

# A Moderate Defense for Visual Arguments: Dynamic Existentialism and the Expansion of Argumentation Theory

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**Abstract:** This paper critically examines the ongoing debate over the legitimacy of visual arguments and proposes a resolution to this issue. Using a type-theory framework, the legitimacy of visual arguments is addressed through two key sub-problems. First, the paper argues that visual arguments exist, with their existence grounded in dynamic existentialism. Second, it contends that visual argumentation theory can expand argumentation theory in both descriptive and normative aspects. The paper advocates for a moderate defense of visual arguments, offering a stronger foundation for future research in the field.

**Résumé:** Cet article examine de manière critique le débat actuel sur la légitimité des arguments visuels et propose une solution à ce problème. En s'appuyant sur la théorie des types, la légitimité des arguments visuels est abordée à travers deux sous-problèmes clés. Premièrement, l'article soutient l'existence des arguments visuels, fondée sur l'existentialisme dynamique. Deuxièmement, il soutient que la théorie de l'argumentation visuelle peut élargir la théorie de l'argumentation, tant sur le plan descriptif que normatif. L'article prône une défense modérée des arguments visuels, offrant ainsi une base plus solide aux recherches futures dans ce domaine.

**Keywords:** existence, multimodal, verbal argument, visual argument, visual argumentation theory

## 1. Introduction

Leo Groarke published “Logic, Art and Argument” in *Informal Logic* in 1996. In this paper, he claims to broaden the definition of argument to take account of visual arguments, thereby enhancing informal logic’s ability to analyze arguments in everyday life. Also in that year, Groarke, along with David Birdsell, co-edited a special double issue on visual argumentation for *Argumentation and Advocacy* (vol. 33 no. 1 & 2, 1996).<sup>1</sup> This issue featured contributions from scholars like J. Anthony Blair, David Fleming, and others. In their introductory paper, Birdsell and Groarke (1996) outline key aspects related to the development of visual argumentation theory, including visual meaning, visual context, visual argument, and persuasion, among others. This pivotal year of 1996 is often regarded as the inception of the field of visual arguments. Since then, a wealth of literature has emerged in this field, encompassing diverse research methodologies such as informal logic, pragma-dialectics, and rhetoric. These works explore various genres and forms of practical application of visual arguments, ranging from advertising and cartoons to scientific communications (Kjeldsen 2015).

Despite substantial progress in the field of visual arguments, a persistent theoretical debate centers on a fundamental question: the existence of *legitimate* visual arguments (e.g., Birdsell & Groarke 1996; Fleming 1996; Johnson 2003; Blair 2012; Popa 2016; Godden 2013; Groarke 2019). Kjeldsen (2015, p. 116) describes this issue as the “principal issue” in the study of visual argumentation. While many scholars now assume the existence of legitimate visual arguments—as Blair (2015, p. 219) observes, the burden of proof for their possibility and existence “has been reversed”—doubts about their legitimacy persist, encompassing various aspects. We believe that skepticism surrounding visual arguments has not hindered the field’s development. As Groarke (2019, p. 334) notes, these doubts “have not

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<sup>1</sup> Within the scope of this paper’s concern, no distinction is made between “argument” and “argumentation”.

stopped” its continued growth. Importantly, as this paper aims to demonstrate, the responses and clarifications prompted by such skepticism have deepened researchers’ understanding of visual arguments, invigorating the field. Further clarification on this issue would provide a clearer understanding of the logical status of visual arguments, establishing a more robust theoretical foundation for their analysis and evaluation, particularly within the framework of informal logic.

When reviewing the literature on the legitimacy of visual arguments, researchers probably notice that skeptics criticize the existence of visual arguments in various ways, leading to numerous and scattered criticisms. To systematically and clearly examine the core controversies surrounding the legitimacy of visual arguments, this paper introduces a novel analytical framework called the *Type-Theory Framework*. Within this framework, the legitimacy problem of visual arguments is reconstructed into two sub-problems:

1) The Legitimacy of Visual Arguments as a *Type of Argument*: Do visual arguments actually exist? Radical skepticism asserts that arguments cannot be conveyed through visual images (e.g., Fleming 1996; Patterson 2010), leading to the conclusion that visual arguments do not exist. Additionally, the concept of visual argument is seen as so conceptually problematic that its very existential possibility is questioned (Popa 2016).

2) The Legitimacy of the *Theory of Visual Arguments*: Is there a need for a visual argumentation theory that exists independently of verbal argumentation theory, as a distinctive theory? Moderate skepticism contends that even if visual arguments do exist, their analysis and evaluation can be effectively handled using existing theories, such as verbal argumentation theory and other related disciplines. This implies that there is no need for a distinctive theory of visual argumentation (e.g., Johnson 2003; Blair 2015; Godden 2013, 2017).

The logical relationship between these two sub-problems is as follows: The legitimacy of visual arguments as a type of argument does not logically entail the legitimacy of the theory of visual arguments, but the latter does logically entail the former. Additionally, the fact that the former holds is a prerequisite for the latter to hold. Therefore, to fully justify the legitimacy of visual arguments, it is necessary to justify these two sub-questions *in sequence*. Through a critical reconstruction and review of the ongoing debate on the legitimacy of visual arguments, this paper aims to provide *qualified affirmative* answers to both sub-problems: (1) Visual arguments do exist, though their existence is *dynamism-based*; (2) A theory of visual argumentation is necessary to exist, but it should be viewed as an *expansion* of existing verbal argumentation theory rather than as a replacement.

In what follows, we will discuss the legitimacy of visual argument as a type of argument in Section 2, and the legitimacy of visual argumentation theory in Section 3. Section 4 will provide a summary and explore the implications of the clarification offered in this paper.

