

# Visual Arguments in Film

Jesús Alcolea-Banegas

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**Abstract** Our aim is to point out some differences between verbal and visual arguments, promoting the rhetorical perspective of argumentation beyond the relevance of logic and pragmatics. In our view, if it is to be rational and successful, film as (visual) argumentation must be addressed to spectators who hold informed beliefs about the theme watched on the screen and the medium's constraints and conventions. In our reflections to follow, we apply rhetorical analysis to film as a symbolic, human, and communicative act that may sometimes be understood as a visually laid out argument. As a mixture of visual, auditory, and verbal stimuli, film demands active and complex interpretation and (re)construction. Our suggestion is to focus on five different but interrelated elements. The reconstruction and evaluation of the visual argument will be based on those elements, and the whole process will be one of visual argumentation.

**Keywords** Visual argument · Argumentation theory · (Informal) logic · Pragmatics · Pragmatic-dialectics · (Visual) rhetoric · Audience · Film theory

## 1 Introduction

New developments in the study of argumentation have addressed new contexts beyond those with which it was initially concerned. One significant point has been the recognition that important realms of argument exist beyond the verbal and written. One of these is visual argumentation. In this context, Birdsell and Groarke (1996) makes the point that some visual images are arguments, but of a non-propositional kind. Blair (1996) maintains that images can have propositional content and qualify as propositional arguments, since those propositions and their argumentative functions

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J. Alcolea-Banegas (✉)  
Universitat de València, Valencia, Spain  
e-mail: Jesus.Alcolea@uv.es

are expressed visually. The controversy affects the logical paradigm of arguments as verbal entities: arguments are understood as products that people develop when they argue. But we may also consider the rhetorical dimension, which allows us to understand the process of arguing as a natural element of the persuasive communication.

In our opinion, this controversy is unnecessary. We assume that some images function as arguments intended to persuade viewers. As our concern is cinema, we think that the contextual factors, the cinematic means, the filmmaker's aims and the characters' emotions are crucial for determining the meaning of visual arguments in film, and ultimately for persuading the audience to accept the thesis the filmmaker wanted to establish. We know that rational argument is not omnipotent. Its power of persuasion might be impressive, but it is inferior to the direct force of images. Vision and images go together in promoting this driving force. According to Gorgias, our spirit is moulded even in its character through vision, 'for the things we see do not have the nature which we wish them to have, but the nature which each happens to have; through sight the soul is impressed even to its core' (2003, p. 82). Carl Theodor Dreyer used to say 'that the film first and foremost is a visual art, first and foremost directs itself to the eye, and that the picture far, far more easily than the spoken word penetrates deeply into the spectator's consciousness' (1991, p. 128). Images have a great influence on our state of mind, and filmmakers arrange the images to induce emotions and passions with the intention of touching us.

As a part of a filmmaker's strategies, visual images impact on spectators' emotions through the emotions experienced by the film's characters. Emotions are also associated with meaning, and beyond visual information we may develop hypotheses to interpret what is seen. In order to fulfil this role, rhetoric must be a way of discovering and communicating good reasons: it should tell us when we are in the presence of truths worthy of assent. The process operates in the realm of contingent judgment, not involving the imposition of the views of the filmmaker on a passive audience but the active participation of spectators. However, we are neither compelled to share the point of view of the filmmaker, nor entirely free to supply pragmatic inferences or critical assessments of our own. Freedom is submitted to the complex process of reading/viewing the film. Thus, by adding elements of rhetorical and pragmatic analysis, cinema allows inference and criticism to carry forward into a domain where the viewer's activity becomes necessary to drive interpretation and reconstruction.

Our aim, then, will be to point out some differences between verbal and visual arguments, promoting the rhetorical perspective of argumentation beyond the relevance of logic and pragmatics. In our view, if it is to be rational and successful, film as (visual) argumentation must be addressed to spectators who hold informed beliefs about the theme watched on the screen and the medium's constraints and conventions. In our reflections to follow, we apply rhetorical analysis to film as a symbolic, human, and communicative act that may sometimes be understood as a visually laid out argument. As a mixture of visual, auditory, and verbal stimuli, film demands active and complex interpretation and (re)construction. Our suggestion is to focus on five different but interrelated elements. The reconstruction and evaluation of the visual argument will be based on those elements, and the whole process will be one of visual argumentation. Although our reflections could be supported by many examples, we close with an illustrative film directed by John Ford.

## 2 Verbal Arguments and Visual Arguments: Logic, Pragmatics and Rhetoric

Visual arguments can be understood as propositional arguments in which the propositions and their argumentative function are expressed visually. This is due to the fact that the definition of argument has always carried with it the idea that an argument is something that can be made explicit. This point brings up what Tarnay has called *the requirement of propositionality*. While some scholars consider that verbal and visual forms of argument are continuous (cf. Groarke 1996), we agree with Tarnay that, when one clarifies an argument transmitted by a succession of images, one has carried out a hermeneutic reconstruction. That is, an argument is built starting from the hierarchy of meanings associated with, or transmitted by, the images (*lógos*); from the rhetorical context in which they are taking place or the intention (*éthos*); and from the emotional effect produced (*páthos*) (Tarnay 2003, p. 1001).

