

ISSA Proceedings 2006 - Theorizing Visual Argumentation: Three Approaches To Jacob Riis



One day, quite some time ago, I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: 'I am looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor' (Barthes 1981, p. 3).

In the opening paragraphs of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes at first seems transfixed by the space between the image captured on a photograph's surface and the materiality of the photograph itself, yet as he treats that conundrum, he begins to understand that he first must come to terms with his own subjectivity. He must wrestle with his subjective relationships to the objects of photographs, the events-being-photographed, and, indeed, the vision - the subjectivity - of the photographer. Barthes could aestheticize the arts and artists of photography, yet knew that he had more than an artistic relationship with the subjects within the frame, even the world from which they came. He was looking at the Jerome's eyes, eyes that had looked at the Emperor himself more than a century before. He, Roland Barthes, was sharing mid-nineteenth-century French life, thanks to Jerome's vision.

Barthes' reactions to the photo of Jerome parallels in attitude and description Ansel Adams' reactions to Jacob Riis's photographs of late nineteenth-century New York City slum life:

These people live again for you in the print - as intensely as when their images were captured on the old dry plates of ninety years ago.... I think that I have an explanation for their compelling power. It is because in viewing these prints I find myself identified with the people photographed. I am walking in their alleys, standing in their rooms and sheds and workshops, looking in and out of their windows. And they in turn seem to be aware of me. (Alland 1974, p. 6)

And so Adams, writing a preface to the first coffee table art book compilation of Riis's pictures, decontextualizes the photos and yet throws himself into a

communicative relationship with the people being photographed.

Both Roland Barthes and Ansel Adams raise important questions about photography in particular and mechanically, chemically, and electronically reproduced visuality more generally. Why are our relationships to visual images so varied and disorganized? In what ways do the contexts within which we view pictures affect our relationships with them? And, for students of argument theory, why does the place of pictures in discursive arguments vary from theorist to theorist? For example, to Gronbeck (1995), they are essentially evidence, similar to Slade's (2003) belief that they provide reasons for assent; Finnegan (2003) expands this approach, arguing that they are enthymematic and hence a part of the inferential machinery. To Shelley (1996), they are visual substitutions for verbal discourse, while to Hariman and Lucaites (2002), especially iconic pictures evoke their earlier discursive and hence argumentative contexts.

I wish to take a somewhat different position in this essay. I will argue that the place of photos - and other visual imaging technologies as well - in argumentative processes is in fact variable. The place of visual objects in argumentation depends upon those objects' relationships to other oral and written, even performative, discursive processes. Pictures and other kinds of images have variable use within argumentation depending

- (1) the approach taken by the disputant,
- (2) material characteristics of the pictures themselves,
- (3) the contexts within which the arguments are being framed, and
- (4) the conceptualizations of pictures generally held by the disputant.

The roles of photos in argumentation, therefore, vary because of personal predilection or credibility, material representational technologies, the rhetorical situation, and even theories of visuality. Visual materials perform different kinds of jobs in argument because, I finally will argue, they exist and have force in webs of discourse, where their jobs depend largely on how they are conceived or understood. Ultimately, what a photograph is conceived to be directly affects what it does in human talk and decision making.

My title suggests that I will want to spend most of my time with that last point: the place of visual theory in explaining how images are employed argumentatively. I will treat the other three factors of variability briefly, however, as I first background Jacob Riis for those who do not know him and then talk about four stages through which his photos went in their journey from the 1890s

to the present.

1. *Jacob Riis, Photographer and Citizen*

Riis was a twenty-one-year-old Danish immigrant who arrived in New York City in 1870 (biographical details from Meyer 1974; Pascal 2005; Riis 1901/1935). Failing to make a living as a carpenter, he got involved in newspaper work as a night reporter in what was called the Five Points region of lower Manhattan. The more he saw of late nineteenth-century slum life, the more indignant he became in the face of poverty, urban decrepitude, immigrant victimage, and the roles of environmental conditions in degenerating the quality of human life. (In the nature-nature debate raging at the time, he definitely was an advocate of nurture: changing conditions-of-life could drag down or elevate the personal, social, and moral character of human beings.) Riis worked out a reporters' office in Mulberry Bend, across the street from the police station, where he followed the police, fire fighters, and health officials into the worst of the Bend's environments to get his nighttime stories.