## **2. The legitimacy problem of visual arguments as a type of argument**

Visual images, ranging from sensational commercial advertisements to thought-provoking public-interest advertisements, from hilarious satirical cartoons to realistic news photographs, undoubtedly possess a remarkable emotional impact. Consequently, it is unsurprising that visual images can be used to sway individuals' opinions. There is no controversy that visual images serve as a significant tool for persuasion. By contrast, the controversial issue is whether visual images can be used for *rational* persuasion. In other words, can visual images change people's viewpoints by providing arguments? If the answer is yes, then visual argument, as a type of argument, is possible. Otherwise, it is not.

To answer this question, it is essential to clarify the concept of

argument. This paper starts with a classic and widely quoted definition of argument provided by O’Keefe (1982). O’Keefe makes a distinction between “argument<sub>1</sub>” and “argument<sub>2</sub>”, and defines these two types of argument:

I think that the everyday sense of “argument” (as argument<sub>2</sub>) paradigmatically refers simply to those cases in which extended overt disagreement occurs between interactions (*ibid.*, p. 11).

Thus my view is that paradigm cases of argument<sub>1</sub> are ones involving a linguistically explicable claim and one more linguistically explicable reasons (*ibid.*, p. 17).

It goes without saying that visual images can be used to show disagreement in interpersonal interactions. For instance, during the political campaigns of the 2024 U.S. presidential election, it is common for a cartoonist who supports Donald J. Trump to portray him as a passionate political leader, while one who opposes him might depict him as a deranged madman. Clearly, the dispute over whether visual arguments exist is *not* about whether visual images can be used to express arguments in the sense of interpersonal interactions (argument<sub>2</sub>), but whether they can express arguments in the sense of *abstract objects* (argument<sub>1</sub>). Therefore, we will just consider the conception of argument<sub>1</sub> as the relevant criterion for the existence of visual arguments. According to O’Keefe (1982, p. 13), “linguistically explicable” differs from “linguistically explicit”. The latter requires that reasons (i.e. premises) and claims (i.e. conclusions) be explicitly expressed in language, while the former only requires that they *can* be expressed in language. In his view, the requirement of being “linguistically explicable” appears self-evident, as it would be unacceptable to claim, “He just made an argument, but I can’t tell you what the argument was (*ibid.*)” when engaging in argument analysis.

According to Blair (2012, pp. 207-208), there are two important implications of the conception of argument<sub>1</sub>: Firstly, argument<sub>1</sub> is

*propositional* because claims and reasons must be propositions. Notably, to avoid unnecessary philosophical disputes, Blair emphasizes that the term “propositional” here should be understood in a *broad* sense if the claims and reasons can be affirmed or rejected. It means that value judgments and norms of action are regarded as propositional (*ibid.*, p. 207). It is noteworthy that Roque (2015) criticizes Blair’s position by arguing that visual arguments are not necessarily propositional, as many widely recognized visual arguments, such as some political posters and public service advertisements, contain conclusions in the form of imperative sentences, which lack truth-value and thus are not propositional. However, as Blair (2012, p. 207) clarifies, “propositional” is understood in a broad sense here, referring to claims and reasons that can be affirmed or rejected. Imperative sentences, such as “We should protect the environment,” clearly can be affirmed or rejected. Therefore, we believe Roque’s criticism is unfortunately based on a misunderstanding of Blair’s position.

Secondly, argument<sub>1</sub> does not limit the argument to verbal arguments, but merely requires that both the reasons and the claims can be *explicated* in language. In other words, the medium of expression for an argument does not have to be language itself; it merely needs to be capable of translation into language. Blair further summarizes these two implications as follows (p. 208):

We have to be able to say what the claim is and what the reasons are, and we have to be able to say so clearly enough that the claims and reasons can be accepted or rejected. (You cannot accept or reject “Yuck!”; you can accept or reject the claim, “This steak tastes like shoe leather!”)

We find Blair’s two implications to be appropriate, as O’Keefe conceptualizes argument<sub>1</sub> as an abstract object, without imposing limitations on the specific mode of its expression, whether verbal or non-verbal. Based on the above discussion, we will refer to O’Keefe’s definition of argument<sub>1</sub> and Blair’s interpretation of it as the “O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument”. So, does O’Keefe-

Blair conception of argument apply to the legitimacy problem of visual argument as a type of argument? We believe it does. This is because:

- 1) This definition establishes a *minimal* criterion for the abstract concept of argument. As a basic form of rational persuasion, we contend that an argument inherently needs to exhibit objectively discernible clarity, implying that its premises and conclusions should be explicable through language at the very least.
- 2) Argument<sub>1</sub> does not presuppose that arguments can only be expressed through language, thereby leaving considerable theoretical space for the existence of non-linguistic forms of argument, including visual ones.

Some might criticize that applying the O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument to the controversy over the existence of visual arguments risks committing the fallacy of circular argument, as it could be seen as assuming that only verbal arguments are legitimate. However, we wish to reiterate and clarify that while the O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument requires that premises and conclusions be linguistically explicable, it does *not* confine these elements to verbal expression alone. This means that premises and conclusions can be expressed through non-linguistic symbols, as long as these expressions can be translated into language. Therefore, this conception does not preclude the possibility of arguments being conveyed in other forms, including visual ones. Consequently, using this conception does not result in circular argument.

Regarding the requirement that premises and conclusions be linguistically explicable, we believe this is appropriate—as mentioned earlier, it is the most fundamental clarity requirement for an argument that claims to be a form of rational persuasion. More importantly, we believe that stating that premises and conclusions are linguistically explicable does not imply that content expressed visually or in other forms can be completely and faithfully translated into

language. Rather, it means that the argumentative content of the expression can be described by language (or at least partially described by language).<sup>2</sup> After all, an argument whose premises and conclusions cannot be characterized by language at all is so vague that it cannot be analyzed and evaluated—this is evidently contrary to the inherent pursuit of reasonableness in argumentation.<sup>3</sup>

The above provides a concise defense of the applicability of the O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument to the issue of visual arguments. If our defense holds, the O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument can serve as a conceptual foundation for addressing the legitimacy problem of visual arguments. In this way, the legitimacy problem of visual arguments as a type of argument is transformed into the following question: Can visual images be translated into a set of verbal propositions, with some propositions serving as premises and others as conclusions?

