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Recommended Citation

Messaris, P. (2009). What's Visual about "Visual Rhetoric"?. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 95* (2), 210-223. https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630902842095

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What's *Visual* about "Visual Rhetoric"?

Paul Messaris

Thomas Ferstle, *Assessing Visual Rhetoric: Problems, Practices, and Possible Solutions* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Verlag Dr. Müller, 2007), xi+204 pp. $76.00.

Kristie S. Fleckenstein, Sue Hum, and Linda T. Calendrillo, eds., *Ways of Seeing, Ways of Speaking: The Integration of Rhetoric and Vision in Constructing the Real* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor Press, 2007), x+256 pp. $60.00 (cloth).

Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope, eds., *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), xxvi+437 pp. $49.95 (paper).

Caroline van Eck, *Classical Rhetoric and the Visual Arts in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xii+225 pp. $80.00 (cloth).

Between them, the two edited volumes listed above contain a total of twenty-nine analyses of various kinds of visual images and displays. Fewer than half of those analyses deal with visual material designed explicitly for persuasive purposes, such as political image-making, social activism, or commercial advertising. To a reader unfamiliar with the study of rhetoric, this seeming neglect of deliberate persuasion might seem puzzling. However, in the world of rhetorical scholarship, it is, of course, an old story. For the better part of the past century, people who write about rhetoric have been expanding their focus to an ever-widening range of media and contexts. A major goal of this expansion has been the desire to understand the workings of the more implicit or covert forms of persuasion. As Kristie Fleckenstein argues (echoing Kenneth Burke) in her elegant introduction to the volume of which she is co-editor, all communication is rhetorical, insofar as it is a means of constructing social reality (9).

The recent publication of several books on visual rhetoric is part of this long-term broadening of the scope of rhetorical scholarship.[1] In an informative and thought-provoking chapter that is presented as an afterword in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader, Thomas Benson points out that an interest in visual media can be traced back to some of the earliest work inspired by the 1925 essay in which Herbert Wichelns laid the foundations of contemporary rhetorical criticism (413). What have we gained from this embrace of visual communication—and what, if anything, have we lost? The gains are, to some extent, self-evident. It is almost axiomatic that mergers between scholarly sub-disciplines are mutually beneficial as a result of the exchange of methodologies and theoretical perspectives. The study of visual communication has also profited significantly from rhetorical scholarship's stronger grounding in history. For example, ten of the *Visual Rhetoric* reader's twenty chapters deal with visual images originating in the mid-twentieth century or earlier periods. As its subtitle implies, this book could serve as an excellent introduction to the history of American visual culture—a topic that doesn't often get good coverage in standard textbooks on visual communication.

Has the merger between rhetoric and visual communication had any negative consequences? The answer to this question depends on what one thinks the goals of such a merger should be. If the main goal is simply to show that rhetorical analysis can be applied to images just as productively as it is applied to words, then the books under review here have all succeeded spectacularly. However, if the study of visual rhetoric is also supposed to result in broader theoretical conclusions about the power of images—if it is supposed to tell us what makes images *special*, in comparison with words and other means of communication—then the record of achievement here is more equivocal, especially as far as the *Visual Rhetoric* reader is concerned. Perhaps because they are reacting to a perceived verbal bias in communication departments' approaches to rhetoric, many of the authors in that collection seem more concerned with the rhetorical intricacies, complexities, and subtleties of specific images than with the generic properties of images as means of persuasive communication. As a result, a reader might come away from some of this material with an insufficient appreciation of how *different* visual persuasion can be from its verbal counterpart.

A case in point is Lester Olson's chapter in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader, an analysis of two images produced by Benjamin Franklin at different points in his journalistic and political career. The first image was published on page 2 of the May 9 issue of Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754, the first year of the French and Indian War. The image showed a snake sliced into eight pieces, each of which was labeled with the initials of a colony or region of British North America, ranging from New England at the head to South Carolina at the tail. Underneath the snake was a caption, "JOIN, OR DIE." The second image appears to have been produced in 1766, at a time when Franklin was in London, lobbying against the Stamp Act. This image, titled "MAGNA Britannia: her Colonies REDUC'D," portrayed a woman's body with her arms and legs chopped off and lying on the ground beside her. The arms were labeled "Pennsyl" and "New York," the legs ‘‘Virg-'' and ‘‘New Eng-.'' The aim of Olson's analysis is to figure out what exactly Franklin was trying to accomplish through the use of these two images. In search of an answer to this question, Olson digs deep into the historical archives, sifting through contemporary commentary about the images, Franklin's own statements about them, and the images' known distribution history.