As Riis grew more distraught with what he was covering, he was motivated to shift his work in two directions: (1) He started taking pictures of the squalor in which he lived and worked in 1887, writing illustrated short pieces for other newspapers and magazines. (2) And, he began to offer lectures in churches, calling for reform in talks that he illustrated with magic lantern slides. His reputation exploded with the publication of a best-seller in 1890, *How the Other Half Lives*, and he spent the rest of his life - until his death in 1914 - writing many other books, articles, and letters, working the lecture circuit across the country urging slum reform, and working with the Progressives, primarily Theodore Roosevelt, to combine public legal reform with charitable, largely Christian, private-side aid to children and the development of public parks, schools, and shelters.

His magic lantern shows marked him as a Christian social reformer. His pictures began as 3.25 x 4.00 inch glass slides projected into images ten feet or more across. Magic lanterns were projection boxes invented sometime in the seventeenth century and were the first screen-based artistic medium (Manovich 2001, pp. 282-283), using everything from candles and low-grade oils to limelight and electric bulbs as light sources. Riis would organize lectures around 50-60 slides, using the images to cue his thoughts and language. His pictures caused great public interest because he had used a flash powder to take nighttime shots of the worst of tenement squalor. With the slides, from which he said "there is no

appeal” (Riis 1901/1935, p. 177), he believed that had imagaic evidence that carried his arguments for tenement reform, playgrounds, and public sanitation projects.

His 1890 book contained far fewer pictures: only forty-three images, eighteen of which were photos, six of which were diagrams, and nineteen of which were sketches or engravings. The half-tone printing process was in its infancy, so the quality of printed photos was terrible-blotchy, with contrast almost non-existent—and offered only in a small size to help increase density. In the book, words took over the proof process, with the pictures serving not as evidence - as they had in the lantern shows - but as mere illustration of cues to topics being discussed (Gronbeck in press).

The pictures then were more or less forgotten after he died until post-World War II, when boxes of them were found and sold to the Museum of the City of New York. There, they were restored by Museum staff photographer John Harvey Heffren and photographer Alexander Alland, Sr., who reworked Riis’s negatives and positives, cropping some, adjusting exposure and contrast, straightening many, even improving focus, and then making large, luscious silver gelatin prints. With those prints, Riis became known as a pioneering artist, the first great nighttime photographer of the United States. In a 1974 coffee table/art book edition of eighty-two of Riis’s photos, Ansel Adams’s preface beatified Riis as a photographer whose pictures “are magnificent achievements in the field of humanistic photography” because of their “intensity, *living* quality” (Alland 1974, p. 6). Adams, as we shall see, totally aestheticized Riis’s work, removing the pictures from their verbal contexts, from concrete thoughts about slum reform, and saw them, yes, as social-documentary photography, but, really, as pictures that transcended the time from which they had come. Adams’ eyes were meeting the gazes of transhistorical subjects, just as Barthes’s gaze had.

But, in the next two and a half decades, another group of commentators got ahold of the pictures, and turned them into objects of cultural judgment: students of Cultural Studies found Riis’s work, and they were not happy. E.T. O’Donnell (2004) found the gaze that Adams thought so affecting and powerful to be a defiant glare by the underclass for their overlords. Maren Stange (1989, p. 296) accused Riis of practicing “photography as [political] surveillance,” and Ryan (1997, p. 193, qtd. in O’Donnell) roared that his pictures bespoke a “language of benevolent violence” that “wages a war on the poor.” Reggie Twigg (1992)

charged Riis with actually increasing the distance between viewers and the subject of his photos, while Keith Gandal (1997) thought that he was practicing a kind of Christian voyeurism, titillating the good church people by showing them scenes of human misery that they would not otherwise have had access to. And, Carrie Tirado Bramen (2000, p. 446) invoked a theory of the “picturesque” – the “aesthetic discourse of the urban picturesque [that] helped to equate ethnic variety and urbanism with modern Americanism,” with Riis as a “tour-guide” showing off the United States as a melting pot that was cooking a cultural stew made up of many different ingredients.

Over the century-plus that Jacob Riis’s photographs have been displayed publicly, they have moved in tortured ways through different modes of presentation and fields of social reaction and commentary. How can we account for such diametrically opposed, even contradictory readings of those pictures? In part, of course, we are dealing with recontextualization and rematerialization. That is, the pictures were seen as different kinds of objects as they were made to do different kinds of work in varied situations. They served as evidence in Riis’s reformist lectures, as illustrations in his books, as artistic artifacts in museums and display books, and as data for critical-cultural historians; recontextualization positioned the photos in multiple webs of discourse, within which they seemed to possess differing kinds of social and political utility. And as well, of course, the pictures were remade materially as they moved from glass slide to half-tone picture or sketch to silver gelatin print to a trace-of-life offered to today by an observer from the past. Rematerialization physically made them into different objects of contemplation, and so altered their relationships to those who gazed upon them.