For many proponents of visual arguments, it seems evident that visual images can be translated into a set of propositions. First of all, human communication practices have demonstrated that propositions are in fact expressed in a variety of forms other than language, including silence, signs or signals, facial expressions, and other body language (Blair 2012, p. 209). This suggests that there is no compelling reason to consider language as the exclusive and legitimate form of propositions. Furthermore, Blair provides examples of advertisements to illustrate that visual images can be translated into a set of verbal propositions that function as premises and a conclusion. For

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<sup>2</sup> In this sense, when we use the term “verbal translation” or “translated into language” in this paper, we generally do not refer to a complete translation but rather a *partial* one.

<sup>3</sup> This view is partially inspired by Godden’s distinction between informational content and argumentative content (see Godden 2017, pp. 419-423). Godden employs this distinction to support the “non-revisionism” of visual arguments, a topic that will be explored in Section 3 of this paper.

instance, he argues that a Benetton advertisement titled “Angel/Devil” (Figure 1), published in *The New Yorker* (April 29 and May 6, 1996 issues), constitutes a visual argument (p. 214):



Figure 1 “Angel/Devil”

Based on the relevant background information of the Benetton advertisement, Blair (p. 215) contends that the visual argument represented by the image can be reconstructed as follows: “Racism is a construct, not an inborn attitude; adults impose its ugliness on the innocence of children; therefore, racism is unjustified and should be ended.”<sup>4</sup> Blair (2012) also provides examples of visual arguments expressed through various mediums such as paintings, sculptures, political cartoons, and television commercials. This approach, where a visual image is presented and then translated into an “underlying” set of visual propositions with premises and conclusions, is the main strategy scholars use to defend the legitimacy of visual arguments. Scholars like Groarke (1996), Birdsell and Groarke (2007), Blair (2012), Roque (2015), and Dove (2016) have utilized this strategy to

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<sup>4</sup> In addition to Figure 1, Blair also analyzes other Benetton advertisements published in the same issue of *The New Yorker* and conceives them as visual arguments too. For the sake of simplicity, we are presenting just one of these advertisements.

justify the existence of visual arguments.<sup>5</sup>

Despite proponents pointing to numerous instances of visual arguments, such as the advertising case mentioned above, critics persist in questioning the existence of so-called visual arguments. We posit that two main doubts are most representative: *structural concerns (SC)* and *propositional concerns (PC)*. Although scholars do not explicitly label their doubts under SC or PC, their criticisms can be categorized or converted into these two types. The distinction between SC and PC proposed in this paper will provide a clear framework for analyzing these criticisms.

SC pertains to the difficulty of visual images in conveying the fundamental premise-conclusion structure of the argument. Fleming (1996) emphasizes that an argument requires a structure in which conceptually distinct ideas can be sequentially linked, but a picture, by itself, cannot array ideas in the two-part conceptual structure of the argument (i.e., premise-conclusion structure). This is to say that, due to the lack of temporal syntax, visual images at best can express a proposition that serves as either a premise or a conclusion, but they struggle to distinctly express premises and conclusions. However, we do not think that SC is insurmountable.

On the one hand, it appears that Fleming primarily considers single or static visual images, overlooking the scenarios involving multiple or dynamic visual images. While a solitary or static visual image might only express a solitary proposition, a sequence of interrelated visual images (such as comics) or dynamic visual images (like animations) has the potential to convey the temporal succession of ideas, thus achieving the fundamental premise-conclusion structure. It is worth mentioning that Champagne and Pietarinen (2020), inspired by the graphical logic of C. S. Peirce, argue that diagrammatic

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<sup>5</sup> If “propositional” is understood broadly, Roque would likely agree that visual arguments are propositional. In the examples of visual arguments presented by Roque (2015), he similarly starts with a visual image and then provides the set of propositions expressed by that image. Therefore, we categorize him among the scholars who use “the main strategy.”

reasoning based on manipulated (erased, dragged, copied, etc.) images can clearly and reliably express premises and conclusions. In short, moving images can express the premise-conclusion structure.

On the other hand, even a single static visual image can present a basic premise-conclusion structure through enthymeme. For example, Figure 1, though a single visual image, is capable of expressing an enthymematic argument that contains an implicit conclusion. In other words, a single visual image can indeed express multiple propositions, with certain propositions and their logical connections expressed through enthymeme.

However, Champagne and Pietarinen (2020, p. 231) argue that if visual arguments are enthymematic and “with no healthy or complete version possible,” this is concerning. Consequently, they do not regard single static images as genuine (or paradigmatic) visual arguments but rather favor visual arguments expressed through moving images.

We certainly agree that visual arguments conveyed through moving images are generally clearer than those expressed through single static images. This is similar to how arguments expressed in several sentences around the same theme are often clearer than those expressed in just one sentence. However, as will be discussed below, we do not believe that single static images fail to constitute genuine arguments. The *incompleteness* often attributed to visual arguments due to enthymeme is, in fact, a distinguishing characteristic that sets them apart from verbal arguments.

Compared to SC, PC appears to be more intractable. PC refers to the difficulty of determinately translating visual images into verbal propositions. This means that even if visual images can convey a premise-conclusion structure (i.e., SC is resolved), critics argue that they struggle to express the determinate content of an argument. Despite proponents presenting numerous instances of visual arguments—cases where visual images are successfully translated into premises and conclusions—Johnson (2003, p. 4) maintains that such a translation process heavily relies on background knowledge. He contends that the image itself cannot “determine” the premises and conclusion, as it is easy to imagine other possible conclusions being

“implied” or “suggested” by the same picture. Consequently, if someone lacks the relevant background knowledge about a specific image, it will be difficult for them to provide a translation that satisfies proponents of visual arguments. Even Blair (2012), an advocate for the legitimacy of visual arguments, concedes that significant differences exist between visual images and language in terms of proposition expression. Making assertions or claims is the default function of language, but this is not the default function of visual images, indicating that expressing propositions through images is indeed remarkably challenging. Furthermore, he summarizes the difficulties in the translation process as a *systematic indeterminacy* (p. 210):

Thus there is a systematic tendency to indeterminacy about visual expression, at least in our culture at the present time, that is absent from verbal expression. To put this point more precisely, in most instances in our culture the conditions of interpretation of visual expression are indeterminate to a much greater degree than is the case with verbal expression.