Now, when contemplating the possibility of the visual argument, and trying to answer affirmatively, Blair (1996) seems to say that it is necessary to communicate the functions of the propositions visually. This task demands that some visual propositions be considered as theses (conclusions) and others as reasons in favor of those theses, leaving aside that some of them have not been expressed explicitly (or even visually). In other words, in principle it does not seem to be impossible to express visually the illative function or the function of being “a reason in favor of.” As a last resort, images can only be understood as arguments if their (manifest and latent) content is reconstructed in propositional terms, repeating the subordination of aesthetics, literature and rhetoric to the perspective of logic as the unique critical method in the argumentative field.

Blair also assumes that the topic requires the adoption of certain visual conventions, but this is not less certain with verbal communication. Cinema, for example, is full of visual conventions. The greatness of some movies results, however, from the ability of some filmmakers to subvert the conventional meanings, leaving the way open to multiple interpretations and to critical polemic. This, once again, is not less certain of the problems posed by large arguments in academic contexts that are not exclusively visual, as is the case in philosophy and the way of interpreting the arguments of great philosophers.

Blair points out an important difference between verbal expression and visual expression. A verbal or written sentence gives an idea of its propositional content, if there is no indication against it. But this does not happen this way with visual expression in general. In this context, he mentions *Batman* (T. Burton, 1989) as a merely entertaining movie, while *Dancing with Wolves* (K. Costner, 1990) and *JFK* (O. Stone, 1991) would aim to be “thesis” movies, which could be dramatically structured with the purpose of expressing a certain point of view and that eventually could emerge as candidates to visual arguments.

Nevertheless, Blair concludes that there is much greater indeterminacy in the visual expression than in the verbal one. This conclusion is quite trivial so far as propositional contents are concerned. Somehow, visual images are arbitrary, vague, and ambiguous, but the same applies to words and propositions. This is the reason, for example, why historians discuss the interpretation of historical documents or why personal antagonism will influence what one said and what one really intended.

While the verbal expression so understood enjoys greater precision than the visual expression, it may enjoy a smaller force of persuasion.

The meaning of a visual argument depends on a complex set of internal relations between (successions of) images and a set of interpreters. We may understand “argument” in the first sense of O’Keefe (1982, pp. 3–4) as ‘a kind of utterance or a sort of communicative act.’ It is a kind of argument that we can make in the absence of an interlocutor, which may have a relatively implicit message and may require considerable interpretation. The way in which an argument is expressed is important for its identification, reconstruction and even its assessment. As in any text, the utterances, the force of their expression, what is said and what is left unsaid (explicit or implicit), the filmic conventions, and so on—all count in films.

It should be recognized that the (visual) meaning is not necessarily arbitrary and that it usually also depends upon the context of its use and the form of its expression. Within the (Gricean) pragmatic tradition, Austin (1962) defended the need to analyze the total speech act in the total speech situation (p. 52), developing a broader sense of argument from the rhetorical perspective. Significantly, the speech situation may include not only the conventions that explain acts like arguing, but even the consequential effects produced ‘upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons’, with some ‘design, intention or purpose’ (p. 101).<sup>1</sup>

That rhetorical perspective has been adopted by Willard (1989, p. 92), who adds that ‘arguers, like all communicators, use any or all of the communication vehicles available to them ... Once we have an argument, *anything* used to communicate within it is germane to an analysis of how the argument proceeds and how it affects the arguers.’ Notice that ‘*anything* used to communicate’ may include a film, and anything can be analyzed on its own terms, according to its particular conventions, the adaptation or presentation of its material to the audience, and so on.<sup>2</sup> This is the reason why we need to draw attention to a set of theoretical components for interpreting, understanding and (re)constructing argument in film.

<sup>1</sup> Compare it with the following declaration by the filmmaker S. M. Eisenstein: ‘A work of art, understood dynamically, is just this process of arranging the images in the feelings and mind of the spectator’ (1947, p. 17).

<sup>2</sup> Elaborating on Willard’s idea, Tindale (1999, p. 84) says that the extension of “argumentative text” may include ‘films, newsreels, humorous anecdotes, fables, and other narratives, even the juxtaposition of headlines with photographs on a newspaper’s front page, may promote a point of view for which an audience’s adherence is sought, or may be used in that promotion.’ Besides, starting from the assumption that rhetoric, as the study of effective techniques of persuasion, operates within a dialectical framework, because it ‘is not per se incompatible with the critical ideal of reasonableness’, van Eemeren and Houtlosser (2000) writes: ‘It is to be investigated which rhetorical strategies are used in the discourse in order to achieve the result aimed for by the speaker or writer. Rhetorical strategies may manifest themselves at three levels: in the selection of material, its adaptation to the audience, and its presentation. In order to achieve the optimal rhetorical result, the selected moves must be an effective choice from the available potential, the moves must be in such a way adapted to the audience that they comply with auditorial demands, and the presentation of the moves must be discursively and stylistically appropriate. At each of these three levels, the speaker or writer has a chance to influence the outcome of the discussion, and the influences may occur simultaneously. A rhetorical strategy is, in fact, optimally successful if the rhetorical efforts at the three levels converge, so that a fusion of persuasive influences is generated.’

