VISUAL RHETORIC IN A DIGITAL WORLD

A Critical Sourcebook

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Building Visual Communication Theory by Borrowing from Rhetoric

KEITH KENNEY

Robert T. Craig (1999) argues that a field of communication theory does not yet exist. Instead, scholars work within narrow disciplines or “traditions.” He distinguishes seven traditions of communication theory: rhetorical, semiotic, phenomenological, cybernetic, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, and critical. Craig believes that each tradition derives from certain commonplace beliefs, and each tradition challenges other beliefs. To become a coherent field of communication, these traditions cannot develop in total isolation from each other, but must engage each other in argument as their beliefs are compared and contrasted. If all goes well, “dialogical-dialectical coherence” results. The goal of this special issue of *Journal of Visual Literacy* is to begin to look at the key issues, concepts, and research questions of the various traditions of VISUAL communication theory so that the “argument” may begin for scholars investigating photographs, video, film, paintings, cartoons, and other visual media.

This article begins by examining rhetoric’s traditional and symbolic perspectives. A selective review of the visual rhetoric literature then shows key rhetorical concepts have been applied to visual means of communication. The value of using a traditional rhetorical perspective is demonstrated with a case study of how photographs and video were used to persuade a county council to limit the number of additional billboards. The value of a symbolic rhetorical perspective is demonstrated by re-analyzing the work of David Perlmutter (1998) concerning the effects of four famous photographs upon American foreign policy.

**Traditional (Classical) Perspective**

The traditional perspective, based upon Aristotle’s teachings, assumes that people are, by nature, subject to and capable of persuasion because, unlike other species, we have the capacity to be rational. Of course emotional,
psychological, and physiological factors also affect persuasion, but classical rhetoric insists that such appeals are subsidiary to, or contingent upon, judgments resulting from rational means of persuasion. Rhetoric is viewed as a battle of words, in which speakers attempt to overcome resistance to a course of action, an idea, or a particular judgment by effectively expressing their thoughts in particular situations.

Rhetoric traditionally was considered to be public, contextual, and contingent. It was public because it affected the entire community and was typically performed before law courts, legislative assemblies, and celebratory gatherings of citizens. Rhetoric was contextual because the meaning of a particular figure of speech or example derived from the particular experiences of a particular audience addressed by a particular speaker at a particular moment. Situations were contingent because the speaker couldn’t know ahead of time what was most important or most necessary to say in order to persuade an audience. Unlike scientists who use systematic, empirical, and objective investigation, or artists who wish to create works with timeless quality, rhetors rely on probability and they seek timely and fitting action (Lucaites, Condit, & Caudill, 1999).

All choices, from the arguments to the style of delivery, were assumed to be conscious decisions made to produce an intended effect on listeners. Critics sought an understanding of both a speaker's intentions and the potential effects upon an audience by asking why a speaker chose to talk about certain topics, why the artistic elements of his speech were structured as they were, why certain styles of speech were followed, and so forth. The critic's job was to assess how closely the speaker came to accomplishing what could have been achieved given the circumstances.

The typical approach to neo-Aristotelian criticism was to use classical rhetorical categories to describe and explain oral persuasive messages. Wichels explains:

Rhetorical criticism is necessarily analytical. The scheme of a rhetorical study includes the element of the speaker's personality as a conditioning factor; it includes also the public character of the man—not what he was but what he was thought to be. It requires a description of the speaker's audience, and of the leading ideas with which he plied his hearers—his topics, the motives to which he appealed, the nature of proofs he offered. These will reveal his own judgment of human nature in his audiences, and also his judgment on the questions which he discussed. Nor can rhetorical criticism omit the speaker's mode of arrangement and his mode of expression, nor his habit of preparation and his manner of delivery from the platform; though the last two are perhaps less significant. "Style"—in the sense which corresponds to diction and sentence movement—must receive attention, but only as one among various means that secure for the speaker ready access to the minds of his auditors. Finally, the effect of the discourse on its immediate hearers is not to be ignored, neither in the testing of witnesses, nor in the record of events. And throughout such a study one must conceive of the public man as influencing the men of his own times by the power of his discourse (1980, pp. 69, 70).

Neo-classical critics, following what they believed to be Aristotle's lead, disregarded many manifestations of symbolic meaning that were nonverbal and non-verbal as being irrelevant to their concerns, and they further disregarded those oral modes of discourse that did not appear to exhibit patterns of (rational) reasoning. Beginning in 1970, however, the scope of rhetorical criticism was expanded to include nondiscursive subjects, and the next sections describe a few of the more important examples of traditional perspective applied to visual forms of communication.

**APPLICATION OF NEO-CLASSICAL PERSPECTIVE TO CARTOONS**

Medhurst and DeSousa (1981) used slightly modified versions of Aristotle's five canons—invention, disposition, style, memory and delivery—as a means to understand graphic persuasion in political cartoons. The first three canons were easy to "translate" into a new medium. Like speakers, cartoonists draw upon a storehouse of conventional topoi—political commonplacest, cultural allusions, character traits—and use those topoi to construct arguments. Like speakers, cartoonists use contrast, commentary, and contradiction as formal organizing principles, or disposition. For style, rather than finding equivalences for verbal figures and tropes, the authors explained how use of line and form, exaggeration of physiognomical features, placement within the frame, relative size of objects, relation of text to visual imagery, and rhythmic montage have persuasive potential.

