Jacuzzi tub large enough for two framed by a bay window. The woman's face is blurred; while this is a convention to allow readers to place themselves in the room pictured, it also

serves to underscore the lack of personality in the home. The space is anonymous; no person belongs in it.

The homes presented are not just large and expensive, they are also empty. Rooms are never occupied; no evidence of habitation is present in these photographs. Possessions, when pictured, are artfully arranged. Most rooms are completely free of clutter. Homes, it seems, are not for living, but for creating an impression.

These visuals create a frame upon which middle class life is read. To be middle class is to own a home that is perfectly arranged with extravagant furniture and art, accessorized with just the right pieces, yet completely devoid of human presence. To be middle class is to orchestrate large parties which must be created around elaborate, multi-course repasts. To be middle class is to create and consume intricate and expensive food concoctions.

5. Visual argument fields and the limits of understanding middle class life Visuals provide a powerful tool for understanding middle class lifestyle; they are created by arguers who are given power by both their profession and their audiences. The commercial photography that illustrates magazines is produced by artists who work within the boundaries of the discipline to produce images that are clearly recognizable as representing the substance of the middle class. Recipients of these magazines unconsciously grant authority to these photographs; they sublimate their own power to the editors of these magazines.

Our preliminary investigations into how middle class life is pictured in lifestyle magazines reinforce our belief that the frames available for interpreting the experiences of the middle class are minimal. While we are far from claiming that these magazines are exhaustive of the possibilities of understanding middle class life, their ubiquity and uniformity raise our suspicions that audiences are offered limited fields in order to examine their understanding of their own experiences. These visuals restrict available public discourse; they eliminate discussion of important economic and social aspects of middle class life in favor of a discourse of consumption. Bill Moyers, in the introduction to the book *Inequality Matters*, warns that the middle class “have been the losers in a class war that disarmed them of political influence before defeating them” (Moyers, 2005, p. 8). We believe the middle class may be complicit in their own defeat in part because visuals have constricted the ability of the middle class to see their own experiences in larger contexts.

NOTES

[i] This section is difficult to report without the extensive graphics. Please contact the author if you are interested in the slide show that accompanied this presentation.

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