Some works have been devoted to the interaction—between utterance meaning and contextual assumptions—that yields the audience’s interpretations. Sperber and Wilson (1986) identify the context as a subset of existing mentally represented assumptions which interacts with newly impinging information (received via perception or communication) to give rise to contextual effects. These effects are the kind of result which a newly received stimulus must bring about, by interacting with some of the assumptions already in the cognitive system, in order for it to be relevant. There are three types of contextual (or cognitive) effect an stimulus produced by watching a film may have: supporting and so strengthening existing assumptions; contradicting and eliminating assumptions; and combining inferentially with them to produce new conclusions.<sup>3</sup> In a broad sense, the context involves a wide variety of cultural suppositions, ideas related to the situation, information that can change as time goes by, the knowledge of the interpreters, and the dialectic developed among them when trying to interpret and reconstruct the (visual) argument.

So in visual expressions, a range of interpretative possibilities can be inferred from the external or internal contextual clues. However, we may face a problem here: while the film is shared, our cognitive abilities, like our visible abilities, are distinct. This is important because we will differ in our ability to infer other facts from those we perceive directly. We do not even know what is known in common by others. This endows visual arguments with a bigger force and versatility. In fact, visual arguments are arguments in whose interpretation, analysis and evaluation, the (meta-)argumentative idea of ‘discussing matters’ (van Eemeren and Grootendorst 2004, p. 14) makes more sense as something typical of the argumentative processes. Here resides, in our view, a very important difference between verbal arguments and visual arguments. This is a relevant point that may assuage the reservations that some theoreticians have expressed with respect to visual arguments (cf. Johnson 2003). These arguments may have elements that contribute to their persuasive force, but when interpreted in order to be reconstructed as arguments, in O’Keefe’s first sense, those elements may be lost or cannot be expressed in (verbal) language.

As is well known, arguments are fundamentally linguistic entities that express, with a special pragmatic force, propositions where those propositions stand in particular inferential relations to one another. If you cannot explicate from a film such propositional assemblies and modes of expression, the film is not, or does not contain, an argument. Our concern, however, is not only with the description of the argument; it is also motivated by an interest in evaluation. We want to assess the degree to which—as a message—a film invites warranted assent and reasoned

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<sup>3</sup> For the usefulness of Sperber and Wilson’s relevance theory in explaining the techniques of “unreliable” filmic narration, see Buckland 1995. Notice, however, that the context of an utterance is ‘the set of premises used in interpreting [it]’. As such, is a psychological concept: ‘A context is a psychological construct, a subset of the hearer’s assumptions about the world’ (Sperber and Wilson 1986, p. 15). Hence in relevance theory context does not refer to some part of the external environment of the communication partners, be it the text preceding or following an utterance, situational circumstances, cultural factors, and so forth. Context rather refers to part of their “assumptions about the world” or “cognitive environment”, as it is called. The notion of “cognitive environment” takes into account the various external factors but places the emphasis on the information they provide and its mental availability for the interpretation process.

adherence. To make that assessment requires evaluation to be analytically independent of description. The argument as a product is (part of) what could have been said by the filmmaker.

Like O’Keefe, we think that there is nothing questionable in abstracting the argument from its communicative vehicle. In fact, the problem with a film where we can identify a visual argument is the fidelity to the filmmaker’s intentions. However, in general, the meaning of a film (a text, a work of art, etc.) can be considered quite independently from any intentions an author might have had, because the intentions behind a film can rarely be fully recovered, especially when the author is absent. Sometimes a great deal of interpretation is required to make explicit the claim of an argument and the whole set of its premises, even though the elaboration of that argument should not be counted among the author’s intentions.<sup>4</sup>

Under the influence of Popper’s philosophy and his theory of the so-called “world 3”, we think that when interpreting a film an interpreter may discover an argument, because the products of that world bring with them some properties beyond the intention of their creators. In fact, Popper says that ‘though man-made, [a work of art] creates its own interrelations’ (1972, p. 180 note). The necessity of world 3 stems rather from the necessity of separating the very argument of the beliefs and desires of the participants in an (argumentative) interaction. It is necessary to show the rationality of the process; that could only be done by identifying the underlying argument, which stands and is developed in world 3 together with propositions, theories, problems, and so on. As is well known, this is a methodological strategy to avoid psychologism. So we are advised not to reduce argumentation to a process of internal reasoning, and not to focus on the intentional character of rhetorical discourse but in its purposiveness.

Finally, some films may implicitly pose a claim, and make use of visual components to support that claim. But a film may also pose a question or a challenge to the audience which may continue into an argumentative process in the mind of the viewers or in actual verbal exchanges between them. In this way, cinema may be argumentative and can prompt argumentative processes. In that case, it is not unconceivable that a filmmaker can argue with his/her critics.

