

## Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory

Sonja K. Foss

As the chapters in *Defining Visual Rhetorics* suggest, recent work in rhetoric has taken a pictorial turn. Three exigencies are prompting this move from exclusive attention to discourse to the study of visual images and material objects as rhetoric. One is the pervasiveness of the visual symbol and its impact on contemporary culture. Visual artifacts constitute a major part of the rhetorical environment, and to ignore them to focus only on verbal discourse means we understand only a minuscule portion of the symbols that affect us daily.

The study of visual symbols from a rhetorical perspective also has grown with the emerging recognition that such symbols provide access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse. As Jean Y. Audigier explains, human experiences that are spatially oriented, non-linear, multidimensional, and dynamic often can be communicated only through visual imagery or other nondiscursive symbols. To understand and articulate such experiences requires attention to these kinds of symbols, as Marguerite Helmers and Charles Hill eloquently suggest in their analysis of the Thomas Franklin photograph that has come to be known as *Ground Zero Spirit*.

For me, the most important reason for studying visual rhetoric is to develop rhetorical theory that is more comprehensive and inclusive. Throughout rhetoric's long tradition, discursive constructs and theories have enjoyed ideological hegemony, delimiting the territory of study to linguistic artifacts, suggesting that visual symbols are insignificant or inferior, and largely ignoring the impacts of the visual in our world. Because rhetorical theory has been created almost exclusively from the study of discourse, rhetoricians largely lack sophisticated understanding of the conventions through which meaning is created in visual artifacts and the processes by which they influence viewers.

As studies of visual rhetoric generate rhetorical theory, then, they challenge and question the linguistic boundaries of our rhetorical theories and provide a more holistic picture of symbol use.

In response to the pervasiveness of visual rhetoric, access to multidimensional human experiences, and a desire for comprehensiveness in rhetorical theory, rhetorical scholars are analyzing photographs, drawings, paintings, graphs and tables, interior design and architecture, sculpture, Internet images, and film. The diversity that characterizes these efforts is exciting and energizing, but it also can be bewildering, as Helmers and Hill note in the beginning of their chapter, for those seeking to understand the role of visual elements in rhetorical theory. The studies in this book provide an opportunity to propose a frame that might order (but not unnecessarily confine) the study of visual rhetoric. They suggest that three major pillars create the frame within which the study of visual rhetoric currently is configured: (1) Definitions of *visual rhetoric*; (2) Areas of focus in the study of visual rhetoric; and (3) Approaches to the rhetorical study of visual artifacts. This is a frame, I will argue, that has the potential to transform rhetorical theory in significant ways.

## DEFINITIONS

Bewilderment concerning the rhetorical study of visual symbols can begin at the definitional level, so that is perhaps a good place to start in my proposal of a frame that loosely organizes the indiscipline of visual rhetoric. The chapters in this book suggest that the term, *visual rhetoric*, has two meanings in the discipline of rhetoric. It is used to mean both a visual object or artifact and a perspective on the study of visual data. In the first sense, visual rhetoric is a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. In the second, it is a perspective scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic processes by which visual artifacts perform communication.

### Visual Rhetoric as a Communicative Artifact

Conceptualized as a communicative artifact, *visual rhetoric* is the actual image or object rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. It is the tangible evidence or product of the creative act, such as a painting, an advertisement, a photograph, or a building and constitutes the data of study for rhetorical scholars interested in visual symbols. *Visual rhetoric* as artifact, then, is the purposive production or arrangement of colors, forms, and other elements to communicate with an audience. As Cara A. Finnegan suggests, it is a product that names a category of rhetorical discourse that relies on something other than words or text for the construction of its meaning.

Three characteristics appear to define artifacts or products conceptualized as visual rhetoric: They must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be

presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating. Visual rhetoric is symbolic action in that the relationship it designates between image and referent is arbitrary, in contrast to a sign, where a natural relationship exists between the sign and the object to which it is connected. Visual rhetoric also involves human action of some kind in that the creation of an image involves the conscious decision to communicate as well as conscious choices about the strategies to employ in areas such as color, form, medium, and size. In its address to an audience, visual rhetoric is also communicative. Visual elements are arranged and modified by a rhetor not simply for the purpose of emotional discharge but for communication with an audience, even if the creator is the sole audience for the image or object.

