

# AN EXPLORATION THE CONSTRUCTION OF CLAIMS IN VISUAL ARGUMENTATION

BY GAIL J. CHRYSLEE, SONJA K. FOSS  
AND ARTHUR L. RANNEY

When images affect, persuade, or appeal to viewers, viewers see and accept a particular claim or argument in the images. Designers of images such as advertisers, graphic designers, photographers, and architects design images to generate in viewers argumentative claims that roughly coincide with the content the designers intend. A greater understanding of the process of visual argumentation—the process by which viewers construct argumentative claims from visual images—should facilitate greater congruence between creators' intended effects and the effects produced by the images they create. If this process of visual argumentation were better understood, designers of images who wish them to communicate in particular ways may be able to make better choices in the creation process. They will understand some of the factors that affect visual argumentation and the sites at which intended arguments are more likely to be contested and disrupted by viewers.

Theorists in the communication field know a great deal about the process of argumentation as it occurs in discourse. Virtually none of this knowledge is applicable to visual argumentation, however, because of the properties that distinguish visual imagery from discursive symbols. Images, for example, are not propositional in the sense that verbal discourse is. Whereas verbal discourse "has a content: a semantic paraphrasable, propositional content," with an idea, fact, or claim as the inevitable result,<sup>1</sup> any proposition attributed to an image derives from the viewer's attribution and not from properties inherent in the image.<sup>2</sup> A second difference between discourse and visual images is that images lack the denotative vocabulary that characterizes discourse. Words have defini-

tions that limit the attributions that reasonably can be made to them, but the independent units of a visual image are not the uniquely differentiated characters that words are.<sup>3</sup> Simultaneity also differentiates visual from discursive symbols. Visual images present their elements simultaneously, so that an understanding of the image begins with a recognition of the whole, in contrast to words, which have a linear, successive order and cannot be presented or processed simultaneously.<sup>4</sup>

But because discursive notions cannot be applied to visual argumentation does not mean that the process of visual argumentation cannot be described and explicated, and this is the task we undertake in this essay. We hope to take a first step toward a description of the process of visual argumentation that is consistent with the properties of images. Our focus is on arguments of inference, or the use of reasons to arrive at claims—arguments that fall within the province of analytic argumentation. The task that confronts viewers of many types of images is not to assess the nature of the support offered for claims in a retrospective process, as it is with discursive argumentation. Rather, in visual argumentation, viewers often must engage in a prospective process of constructing claims for images.

In our explication of the process by which viewers construct claims for images, we are assuming an audience-centered perspective on the creation of meaning in images. This perspective situates the viewer as the dominant factor in the construction of arguments from images. Although we use the data of images as the basis for the development of argumentative claims, we do not see the arguments made by images as somehow embedded in their material components or physical characteristics. Although material form is essential to the construction of claims for visual images—and certainly makes some claims more likely to be developed than others—it does not determine the claim that results; that is the task, we believe, of the audience.

Our focus in this exploration of visual argumentation is on a

particular type of audience for images — lay viewers. We are interested in the impact of visual symbols on viewers who do not have technical knowledge in areas such as design, art history, aesthetics, or art education — viewers whose responses to images are not developed on the basis of art protocols or frameworks that privilege the creator's intent or the art expert's knowledge of art traditions and conventions in attributing meaning to images. Lay viewers' responses to images are constructed on the basis of viewers' own experiences and knowledges, developed from living and looking in the world. We assumed a lay position in this exploration of visual arguments because we used our everyday experiences and responses as the basis for our analyses, drawing on knowledge, experiences, and information typically available to most viewers in our culture.