### 3 Viewing, Interpreting, Reconstructing, and Being Moved

In film, as in art, meaning depends upon perception. Even representation is important because a film intends to say something: it conveys some meaning to somebody. Viewers have to interpret what was said starting from the explicit elements, frequently reconstructing the original message with their own means and

<sup>4</sup> Groarke’s (1996) reconstruction and evaluation of *The Death of Marat* by J.-L. David comes to mind as an example. After providing background knowledge and aesthetic commentaries, Groarke reconstructs an argument and claims that his interpretation ‘well captures the essence of the piece, which is a call to emulate Marat built upon an argument from analogy which compares Marat to Christ’ (p. 120). Although we are probably far from having David’s intentions properly reflected in that interpretation, Groarke has provided us with an argument and so *The Death of Marat* qualified as a visual argument (cf. Johnson 2003).

words, and connecting the meaning constituted in this way with their own experiences, beliefs and values. In this sense, and by way of example, it could be said that the most intellectual films, as visual arguments, leave the way open to different interpretations. Interpreters will endow arguments with a meaning that will not necessarily coincide with the meaning that the filmmaker had originally in mind. In this sense, we can speak of the *formal* or *open* character of the visual arguments. Once interpreted, those arguments may give rise to controversy among the critical interpreters, because there will always be disagreements over the correctness/incorrectness of the interpretation.

Since the arguments do not always appear in the form required by logic, the logical standpoint is a retrospective account that is activated when somebody adopts a critical position and lays out an argument ready for analysis and evaluation. When carrying out a logical evaluation, the critics should also deploy their rhetorical and dialectical perceptiveness. Given that the symbolic resources by means of which we can make arguments are virtually infinite, the arguments can be constructed in a subtle and obscure way. Rhetorical analysis is useful when bringing to light the subtle movements inside argumentative texts, and it transforms itself into a necessary instrument of logical reconstruction. In other words, rhetoric allows us to see which arguments are being constructed and which symbolic elements used.

As Kracauer (1997, p. 285) has argued, cinema reaches people’s minds through symbols. As a kind of language, film is *symbolic* and it will be ‘inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols’ (Burke 1969, p. 43). It involves human action in the process of its creation (*authorship*) and in the process of interpretation (*audience*). So, a film is a symbolic, human, and communicative act, because (1) it establishes an arbitrary relationship between image and some (imaginary or real) referent; and (2) it is created by human beings to be communicated to other human beings that will be interpreting it. It is quite obvious that without all these elements we cannot speak of argument in film (see Fig. 1). Nonetheless, film does not exist simply to transmit messages. If it did, there would

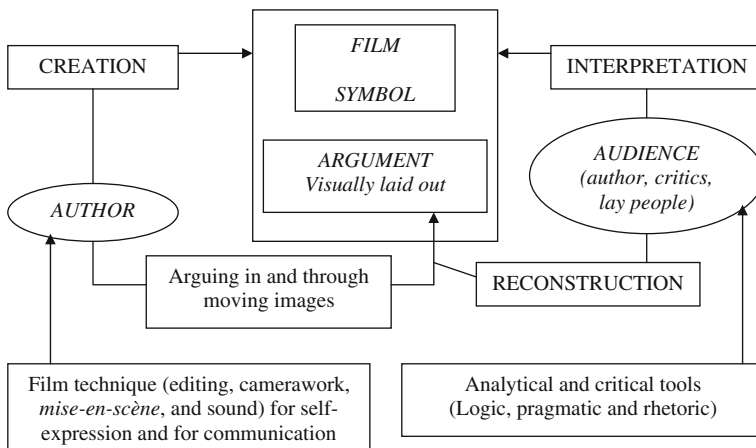


Fig. 1 Argument in film

be no difference between it and ordinary informational discourse. As a work of art, film is primarily an engagement of people with materials and forms.

However, moving images do not express a proposition or set of propositions in the way that verbal discourse does. In fact, as with pictures, a film ‘shows more than can be said—and not simply because the verbal lexicon is short of corresponding equivalents: it is not just a matter of the non-availability of verbal names for the thousands of colours and forms that we can distinguish’ (Black 1972, p. 109). So, to identify the independent units of a sequence that would correspond to words or even propositions is practically impossible. We have to decode the symbols to provide them with a meaning that will not be independent of the rest of the sequence. We may attribute propositions to them, but somehow meaning has a holistic character in film, because the film is a sort of organization in which the parts create and support the whole structure, and hence, by derivation, the visually laid out argument.

In that respect, *Rashômon* (A. Kurosawa, 1951) teaches us at least two lessons. Between words and action, Kurosawa tends to trust action more. In this film, a great part of the plot is visual, perhaps due to the fact that the eye discerns more than the ear. The reconstruction of the images of the alleged crime are produced and interwoven in such a way that it is impossible to contemplate them without becoming seriously aware of their relevance for the film’s thesis. It seems to assert the relativity of truth, in the sense that we never know where it lies or who possesses it. Its unusual narrative structure reflects the impossibility of obtaining the truth about an event when there are conflicting witness accounts (the bandit, the murdered samurai, his wife, and a woodcutter). These accounts contradict each other, leaving the viewer unable to determine the truth about the events. The viewer never knows what really happened, because there is no recording of the events as they actually occurred. Thus, the absolute truth may be unknowable. In addition, *Rashômon* provides a model for the film’s insistence on the influence of interpretation on action, and on the way in which our judgments of the behavior of others serve to license our own. The scenes in the courtyard where the bandit is judged show the total impossibility of validating interpretation, while the scenes at the gate during the rainstorm show the absolute need to interpret. So the film emphasizes the indispensability, even in the absence of certainty, of making a commitment.