The chapters in this book represent the breadth of visual objects that now are conceptualized as visual artifacts appropriate for study as visual rhetoric. Two-dimensional images are the subjects of the chapters by Helmers and Hill, Finnegan, Helmers, and Janis L. Edwards, who study photographs, paintings, and cartoons. Three-dimensional artifacts are analyzed in Greg Dickinson and Casey Malone Maugh's chapter on the embodied space of a grocery store, while moving images receive attention by J. Anthony Blair in his analysis of television commercials and by David Blakesley in his study of film. That artifacts included under the rubric of visual rhetoric are equally broad in terms of their functions also is highlighted in these chapters. Both aesthetic and utilitarian images constitute visual rhetoric, with the utilitarian a more dominant emphasis; the aesthetic images studied by Helmers, in contrast to the explicitly persuasive and utilitarian biographical candidate films analyzed by J. Cherie Strachan and Kathleen E. Kendall, the advertising images studied by Diane S. Hope, the atlases explored by Charles Kostelnick, and the decorative homemaking texts examined by Andrea Kasten Tange exemplify such work.

Maureen Daly Goggin's chapter on needlework as a semiotic practice complicates and most thoroughly explores the definition of *visual rhetoric* as artifact. She notes that a focus on the materiality of semiotic practice challenges a clear division of rhetoric into the image and the word because when images and words appear together, written verbal rhetoric is visual rhetoric. She uses the history of sampler making to demonstrate the ways in which the relationship between rhetoric of the word and rhetoric of the image is more fluid than is typically theorized. She suggests that *rhetoric of the visual* might be a better term to use than *visual rhetoric* to label meaning-making material practices and artifacts that engage in graphic representation.

### **Visual Rhetoric as a Perspective**

*Visual rhetoric* refers not only to the visual object as a communicative artifact but also to a perspective scholars take on visual imagery or visual data. In this meaning of the term, *visual rhetoric* constitutes a theoretical perspective that

involves the analysis of the symbolic or communicative aspects of visual artifacts. It is a critical-analytical tool or a way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images or objects. Finnegan provides an excellent definition of this sense of the term when she suggests that visual rhetoric is "a mode of inquiry, defined as a *critical and theoretical orientation that makes issues of visibility relevant to rhetorical theory*" (197). *A rhetorical perspective on visual artifacts constitutes a particular way of viewing images—a set of conceptual lenses through which visual symbols become knowable as communicative or rhetorical phenomena.*

Key to a rhetorical perspective on visual artifacts is its focus on a rhetorical response to an artifact rather than an aesthetic one. An *aesthetic response* consists of a viewer's direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the artifact. Experience of a work at an aesthetic level might mean enjoying its color, sensing its form, or valuing its texture. There is no purpose governing the experience other than simply having the experience. In a *rhetorical response*, in contrast, meaning is attributed to the artifact. Colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an artifact provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas. Understanding these rhetorical responses to visual artifacts is the purpose of visual rhetoric as a perspective, exemplified in Helmers's chapter on the fine arts. Her purpose is not to develop insights into the aesthetic effects of paintings but to discover how they function rhetorically. A rhetorical response, she suggests, is a process of accrual in which past experiences merge with the evidence of the canvas to construct a meaning.

Another major feature of the rhetorical perspective on visual symbols is a particular conception of the audience for the artifacts studied. Visual rhetoricians are interested in the impact of visual symbols on lay viewers—viewers who do not have technical knowledge in areas such as design, art history, aesthetics, or art education. Lay viewers' responses to visual artifacts are assumed to be constructed on the basis of viewers' own experiences and knowledge, developed from living and looking in the world. Hill's chapter illustrates such a focus on the ways in which visual symbols communicate to lay audiences. He begins with the question of how images persuade and describes the psychological processes involved in viewing, including aspects such as visual perception and the effects of images on emotional reactions and analytical thought. The processes he describes are not dependent on viewers' possession of art protocols that privilege the art expert's knowledge of art conventions for attributing meaning to images but are processes that are universal for all viewers. His chapter illustrates how visual rhetoric functions as a perspective to discover the nature of rhetorical responses to images by lay audiences.

As the authors of the chapters in this volume do, most scholars of visual rhetoric employ the term *visual rhetoric* in both senses in their studies. They analyze visual data of some kind—visual artifacts, objects, or images—and also use visual rhetoric as a perspective on their data. What they do in their

analyses of visual data and the nature of the perspective they take on those data are developed as they focus on particular aspects of visual artifacts—areas of focus that then function to transform rhetorical theory.