Medhurst and DeSousa were ingenious when applying the canons of memory and delivery. In the classical tradition, a speaker had a good memory if he (normally a man) could construct a mental image filled with specific icons, which the rhetor then associated with particular ideas, and the placement of the icons correlated with the order in which the ideas were to be presented. Movement was from visual mental construction, to specific idea, to oral discourse. With political cartoons, Medhurst and DeSousa write, the movement is reversed. The cartoonist starts with the universe of discourse—oral, written and pictorial—from which he (again, cartoonists are usually male) selects a specific idea and then draws a visual sign to represent that idea. In graphic expression, therefore, memory is primarily an act of evocation. The cartoonist attempts to compress into a single image the various streams of cultural consciousness from which he has drawn his idea. Readers then are expected to unpack one or more layers of available cultural consciousness that the cartoon has evoked from them. The cartoons "work" to the extent that readers and cartoonists share cultural symbols.

In the classical tradition, speakers could use volume, tone, rate, pitch, and so forth to get and keep listeners' interest when delivering their message. When applied to the medium of newspapers, the canon of delivery is recontextualized as image placement, size, and typeface to get and keep readers' attention. Although others have used rhetoric to analyze editorial cartoons, no one (including Medhurst and DeSousa) has applied this typology to critique a particular set of cartoons.
APPLICATION OF RHETORICAL STYLE TO MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENTS

Rhetorical figures, defined as artful deviations, are considered a stylistic device, and rhetorical critics of oral, written, or visual messages frequently note their presence and categorization. McQuarrie and Mick (1996) provide a sophisticated analysis of why advertisements with visual figures are more memorable and give consumers greater pleasure than ads without figures. They distinguish two types of rhetorical figures: schemes and tropes. Schemes occur when a text contains excessive order or regularity, so schemes add internal redundancy to advertising messages, and readers will have multiple possibilities to retrieve the message. Examples of schemes are rhyme, alliteration, and antithesis. Tropes contain a deficiency of order or irregularities, so tropes lack closure, and readers will be invited to elaborate, or engage or interpret a text. Examples of tropes are hyperbole, metonym, metaphor, pun, irony, and paradox. The additional cognitive activity of schemes and tropes, therefore, increases the number of associative pathways stored in memory and makes retrieval of messages easier.

Later, McQuarrie and Mick (1999) used four test magazine advertisements with different visual figures, as well as four manipulated copies of the ads without visual figures, in order to test their theory. For example, a mascara ad originally used visual rhyme in that the eyelashes of the model echoed the contours of her fur coat. Visual rhyme is an example of a scheme because it has “excessive order or regularity,” so it was expected to add internal redundancy to the advertising message and provide multiple opportunities for retrieval. In the manipulated ad, the fur ends were airbrushed to remove their texture, eliminating the repetition of contours. A motion sickness remedy ad, on the other hand, originally used visual metaphor by depicting a package of Dramamine as a seat belt buckle. Visual metaphor is an example of a trope because it has a “deficiency of order,” so it was expected to increase the number of associations and to make retrieval easier. In the manipulated ad, a buckle was added to the seat belt and the package was moved further away to break the metaphor. An experiment with seventy-two undergraduates then demonstrated that the manipulated ads indeed led to greater elaboration. The authors then conducted a second experiment, which supported their theory that visual rhetoric leads to a positive attitude to the advertisements. Between the two experiments, they showed that the persuasive effect of visual figures held across samples and product categories.

CAN VISUALS FORM RATIONAL ARGUMENTS?

When rhetorical critics use the word argument they mean the presentation of premises followed by a conclusion, and they mean a debate in which disagreement is expressed. By such standards, it is not obvious whether or not pictures can argue.

Some scholars deny the possibility of visual arguments because visual images do not have explicit meanings, so they lack clear premises. Birdsell and Groarke (1996), however, write that if visuals lack explicit meanings, then do words—the meanings of both are dependent upon their context. For visual images, three kinds of context are important—immediate visual context, immediate verbal context, and visual culture. Most people have no trouble understanding immediate visual and verbal contexts, but they may have problems with visual culture because visual culture changes significantly over time, and some people may lack visual cultural literacy. In order for visuals to have more explicit meanings, therefore, the authors recommend charting changes of visual culture over time.

Scholars also deny the possibility of visual arguments because pictures are perceived as whole, rather than processed sequentially; therefore, pictures lack the two-part relationship of premises leading to conclusions. The solution to the problem of finding both premises and conclusions within a visual, Blair (1996) writes, is the interplay between the visual itself and the visual’s context. The eight-page block advertising for Benetton clothing, he explains, is an example of a visual argument against racism (but not an argument for buying from Benetton). The first two-page spread shows three hearts, suggesting we’re all human. The next spread shows a white girl and black girl hugging, suggesting innocent children have no racial prejudices. The third spread shows a black man named to a white one, suggesting we are locked together, and there is no escaping our condition and we are prisoners of our own prejudices. From these suggestive photos, we get the following premises:

1. We are all the same under our skin;
2. Racism is a construct, not an inborn attitude;
3. We are joined together, black and white, inescapably; we are prisoners of our attitudes. The conclusion is that racism is unjustified and should be ended.

Finally, some scholars deny the possibility of visual arguments because they believe pictures cannot point out the weaknesses in opposing arguments. Lake and Pickering (1998), however, contend that visual arguments can refute one another even though they do not, strictly speaking, negate one another. Such refutation can be accomplished:

1. through substitution, in which one image is replaced within a larger visual frame by a different image with an opposing polarity; and
2. through transformation, in which an image is “recontextualized in a new visual frame, such that its polarity is modified or reversed through association with different images” (p. 82).