Do all visual expressions possess such systematic indeterminacy? Godden (2013) seeks to identify a determinate visual argument, arguing that scholars often focus on eye-catching advertisements or cartoons as paradigmatic cases of visual arguments, yet these examples are contentious. In contrast, Godden (*ibid.*, pp. 1-2) suggests that legitimate visual arguments are far less interesting and far rarer than proponents might assume—citing examples such as the Venn diagram in mathematics. He (*ibid.*, p. 9) provides a specific instance, noting that the following diagram (Figure 2) unambiguously represents a valid syllogism: All *M* is *P*; Some *S* is *M*; Therefore, Some *S* is *P*.

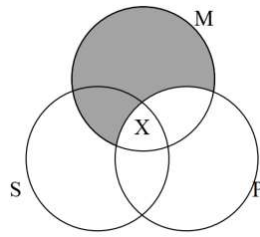


Figure 2

However, strictly speaking, we contend that Godden's example does not qualify as a visual argument. The Venn diagram merely represents a valid argument *form*, not an argument in itself. It is only after this form is exemplified—for instance, by substituting *M* with “felines,” *P* with “mammals,” and *S* with “leopards”—that the Venn diagram can be said to represent an argument. This process of exemplification necessarily involves language. In other words, some Venn diagrams can explicitly express a valid syllogism, but this expression relies on certain assumptions (such as the interpreter's understanding of the rules for reading Venn diagrams) and linguistic exemplification.

Thus, while Venn diagrams may depend less on language compared to advertisements or cartoons, they still rely on it if they are intended to convey arguments. Returning to the key question—do all visual expressions have such systematic indeterminacy? Our answer is: Yes, though to varying degrees. It is plausible to conclude that various types of visual expressions differ not in whether their reliance on language, but rather in the extent to which they do so.

Crucially, is the systematic indeterminacy of visual expressions sufficient to make visual argument impossible? Regarding this question, Johnson (2003) would likely provide an affirmative response. He (pp. 10-11) emphasizes that in the process of constructing arguments, “most of the essential work” is accomplished by language rather than images. Therefore, visual arguments, according to him, do not exist.

Similarly, Patterson (2010), drawing on the later Wittgenstein's views on images, argues that visual images inherently lead to different interpretations, and the process of selecting among these interpretations clearly goes beyond the information provided by the images themselves. In his view, visual propositions largely emerge as a result of individuals employing language to "frame" images, rather than being intrinsic to the images themselves. Thus, language itself can contain arguments (so verbal arguments exist), but images do not (so visual arguments do not exist)—it is just that people are using images to make arguments.

Compared to Johnson and Patterson, Popa's view is more radical. Popa (2016) argues that the concepts of "visual argument" or "verbal argument" themselves are problematic because they lead to "category mistakes." In his view, argumentative interactions are "irreducibly multimodal" (*ibid.*, p. 83), and context is indispensable in reconstructing arguments. Thus, the category mistake of the concept of visual (or verbal) argument lies in disregarding the distinction between recording and reproducing (parts of) a communicative event and analyzing that episode through analytical instruments. This implies that visual information alone is far from sufficient for argument reconstruction, making the concept of visual argument untenable.

In contrast to Johnson, Patterson, and Popa, Blair (2012, p. 210), even though acknowledging that such systematic indeterminacy is likely to pose "formidable practical problems" for both arguers and audiences, believes that it does not make visual argument impossible "in principle." In a recent article, Groarke (2019) responds to the criticisms faced by the visual argument. He begins by pointing out that the object of the opponents' criticisms is "purely visual argument."

For instance, Johnson (2003) contends that paradigm cases of visual arguments consist solely of visuals, while Patterson (2010) focuses on purely visual arguments. However, Groarke clarifies that neither he nor other defenders of visual arguments define a visual argument as one expressed exclusively by pure images. Instead,

Groarke (2019, p. 335) posits that visual arguments only require that “they have important (non-verbal) visual content.”

Although Groarke (2019) does not directly respond to Popa’s (2016) criticism, we believe that Groarke’s argument can be extended to address it. The concept of visual arguments emphasizes the importance of visual images in certain argumentative expressions without negating the role of other forms of information, such as verbal information. In our interpretation, proponents of visual arguments likely do not reject Popa’s (2016) assertion that all arguments are multimodal. Rather, when they refer to visual arguments, they mean multimodal arguments in which visual images play a significant role. Consequently, we think that the criticisms raised by Johnson, Patterson, and Popa may be attacking a straw man, as they seem to misconstrue the definition of visual arguments—a definition that proponents of visual arguments do not actually endorse.

More importantly, in Groarke’s perspective, this systematic indeterminacy appears to be overcome (2019, pp. 336-337). On the one hand, arguers often adhere to conventions and norms in their use of images, such as representing death with a skull, nations with flags, companies with logos, and so forth. On the other hand, a modified version of pragma-dialectical principles of communication can be applied to handle the selection of different interpretations in instances of visual arguments.

The above dispute reveals that scholars have divergent understandings of the key term ‘visual arguments,’ or they may be using the term in different senses. We align with the proponents’ perspective that visual arguments should be understood as arguments in which visual images play a significant role. This interpretation aligns with the usage by proponents of visual arguments and addresses the main concerns of researchers regarding visual argument practices. For instance, in the literature, the most common examples of visual arguments are advertisements or cartoons that combine text with images, rather than pure visual elements like traffic signs.