Another important difference between verbal and visual language is that the first is general and abstract, while images are particular and concrete. As it works with emotions as much as with logical elements, cinema refers, evidently, to particulars. The emotions affect people in particular situations. But with this accent on particular situations, cinema really aspires to universality, facing it in a different way. In *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), what O. Stone says about war is said of the idea of war. The story of Ron Kovic is not only the story of an American boy who is paralyzed, but represents a universal argument about the stupidity of the war in general. The emotion we feel viewing Kovic’s drama is not simply the pity we feel because it happened to a particular person. It is created by a reflection of universal scope that allows us to think about the world globally, beyond the simple story shown by the film. The emotional impact will have served not for us to stop in the particular situation, but to help us to catch the universal idea in a more overwhelming way.



As *Born on the Fourth of July* shows, the film may preserve its rhetorical impact and its persuasive efficacy through our emotional participation. It seems that those elements that would apparently distort contemplation—interests, feelings, compulsions, affective preferences—are precisely its most indispensable instruments. Emotional mediation is essential for understanding many problems. Purely logical arguments are unable to penetrate the essence of things without the help of emotions. Any idea may be accepted by the rhetoric and persuasive force of emotion, but the image and its emotional impact may be insufficient. Sometimes, they need some external element from the context, some information that does not spring from the mere image. For instance, Soviet filmmakers use visual elements as referents of the prevailing ideology. In *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), the pictorial symbolism allows us to grasp the referent of the marble lion that leaps up in protest against the bloodshed on the Odessa steps. Composed of three shots of three stationary marble lions (sleeping, awakening and rising), it is an example of the way Eisenstein used to experiment with the dialectical montage that would eventually become intellectual cinema—a cinema able to convey ideas through emotion, feeling and poetry, able to mobilize a sensorial thought. Eisenstein wrote (1992, pp. 149 and 154) that in film ‘*emotional* effect begins only with the reconstruction of the event in montage fragments, each of which will summon a certain association—the sum of which will be an all-embracing complex of emotional feeling.’ While the ‘film directs the *emotions*, this suggests an opportunity to encourage and direct the whole *thought process*, as well.’ But insofar as the film uses procedures for rhetorical ends, the process of narration becomes overt.

It might be objected that we are merely describing an argumentation practice, and providing no principles that would justify the priority of meeting rhetorical standards over those of logic and dialectic in film. However, this particular practice has a long history of functioning fairly well in realizing its objectives all over the world. The instantiation of epistemic, aesthetic, moral, political and social values is included in those objectives. So the first task of (visual) argument interpretation and assessment—and of (visual) argument design and presentation as well—is to situate the argument or argumentation rhetorically. In this respect, rhetoric has theoretical priority. In other words, as communicative practices, films and visual arguments can be best understood by their rhetorical features.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4 The Elements for Developing a Claim from a Moving Image

Visual images and discursive symbols are also quite different from the point of view of the process of argumentation. As a mixture of visual, auditory, and verbal stimuli, film demands active and complex construction. That means that we cannot split form from content, because everything has a formal function and a dynamic relation of unity. However, we suggest it would be appropriate to focus on five different but

<sup>5</sup> As is historically well known, for those who have emphasized the dialectical and pragmatic properties of argumentation, norms of logic are essential components to the extent that the practice is rational in some sense, and norms of rhetoric are followed to the extent that the practice involves successful communication.

interrelated elements for our idea of a visual reading of the film and for the process of developing a claim from a moving image:

- (1) *Physical (cinematic and technical) elements* including design, form, style, and medium. Cinematic means of camerawork (such as distance, angle, and mobility), *mise-en-scène* (behavior and placements of the figures, lighting, costume, and so on), editing, and sound are used to create logical patterns, because a film may be ruled by a cause-effect logic (cf. Bordwell and Thompson 2004, pp. 69ff). Those means construct space and spatial relations. The story may also consist of events connected in time by causality, while the plot is the way these events are actually presented in the telling. Flashbacks, ellipses, abrupt omissions, limited points of view, narrators, and so on are the means by which the plot manipulates the presentation of story events. A nice example would be *Citizen Kane* (O. Welles, 1941), whose plot summarizes much of the film story events through the recollections of Kane's associates, but in a way that each one may describe Kane's personality as a man that spends his life collecting objects (including people) to be finally (re)collected by them.
- (2) *Non-physical elements* (such as ideas and subjects) suggested to, or inferred by, the viewers. Here is where pragmatic inferences may take place. In Dreyer's *The Word (Ordet)*, (1955), the vision of Anne Petersen with the birdcage in her hands allows us to infer that she is less free than the bird in its cage. This inference will be confirmed by her father's prohibition to meet (and to marry) Anders Borgen. In fact, she is a prisoner of a dreadful way of understanding religion. In general, cinema is a powerful means of transmitting ideas, feelings and moods. As we have suggested before, this is particularly true of Soviet cinema, where the demands of poetics and rhetoric shape basic film strategies. However, the story may also represent a set of abstract propositions whose validity is presupposed or reaffirmed by the film. For instance, Eisenstein's *Strike (Stachka)*, (1925) is not only the story of a particular strike. It is a discourse about all the Russian strikes that led to the Soviet revolution. The purpose of the film is to create a conflict that proves the thesis and offers narrative interest. The argument works by appeal to example: narrative cause and effect show the need for the working class to struggle against capitalist forces.
- (3) *Prior knowledge* acquired by the viewer through experience and learning, watching films or from the everyday world, or in general what may be called "cognitive environment", following Sperber and Wilson's suggestion (1986, p. 38). This idea takes into account various external factors, emphasizing the information they provide and its mental availability for the interpretation process. However, when watching/reading an image or attending a discourse, it is difficult to make a distinction between what is given by that image or discourse and what is provided by us in the process of projection started by recognition. As persuasive discourse, a film is effective because of its insertion as a whole into a concrete situation. We search for a coherent sense, trying to make it part of an organization that will have a coherent interpretation. Inside