Lake and Pickering (1998) illustrate the concept of substitution with an account of Planned Parenthood’s rebuttal film, which was created after the anti-abortion film Silent Scream received much media attention. In Silent Scream, women seemed limited to their ability to bear children. No woman speaks in the entire film. Visually, they are depicted as passive, pregnant objects victimized by “abortionists.” In the response film, however, audiences see images of women as active professionals. They speak extensively and
authoritatively on a number of issues. Planned Parenthood's film also shifts viewer attention from the act of abortion to the reasons for abortion, so women's motivations become visible for the first time. The active, outspoken achieving women in Planned Parenthood's film, therefore, serve as a counterargument to the original lack of presence of women in Silent Scream.

The concept of transformation is vividly illustrated by "reframing" and "mobile framing," two techniques used by filmmakers when photographing still images for their movies or videos. Ken Burns, for example, uses reframing when he only shows part of an original photograph. He uses mobile framing when pans, tilts, or tracking shots prolong, beyond normal expectations, the time it takes viewers to decipher exactly what they are seeing. Lancioni (1996) explains that both techniques are used to foreground ideological implications. With "reframing," the same photo can have several meanings, depending on which aspects of it are foregrounded. With "mobile framing," delayed recognition obliges us to reflect on the meaning of the images. The techniques of mobile framing and reframing demonstrate that the social relationships previously regarded as "real" and constant are, in fact, susceptible to change.

Visuals, therefore, can be said to persuade by argument when we have the ability to choose. Visuals also must:
1. provide reasons for choosing one way or another;
2. counter other arguments, perhaps via substitution or transformation; and
3. cause us to change our beliefs or to act.

A BILLBOARD CAMPAIGN

A journalism and mass communications professor, Dan (name changed), has been leading a group of local citizens in an effort to stop the proliferation of billboards (see Figure 1). This section will apply a traditional rhetorical perspective to critique his efforts to visually persuade the local county council that there are too many billboards and they are visual clutter.

Traditional criticism evaluates the various choices that were made throughout the persuasion process and, of course, the final effects. Was Dan the best possible visual communicator (speaker)? In this case, yes. He knows how to do research, so he is well informed about the billboard problem around the country. He teaches graphics and public relations, so he knows how to create visually effective messages that the media will want to use. He has been a community activist for years, so he has credibility within the community, and he can link the community's efforts to similar efforts around the state and country. He can take pictures and shoot video that are easily understood by general audiences, but he is NOT a professional photographer, so the images do not appear to have been (and were NOT) taken by someone hired to make a certain point. Dan's images seem more "realistic," "documentary," and, therefore, "truthful" because they lack the slick, high production quality that would occur if an advertising or public relations photographer was given the job.

Evidence of his effectiveness as a visual communicator came from his opponents, the billboard industry. At one point in the hearing, a billboard spokesperson told the audience that Dan had introduced himself but had not told them who he was; that he was a journalism professor who knows "how to manipulate the media." True, Dan knows how to get his views into the newspaper better than many people. For example, during one presentation, he showed a photograph of a river with the city's skyline in the background and a billboard sign in the middle of the river. Then he showed the same image after he had digitally removed the billboard, visually depicting how much nicer the view would be without "visual clutter." (See Figures 2 and 3.) This is an example of "antithesis," a scheme that is a type of visual figure that helps people remember messages. After the presentation, he handed the reporter a computer disk that contained the before-and-after images of the billboard in the river. Rather than bringing editors a bland meeting picture, the reporter (easily) delivered two emotionally powerful images for the next day's newspaper.

Dan understood his audience, a group of conservative politicians, as demonstrated by the first visual image in his PowerPoint presentation of an interstate billboard promoting a strip club. He knew the council would find the image of a stripper offensive and would be embarrassed, which was the entire point; billboards make (some) people uncomfortable, yet people cannot get away from billboards. The NIMBY (not-in-my-backyard) attitude towards the sex industry might carry over to billboards in general.
Another major idea (topoi), and a good choice, was that billboards are a form of litter. Local football coach Lou Holtz is known not only for football and motivational speaking, but also for his dislike of litter. Holtz informally leads a publicity campaign to clean up trash (on the ground) of the state's roads, so litter is a high-profile issue. This idea was visually communicated two ways. First, Dan went around town photographing billboards with peeling signs, and to each picture he added the bold headline “Litter on a Stick.” This effective element of style used the metaphor “litter on a stick,” to compare billboards to oversized pieces of trash raised up high. Another effective element of style was repetition. The audience saw many photographs of peeling billboards and these repetitions made the billboard problem seem to grow and grow. Certainly the billboard people found the message effective because the next day every peeling billboard shown in Dan’s presentation was replaced with a new sign, generally a public service advertisement to prevent forest fires (see Figures 4 and 5). At their next encounter, Dan teased that the number of forest fires had recently declined (the area is an urban environment where forest fires do not pose a risk).

Dan also shot video of billboard-related litter. The sequence begins with a light shot of litter on the ground. The camera then tilts up and zooms out to reveal a medium shot of a billboard with a peeling sign. This device evokes memories of a searchlight as the audience sees the “problem” (trash on the ground) and then the camcorder jerkily moves up and around until it has the “villain” (billboard) in its “beam.” The ground litter obviously came from the peeling billboard above.