However, simply clarifying the meaning of visual arguments is

insufficient to counter the criticism against them. Critics argue that the reliance on linguistic assistance to convey clear meaning highlights the inherent ambiguity of visual images. This ambiguity, they contend, leads to a systematic indeterminacy in translating visual images into verbal propositions. Furthermore, even the cases provided by proponents of visual arguments, such as Groarke (1996), where images are combined with text, could still provoke diverse interpretations (Johnson 2003). Similarly, the Benetton advertisement cited by Blair (2012, pp. 214-215) as a typical example of visual arguments highlights the issue of interpretative indeterminacy. For instance, a Chinese high school student, unfamiliar with the American socio-cultural context, might construct a different visual argument from what Blair suggests. This student could interpret the advertisement as follows: “The two girls are embracing each other with smiles; therefore, the two girls are friends.” This interpretation focuses on a surface-level reading of the image, which clearly differs from Blair’s interpretation, where the image is understood to convey a message about racism being a social construct, imposed on the innocence of children.

This suggests that as long as images play a significant role, the indeterminacy in converting visual propositions into verbal ones remains. Consequently, critics argue, that visual arguments do not truly exist. Despite proponents’ efforts to establish norms or principles for interpreting images, the gap between visual images and language in terms of determinacy seems challenging to bridge. Take, for instance, the use of a skull image to represent death, as discussed by Groarke (2019). While a skull does indeed signify death in many contexts, it also carries a level of ambiguity. Depending on the context, it could represent danger, pirates, tattoo art, or anatomy. In contrast, language can convey the concept of death with much greater precision and clarity—for example, by directly stating the word ‘death’. This comparison underscores the inherent uncertainty in visual representations, which often rely on context and interpretation, whereas linguistic expressions can achieve a more straightforward and unambiguous conveyance of meaning.

In summary, critics of visual arguments argue that only verbal arguments, which typically offer relatively determinate propositional interpretations, are legitimate. Supporters of visual arguments, on the other hand, accept both verbal arguments and visual arguments, even when the latter involve relatively indeterminate propositional interpretations. By revealing these two foundational presuppositions regarding the existence and legitimacy of arguments, we believe that the controversy over the existence of visual arguments can be addressed through terminological clarification.

We propose that visual arguments do exist, but in a different sense than verbal arguments. Verbal propositions, owing to their greater determinacy, are typically clear and unambiguous. Even when they are not initially clear, individuals can clarify them using language-based resources (e.g., by understanding contextual information or engaging in dialogue with the arguer). Therefore, this paper conceptualizes the existence of verbal arguments as being *determinacy-based*.

In contrast, the meaning of images tends to be more indeterminate, which makes the process of translating images into verbal propositions significantly more flexible. As such, this paper views the existence of visual arguments as being *dynamism-based*. This perspective can be referred to as the *dynamic existentialism of visual arguments*. In this regard, we further clarify the following points:

- 1) We do not deny the inherent ambiguity of language; rather, we emphasize that, in general, the meanings conveyed by verbal expressions tend to be more determinate than those conveyed by images.
- 2) The terms *determinacy-based existence* and *dynamism-based existence* are not intended as value judgments; they do not suggest that one type of existence is superior to the other. Instead, we believe that each type has distinct characteristics, without implying any inherent superiority or inferiority. These terms are descriptive and are used to characterize the respective traits of verbal and visual arguments.



that only determinacy-based existence (as seen in verbal arguments) constitutes a legitimate form of argument. By doing so, it opens up theoretical space for recognizing the legitimacy of visual arguments.

Critics might argue that dynamism-based existence does not qualify as a legitimate form of existence, thereby questioning whether dynamic existentialism truly resolves the controversy. However, we contend that such a narrow view is difficult to justify. After all, even critics of visual arguments acknowledge that verbal argument interpretation involves some degree of indeterminacy.<sup>6</sup> Both verbal and visual arguments share a fundamental trait: they exhibit indeterminacy, though to varying degrees, with verbal arguments being less indeterminate and visual arguments more so. In other words, the distinction between verbal and visual arguments in terms of interpretative indeterminacy is not that one possesses it while the other does not; rather, both exhibit indeterminacy, albeit to different degrees. Given this, it is unlikely to provide a compelling reason to classify one as existent and the other as non-existent. If the existence of verbal arguments is not dismissed due to their interpretative indeterminacy, then the existence of visual arguments should not be dismissed for this reason either.<sup>7</sup> As Blair (2012) points out, while visual arguments face interpretative challenges, this does not make them theoretically impossible. With appropriate conditions, plausible interpretations and reconstructions of visual images can be provided. Therefore, rather than wholly rejecting the legitimacy of visual arguments, it is more justifiable to acknowledge their legitimacy with qualifications, specifically recognizing them as dynamism-based existences.

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<sup>6</sup> Notably, Popa (2016) discusses this matter, arguing as an opponent of visual arguments that all arguments, including verbal ones, are inherently multimodal and require context-sensitive interpretation. This suggests that the interpretation and reconstruction of any argument involve inherent complexity and flexibility.

<sup>7</sup> It is reasonable to think that arguments, regardless of their modality, encounter varying degrees of interpretative indeterminacy. If we were to reject the existence of arguments solely due to their indeterminacy, we would be led to an unacceptable conclusion that no argument exists.

### **3. The legitimacy problem of visual argumentation theory**

According to the type-theory framework outlined in this paper, in addition to the legitimacy problem of visual arguments as a type of argument discussed in the previous section, there is a need to assess the theoretical value of visual argument—is there a need for a theory of visual argumentation in addition to the current dominant theory of argumentation centered on verbal arguments?

In general, a comprehensive theory of argumentation consists of two main parts: 1) a descriptive theory of argumentation, i.e., argument analysis, which involves a standardized reconstruction of an argument and an analysis of its logical structure; and 2) a normative theory of argumentation, i.e., argument evaluation, which involves an evaluation of the premise acceptability and the degree to which premises support conclusions. Given this, if there were to be a visual argumentation theory different from the current verbal argumentation theory, could it make a unique contribution in these areas? This paper will answer the question in terms of descriptive and normative aspects respectively.