### AREAS OF FOCUS

The chapters in this book suggest that rhetorical scholars tend to study visual objects with a focus on one of three areas—nature, function, or evaluation. In this pillar of the framework for studies of visual rhetoric, *nature* deals with the components, qualities, and characteristics of visual artifacts; *function* concerns the communicative effects of visual rhetoric on audiences; and *evaluation* is the process of assessing visual artifacts.

#### Nature of the Artifact

Essential to any study of visual rhetoric is explication of the distinguishing features of the visual artifact itself. This area of focus is primary and is part of all studies of visual rhetoric because to explicate the function of or to evaluate images or objects requires an understanding of the substantive and stylistic nature of the artifacts being explored. Description of the nature of the visual rhetoric involves attention to two primary components—presented elements and suggested elements. Identification of the presented elements of an artifact involves naming its major physical features, such as space, medium, and color. Identification of the suggested elements is a process of discovering the concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions that a viewer is likely to infer from the presented elements; for example, the ornate gold leafing found on Baroque buildings might suggest wealth, privilege, and power (Kanengieter 12–13). Analysis of the presented and suggested elements engenders an understanding of the primary communicative elements of an image and, consequently, of the meanings an image is likely to have for audiences.

An analysis focused on nature of the artifact is exemplified in the chapter by Hope on gendered environments in advertising. She suggests that the creation of gendered environments is a dominant strategy of image-based advertising. She identifies the components of this rhetoric to suggest how advertising overcomes the resistance of environmentally aware audiences to advertising by appropriating images of nature. Because of the presented elements of these ads and their suggested links to femininity and masculinity, she concludes, they are able to construct a denial of connection between consumption and environment.

Studies of visual rhetoric with a focus on the nature of the visual symbol play a critical role in the expansion or transformation of discourse-based rhetorical theory by reconceptualizing the basic elements of rhetoric. Such studies encourage rhetorical scholars to explore how traditional rhetorical elements can

be translated into forms that apply to visual rhetoric—elements such as metaphor, argument, enthymeme, *ethos*, evidence, narrative, and stasis. At the same time, these studies push rhetorical theory to deal with an entirely new set of visual constructs, such as color, space, texture, and vectoriality. A rhetorical theory once restricted to linear linguistic symbols thus explodes into one characterized by multidimensionality, dynamism, and complexity as visual units of meaning are taken into account in rhetorical theory.

### Function of the Artifact

A second focus for scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on visual symbols is the function or functions the visual rhetoric serves for an audience. The function of a visual artifact is the action it communicates (Foss). Functions of visual artifacts, for example, might range from memorializing individuals to creating feelings of warmth and coziness to encouraging viewers to explore self-imposed limitations. Function is not synonymous with purpose, which involves an effect that is intended or desired by the creator of the image or object. Scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on visual artifacts do not see the creator's intentions as determining the correct interpretation of a work. Not only may the scholar not have access to evidence about the intentions of the creators of artifacts, but a privileging of creators' interpretations over the interpretations of viewers closes off possibilities for new ways of experiencing the artifact. Once an artifact is created, these scholars believe, it stands independent of its creator's intention.

Edwards's chapter on the construction of cultural memory through images illustrates a focus on function in the study of visual rhetoric. She notes that one use of iconic images is their appropriation to new contexts, where they function to create analogies that recall past moments and suggest future possibilities. Focusing her analysis on the photograph of John F. Kennedy, Jr. saluting his father's funeral cortege, Edwards explores how it was used at the time of the deaths of Jackie Kennedy and the son, John Kennedy. She concludes that the photograph connected the past and the present through its symbolic twin expressions of outrage and regret.

Two chapters analyze visual rhetoric for ideological functions that construct viewers' identities in particular ways. In Dickinson and Malone Maugh's analysis of the Wild Oats Marketplace, they seek to discover how Wild Oats responds to the abstractions and discomforts of globalized postmodern consumer culture. They suggest that the store repackages the possibilities of globalization to convert individuals who normally would be resistant to such culture into consumers comfortable with the wide range of goods available to them as a result of it. The analysis by Kaston Tange of the images in Victorian books devoted to teaching home arts highlights a similar function. Books that contained floor plans, pictures of furniture, drawings of

window treatments, and diagrams of how to set a table, for example, not only gave directions on how to achieve the home the readers desired but also helped create the desire for a home and, consequently, a middle class.