Dan’s visuals appealed to people’s need to exercise some control over their environment and to their desire to have an attractive home. The billboard industry claimed that only two areas had a high density of billboards—Decker and Two-Notch roads. To refute this claim, Dan used pictures from locations around the city to show the intrusiveness of billboards. He also went to an area with a high concentration of billboards and used a telephoto lens to compress distance, making the density of billboards seem even higher. The pictures make it seem as if the billboards are multiplying beyond anyone’s control. They say: “Look at what’s happening in our own backyard—and we aren’t doing anything about it”? Then Dan showed pictures of beautiful streets without billboards. These pictures say: “If we work together to limit billboards, we can have an attractive city.” The disposition, therefore, was “contrast” between the tree-lined and billboard-cluttered streets.

Dan copied a technique commonly used by 60 Minutes investigative reporters. He first showed the home page of the Outdoor Advertising Association’s Web site. Dan then enlarged and added dramatic drop shadows to selected portions of the site’s text. One passage said, “Billboards grab you; they make you look.” Another said, “Billboards operate in the people’s space, creating a veritable theater of the streets.” So Dan used the billboard industry’s words to make his point that the billboard industry is using something of value (people’s space) and that they are intrusive (they make you look),
but, of course, Dan’s conclusion differs; rather than invest in more billboards, he argues for additional regulation.

Normally when citizens and industry representatives “voice” their concerns on an issue, people will stand at the microphone and make a passionate plea. Dan used a portable computer and a projection unit to display pictures and video for the audience. Industry representatives were caught unaware; in other words, they lacked visual images and could only stomp their feet in frustration. At the next meeting, however, the billboard representative displayed visuals on an oversize plasma screen, so its visuals would be even larger than Dan’s. An important element of *delivery*, therefore, was “image size” as the size of the pictures became a competitive struggle between the opposing persuading forces.

One *style* Dan used was low camera angles, which forced viewers to look up at dominating billboards. In one case, however, the billboards were not high enough (to their owners). To make the drive into the city more attractive, the city planted palmetto trees along the road from the airport to downtown. As the trees grew, the company that owned the billboard behind the trees asked for the trees to be cut down. Citizens heard about the request and protested. So the owner of the billboard changed the sign to show apes looking over the trees accompanied by type that reads “Here’s Looking At You... the Billboard People.” The intended message seems to be that the city had planted trees and blocked drivers’ view of the billboard, but the billboard company could still look back at the drivers. Dan, however, put the sign into a new context. A video sequence opened with a tight shot on “The Billboard People” text part of the sign and then the camera panned over to the apes. The recast message is that the billboard people are like apes, or at least the billboard people used a clumsy image to make their point.

One way to measure the effectiveness of Dan’s visual presentation would be to wait for the city council’s decision about the pending billboard law, and if it decides to stop companies from adding billboards or increasing the size of billboards, then “victory” was obtained. But even if the council was logically persuaded by Dan’s presentation, it may not stop the addition of billboards. Politicians seem to cast their votes on the basis of getting re-elected, and Dan’s visual presentation did not show that many voters care about the billboard issue. The presentation, however, could be effective without ultimate victory. The council must have noticed the agitated reactions of the billboard representatives, who obviously found Dan’s presentation distressingly compelling. The billboard industry hired a political consultant to counter Dan’s presentations and to develop a new strategy to persuade the city council and the public. They thought that the visuals were particularly convincing; actually, they would say the visuals were “misleading.” Dan was accused of running a smear campaign.

To analyze the presentation in terms of visual arguments, three premises are considered:

(a) Billboards clutter our landscape;
to the receiver's conscious memory, where it is stored and later retrieved for weighing against existing attitudes and input from others until a logical decision can be made. Instead, visual messages are brought out of people by striking responsive chords. Visual communication follows a "mosaic model" with massive parallel processing that creates chains of reaction with other stored memories so that entire experiences, including feelings, are recalled (Larson, 1982). Metaphoric, narrative, mythic, and fantasy theme analyses fit well with the mosaic, or "evoked recall," models.

**IDENTIFICATION, APPosition, CLICHES, STEREOTYPES, CULTURETYPES, ARCHETYPES, MYTHS**

Identification is defined as: "The act of crossing individual boundaries to gain another person's or group's perspective through shared characteristics, experiences, objects, assumptions, beliefs, goals, or languages" (Youngdahl and Warnock, 1996, 337). Rhetoric, therefore, becomes the act of discovering or creating the common interests that make persuasion possible. The degree of identification may vary from pure identification—consubstantiality, meaning sharing the same nature or essence—to a mere sense of recognition because of a shared bumper sticker.

Identification occurs via a common (visual) language, shared assumptions, stereotypes, and universal appeals. Olson (1983) found that to create posters with broad appeal, Norman Rockwell used symbols from diverse American populations, situations, and actions, and he also omitted details that could have limited the potential number of identifications. Visual identification often is used to separate "us" from "them." It occurs in politics when one candidate appears in front of the flag and the opponent appears to be scowling and shaking hands with the enemy. Countering such simple presentations of virtue and villainy is difficult, writes Jamieson (1992), whereas capitalizing on them is too easy.

Apposition is similar to identification, but rather than visually depict the candidate as virtue or villain, campaigns try to associate their candidate's name with everything the electorate cherishes and to transform the opponent into an antonym of those treasured values. After associating one's candidate with "good" and the opponent with "evil," all a campaign has left to do is remind voters of the resulting contrasts (Jamieson, 1992). Of course, visuals in print advertisements perform the same affective, psychological identification, and thus do the real selling job.