One last point: the public persona of Riis himself was altered across time and place. When giving lantern shows, he was the expert observer-reporter, showing those whom he hoped would become involved how the other half lived; his pictures were documentary evidence of that life. As author of books and articles of advocacy, he was the prototypical person of words, and the photos, sketches, and diagrams were topical illustrations, providing human interest or orientation, with the heart of reform arguments beating in his prose. Once he was identified as an artist, the pictures broke free from both context and the oral and written media that had melded with them; now they became artistic renderings that could transport the minds of observers to other times and places, as art always has done. Only when the cultural critics and historians got ahold of his pictures and writing about them was he pulled back from the aesthetic sphere and turned into

a bigot and exploiter of the underclass; the pictures once again became evidence, not of human misery so much as of acts of privileged social and economic uses of others.

2. *Theories of Visuality and the Reception of Riis's Pictures*

But - and now I move to my actual topic for this paper - we also are seeing different conceptions of visuality and of visual argumentative processes at work across these four stages of reactions to Riis and his photos. Three very different theories of visuality, I argue, are being used to describe and make sense of these pictures. What often is called *semiotic-structuralism* focuses on the picture as text, decoding its array of signs and their arrangements to specify processes of signification.

Phenomenological approaches to pictures explore the work done with and on them subjectively, attempting to specify operations of the interiority of human perception. And, *culturalism* preaches the gospel of collective power, of the ways in which scopic regimes, legitimated in particular times and places, govern human understanding of visual objects and material environments, and hence of human evaluations of what is seen and where it is shown. Generally speaking, then, semiotic-structuralism examines the picture as text, phenomenology, the viewer as text, and culturalism, social-political conventions and/or collectivist institutions as text. Let me examine each theoretical approach in concert with commentaries on Riis's photos.

Far and away the most usual way to approach the analysis of the static and moving pictorial arts in our time is semiotically (Vande Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck 2004, pp. 66-109, Ch. 5). Here, a picture usually is seen as an array of signs, signs whose selection and arrangement on a plane or in a viewing area convey or evoke significations in viewers. The frame of a picture cuts off other signs from the viewer and so further enhances or makes seemingly important those signs that are encased within the frame; a viewer is encouraged by the frame to examine that which is depicted semiotically within it. And then, the vantage point from which the plane or area is observed becomes a subject position from which the viewer is allowed (or required, in a sense) to see the symbolic world of the picture. This last point within semiotic studies is underwritten by Louis Althusser's idea of interpellation (1970) or Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze (1975).

The best example of someone reading Riis's pictures semiotically is Ansel Adams,

of course himself a dominating figure in the world of photography. In his preface to Alland's art book of Riis's pictures, Adams implicitly worked from the idea that signs comprise photos both as images within the frame and as the technology of photography itself, which can be manipulated and put to human use every bit as easily as the symbol system we call verbal language. So, of Riis's control over the technology, Adams (Alland 1974, p. 7) said: "the quality of his flash illumination is extraordinary; the plastic shadow-edges, modulations and textures of flesh, the balance of interior flash and exterior daylight - what contemporary work really exceeds it in competency and integrity?" And of the people who comprised the objects within the photographic scenes, Adams was fascinated with the head-on quality of the images, as I've noted. He (ibid. p. 6) went on: "[I]n many of these the subjects are looking at you - you are there with them, you may almost speak to them. Because of this intimacy, reality is magically intensified, another dimension of response is added to the dimensions of statement."

Here, then, is a decontextualization of photography that permits a union of the picture and its viewer at some transcendent point in time and space. Vivian Sobchack (1992, p. 59) explains:

In the still photograph, time and space are abstractions. Although the image has a presence, it neither partakes of nor describes the present. Indeed, the photograph's fascination is that it is a figure of transcendental time made available against the ground of a lived and finite temporality. Although included in our experience of the present, the photograph transcends both our immediate present and our lived experience of temporality because it exists for us as ever engaged in the activity of *becoming*.