Our investigation into visual argumentation began with a search for literature in communication and aesthetics relevant to the subject, a search that revealed only three studies that address the process of visual argumentation explicitly. The nature of visual argumentation is the subject of Chase's essay, in which he suggests that the aesthetic dimension of images creates visual arguments that are different from verbal ones and calls for an exploration of these differences.<sup>5</sup>

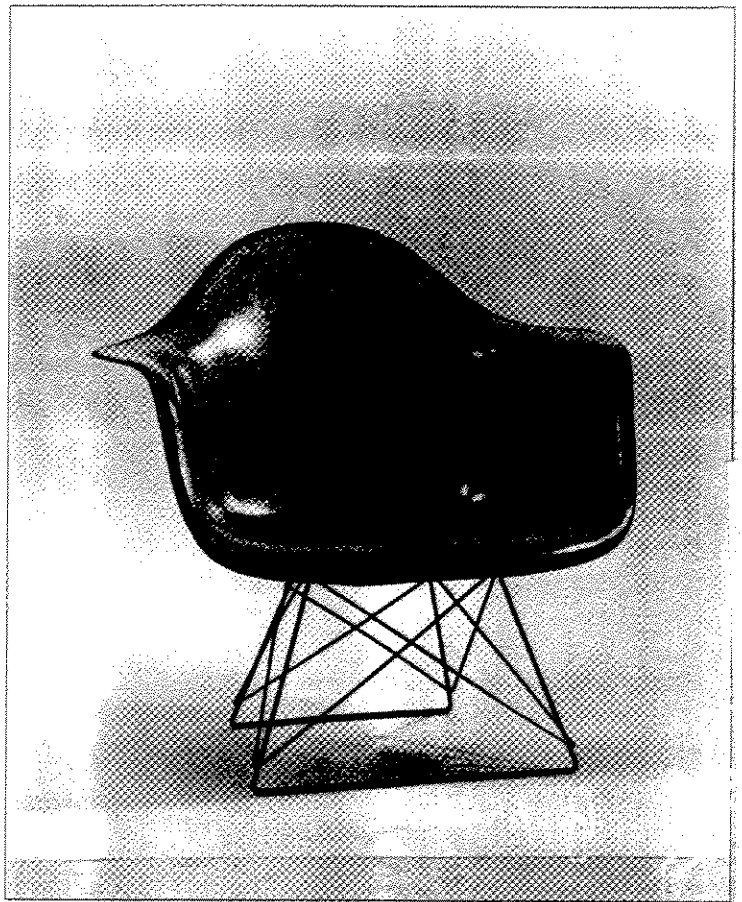
Feinstein presents a prescriptive, instructional tool for constructing meaning from visual forms that involves five steps: (1) description, a general inventory of what is seen and known about the work; (2) analysis of form, an examination of how the work was composed and the materials and techniques used; (3) metaphoric interpretation, in which the image is studied to discover what it stands for or means; (4) evaluation of an image in relation to others of its kind; and (5) preference, the stating of likes and dislikes about an image. In the third step, metaphoric interpretation, the viewer constructs a possible argument from the image, although Feinstein does not use this terminology.<sup>6</sup>

Kanengieter's work on message formation from architecture deals most specifically with visual argumentation. She begins with the assumption that "architecture can function as a kind of argument in that a viewer can see a building as making a claim or an assertion of some kind,"<sup>7</sup> and she lays out a prescriptive method by which a viewer may formulate a claim as a result of interaction with a building. She identifies three steps in the process: (1) identifying presented elements or physical features of the building; (2) processing the presented elements, which involves the identification and organization of suggested concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions a viewer is likely to infer from the presented elements; and (3) devising a message or claim for the building.

Our work extends that of Chase, Feinstein, and Kanengieter in two primary ways. First, our analysis is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Feinstein's and Kanengieter's interests lie in detailing means by which viewers may come to claims on the basis of visual data; our interest is in how that process happens for viewers without the benefit of pre-existing guidelines to follow. Second, both of their models omit from consideration elements such as feelings that we suspected might be important in the development of claims about visual images, and we wanted to be able to take these into account if they seemed significant in visual argumentation.