this interpretation we must find the argument. As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca wrote, ‘the analysis of one link of an argument out of its context and independently of the situation to which it belongs involves undeniable dangers.’ In film these are due not only to the equivocal character of film language, but also to the fact that ‘the springs supporting the argumentation are almost never entirely explicitly described’ (1969, p. 187). In a nutshell, if we do not grasp the situation, we do not grasp the argument. Grasping the situation requires possession of previous knowledge. Film, as art, demands reflection, effort, and participation from the spectator. In that respect, Antonioni’s visual narration, intensively concentrated on the sheer appearance of things and the rejection of explanatory dialogue, proposes a way of encouraging participant spectatorship in a format not divorced from questions about life.<sup>6</sup>

- (4) *Emotional states* evoked in the viewer by the moving image. We may recall that in the beginning of his *Poetics*, discussing the mimetic procedure (representation), Aristotle (1991) concludes that the visual aspect encompasses all other aspects (1447a13-18). In fact, the visual is the most seductive mode for the spirit (*psuchagôgikon*). The images called into being by words should thus coincide with the representation on stage, or, more specifically, with the emotions evoked by the gestures and performance of the actors (1455a22-23). In cinema, even colours and forms may be at the service of arousing emotions. In *Interiors* (W. Allen, 1978), the interior of Eve’s home—designed by her—tells the audience a lot about the way Eve feels and thinks: she has created a crystal palace as cold as her soul. The viewer cannot avoid that feeling watching the film. In fact, that idea is part of Allen’s thesis.
- (5) The *purpose* for which the moving image was created: defending a thesis, propaganda, documentation, entertainment, and so on. Some films may be analyzed as material from which to begin to describe steps in the inferential process of using reasons to arrive at claims. When shooting a documentary film, the filmmaker opens his/her lens to the world. In *Darwin’s Nightmare* (H. Sauper, 2004) we do not find any word that establishes a presumptive claim, but the images provide some clues for the viewer to make it explicit. To take another example, the advertising images (such as TV commercials) may fulfil different functions. One of them is the argumentative one (cf. Slade 2003) in which the images justify with reasons the quality of the product, although interest in its acquisition depends on the audience.

All the elements in film serve the primary purpose of telling a story. What makes stylistic elements particularly salient is their function to involve the viewers in the storytelling process as active, intelligent partners. Filmmakers have also the associative capacity to propose meanings to the spectators, and to articulate the images in a way that viewers will be able to make the relevant inferences through interpretation. We may discover here the originality of the filmmaker through two

<sup>6</sup> In fact, in accordance with Gombrich’s (1998) reflections on painting, the viewer needs some knowledge of the medium’s constraints and conventions, a sense of the purpose, the ability to filling what is missing, and a proclivity to compare the painting with pertinent experiences of the world.

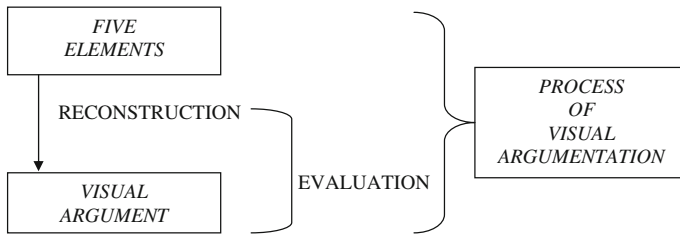
abilities: (1) the ability to complete, to a certain point, the images generating argumentative structures, which can be identified by the spectators; and (2) the ability to conceive a narrative program in order to make it acceptable to the spectator, setting its elements in a way that the audience could participate (seeking their complicity), and making it entertaining.

People who doubt the spectator's capacities to think while watching a film should remember that, when attending a verbal discourse, they "see" the "style" of delivery: voice, accent, pauses, inflections, stresses, gestures, the particular stance and posture of the body, and the management of the eyes and of facial expressions. An inept delivery ruins a speech. In film we find a complex aesthetic system that combines form and representation with the aim of catching the spectator's eye and inviting him/her to think. But the quality of the audiovisual story lies not in the theme but, above all, in the discourse, in the way it is dealt with and developed until the moment it is transformed in an argument. So the argument is the rhetorical and pragmatic effect of the audiovisual discourse. In its action, this discourse reveals the consistency of rational argument and the efficiency of persuasive force. This is achieved by the verisimilitude of the story and the constructive involvement of the spectator, which contribute to the structural articulation offered by the filmmaker.