That sense of sign-images existing in a state of transcendent becoming was captured by Adams (Alland 1974, p. 6) explicitly when he argued: "Alland's beautiful prints, by exalting the physical qualities of Riis's work, intensify their expressive content. The factual and dated content of subject has definite historical importance, but the larger context lies in Riis's expression of people in misery, want and squalor." Working as a semiotic-structuralist, therefore, Adams reads photography's technical characteristics as a set of signs comprising a language, while the objects of the photographs are bearers of significations at both a first- and a second order, which then evoke a structuralist understanding of relationships being construed between manifest or everyday life and transcendent, cultural or mythic dimensions of sociality.

This brings us to the second theory of visuality, the hermeneutic phenomenology of vision, which can account for other discursive accounts of photos. Though I am just doing my first systematic reading in this field, I go to hermeneutic phenomenology to get ahold of subjectivist reactions to the visual world unencumbered by psychoanalytic machinery. I have nothing against psychoanalytic readings. But, what I want to explore is the ways in which some commentators - especially Riis himself - draw on experience-based memory traces (see Levin, 1998, on Merleau-Ponty [esp. 1968] and Levinas) to construct the objects of pictures, or what Gestaltists term "figures," within their experiences of what Gestaltists call "grounds" or "fields," as a utilitarian way of speaking about the subjective dimensions of personal life. This brings us into languages not often spoken of in American conceptions of argumentative communication, though I can say that C. Caha Waite (2003, p. 76) has labored to translate phenomenological discourse into terms we are more familiar with, as when she argues that "It is the lived body that mediates one's experience of the world; the human sensorium discovers and rediscovers one's relationship to that world through the interrelationship of sight, sound, touch, and movement."

To understand subjectivity as a kind of negotiation between one's consciousness and the sensory fields of individual experience helps us understand, particularly, Riis's own use of his pictures in his lectures. Conventionally, lanternists put their slides in a stack, and then, when loading a slide into the lantern, began talking from memory. Indeed, Riis specifically said in a note penned on an 1891 lecture (Riis 1891) that "As I speak without notes, from memory and to the pictures, the result is according to how I feel." Magic lantern shows, therefore, usually were structured around pictures being used to cue memory and to place memories within particular perceptual fields, what Schutz and Luckmann (1973) termed "zones of experience," ranging from those distant in time and place to those in one's immediate circumstances, to create a complex unity or whole.

Notice, for example, what Riis says in his 1891 lecture on "The Other Half and How They Live" when loading a slide of what we now call the Italian rag-picker: If you want to understand just what [the struggle to keep children alive] means, come with me at three o'clock some morning in July or August when these stony streets are like fiery furnaces, and see those mothers walking up and down the pavements with their little babes trying to stir some breath of God's air to cool the brows of the sick child and hear the feeble wails of those little ones! Then tell me they have no cause of complaint, that they ought to be content. Here (shows the

picture of “Home of the Italian rag-picker” - Italian woman with child in her arms) is one of them, an Italian baby in swaddling clothes. You have seen how they wrap them around and around until you can almost stand them on either end and they won't bend, so tightly are they bound. It is only a year ago that the Italian missionary down there wrote to the city mission that he did not know what to do with these Italian children in the hot summer days, for ‘no one asked for them.’ They have been asked for since, thank God! Christian charity has found some of them out.

Notice the subjective flow in scenes in this object lesson of engaged ghetto motherhood. Riis calls from memory his sensory experiences with sweltering summer nights, peripatetic mothers walking the streets to get outdoor air into their children's lungs, an envisioning of how babies are swaddled, and a story about a frustrated church worker but with a seemingly happy ending to that story, thanks to the generosity of people like those in his audience. Notice, too, that the actual picture - her Madonna-like upward glance, her basement dwelling filled with bags of rags and her stove for boiling them, even the ladder that presumably is her way in and out of the basement with its dirt floor. That picture is neither described nor made specifically relevant to what Riis is saying. Rather, the figure in the picture cues Riis's zones of experience - from his nighttime reporting work, his observations of child care, his efforts at providing supportive settlement house for needy women and their children. He thus places the figure within grounds from his own life work. And so, memories are evoked by the picture from Riis's own subjectivity, his own fields of experience, demonstrating what Heidegger (qtd. in Levin 1999, pp. 186, 193) said about re-presentation:

To re-present means here to present before oneself, to bring before oneself and to master, to attack things.... [T]o apprehend... means to let something come to one not merely accepting it, but taking a receptive attitude toward that which shows itself.