Concerning the descriptive aspect, verbal argumentation theory already develops a series of theoretical tools for reconstructing and analyzing arguments, including Toulmin's model, argumentation schemes theory, pragma-dialectics, argument structure diagrams, and so forth. However, does visual argumentation possess its own distinctive descriptive theory? Scholars have proposed various theoretical tools for the descriptive analysis of visual arguments. For instance, a modified version of pragma-dialectical principles of communication, as mentioned earlier, can be applied to interpret images in arguments (Birdsell & Groarke 2007; Groarke 2019). Furthermore, Groarke (2015, 2019) demonstrates how to extend the “Key Component” (KC) table and diagram to analyze visual arguments through cases such as paintings and political cartoons. Additionally, visual images provide an intense sensory experience to the audience, enabling them to establish a closer connection. Consequently, rhetorical

theory has been naturally incorporated into the study of visual arguments, particularly for comprehending the use of tropes and figures within visual arguments (Kjeldsen 2015).

Interestingly, Johnson (2003) contends that we do not need a theory of visual argumentation. He recognizes that interpreting the meaning of visual images is important, but that other theories (rather than argumentation theories) can offer more help with this, such as deconstruction, semiotic theories, message design theories, and so forth. He states (p. 2):

For example, with respect to film, if you are going to understand the genius of a Fellini or a Kubrick, you will need to know a lot about symbolism and film technique, but I suspect very little about argument (in any robust sense). If you want to instill in students the ability to appreciate about painting, then you will need to teach them about how to observe a work of art, what to look for...I don't mean to suggest that logic (informal logic) has nothing to offer the goal of helping students to become visually literate, but I differ with Groarke on how that is to happen.

Inspired by Johnson's above criticism, we argue that the challenge for the descriptive theory of visual argumentation is twofold: Firstly, the interpretation of meaning in images has been extensively explored in other disciplines, such as semiotic theory, painting, and film studies. Secondly, once the interpretation is complete and the image's meaning is articulated through verbal propositions, verbal argumentation theory can be employed to analyze the argument. This presents a dilemma regarding the necessity of a distinct theory of visual argumentation, which this paper refers to as *the dilemma of visual argumentation theory (DVA)*:

DVA: When the meaning of a visual image has not yet been described in language, its analysis is conducted by other disciplines; when the meaning of a visual image has been described in language, its analysis aligns with the theory of verbal argumentation. Hence, a theory of visual argumentation is considered unnecessary.

We believe that the solution to the DVA lies in addressing both horns presented by this dilemma. Regarding the first horn, we acknowledge that interpreting and translating visual images often requires theoretical tools from other disciplines, such as semiotics, communication studies, and art. Indeed, this is exactly what scholars in visual and multimodal argumentation have been working towards. A recent example is the special issue on “Multimodal Argumentation” published in the *Journal of Argumentation in Context* (13:2, 2024). This issue seeks to promote a systematic analysis of multimodal argumentation across different genres and contexts by integrating perspectives from various fields, including logic, philosophy, critical studies, semiotics, rhetoric, and cognitive pragmatics (Stöckl & Tseronis 2024, p. 168). This is analogous to how verbal argumentation theory draws upon theories from other relevant disciplines. Argumentation theory, being inherently interdisciplinary, naturally incorporates perspectives from various disciplines for comprehensive analysis. The specificity of visual argumentation theory does not imply that it completely avoids drawing on theoretical resources from other disciplines; rather, it is characterized by its focus on translating the argumentative content of visual images, with resources from other disciplines serving this purpose. Thus, the first horn of the DVA does not convincingly argue against the necessity of a dedicated theory of visual argumentation.

Regarding the second horn, we argue that even when the meaning of a visual image has been described in language, its analysis still requires consideration of the visual elements and cannot rely solely on existing verbal argumentation theory. As previously mentioned, Groarke (2015, 2019) developed an extended version of KC tables and diagrams to analyze the structure of visual or even other multimodal arguments. When KC tables are used to analyze verbal arguments, they identify the key components of the argument (i.e., premises and conclusions) by quoting them or paraphrasing their content. However, when KC tables are applied to visual arguments, they iden-

tify the key components through “visual quoting or ostension”—directly referencing the image (i.e., visual quoting) or guiding the viewer to observe the image (i.e., visual ostension), without providing a verbal description of the image’s content. According to Groarke (2019, pp. 365-368), directly viewing the image is an essential element of visual argumentation, and visual quoting and ostension can provide a more faithful account of what actually occurs in many multimodal acts of arguing, and avoid the potential disputes associated with verbal description. This aligns with the views of Barceló Aspeitia, a fellow advocate of visual arguments. Barceló Aspeitia (2012) argues that images can contribute directly and substantially to the communication of the propositions that serve as premises and conclusions, and they can do so without the need for verbalization. Indeed, in certain contexts, purely visual images can effectively convey an argument without the aid of language. However, we wish to reiterate, as discussed in the second section of this paper, that while purely visual images can clearly express an argument in specific contexts, this does not imply that they cannot be described in language, nor does it suggest that describing them in language is unnecessary.

While we agree that direct viewing of the image is fundamentally important for understanding visual arguments, this does not imply that verbal description is unnecessary. As discussed earlier in this paper, verbal expression provides essential clarity, which is crucial for argument analysis.

Some might argue that certain visual arguments do not require verbal description. For example, Groarke (2015, pp. 136-137) presents a case involving van Eemeren at the airport: Suppose you and I are debating whether van Eemeren is currently in Amsterdam. I believe he is, while you believe he is not. At that moment, I see him ahead of us and show you his photograph while pointing in his direction to support my position. Groarke suggests that in this instance, “verbal elaboration” (*ibid.*, p. 138) is not necessary.

We acknowledge that Groarke’s example of van Eemeren at the Amsterdam airport may be “self-sufficient” (*ibid.*, p. 139) and may

not require verbal description. However, such cases, which involve simple recognition, evidently do not represent the majority of visual arguments. In more complex visual arguments (e.g., cartoons, advertisements), verbal description becomes unavoidable; without it, determining whether an argument is being made can be nearly impossible.