Identification also occurs via the telling of stories and myths. Myths are a special kind of story that captures the imagination of people and provides resources for both interpreting and explaining "reality." The myth must seem to be the answer to some compelling question, the dramatis personae must seem larger-than-life, and the myth must convey the sense of the sacred (Osborn, 1990). For example, the Adamic Myth was used to explain Oliver Stone's movie, JFK (Medhurst, 1993). Successful myths must include both culturetypes and archetypes in harmonious combination. Archetypes are ideal...
examples of a universal type, and culturetypes are culture-specific symbols that resonate important values. They complement each other, with culturetypes expressing the special values and meanings of a society, and archetypes anchoring the cultural system in enduring meaningfulness. Culturetypes, for example, remind us of what means to be American, while archetypes remind us of what means to be human.

**EPIEDEICTIC GENRE**

Although the concept epideictic genre goes back to Aristotle and classical rhetoric, it is included in the symbolic perspective because evocative words and images are used to display values rather than to force audiences to submit to the power of cold logic. The epideictic genre was devoted to celebration. Its goals were to glorify and promote in order to achieve benevolence, goodwill, jubilation, and generosity of spirit. The epideictic genre also was devoted to memorializing the nobility so they would live forever in the sensibilities of the community. Unfortunately, over time, the messages for celebration and memorialization were over-used and they became empty rituals and hollow clichés. Instead of inspiring a community, too often epideictic rhetoric now gives honor in a detached, even platitudinous spirit (Rosenfield, 1989).

Whereas arguments have a definite structure of premises—conclusion within a context shared by the rhetor and audience, images in the epideictic genre are juxtaposed in novel ways and decontextualized. Images, for example, may follow each other consecutively but without a clearly marked temporal relationship. Epideictic discourses work by unifying audiences around a common set of values. These clichés, stereotypes, and myths create a favorable, reassuring impression through associations. The resulting images are pleasurable because they are so effortlessly recognizable. They reinforce conventional images of social reality and one’s place in it and are perceived to represent truths.

Morrace (1991) uses epideictic rhetoric to explain how the political campaign film functions so effectively. In 1984, for example, the Reagan campaign aired the lushly produced film, *A New Beginning*, in place of the nominating speech at the Republican National Convention. The half-million dollar, fifteen-minute film borrows truth-like devices from the documentary genre as well as persuasive elements from the advertising business. Filmmakers used actors, props, staged settings, lighting, color, and camera work to give the film a soothing feel. The film was ordered thematically rather than chronologically, and its message was entirely upbeat. It used mythic images such as the American flag and the Statue of Liberty to depict American values such as work, family, and patriotism.

**DEPICTION**

Depiction is a complex concept that includes the ideas of identification, culturetypes, archetypes, myths, epideictic genre, etc. discussed above. Osborn (1986) defines depiction as “strategic pictures, verbal or nonverbal visualizations that linger in the collective memory of audiences as representative of their subjects” (p. 79). Their meanings can be influential even if neither the rhetor nor the audience are fully aware of them.

According to Osborn, the five functions of depiction are:

- presentation,
- intensification of feeling,
- facilitation of identification,
- application of identification, and
- reaffirmation of identity.

*Presentation* is the way we experience the world via messages (rather than direct experience). Presentations range from highly reflective (resembling “reality”) to highly symbolic (colored by the communicator). Presentations can be repetitive or innovative. Repetitive presentations show us what we already know, and they attempt to reinforce our acceptance. Examples include icons, culturetypes, archetypes, narratives, myths, stereotypes, and the like. Metaphors, on the other hand, are innovative symbolic presentations that link the familiar with the novel, and they disturb expectations that had been established by repetitive representation.

The second function of depiction is *intensification of feeling*. When a vast number of subjects are reduced to a few synecdochal instances, intensification of feeling occurs. Likewise, when vague subjects are given form through metaphors, intensification occurs because now we can transfer feelings from something we know and care about to something new and difficult to define.

*Facilitation of identification* is defined as creating a feeling of closeness in a community. To Osborn, identification occurs via culturetypes and archetypes transmitted quickly by mass media and understood easily by a mass audience.

The fourth function is *implementation*, defined as applied identification. Examples are a form of implementation because they either offer illustrations of a principle, or they embody the consequences of following or not following some potential course of action. “For example,” rhetors can use graphic lessons from the past to influence and lend urgency to present decisions.

The fifth function is to *reaffirm identity*, “often in ceremonies during which heroes, martyrs, villains, and the role of the people are recalled and renewed in common appreciation” (Osborn, p. 95). In other words, reaffirming identity is the same as epideictic rhetoric.

**REPRESENTATIVE FORM**

Building upon depiction, Edwards and Winkler (1997) introduce the concept of “representative form.” They contend that the 1945 photograph of the flag-raising at Iwo Jima has been used and parodied in editorial cartoons and has become a special type of symbolic form; it is an instance of depictive rhetoric that functions as a visual ideograph (p. 303). Edwards and Winkler define
representative form as an image that "transcends the specifics of its immediate visual references and, through a cumulative process of visual and symbolic meaning, rhetorically identifies and delineates the ideals of the body politic." (p. 295). A representative form originates in actuality and specificity, but is abstracted into a symbol or concentrated image, and provides an explanatory model for human motive.

Edwards and Winkler explain how the Iwo Jima image meets the same (slightly adapted) criteria established by McGee for (verbal) ideographs: (1) it must be an ordinary image found in political discourse, and both the elite and the non-elite must be influenced by the image; (2) it must be a high-order abstraction representing collective commitment to a particular, yet ill-defined normative goal; (3) it must warrant the use of power and guide behavior into acceptable and laudable channels; and (4) it must be culture-bound.