Studies such as these that have function as their focus have the capacity to transform rhetorical theory in that they encourage a conceptualization of a broader array of functions for symbols. Although discursive rhetoric can serve an infinite number of functions, the functions explored in rhetorical theory tend to be persuasive functions, with symbols designed to change audience members in particular ways. Such a singular function is much more difficult to attribute to many visual symbols given their greater ambiguity over verbal discourse. Exactly what the message is of an artifact is often open to myriad interpretations, limiting its persuasive potential but expanding its potential to communicate functions that may be less dominating and more invitational (Foss and Griffin), more eclectic, and more fragmented. Study of the visual, then, may help move rhetorical theory away from a focus on changing others to attention to a much broader array of functions for symbols and thus to a greater understanding of the infinitely varied actions that symbols can and do perform for audiences.

### **Evaluation of the Artifact**

A third area in which scholars focus as they analyze visual rhetoric is evaluation or assessment. Some scholars choose to evaluate an artifact using the criterion of whether it accomplishes its apparent function. If an artifact functions to memorialize someone, for example, such an evaluation would involve discovery of whether its media, colors, forms, and content actually accomplish that function. Other scholars choose to evaluate visual symbols by scrutinizing the functions themselves that are performed by the symbols, reflecting on their legitimacy or soundness determined largely by the implications and consequences of those functions—perhaps, for example, whether an artifact is congruent with a particular ethical system or whether it offers emancipatory potential.

Strachan and Kendall's analysis of political candidates' convention films is an example of a focus on evaluation in rhetorical studies of visual artifacts. They are interested in understanding the nature of the biographical candidate films aired at political parties' conventions and analyze and evaluate the films of George W. Bush and Al Gore in the 1998 presidential campaign for this purpose. The Gore film, they assert, failed to live up to the full potential of its genre because it did not address the audience's patriotic values and thus did not evoke strong emotional reactions to the candidate. They evaluate the Bush film more positively as an artifact of the genre of the convention film because it celebrated values through emotional appeals and presented Bush as a rugged individualist standing for America. Like other scholars who focus on

function, Strachan and Kendall are interested in understanding how the quality of the rhetorical environment is affected by various kinds of images and other visual artifacts.

A focus on evaluation, like those on nature and function, also has the potential to transform rhetorical theory. In particular, such a focus encourages a questioning of the traditional notion of effectiveness. Discourse at the interpersonal or small-group level typically is evaluated on the basis of whether an audience has changed in the direction desired by the rhetor after exposure to the rhetor's message. How such a criterion would be applied to visual rhetoric that is non-representational and perhaps baffling for audience members is unclear. Certainly, standard rhetorical criteria for assessing the potential of messages to create change such as clarity of thesis, relevance of supporting materials, vividness of metaphors, appropriateness of organizational pattern, dynamism of style, and credibility of the rhetor are largely irrelevant.

In the context of public discourse, an additional criterion for effectiveness often is added to the criterion of audience change—contribution to rationality. From this perspective, rhetoric is supposed to contribute to rational debate about issues in the public sphere, and visual rhetoric often is judged to be lacking according to this criterion. Neil Postman, for example, argues that the visual epistemology of television “pollutes public communication” (28) and contributes to a decline in “the seriousness, clarity and, above all, value of public discourse” (29). Similarly, David Zarefsky suggests that rhetorical forms such as visual images “stand in for a more complex reality” (412), contributing to the deterioration of “a rich and vibrant concept of *argument*, of public deliberation” (414).

Visual rhetoric may not be used to persuade audiences in directions intended by a rhetor and may not be contributing to standard definitions of rational public communication, but its effects are significant and certainly not always negative. The world produced by visual rhetoric is not always—or even often—clear, well organized, or rational, but is, instead, a world made up of human experiences that are messy, emotional, fragmented, silly, serious, and disorganized. Such experiences are not often captured in rhetorical theory that posits criteria for assessment that require that visual rhetoric be judged negatively or ignored entirely. Studies of visual rhetoric that focus on evaluation, then, expand rhetorical theory to include broader criteria for the evaluation of rhetoric that more accurately capture and acknowledge the role of the visual in our world.

## APPROACHES

The chapters in this volume add a third pillar of the frame of the current study of visual rhetoric to definition and areas of focus in that they suggest how studies of visual images and objects approach their areas of focus to transform



rhetorical theory. Some scholars deductively apply rhetorical theories and constructs to visual symbols to investigate questions about rhetoric and to contribute to existing rhetorical theories generated from the study of discourse. A second approach involves an inductive investigation of visual artifacts designed to highlight features of the artifacts themselves as a means to generate rhetorical theory that is expanded to include the visual.