### ANALYSIS

To develop a description of the process of visual argumentation, we analyzed three images in photographic form — the Eames shell



LUCIA EAMES DEMETRIOS DBA EAMES OFFICE © 1989, 1996

### Eames Shell Chair

chair; the Central Police Headquarters building in Columbus, Ohio; and a dead German soldier from World War I. We chose these particular images on the basis of personal interest and, of course, make no claim that they encompass or are representative of all image forms. We simply used our analysis of these images as a starting point from which to begin to describe steps in the process of visual argumentation. Our method of analysis was inductive; it involved examining each image and discussing what we saw in it and inferred from it in an effort to develop a claim or proposition for the image. We then attempted to describe the process involved in these efforts.

Our analysis of the images revealed four elements that seem to be involved in the process of developing a claim from an image; in standard argumentative terms, these elements would constitute the evidence, the foundation on which the claim rests. Presented facts are the physical data and features of an image and include design elements such as form, style, and medium. Feelings refer to affective states — emotions or attitudes — evoked in the viewer by an image. Knowledge is information accumulated through experience or learning and can be technical, concerned with the processes and materials used to produce or use an object; cultural, concerned with codes, conventions, and socially shared and accepted marks and signs; or historical, focused on the chronology or narrative of past events. Function refers to the use for which an image is employed outside of its form as an image.

Each of the analyses of the three images made use of these ele-

ments in different ways and suggested that Feinstein's and Kanengieter's prescriptive steps for developing claims from images may not be the ones followed by viewers who come to argumentative claims without the benefit of prescriptive guidelines. In the sections below, we detail the processes we used to develop claims for the three images analyzed.

### EAMES SHELL CHAIR

The Eames shell chair, designed in 1950, was the collaborative effort of Charles Eames and Ray Kaiser Eames, both architects, furniture designers, and graphic artists. The body of the chair is sea-foam green in color and made of molded fiberglass that curves to create a gently rounded back, arms, and seat. The body is supported by a low, black, wire-strut base composed of open triangular planes that cross as they support the chair.

A claim was not initially apparent to us as we viewed the chair, so we began our analysis by observing specific presented facts about it. We noted that the chair is rounded, composed of fiberglass, smooth in texture, hard, shiny, and straight legged — observations that rely on technical knowledge concerned with the processes and materials used to fashion an object.

Our observations about the chair's physical features led to inferences of function. The physical data of the chair encouraged the notion of some ways in which the chair functions — the activities it is likely to generate, the role it performs, or its purpose. The chair's functions were known to us because of technical and cultural knowledge available to us. The hard material of which the chair is made is unyielding to the human body, a function reinforced in the chair's molding to fit the prototypic individual: it is not likely to fit or to be comfortable for most people. Consequently, the chair literally keeps its users on their toes; it makes them sit upright and does not allow them to sit still or lie down. Yet another function generated by the chair is ease of cleaning; it can be wiped off easily because of the materials of which it is made. Finally, because the chair is mass produced, anyone is able to own it; it thus functions as an easily accessible object for the average consumer.

The suggestions of function developed from the data suggested a claim for the chair; it celebrates mass production, where nothing is left to chance or individuality and where conformity is extolled. There is no room for individual variations in body shape, size, or preference. Instead, users are being given a chair that says, essentially, that it is good for them, whether they like it or not, whether it is comfortable or not. Behind the claim of a celebration of mass production and reflected in the design of the chair, we saw an attitude of arrogance and superiority that the designers know what the user

needs in a chair and have constructed one they believe fits everyone. As the viewers of this chair, our responses to this attitude were feelings of annoyance and rejection.

The analysis of the images of the Eames shell chair, then, began with the physical data or presented facts of the chair, data derived from a technical knowledge of materials and constructions. Functions or conditions of usage then were inferred from the physical data. In the third step, we devised a claim made by the chair: the celebration of mass production, accompanied by an arrogant attitude that the manufacturers know what viewers need in chairs. This claim generated particular feelings in us as viewers — annoyance and rejection.