In this way, the spectator may unveil fundamental positions in the story and explain the validity and coherence of the arguments put forward by the filmmaker. Here the *mise-en-scène* is probably the most important film resource. It allows a great conciseness and immediacy in a character's description and way of thinking. *The Asphalt Jungle's* *mise-en-scène* shows J. Huston's skilfulness to translate the script into images and to think in and through images. In that film, released in 1950, the *mise-en-scène* provides us with one of the most beautiful visual dilemmas. When Louis Ciavelli decides to grant Gus Minissi the loan, so that Dix Handley can pay his debt, Louis comes closer to his bedroom, spends some seconds contemplating his wife and son sleeping, and then returns to the telephone and closes the door in an expression that confronts the moral option of the situation: against the hindrance of family and home, on whom he turns his back, Louis remains loyal to the friend, in this case Gus. After evaluation we may see that the dilemma is perfectly coherent with the story.

The reconstruction of the visual argument that supports the claim will lean heavily on those five elements, and we propose to call the whole process *the process of visual argumentation* (see Fig. 2)<sup>7</sup>. It allows us to improve our understanding of the communicative dimension of the moving image. Analysis of the physical and non-physical elements allows the audience to understand the communicative units and to grasp the different interpretations the film may afford. Although the images operate transmitting ideas, the filmmaker's intentions do not always determine the correct interpretation of the film. Critics, for instance, may be interested in discovering the filmmaker's motivations because, as a work of art, the film is always open, and it stands independently of its creator's intention. What makes a film a

<sup>7</sup> We have found inspiration in Tindale's (2004) idea of rhetorical argumentation.



**Fig. 2** The process of visual argumentation

classic is not only that new audiences may enjoy it, but that they may discover new ideas and even (visual) arguments.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the evaluation of the film may be done in different ways. The most common focuses on the way it accomplishes the functions suggested by the image, and the purpose. Thus, the evaluation will discern whether or not the physical elements are working properly. Experts in film studies will enjoy this kind of evaluation, but some other experts will be reflecting on the consequences of the functions. Analysis and evaluation allow us to discover whether or not we are facing an argument to support the thesis advanced, and its validity and coherence. Significantly, with respect to the (narrated) story, the whole visual argumentation exhibits these functions: (1) it arranges the referential dimension of the story, (2) it transforms the story into an abstract and discursive operation of the mind (logical and philosophical dimension) bringing to light the visual argument, (3) it shapes the story in order to be content of (persuasive) communication (rhetorical dimension), (4) it articulates the story as a dialectics of human actions, linking characters to scenarios, strategies and goals, and shaping characters' arguments as central elements in their speeches, and (5) it makes the film legible.

## 5 Concluding: Visual Arguments in *the Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*

Groarke (2002, p. 145, 2007) says that three principles of visual communication are available to interpret images in visual arguments. They come from pragma-dialectics. In order for them to be applied to films, they should be rephrased as follows: (1) moving images must be in principle understandable; (2) moving images must be interpreted making sense of the film's internal elements; and (3) moving images must be interpreted making sense of its external connections. As we have suggested, although the interpretation may be diverse, the evaluation of visual argument in film will depend on a successful interpretation. For our purposes we had the fortune to find a film that may have just one interpretation and has a lot to say about communication in a non-civilized society in transition to another supposedly civilized one. In our opinion, this film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962), illustrates the three principles of visual communication. In short, everybody may understand and interpret its images in a way that does not lack

<sup>8</sup> This is quite in line with Popper's philosophical ideas, as previously noted.

internal and external coherence, and at the same time everybody may value the interplay among the five elements that facilitates the visual reading in the process of developing a claim. Very much to the point, our understanding and interpretation match Ford's humanistic ideas perfectly.

In *The Man...* we are faced with a society in the process of being taught to read and write, because education is the basis of law and order. Everything turns on the birth of a new state, and so it is necessary to sacrifice a determinate way of life. The thesis defended by Ford may be translated into a question for the (American) spectators, "Are you proud of this transition with progress?" Ford's argument is centred on the comparison of these five pairs: violence/law and order; revenge/legality, state; pre-rational/rational; passion/reason; and preverbal communication/verbal communication. The first component of each pair is shown in the film through images. Words are conspicuous by their absence. The representative of the first component is Liberty Valance, who establishes the conflict between Western law and the law that comes from the East.

But while Valance is the ugly face of the West, Tom Doniphon is the man self-sacrificed in order to facilitate the change to a new age. While Tom represents strength and natural authority, Ransom Stoddard, a representative of the second pair, embodies the word, the knowledge of law and, therefore, progress. Not being a man of words, Tom will reproach Ransom precisely for this ('You talk too much, think too much!'), although unconsciously his will be the hand that drives progress, turning himself into an obsolete piece of the past. Indeed, this occurs dramatically because Tom is a hero that leaves the stage deliberately and silently because he loves Hallie. When Tom tells Ransom about the man who really shot Valance, exonerating him from his moral scruples, we know for sure that Tom is the man of this transition ('Hallie wanted you alive. You taught her to read; now... give her something to read about'). This is the story of *The Man...* that is narrated visually. In doing so, Ford has claimed that progress is a contaminating force (cf. McBride 2004, p. 692: 'There's no future in America'). Although he has consciously shot the falsity of the legend, he has proved—visually but perhaps unconsciously—a truth, namely, that there is a 'territory' for visual argumentation in films!