An excellent example of criticism using visual ideographs is the work of DeLuca (1999), who studied how environmental activists controlled the way they were verbally and visually presented to the general public and how they shifted the parameters of discussion about the environment. He writes that social movements change in the meanings of the world, and such redefinitions of reality are always constructed through rhetoric. DeLuca believes environmental groups also are attempting "to disarticulate and rearticulate" the links between ideographs in order to create a new discourse. In other words, they are challenging the links between progress and nature, as well as the links between humanity, technology, and reason.

Environmental groups change the meaning and linkages of ideographs by creating image events that call attention to mass extinctions, deforestation, toxic wastes, nuclear radiation, etc. They use shock (dis-identification) to shatter familiar landmarks of thought. For example, when Greenpeace confronts a Soviet whaling ship, we see a hulking, black ship dwarving the Greenpeace rafts. With modern industrial technology, the nature/culture dichotomy has been reversed and now the huge ship towers over the whales (and Greenpeace). The whaling ships are the new leviathans of the deep. By arguing against reducing animals to economic resources and instead proposing that animals have intrinsic value and inalienable rights, Greenpeace contests the linking of economic progress with nature as a storehouse of resources, thus challenging the discourse of industrialism that warrants the use of technology to exploit nature in the name of progress.

**INVITED AUDIENCE**

Rhetorical critics generally focus on the context of production and they generally pay little attention to how people receive the message. Rhetorical critics know that other people may interpret the same message in a different way, and they even acknowledge that other readings may be more productive and responsible, but they do not investigate how audiences experience messages. Critics simply evaluate how well the rhetor chose between various options when creating a message, and then pronounce that the effects will be great/(minimal) because the right/(wrong) choices were made. Rhetorical critics do not generally consider differences in how messages are consumed because they assume texts are straightforward containers of meaning.

Like other critics, Thomas Benson does not ask moviegoers about their interpretations of films, but he goes to greater lengths than many others to identify structures that "invite" audiences to particular interpretations. He wants to know how people can, did, or should use a film. He is interested not only in what meaning emerges from a film, but also how it emerges. To do this, he pays attention to the details of films, to the internal and external contexts that give the film meaning, and to ways symbolic forms connect to create meanings.

Benson begins his review of **High School** (1980) with two arguments about interpretation. He argues that because **High School** is an audio-visual experience, and because it is an example of cinema verité that borrows from actuality, it resists linear, prepositional argument, and so Benson himself refuses to reduce the film to "an oversimplified pseudolinearity." If filmmaker Wisemen had wanted to be explicit, he would have written an essay, writes Benson. By making a film, with inexplicit messages, Wisemen could appeal to a larger shared experience.

Benson also argues that to avoid over-interpretation, which could happen by selecting a detail here or there and calling it a symbol, critics should only interpret elements as symbols if one of three conditions exist: (a) the element's context requires such an interpretation; (b) the same or contrasting elements appear repeatedly; or (c) failure to account for the symbol makes the element incoherent, implausible, or distracting. Benson explains how Wisemen invites readers to experience a particular group of meanings by analyzing two levels of symbolic activity: the film as a structure, and the social behavior recorded in the film as another structure.

All the themes Benson discussed had been mentioned by other writers. Benson's role was to develop the themes in more detail, to show how those details related to one another to form a structure, and to offer an account of how the structure might invite a rhetorical response. He proceeds sequence by sequence through the film, presenting a detailed exposition that suggests the ways in which Wisemen invites viewers to experience the meanings of **High School** as structures. One useful idea is that a **meaning**, once established, begins to absorb neutral or ambiguous signs. For example, one of the themes of the movie is that schoolteachers and administrators are aware of students' heightened sexual awareness and they use students' hormones for their own power plays. Once viewers become aware of this sexual theme, gestures that are, in themselves, neutral, seem to take on special (sexual) relevance.

**EVALUATION OF VISUAL MESSAGES**

According to Foss (1994), semiotics is similar to rhetoric in that both deal with how meaning is constructed from signs and symbols. Semiotics is concerned with the codes needed to understand a text. Rhetoric, on the other hand, attempts to persuade a specific audience, so both the intended and perceived
messages are contingent upon the situation, and a fixed code cannot be used. Berger (1991) provides a good metaphor to explain the difference. Semiotics judges a meal by the kinds of ingredients (i.e., pork instead of chicken, lamb, beef; with rice instead of potatoes, cous-cous, bread, etc.) and what it would mean if you chose those particular ingredients. Rhetoric not only considers the ingredients, but also how they were cooked that particular evening and how they tasted for those particular diners.

For rhetorical criticism, Foss believes that a visual image should be judged in terms of the functions of the image. She also believes that the audience rather than the creator determines the function of an image. A message, once completed, stands independent of its production, she writes.

To evaluate an image from a rhetorical perspective, therefore, involves three kinds of judgments: (a) identification of a function communicated in the image; (b) assessment of how well that function is communicated; and (c) evaluation of the legitimacy of that function. Identification of a function occurs via a critic’s interpretation of the physical data of the image. The function the critic names is but one possible function. The critic must support his/her choice by showing the steps taken from the physical data to the claim. The next step explores the connections made between the identified function and the means available in the image to support it. The critic looks at subject matter, medium, forms, colors, organization, craftsmanship, and context, for example. A visual image is compared to other images with the same or a similar function in an effort to highlight available options in communicating such a function. Finally, the third step involves scrutiny of the function itself—is the function legitimate? Is the function legitimate? If the function is judged to be problematic in terms of its likely consequences, other functions may be suggested as more legitimate than the one communicated by the image.