### CENTRAL POLICE HEADQUARTERS BUILDING

The building image chosen for analysis was the exterior of the Central Police Headquarters in Columbus, Ohio, completed in 1991. Located on a corner at the northwest edge of the downtown area, the building is positioned diagonally on its square site. Its beige and white marble exterior is nine stories high and topped by a green metallic roof. On the ground floor, twelve vertically rectangular windows flank the two entrances to the building. Identical rows of twenty mirrored, square windows mark the second through the seventh floors, while the four square windows on the eighth floor are unreflective. The ninth floor has two tall, rectangular central openings flanked on either side by five square openings. Each entrance to the building features mirrored doors framed by four white columns, and over each entrance and at the roof line are large ornamental diamonds created through an interplay of white and gray stone. The main entrance is flanked by two sculpted lions that were saved from the old headquarters building.

Analysis of the image of the building began with an agreement that a claim was not readily apparent from its physical data but that one could be developed from an assessment of the building's function. The building functions as a place to house the police bureaucracy and, as such, to communicate its ideology. Cultural knowledge of police responsibilities and behaviors encouraged the discovery of attributes of authority, protection, and surveillance in the building's design, attributes that produced both positive and negative feelings for us.

The presented facts of the building provided support for and clarification of our mixed feelings. The gray, black, and white color scheme of the building and the regimentation of the mirrored windows suggest surveillance and authority and provoked in us fear and feelings of danger. The suggestion of the entrances as barriers and the decorative diamond shapes over the lintels that perhaps can be



BARBARA VOGEL

Central Police Headquarters Building

read as swastikas heightened these feelings. At the same time, the linear and decorative elements of the building that suggest a police officer with hands on hips give the building a whimsical tone and generated feelings of playfulness and safety. Our confusion about how to read the building continued as we noticed that some aspects of the building seem functional, while some seem frivolous, suggesting an uncommitted attitude toward aesthetics and giving the building an air of irresoluteness and ambivalence. Ambivalence is, of course, the nature of police work — to define a police officer's job is difficult: Providing protection? Arresting criminals? Giving tickets? Interpretations of the presented facts, then, seemed closely linked to symbolic and cultural knowledge about the police and, as a result, we were uncertain about whether the claim is one of friendly protection or of authoritative and restrictive surveillance.

With the Central Police Headquarters building, then, an assertion was developed based primarily on cultural knowledge of the function of a building that houses police — to house a bureaucracy charged with protecting citizens and maintaining safety. Strong feelings about this assertion encouraged examination of the physical data of the building for support. But the data evoked mixed feelings and led to the development of an ambiguous claim that the police restrict freedom while they protect. Because the claim developed from cultural knowledge of the function of the building was not supported by the physical data, we were unable to decide which claim to attribute to the building.

#### GERMAN SOLDIER

A dead soldier lying at the edge of a bunker is the subject of a black-and-white photograph by an unknown photographer from *The First World War: A Photographic History*.<sup>8</sup> Almost on his side, the soldier leans or has fallen against sandbags that are piled against an earthen bank matted with vegetation. The soldier's knees are bent, and one hand rests on his thigh, while the other is raised to his forehead. His boots are caked with mud, and his toes turn inward. Although details are difficult to discern, he may be wearing remnants of a gas mask or may have a gaping facial wound.

The image of the soldier evoked immediate and strong feelings in us; we felt horror and sadness at seeing the dead soldier. Our efforts to understand the image began with efforts to recreate the reality of the event depicted, efforts that relied on historical and technical knowledge of war. A claim was suggested that war is horrible if young people can be extinguished so readily and in such a violent fashion. Our historical knowledge allowed us to extrapolate from one young, dead, German soldier to millions of soldiers of every nationality who were killed in World War I, suggesting a clear anti-war statement from the event the image depicted.

Recognition that our analysis was focused on the event depicted rather than on the artifact of the documentation of the event suggested yet another claim — one for the art of the photograph. The photograph could be interpreted either as a commemoration of the glory and sacrifice of soldiers or as a lamentation of the death and horror generated by war. Both claims could be supported by the presented facts of the image. The soldier clearly was dead, suggesting perhaps the greatest possible sacrifice a human being can make for a cause, thus supporting the first claim. Likewise, the details of the image that suggest death — and a grisly death at that — clearly evoke the horrors of war and supported the latter claim.