We could pursue a phenomenological analysis farther, dealing more fully with the obvious hermeneutic circle of relationships between past and present that are illustrated in this excerpt, with observations of how memory traces (see esp. Levin, 1998) condition our experience of the Other and even, perhaps, our reactions to the Others' experiences of us, or with the great difficulty in operationalizing phenomenologists' claims that some traces are pre-personal and hence pre-linguistic apprehensions of the world - making an analysis of

phenomenological argumentation a theoretically gnarly task. But, I will not go farther here. Perhaps we have seen enough, however, to suggest that a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach to visibility, to pictures, produces not an analysis of signs but an analysis of consciousness and subjectivity, where the perceiver and not the visual object is the text to be understood, rationalized, and interpreted.

And so we are left with culturalism, more particularly one or another variants of the critical-cultural theory that goes by the name of British Cultural Studies. To strict culturalists (those whom Anthony Woodiwiss 2001, terms “cultural representationalists”), human beings are born into a perceptual field of pre-coded or conventionalized understandings of the world and our relationships to it. For example, “horses” were named and valued – commodified if one wishes to talk use-values – long before you were born, and an important job in your growing-up was to learn both the linguistic sign and the significations at multiple levels or orders that have been attached to that sign. Those conventionalized codes and their significations dwell in a symbolic realm that is given force and applications in your life by primary groups such as family and secondary institutions such as banks, churches, governmental bureaus, and of course the American Quarter Horse Association. Acculturation, then, is a set of processes by which you gain access to the symbolic realm. You violate its conventions and expectations, in socially important situations, at your peril; insane asylums, rehabilitation centers, therapy, and prisons await those whose violations are adjudged severe.

And so, strict culturalists insist that you and I can encounter and understand the world – at least the world we might want to share with others – only through the linguistic and performative conventions that are a part of the society within which we are operating. Indeed, because those conventions pre-exist our encounters with others in life, they serve not only as tools for collective understanding but also measuring rods for collective judgment, and therein lies culturalism’s characteristic modes of interpreting visual images. Let us return to the reactions to Riis’s photos by contemporary cultural critics and cultural historians with which I began this paper.

E.T. O’Donnell (2004), like Ansel Adams before him, focuses on the eyes of the Riis’s subjects, and argues that they are glaring at us. He does not know that, of course, but rather assumes that direct, face-to-face orientations together with facial displays that most would interpret as frowns are cultural markers of displeasure, even class consciousness, in situations where someone of a higher

class, accompanied by law officers, takes pictures. An equally plausible account, of course, is that someone was sleeping when his or her room was invaded by someone else with exploding lye-magnesium powder and a group of other, unaccounted-for, legal authorities. O'Donnell's judgments are not based on firsthand knowledge, but, rather, cultural truisms.

Stange's (1989, May) interpretation of Riis's "politics of surveillance" was based explicitly upon a culturalist assumption that "many of the photographs Riis showed represented imagery already current in urban visual culture, and his text rehearsed familiar responses to such scenes" (Stange 1989, p. 2). His work, so far as Stange was concerned, was culturally pre-coded so as to play upon (*ibid.*, p. 6) "middleclass fears and concerns," in ways that were (*ibid.*, pp. 12-13) "consonant with Riis's larger text - the representation of 'Gotham's crime and misery.'" In this way, Riis's (*ibid.*, p. 13) "[h]umorous or adventuresome anecdotes imposed a reassuring order on content whose 'crime and misery' might otherwise overwhelm. They also confirmed the privileged position of the viewer by implying that he or she had a right to be entertained by an encounter with such material even while absorbing Riis's moral strictures."

Stange's culturalist mode of thinking, thus, is clear. She has a binary conception of culture - of the an overclass and an underclass - that sustains opposing interests. She assumes that the overclass has dominating economic and political interests that make surveillance of the kind that Riis practiced as both police reporter and then photographer an essential part of social order. In his raced and classed commentary she also sees a kind of cultural violence and reductionism. Stange comes close - and Trachtenberg (1989) even closer - to simply transferring the language of multiculturalism from today to the 1890s, and in so doing subtly imposing today's cultural and even use values unto yesterday's actions. Trachtenberg (*ibid.*, p. 171) goes so far as to argue that "To outsiders like Riis, the slums seemed a chaos of alien tongues, strange costumes and customs, foods, habits of child-rearing - a frightening caldron of poverty and despair."