### **Deductive Application of the Rhetorical to the Visual**

Scholars who apply a rhetorical perspective to visual symbols deductively use visual artifacts to illustrate, explain, or investigate rhetorical constructs and theories formulated from the study of discourse. They begin with rhetorical constructs and theories and use them to guide them through the visual artifact. Underlying this approach is the assumption that visual symbols possess largely the same characteristics that discursive symbols do. These studies produce a contribution to a rhetorical theory focused on verbal discourse and thus one that tends to be unidirectional. The theory affects the understanding of the artifact, but what is discovered in the artifact has less effect on the nature of the theory in that analysis of the visual largely affirms the discursive features of the theory. Affirmation is not insignificant, however, because it suggests which aspects of rhetorical theory apply to both the visual and the verbal, thus marking areas of study where attention to the visual is likely to be less productive because, in those areas, verbal and visual rhetoric are functioning similarly.

Finnegan's chapter on photographs exemplifies the approach in which a rhetorical theory or construct generated from discourse is applied to visual data to generate insights into that rhetorical theory. She explores the place of rhetorical history in visual rhetoric and demonstrates how the rhetorical historian might engage visual images. Her chapter models a rhetorical history of the visual based on her analysis of Farm Security Administration photography of sharecroppers published in *LOOK* magazine. As Finnegan's chapter demonstrates, the deductive, rhetoric-based approach offers ease of connection to existing rhetorical theory. Because it begins with rhetorical theory and applies existing theory to visual data, theoretical connections are easily made between the visual and the verbal in the development and elaboration of rhetorical theory.

### **Inductive Exploration of the Visual to Generate the Rhetorical**

A second approach to the study of visual rhetoric is the investigation of the features of visual images to generate rhetorical theory that takes into account the distinct characteristics of the visual symbol. Scholars who pursue this route begin with an exploration of visual artifacts and operate inductively,

generating rhetorical theories that are articulate about visual symbols. An assumption of scholars who proceed inductively from visual objects is that these visual objects are different in significant ways from discursive symbols. They focus on the particular qualities of visual rhetoric to develop explanations of how visual symbols operate in an effort to develop rhetorical theory from visual symbols to insure that it takes into account the dimensions of visual forms of rhetoric.

Two chapters exemplify the inductive approach to the study of visual rhetoric. Blair asks whether there can be visual arguments when arguments as we usually know them are verbal. He articulates the two primary reasons offered against the possibility of arguments as visual—that the visual is inescapably ambiguous and that arguments must have propositional content—and answers both objections. He concludes by offering a definition of visual arguments that expands traditional definitions of argument and goes on to assert that the particular qualities of the visual image make visual arguments different from verbal ones in that the visual has an immediacy, a verisimilitude, and a concreteness that help influence acceptance in ways not available to the verbal. He thus expands an understanding of argumentation rooted in the particularities of the visual.

David Blakesley's analysis of Hitchcock's film, *Vertigo*, is another example of an approach that begins with a focus on characteristics of the visual. He proposes four approaches to film rhetoric derived from the characteristics of films—language, ideology, interpretation, and identification. Film identification is the focus in his analysis, and he suggests that Hitchcock employs a variety of visual techniques to focus attention on the psychological consequences of the desire for identification or identity. Because of its visual qualities, he notes, film makes identification even more inviting than it might be in a verbal text.

The inductive, artifact-based approach exemplified by Blair and Blakesley, because it begins with the characteristics of artifacts and builds rhetorical theory on the basis of those characteristics, offers the most opportunities for rhetorical expansion. It has the greatest potential to expand rhetorical theory beyond the boundaries of discourse as it offers rhetorical qualities, characteristics, and components for which current rhetorical theory cannot account.

## CONCLUSION

The chapters in this volume represent the variety that exists in the analysis of visual rhetoric and provide models for the study of the rhetorical workings of visual artifacts. More important, however, these chapters lay out the primary components of the current framework for such study—definition of *visual rhetoric* as artifact or perspective; areas of focus as nature, function, or evaluation; and methodological approaches as deductive or inductive in their move-

ment between visual artifact and theory. This framework is not simply a framework for an understanding of visual rhetoric, however, but also for transforming discourse-based rhetorical theory. As rhetorical theory opens up to visual rhetoric, it opens up to possibilities for more relevant, inclusive, and holistic views of contemporary symbol use.

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