Foss also has used a rhetorical background to explain why a visual image arouses interest in viewers, which leads to a positive evaluation of the image (1993). She believes that construction of appeal in a visual image is triggered by an element of technical novelty that results in a displacement of the image from its usual interpretive context. The violation of expectations and lack of context in which to place an image could generate confusion and frustration for viewers, causing viewers to abandon their efforts to understand the image. But the element of technical novelty makes abandonment of the image unlikely. Viewers want to resolve the tension created by the technical novelty, which they do by associating the appealing image’s form or context (or both) with familiar contexts of events, objects, and qualities. These associations, such as delight, affection, nostalgia, or other positive qualities, are likely to result in viewers’ assignment of a positive meaning to the appealing image.

**Effectiveness of Photographic Icons of Outrage**

Can iconic visual images emotionally sway world opinion, which then forces American policy makers to respond? David Perlmuter has written a thought-provoking book, *Photojournalism and Foreign Policy*, that challenges this idea.

He is skeptical about the power of images and encourages greater prudence “before automatically attributing to a news photograph, icon or not, the power to change the world, scar the nation, outrage the people or make or break policy” (p. xiii). The purpose of this section of the essay is to examine what Perlmuter describes as the theory of “visual determinism,” as well as his challenge to the theory, and then apply some of the concepts of the symbolic rhetorical perspective to a critique of photographic “icons of outrage.”

The theory of visual determinism seems to include the following statements:

(a) Policy makers and the public get their understanding of world events from the news media, especially TV.
(b) TV (and print media) use a lot of news pictures.
(c) These news pictures have universal, denotive meanings that reflect “reality.”
(d) These fixed meanings evoke viewers’ emotions rather than rational thoughts.
(e) These emotion-laden pictorial messages are transmitted to the public quickly.
(f) Quick transmission bypasses channels of public decision making; therefore, news pictures deliver messages like hypodermic needles.
(g) Some of these pictures demand our attention and become the center of public discourse.
(h) These “icons of outrage” have a subject content that is stored in our collective memories.
(i) Our memories do not include the original contexts of the images.
(j) Without context, meaning is framed via the media, following public political arguments.
(k) Picture content, (lack of) context, and media framing (irrationally) affect public opinion.
(l) Public opinion causes the nation’s leaders to alter public policy.
(m) New public policy changes the world.

Perlmuter’s first challenge to this “lay” theory arises from a questionnaire he gave to 146 students in a college introductory mass communication course. He found that they could neither name nor describe “famous” photographs from the Tet offensive in 1968 (ten years before their birth). In a reverse experiment, Perlmuter showed a different class of students a set of famous photographs and found they could correctly associate an image with an event, but few could provide any detail about the exact context and circumstance of the picture’s creation and provenance. These results defeated Perlmuter, who concluded that the icons of one generation are the enigmas, or shadows, of another generation. If a picture is not well known, can it be an icon, he asks? (Of course, college students do not affect current government policy and they will have their own icons when they are elected officials.) Perlmuter concludes there is a major difference between scholars/media workers who comment on images and the general public, and that those who study images for a living are the least qualified to talk about them.
Perlmutter also challenges the idea that iconic pictures have clear meanings. He believes that people project meanings onto the pictures rather than simply inspecting the pictures for meanings. In other words, Perlmutter seems to say that these icons have connotative as well as denotative meanings, and that much (visual) meaning is in the eye of the beholder. He adds that "photographers, editors, commentators, and historians try to direct us to an approved meaning." From "approved meaning" Perlmutter quickly moves to the idea that images are prone to ideological manipulation "to almost any degree and in almost any direction" (p. 28). He implies that a dictator controls unanimous agreement about the meaning of a photographic icon. Regarding the image of a man blocking a line of tanks at Tiananmen in 1989, Perlmutter wrote:

A consensus exists in the West that the picture was important, well known, and influential, and that the event was a metonym of Beijing Spring; but is no other interpretation possible? If everyone agrees an image means something, then must they be correct? . . . In dictatorships when only one approved meaning is attached to an event, but people, in their own minds, may refute the official story, how may we judge the consensus of truth? (p. 74)

Perlmutter sets tough standards for measuring the effects of photographs. Pictures do not affect policy, he implies, unless politicians use ALL of their influence to react upon the outrage AND their actions have long-term success. Perlmutter cites the "man against tanks at Tiananmen" picture as an example of how pictures can affect policy, "but only marginally. The losers of the media battle won on the ground, and eight years later have triumphed in all areas of their foreign policy interests save the capturing of the Olympic Games for Beijing in the year 2000" (p. 83). The reaction to images in the press may be strong, but are shallow, he writes, because "few political elites are willing to expend their total political capital and influence on reacting to the outrage, especially from a foreign land," and certainly not when the lives of Americans are involved (p. 83).

With the picture of the naked body of an American soldier dragged through the streets of Mogadishu by jeering Somalis, there seems clear evidence that the photograph affected public opinion. Perlmutter cites a survey, which found that sixty percent of respondents who had seen the images favored withdrawal from Somalia as opposed to only thirty-three percent who had not. Perlmutter, however, does not find the image "powerful." He writes that pictures do not affect policy because people are not reacting to pictures; instead they are reacting to the people-objects-events portrayed in the pictures.