Our analysis of the image of the soldier, then, began with recog-

nition of feelings evoked and moved to reconstructions of the reality of the event photographed and to the photograph as artifact and to the development of claims for each. Physical data of the image then were examined for support of the claims developed. Calling on technical and cultural knowledge, we developed an ambiguous claim for the photograph as artifact — commemoration of the sacrifice of soldiers or a lamentation of the horrors of war — but a clearer claim for the event the photograph depicted — an anti-war statement.

#### THE PROCESS OF VISUAL ARGUMENTATION

Clearly, our efforts to explicate the process of visual argumentation here are preliminary. Whether or not the specific claims, the kinds of claims we developed, and the processes that led to them would be those that typically characterize viewers' development of argumentation claims from images is not something we can determine on the basis of this analysis. We acknowledge that the types of claims we developed and the sequence of steps that led us to those claims may be peculiar to us — the result of our own particular orientations as viewers — and may not be typical of others' constructions of visual arguments.

Even if our sequences for constructing claims are idiosyncratic, however, we believe that the components of the process and the kinds of knowledge on which viewers tend to draw in developing argumentative claims from images may be universal — at least within the perimeters of our culture — and thus may constitute a starting point for an explanation of visual argumentation that is applicable to more than the three of us. Our analyses of the images involved the elements of presented facts or physical data, feelings, knowledge, and function in various sequences, suggesting that these may be significant components of the process of visual argumentation and potential sites for disruption of the claims intended by creators of images.

A variety of factors may account for the variation in the order of steps revealed in our analysis of the three images and variation in general among viewers. One factor that may affect the nature of the visual argumentation process is the degree to which a perceived reality intrudes on an image. The more a photograph or other image seems to document an actual event or happening, the more difficult is a recognition of the argumentative dimensions of the image itself. Presumptions about certain kinds of representations, then, may interfere with viewers' recognition or development of claims from images.

A second factor that may account for variations in the process of visual argumentation is the cultural, historical, and technical knowledge on which viewers draw as they attempt to formulate arguments from images. In our analysis of the three visual images, we found that various kinds of knowledge available to us as viewers served as warrants for the claims we saw the images making — the justification for moving from particular data to a claim about those data. In the analysis of the image of the Eames shell chair, for example, technical knowledge concerned with the processes and materials used to fashion an object led us to inferences of function — the activities the chair would be likely to generate, the role it would perform, and its purpose; ideas in these areas then led to the conclusion that the chair is mass produced and easily accessible to the average consumer. In the analysis of the image of the building, in contrast, our cultural knowledge about the ambiguous role of police officers provided the warrant for an uncertain claim about the building — it

in contrast, our cultural knowledge about the ambiguous role of police officers provided the warrant for an uncertain claim about the building — it is both friendly and protective, authoritative and domineering.

Feelings played a major part in our inference of claims and in our experience of the images and also may explain variations in the steps of visual argumentation. If our feelings were not in accordance with the claim determined, we continued to search for resolution of the tension between the two, often returning to the data or the warrants for clarification of or further support for either our feelings or the proposed claim. We sometimes experienced feelings prior to development of a claim; at other times, the claim was sanctioned by the feelings we experienced. With the image of the German soldier, for example, our initial response was emotional — sadness, horror, and revulsion at the results of war and the attendant useless waste of life; these feelings led us to qualify what we would accept or reject as a claim. Although feelings usually are excluded as a legitimate element of argumentation, in our analysis of the images, we found that feelings mediated our willingness to develop certain kinds of claims.