Therefore, we propose a modified version of the KC table that incorporates both visual quoting or ostension and verbal description, as both elements are indispensable for the analysis of visual arguments. This is a *compromised* version of the KC table in the sense that, unlike Groarke's version, it is not as radical in completely abandoning the verbal description of images. It is important to note that verbal description is not intended to replace visual images but rather to serve as a crucial reference that aids in understanding the argumentative content of these images. The juxtaposition of visual quoting or ostension with verbal description allows analysts to better grasp the key components of visual arguments.

To use a metaphor, consider a bilingual dictionary (e.g., English-French, English-Chinese). Compared to a monolingual dictionary, such a resource helps language learners gain a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of a word's original meaning, given the challenges—or even the impossibility—of achieving complete translation between two languages. Similarly, there is an interpretative gap between visual images and their verbal translations or descriptions. Compared to Groarke's version, our compromised KC table, which facilitates an intuitive understanding of the visual image while also providing a verbal reconstruction of its argumentative content, better helps people fully and accurately comprehend the meaning of the image.

While this is not the place to delve deeply into Groarke's theory of argument analysis, our discussion of his extended KC tables and our proposed compromised version demonstrates the possibility of developing a theory for the descriptive analysis of visual arguments.

More importantly, the above discussion leads to a proper positioning of a theory for the descriptive analysis of visual arguments: it is not a completely new theory that can replace verbal argumentation theory but rather an expansion of verbal argumentation theory that introduces new elements related to visual analysis. Thus, the second horn of the DVA does not convincingly argue against the necessity of a dedicated theory of visual argumentation either. At this point, the DVA has been demonstrated to be a false dilemma.

The previous discussion explored the legitimacy challenges that visual argumentation theory faces in its descriptive aspect. Now, we turn to the normative issues it encounters, which present a more challenging problem. According to Godden (2013, 2017), the debate over the existence of visual arguments and their descriptive challenges is a relatively minor issue, as he confidently assumes these can be satisfactorily addressed. Instead, he identifies the normative challenge as “the most important theoretical issue” (Godden 2017, p. 396). Godden (2013, 2017) argues that if the existence of visual arguments does not necessitate any revision of the normative standards of existing argumentation theory, then it lacks normative significance. We concur with this opinion. If the normative significance of visual argumentation theory cannot be adequately defended, then even if its descriptive significance is justified (as discussed above), the overall significance of visual argumentation theory would be greatly diminished.

The most systematic challenge to the normative aspect of visual argumentation theory comes from Blair (2015) and Godden (2013, 2017). Blair (2015), through the verbal reconstruction of four visual argument cases, illustrates that the probative merits (or logical cogency) of visual arguments can be evaluated using the same criteria as verbal arguments (*ibid.*, p. 231):

Are the premises acceptable? Do they serve to justify the conclusion?  
Are there objections either to the premises or to the inference that would

refute them unless successfully countered? Are there, independently, objections to the conclusion that would refute it unless successfully countered?

Similar to Blair's perspective, Godden (2013, 2017) argues that visual arguments can be evaluated using the same methods as verbal arguments. In other words, visual arguments do not require distinct normative theories, methods, criteria, or standards for evaluation. He refers to this position as "normative non-revisionism" and labels the opposing stance as "normative revisionism" (2017, p. 401). In Godden's initial article on normative non-revisionism, he outlines the argument as follows (2013, pp. 6-7):

P1. Arguments (whatever else they are or do, and however they are presented) necessarily involve (contain, express, convey) reasons.

P2. Assessing the rational quality of arguments involves assessing the probative qualities of their reasons.

P3. The probative qualities of reasons do not vary according to their manner of presentation or mode of expression.

C. Hence, visual arguments do not require any revision to our normative theories of argument.

Building on this line of argument, Godden presents a more systematic defense of normative non-revisionism in his later article (2017). He elaborates on each premise of the argument structure and provides detailed refutations of what he refers to as "the incommensurability thesis" (i.e., the claim that visual arguments are normatively incommensurable with verbal arguments) and "the ineffability thesis" (i.e., the claim that visual arguments are irreducible to verbal arguments).

We find Godden's detailed argument for normative non-revisionism is generally convincing, but we still have some important reservations: even if visual arguments can be evaluated using the same standards as verbal arguments, this does not necessarily imply that

the theory of visual argumentation is normatively insignificant.

The criteria for evaluating arguments, as advocated by Blair and Godden, are trans-modal, applying to arguments regardless of their mode of expression. The RSA triangle—comprising acceptability, relevance, and sufficiency (which includes both inferential and dialectical sufficiency)—is commonly used to evaluate verbal arguments and is equally applicable to visual arguments (Blair 2015, p. 231; Godden 2017, p. 400). However, we argue that current argumentation theory primarily focuses on the acceptability of verbal premises, often *neglecting* the unique considerations required for visual premises.

When applying the RSA standards to visual arguments, the relevance and sufficiency criteria assess the logical relationship between premises and the conclusion. It is reasonable to argue that the logical connection between propositions is based on their content rather than their mode of expression. However, the acceptability criterion involves evaluating how well a premise is received by an audience, a process inherently subjective in nature. Given this subjectivity, the mode of expression becomes important, alongside the content.

Visual images often convey rich and vivid information more effectively than text. For instance, a photograph of bombed civilian homes can evoke a deeper understanding of the suffering caused by war compared to the verbal statement, “People’s houses are blown up in the war.” Even when the content is the same, the acceptability of a visual premise can differ significantly from that of a verbal premise. Therefore, it is crucial to examine the visual premise itself, not just its verbal description, when evaluating its acceptability.<sup>8</sup>

Current standards for evaluating premise acceptability are primarily based on verbal propositions. For example, Freeman (2005),

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<sup>8</sup> The compromised KC table proposed in this paper facilitates the direct examination of the visual premise itself. Hence, the compromised KC table supports a more nuanced evaluation of the acceptability of visual premises.