Gandal's (1997) charges of Christian voyeurism and Tirado Bramen's (2000) interest in the urban picturesque both are instances of culturalists bringing interpretive templates from critical-cultural theory and fitting Riis's activities into them. Nothing in Riis's writings or speeches suggests voyeuristic psychoses nor does he write in melting-pot terms. Both Gandal and Tirado Bramen - the one attacking Riis, the other affirming socially positive values in his actions - are applying external explanations of his motivation to his life work and the dynamics

of the world within which he carried out that work.

And so, the culturalist, I would argue, is actually analyzing late nineteenth-century American urban culture, in this case with Jacob Riis and his photos as exemplars, rather than studying the man and his labors. "Culture" can become the text if human actions and products are ripped from their original context and then placed into an interpretive, remanufactured context, one with personal and collective motives and viewpoints rearticulated as parts of writing an enlightened cultural history. As Jackson (2003) suggests, the sort of objectification that photos viewed outside of their original rhetorical contexts seemed to produce never occurred in Riis's lectures, articles, and books because of the dual, sentimentalized discourse in which he clothed his arguments: he used the languages of both secular (Progressive) slum reform and religious (social gospel) commitments to make reform happen, with images of human sadness, misery, and yet hope embedded in both of those languages. The pictures were, therefore, never read in the 1890s as pre-coded, conventionalized signs independent of their actual, historically situated uses.

3. Theories of Visuality and the Variability of Visual Argumentative Processes

So then, what might one conclude from this meandering through the history of some pictures, the man who took and used them, the people who reacted to them, and conceptual accounts for how different interpretations and assessments of the pictures, the man, and the times articulated visual experience and argument? In a single essay, I really only can suggest the outlines of three conclusions.

(1) Photographs never simply mean, because they are so easily altered in a material way and hence are materialized in forms with varying communication characteristics. As Riis's photos went from magic lantern slide to sketch or half-tone picture to art object to cultural trace, they were literally different communicative signs. Photographic, photo-processing, and printing operations change and, with them, pictures themselves become different objects. Then, the pictures can be put on paper, glass, tee-shirts, steel plates, or pixilated circuits; printed very small or large; opaque or visible only when light is passed through glass, celluloid, or other transparent surfaces; mounted individually on a wall, melded with other material, visual, verbal, or acoustic media; and sequenced as moving images or de-individualized in collage. As pictures are transformed in photographic, processing, and printing operations, so also are their values as signs. Pictures are inherently unstable sets of signs.

Additionally, as we have seen, as photographs are remade materially and recontextualized within varying discursive webs, so also is the public persona of the photographer re-symbolized. Jacob Riis became a different person as his persona was reconstructed in moves from one historical-discursive context to another. And as that persona moved, so did it seemly advance and also be asked to respond to different social, political, professional, and even aesthetic arguments.

(2) Second, various theories of visibility are not simply conceptual machines and philosophies of vision but also become varied ways of accounting for how we understand and value photographs and other visual media. The semiotic-structuralist, phenomenological, and critical-cultural theories reviewed here do not really “explain” pictures per se or explain the physics and chemistry of photographic processes. They are helpful principally as modes of talk-about pictures, as discourses of human perception, interpretation, and judgment of those objects we call pictures. Some of those modes, for example semiotic structuralism, aid us primarily in dissecting pictures themselves; others, for example hermeneutic phenomenology, attempt to account for our experience of visual stimuli; and still others, for example cultural representationalism, concentrate on showing how contextual conventions govern perception, interpretation, and assessment. Varied theories give us entrance into varied dimensions of human visual experience.

(3) And third, the social contexts or perceptual fields within which photos are put not only make them into different objects but also enable them to do different argumentative work: to serve as evidence of existence, as they did in Riis’s magic lantern shows; to illustrate topics about which he was writing, as they did in his books and articles; to essentialize timeless embodiments of human destiny, as they did in art books, becoming a type of aesthetic warrant for arguments about the place of photography in social life; or even to mark ideological distortion and control, which to the culturalists work as evaluative warrants and even backing for such warrants because they become unchallenged assumptions about the dynamics of political-economic power in collectivities. Visual argumentation, therefore, as suggested in the opening of this paper, is not a process that one can capture in a single Toulmin-like or syllogistic model. Rather, pictures become woven into complex argumentative discourses, and their places vary across different discursive practices.

John Hartley (1992, p. 28) captures this variability well:

No picture is pure image; all of them, still and moving, graphic and photographic, are 'talking pictures,' either literally, or in association with contextual speech, writing or discourse. Pictures are social, visual, spatial and sometimes communicative [read: argumentative]. As visual text and social communication they construct literal space within and between the frames and fields of which they're made.

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