People reacted to the events; the icons focused their reaction. This is a crucial distinction in assessing the power of an image. Pictures are not just forms and shapes; they show things and people. How much we care about those things and people affects the power of the image over us (p. 115).

With this line of reasoning, no representational photograph, video, or film could have much effect.

If Perlmutter had applied rhetorical concepts to understand the impact of photojournalism on foreign policy, would his conclusions have changed? To attempt to answer this question, the effectiveness of the same four images—Eddie Adams’ picture of a South Vietnamese policeman firing a pistol at the head of a prisoner on the streets of Saigon in 1968; Kevin Carter’s picture of a Sudanese child bending over the parched savanna with a vulture lurking in the background in 1993; Charles Cole’s picture of a man blocking a line of tanks at Tiananmen in 1989; and the picture from Somalia—are analyzed from a symbolic perspective.

Rhetoricians might argue that the photographs were persuasive because they helped American audiences identify with foreign events. The Somalia image, for example, quickly separated "us" (Americans) against "those people" who had been so ungrateful and were now killing "our" soldiers. The Beijing image resonated with American stereotypes of rebellion and defiance against authority. It took on mythic qualities of "David versus Goliath." The Sudan image was an archetype that appealed to anyone with a nurturing spirit who wants to protect vulnerable children. The Saigon picture helped transform an ally (South Vietnamese military policeman) into a villain and an enemy (North Vietnamese prisoner) into an object of sympathy. This process of identification, of who is "good" and who is "evil," lays the foundation for subsequent actions by political leaders for decades.

The concept of depiction is helpful because it recognizes that images may be highly reflective or symbolic and they can be repetitive or innovative. Photographs such as the one of the starving child and vulture reinforce what we already knew about the problems of starvation in war-torn regions, but they also intensify our feelings. As every journalist knows, it is easier to make the public care about one suffering person than to write about the thousand or million or more who suffer from the same problems. Because the vast number of people are reduced to one synecdochal instance, we care more. We begin to identify with the child and feel a feeling of closeness in a (world) community develops. Perhaps a myth will be generated. In this case the photojournalist, Kevin Carter, became a Christ-like figure after committing suicide. He had suffered great pain ("I am haunted by the vivid memories of killings & corpses & anger & pain . . . of starving or wounded children") in order to enlighten others with his images, and the pain proved to be overwhelming, so he took his own life. The picture, therefore, became an example of the consequences of war. Perlmutter is correct that the picture "does not tell us who is really to blame for the girl’s plight" (p. 28), but I would argue that people have some context for the image, and that the image serves as an example for that context. So, finally, the picture magnifies and reveals the shame of fighting between the Arab and Muslim-dominated government of the north and the black and Christian rebels of the south.

Like the Ivo Jima image, the picture of the public execution in Saigon is probably an example of a representational form. Perlmutter seemed disturbed that photographic icons became separated from their original context (and therefore, he implies, the icons do not affect policy). Rhetoricians, in contrast,
would applaud a visual ideograph that “transcends the specifics of its immediate visual references and, through a cumulative process of visual and symbolic meaning, rhetorically identifies and delineates the ideals of the body politic.” Because a visual ideograph becomes a concentrated symbol of a normative goal for a particular culture, it warrants the use of power. After all, doesn’t the ideology of a culture affect public policies more than policies affect ideology?

According to Foss, these four photographic icons should be evaluated in terms of their functions as determined by their audiences. For most Americans, I would argue, the function of the Somalia image was to settle an ongoing debate about the U.S. military’s humanitarian role in Somalia and other countries without any social-economic-political-defense ties to America. I would argue that the functions of the Saigon execution image were to show the barbarity of war and to question whether the U.S. was in the “right war.” Although these are not the only potential functions of the two images, they are reasonable choices given the extensive list of comments on the two images provided by Perlmutter in his book’s appendices (pp 137-41; 145-48). These functions were more clearly communicated in the execution and dragging photos than in other photographs of war, or stories of war, or speeches, movies, books, etc. Finally, the third step in Foss’ evaluation process involves scrutiny of the functions themselves. In the case of the Somalia photograph, certainly the debate about using American military personnel for humanitarian missions in countries involved in civil wars is legitimate. But would any one image be adequate for a debate? This picture effectively shows the costs of the worst-case scenario. Where is the photo showing the benefits? With the Saigon photo, no photographer in the history of photography would argue against the legitimacy of using images to show the brutality of war. Moreover, the photo’s function of questioning America’s involvement in Vietnam was sound since neither the U.S. military nor government seemed to avoid self-interest when examining the question.

In summary, Perlmutter seemed to evaluate the effectiveness of “famous” photographic icons according to the same “hypodermic needle” theory of communication he derided in his text. Since scholars cannot clearly establish a cause-effect relationship between a particular image and long-term foreign policy, the commonly held belief in the effects of those images is unjustified, he writes. On the other hand, from a rhetorical perspective, which emphasizes a ritual model of communication and a social construction of reality, these images seemed to have both immediate and long-lasting effects upon citizens and leaders. Foreign policy debates still take account of the “Vietnam syndrome” partly defined by Adams’ photograph, and U.S. relations with China remain influenced by the Tiananmen incident best remembered by Cole’s image. The genocide of Rwanda without intervention by the U.S. has been attributed to the ideological climate established in Somalia characterized by the dragging photo. These symbolic effects are more difficult to measure over short time periods, but they still exist.