Groarke and Tindale (2012), and Govier (2013) outline various criteria for premise acceptability, such as true premises, presumed premises, premises supported by a cogent sub-argument, premises supported elsewhere, and premises known a priori to be true. These standards seem to overlook the distinct characteristics of visual images.

To address this gap, we propose expanding the criteria for premise acceptability by incorporating insights from disciplines such as communication studies, visual rhetoric, semiotics, and cognitive science. The criteria for premise acceptability could be enriched in various ways to allow for more targeted evaluations of visual premises. Here, we will briefly consider a few examples.

For instance, when assessing the authenticity of an image, it is essential to determine whether the image has been edited or manipulated to the extent that it misrepresents reality—a criterion particularly relevant to photo-based visual arguments. In the era of AI, where the boundary between real and synthetic images has become increasingly blurred, realistic yet fake images can be easily generated, making this criterion crucial. Scholars have extensively discussed the challenges posed by advancements in image forgery technologies, such as “deepfake technology”, on information dissemination. They have also explored technical approaches and media literacy strategies to address these challenges (e.g., Farid 2019; Paris & Donovan 2019), providing theoretical resources for assessing the authenticity of images.

Moreover, when considering the composition and hierarchy of visual images, we should evaluate whether these aspects facilitate or hinder the audience’s acceptance of the image’s primary message. Scholars have introduced the concept of “visual grammar” and conducted in-depth research on how different compositional elements, such as framing, salience, and information value, contribute to the meaning-making process in visual communication (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen 2020; Machin 2007). These studies provide a solid foundation for understanding the communication and acceptance of

visual premises.

Additionally, regarding the cognitive aspects of visual images, it is important to assess whether the images can evoke cognitive stimulation, such as attention, memory, or pattern recognition, thereby enhancing the audience's acceptance of the visual premise. Cognitive scientists have conducted extensive research on visual communication, exploring how visual information is perceived, understood, and utilized (e.g., Humphreys & Bruce 1990; Kosslyn 1994). Their works provide a basis for evaluating the acceptability of visual premises from a cognitive perspective.

A more detailed exploration of these ideas lies beyond the scope of this paper, but the preceding discussion demonstrates that it is indeed possible to extend the criteria for premise acceptability to incorporate considerations specific to visual premises. This suggests that while the RSA standards can be applied to the evaluation of visual arguments, theorists should enhance the acceptability criteria by integrating additional sub-criteria tailored to visual images. In other words, the evaluation theory of visual argumentation does not propose an alternative to the RSA standards but rather enriches or expands them *within* the existing framework. Therefore, even if normative revisionism is incorrect, it cannot be argued that visual argumentation theory lacks its own unique normative significance.<sup>9</sup>

Another reason supporting the normative significance of visual argumentation theory is the development of argument schemes specifically tailored for evaluating visual arguments, such as the scheme of argument from fit proposed by Dove (2016). The identification and development of additional such visual argument schemes would undoubtedly bolster the normative significance of visual argumentation theory. Although this falls outside the scope of this paper, it is a

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<sup>9</sup> Certainly, "revisionism" in this context should be understood in a narrow sense, referring to fundamental changes to the RSA standards, such as removing one of the criteria or proposing an entirely new standard that diverges from RSA. Under this interpretation, adding sub-criteria within the RSA framework should not be classified as "revisionism".

research direction that warrants further exploration.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The primary aim of this paper is to critically reconstruct and examine the ongoing debate on the legitimacy of visual arguments and, based on this analysis, propose a solution to this issue. Using the type-theory framework we have introduced, the legitimacy problem of visual arguments is addressed more systematically, dividing it into two sub-problems.

First, regarding the legitimacy of visual arguments as a type of argument, this paper uses the O’Keefe-Blair conception of argument as the conceptual foundation. It addresses two primary challenges to the existence of visual arguments: structural concerns (SC) and propositional concerns (PC). By uncovering the presuppositions underlying the debate over the existence of visual arguments, the paper demonstrates that this controversy can be resolved through terminological clarification. We argue that visual arguments indeed exist, though their existence is dynamic rather than static, which we term *dynamic existentialism*. Unlike the determinacy-based existence of verbal arguments, the dynamic existentialism of visual arguments emphasizes the inherent flexibility in interpreting the meaning of images. This terminological clarification has been justified: it is more reasonable to acknowledge the legitimacy of visual arguments—specifically, recognizing their dynamic existence—than to deny their legitimacy entirely. This approach provides researchers with a clearer understanding of the logical status of visual arguments, indicating that logical theories and tools can be employed for analysis, even if the methods may not be entirely identical to those used for verbal arguments.

Second, in addressing the legitimacy of visual argumentation theory, this paper argues that visual argumentation theory can offer distinctive contributions to both the descriptive and normative aspects of argumentation theory. In descriptive aspects, by advocating a

compromised version of Groarke's KC table—specifically, incorporating both visual quoting or ostension and verbal description into the KC table—we demonstrate that it is possible to develop a descriptive argumentation theory that captures the unique characteristics of visual arguments. In normative aspects, although the evaluation criteria from verbal argumentation theory (i.e., the RSA criteria) can also be applied to visual arguments, the acceptability criteria can be enriched by integrating additional sub-criteria tailored to visual images. Therefore, developing a normative theory with distinctive features for visual argumentation is also feasible. Overall, we contend that a legitimate visual argumentation theory is not an alternative parallel to verbal argumentation theory but rather a theory that enriches and expands the existing framework of verbal argumentation theory.

In conclusion, the proposed dynamism-based existence of arguments and the suggested expansion of existing verbal argumentation theory provide a more systematic defense of the legitimacy of visual arguments. As mentioned at the end of Section 1, our defense is moderate in that it offers *qualified affirmative* answers to the two sub-problems concerning the legitimacy of visual arguments. This approach seeks to balance criticisms and support for visual argumentation theory by highlighting its distinctive features while acknowledging its limitations. We believe that this moderate defense can establish a stronger foundation for the flourishing field of research on visual arguments.

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