As we see it, *The Man...* introduces explicit visual argumentation in an innovative way. The film both tells a story and explicitly argues a thesis. The viewer is faced with a question that never seems to be answered: is this an argumentative essay serviced by a visual narrative whose story line is explicated by one of the characters without ever saying a word about the thesis being argued? The answer is positive. In fact, the visual is used to argue. Ford metaphorically characterizes the contaminated progress with the train at the beginning and at the end of the film. The smoke through the sown fields is worth a thousand words about the thesis that has been sustained throughout the film. Narrative is on argument service. As Ransom becomes very much involved in the life of Shinbone's citizens, visual images do their job in an informal way and with plenty of emotion, although they have not been mechanically matched. The discontinuity of sound and visual images seems to accomplish something very important: to stress the independent objectivity of the story and, consequently, the independent objectivity of the (dialectical) arguments exhibited by the characters. It seems as if the camera has nothing to do with the

story. It is like the collective eye of the audience. Moreover, it seems as if Ford were telling us, “If you accept the set of (visual) premises that form this film, then you must accept the conclusion that progress is a contaminating force.”

The behavior of the fictional characters illustrates the need to argue visually, but naturally, in a preverbal community. Beneath their too familiar personal ways of communication, we can see broader ways of persuasion. The dialectic of the verbal and preverbal has been driving the story, showing the conflict between two mentalities. In fact, words will be associated with progress. But people who were born in that preverbal community will keep on using the same norms of behavior to communicate and argue among themselves. At the end, even Ransom adopts that sort of behavior—silence—as an answer to the ticket collector in the train, because the meaning of some feelings is beyond words.

Ford visually describes the limitations imposed on men and women by their situation in Shinbone’s society. That human culture, whose purpose is to secure the cohesion of the group, stringently controls the degree to which some of its members may fight. Because overt physical struggle will not do in “civilized” society, little by little it will be replaced by dialectical struggle through political speeches. Shots of these moments constitute a visual representation of men arguing a certain case. But precisely in those moments, filmic shots of Tom—silently, unshaven, dressed as an old cowboy—show that we are witnessing the end of a society. At least, that is the most relevant inference.<sup>9</sup> In fact, when Tom starts revealing the truth about the man who shot Liberty Valance, the smoke from his cigarette is the prelude to the train’s contamination and a visual argument that tries to prove metaphorically that modern society, and therefore democracy, is based on a lie.

The uniqueness of the film resides in the fact that we are witnessing a story where visual arguments have their place in showing a transition from a nonverbal society (where visual arguments abound as a way of communication) to a verbal society. Anyone who knows Ford’s love for the Western may understand his preference for that old preverbal world, which even enjoys a different morality. Somehow this film was his last word in defence of that world. But notice that we may divide up the discourse functions: on one hand, the inside story and, on the other, Ford’s reflections and argument. The former tells the events of the story, the latter tells about the moral, political and social ideas of his creator. From the narrative perspective, reflections and argument go parallel to the story, but must be reconstructed by the spectators. In other words, the reconstructed argumentative discourse makes reference to the story, but the narrative discourse brings together the elements of the argument—sometimes in an emotive way. The return of Ransom and Hallie to Shinbone to attend Tom’s funeral is a case in point.

We have gone into detail in characterizing this film because of its effective demonstration of how cinema can tell a story and explicitly argue a relatively simple case at the same time, but in a visual form. The film’s visual elements foster

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<sup>9</sup> This inference has contextual effect. On account of this, (1) it allows the conclusion to be derived, (2) it provides evidence to strengthen the assumption that Ransom is the man who will bring progress to Shinbone, and (3) it contradicts the prevailing assumption that Ransom is the man who shot Liberty Valance. It is obvious that watching the film is the best way to appreciate how this new information is introduced into the cognitive environment, and how it causes adherence to the thesis.

identification and appeal to the capacity of our mind to assert its vision of the world. The experience of visualization is quite distinct from the experience of propositional (verbal) argument. It leaves open the possibility that in some uses of visual imagination we are drawing upon past experiences of seeing as evidence, because the visual field arrives in consciousness as fully formed visual experience. However, the visual field is usually tainted by ideology or desire (cf. Gregory 1998). In some way, what we see is a consequence of what we are looking for. So this is a risk we must face when trying to interpret the supposed visual argument. Besides, the medium requires the audience to do a lot of inferring. Filmmakers prefer to present information visually, through different techniques. Even unsophisticated audiences have learned to draw conclusions from relatively small bits of visual information. Our skill in doing so is especially developed for narrative films, since they are the kind that we see most often. As part of the process of visual argumentation, we constantly test our interpretations against some story line and even the point of view of other interpreters. In films like *The Man...* many of the shots constitute enough evidence for intellectual propositions, and narrative is used to express its arguments visually. Of course, what gets communicated is a complex inferential construction based not just on what was said/shown, but also on the way it was said/shown. As in the case of any message, there is a lot more to the meaning of the film than what can be extracted from a set of propositions by logic.<sup>10</sup>

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