We hope that our initial efforts to explicate the process of visual argumentation provide the impetus for scholars in various fields to work toward the continued identification of elements involved in the process of the construction of claims from visual imagery. To be most helpful for the creators of images, future research needs to address a number of factors that affect the process of visual argumentation and the claims viewers are likely to construct from images. Differences in the process of visual argumentation between representational and nonrepresentational images need to be explored, for example. All of the images we analyzed are representational; whether the process we have begun to explore changes with nonrepresentational images is an area that deserves attention. The context in which images occur undoubtedly affects the process of constructing claims for them and was a factor largely ignored in our analyses. Included in context, particularly in advertisements, is discursive text; the interaction between text and image in visual argumentation is an area that needs to be addressed. Style also may be a dimension that affects visual argumentation; how the various aspects of diverse styles affect the process may be critical in explaining how visual argumentation works. Future studies also need to focus on characteristics of audiences. Is a particular level of visual literacy, for example, required of viewers to construct claims from images? If so, what kind of competence is required for this kind of visual literacy? A full accounting of the process of visual argumentation must take into account these and myriad other features of both images and audiences.

Despite the preliminary nature of our study of visual argumentation, we hope that our efforts constitute a preliminary response to those who have suggested that visual images function as an incomplete or deficient form of argumentation. Zarefsky, for example, suggests that visual images “stand in for a more complex reality,”<sup>9</sup> contributing to the decline of a “rich and vibrant concept of argument, of public deliberation.”<sup>10</sup> Jamieson suggests several reasons for such negative effects from visual images. Images are particularly susceptible to a truncation of argument, she asserts, in that they include only statement — one of the two parts of argument — and not both statement and proof.<sup>11</sup> She also attributes the negative

effects of visual images to viewers’ reliance on the peripheral mode of cognitive processing as they interpret images; this mode does not involve the testing of evidence and the framing and evaluation of propositions. The processing of visual imagery, Jamieson thus suggests, is less conscious and less critical than the mode used to process discourse.<sup>12</sup>

We suspect that some of the reluctance of such scholars to accord legitimacy to visual arguments comes from the lack of a model of argumentation that encompasses and explains the components and processes involved. We hope our efforts here begin to counter these scholars’ claims that visual images should be discounted, ignored, and mistrusted by identifying some of the sophisticated and complex ways in which viewers construct arguments from visual images — ways different from but not inferior to arguments created verbally.

**Gail J. Chrysee is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at South Alabama University in Mobile, Alabama. Sonja K. Foss is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Arthur L. Ranney is an assistant professor in the Division of Communication Arts at Shorter College in Rome, Georgia.**

<sup>1</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (1985; reprint, New York: Penguin, 1986), 49-50.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Marcia Eaton, “Truth in Pictures,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 39 (Fall 1980): 15-26; R. A. Goodrich, “A Revival of the Propositional Theory of Art?,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 24 (Autumn 1984): 314-24; Edward S. Casey, “Expression and Communication in Art,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 30 (Winter 1971): 192-101; and David Novitz, *Pictures and Their Use in Communication* (The Hague, Netherlands: Marinus Nijhoff, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (1942; New York: Mentor/New American Library, 1951); and Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation Between Modern Literature and Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example: Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*; Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1953); and Bennett Reimer, “Language and Nonlanguage Models of Aesthetic Stimuli,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 11 (July 1977): 40-41.

<sup>5</sup> Ken Chase, “Argument and Beauty: A Review and Exploration of Connections,” *Perspectives on Argumentation: Essays in Honor of Wayne Brockriede*, ed. Robert Trapp and Janice Schuetz (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland, 1990), 258-271.

<sup>6</sup> Hermine Feinstein, “The Art Response Guide: How to Read Art for Meaning: A Primer for Art Criticism,” *Art Education* 42 (May 1989): 43-53.

<sup>7</sup> Maria R. Kanengieter, “Message Formation from Architecture: A Rhetorical Analysis,” Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1990, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Laurence Stallings, ed., *The First World War: A Photographic History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1933), 38.

<sup>9</sup> David Zarefsky, “Spectator Politics and the Revival of Public Argument,” *Communication Monographs* 52 (December 1992): 412.

<sup>10</sup> Zarefsky, 414.

<sup>11</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 240.

<sup>12</sup> Jamieson, 60.