The outcome of Olson's analysis is a vivid demonstration of just how profoundly context can affect the meaning of a message. He points out that "JOIN, or DIE," which could be seen as pro-British in its original context, came to have the exact opposite connotation when it was later reprinted in publications opposing the Stamp Act (334). Conversely, although "MAGNA Britannia" could be seen as an appeal for solidarity between Great Britain and her colonies, when Franklin was accused of disloyalty to Pennsylvania, the image was used in his defense, as proof of his efforts on behalf of the colonies. Olson's study is an outstanding piece of historical scholarship. It is meticulously documented and argued with admirable rigor. It gives us a wealth of information about Franklin's two pictures and their context. However, it tells us almost nothing about pictures in general. After I had finished reading it, I found myself wondering how—if at all—Olson's methods or conclusions might have differed if he had been dealing with purely verbal expressions of solidarity, such as Franklin's celebrated admonition about hanging together or hanging separately. Explicit answers to such questions are often lacking from the studies in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader.

All the same, this observation should not be taken as a criticism of Olson or any of the other authors under consideration here. It would be both illogical and unfair to criticize someone for not doing what he or she did not set out to do. Moreover, if we look between the lines of the specific analyses offered in this group of books, it is possible to extract quite substantive contributions towards a more theoretical approach to visual rhetoric, even when the authors themselves do not explicitly address such matters. In particular, some of these analyses have very productive implications regarding three major questions that any theory of visual rhetoric has to grapple with: Do visual arguments need captions? Are pictures more emotional than words (and words more informative than pictures)? Do photographs provide more trustworthy evidence than words or other kinds of pictures? I have tried to phrase these questions as simply as possible. Answering them, however, is no simple matter. What we are really trying to get at when we ask such questions is not some essential property of images but, rather, how the creators and viewers of images make sense of them. In other word s, we are asking empirical questions with necessarily messy answers. Moreover, those answer s are constantly changing as visual culture evolves. Visual rhetoric is a moving target, and, in an age of rapidly changing digital media, that target's movements are getting faster.

Do Visual Arguments Need Captions?

Are there types of meanings that pictures can't convey by themselves? In the field of visual communication, one of the earliest attempts to deal with this question in detail occurs in an article by Sol Worth, a foundational theorist of visual media.[2] The article's title is a succinct statement of Worth's conclusion: "Pictures Can't Say Ain't." Worth was making a basic distinction that others have made in more elaborate terminology: language is propositional, images are presentational; language has a syntax for making claims about reality; images have no such syntax and are merely uninflected representations. Hence, a picture can be a false representation, but it has no means of asserting its falseness. An example that may seem to be a textbook proof of Worth's point is the now notorious *New Yorker* cover of July 21, 2008, featuring Barack Obama dressed as a Muslim, Michelle Obama in sixties radical hair-do and vaguely revolutionary attire, a picture of a somewhat Osama-bin-Laden-esque man on the wall, and the Stars and Stripes burning in the fireplace. In the criticism that followed the publication of this image, it was often noted that there should have been a caption of some sort to explain that this was supposed to be a portrayal of Obama's opponents' *lies* about him, not the cartoonist's or the *New Yorker*'s actual beliefs. (In fact, the magazine's contents page did list a title for the cover illustration: "The Politics of Fear.") For example, according to *Los Angeles Times* blogger Andrew Malcolm, "[a] problem is there's no caption on the cover to ensure that everyone gets the ha-ha-we've-collected-almost-every-cliched-rumor-about-Obama-in-one-place-in-order-to-make-fun-of-them punchline."[3] Q.E.D., it would seem.

But was the Obama cartoon's miscommunication really a result of the limitations of pictures, or did it stem from broader difficulties confronting all forms of satire? After all, one of the most prominent instances of misperceived satire in U.S. culture is the purely verbal case of *Huckleberry Finn*, whose sardonic portrayal of the speech patterns of nineteenth-century racists has ended up offending many contemporary readers' racial sensitivities. The problem with Worth's argument—and with similar approaches to visual theory—is that it treats visual communication as if its properties were determined by some inherent, unchanging essence, instead of the ever-mutating conventions of the users of visual media. Although it may be true that pictures don't have an explicit, standardized counterpart of verbal negation or of other features of verbal syntax, it is also true that artists, filmmakers, and other creators of images have a long history of attempts to cobble together propositional structures with the means at their disposal. The two collections reviewed here contain several analyses of such structures. Taken together, these analyses hint at an intriguing conclusion about this aspect of visual rhetoric: far from being a limitation, the lack of an explicit propositional syntax may actually be one of the distinguishing strengths of images when they are used as means of persuasion.

Advertising in all its forms (including political ads and social advocacy videos) has always been a fecund source of experimentation in the construction of visual arguments through the juxtaposition of images. This kind of experimentation,that has accelerated since the advent of widely affordable computer-based editing systems in the 1990s, is dissected at length in Ronald Shields's contribution to the *Visual Rhetoric* reader, a study of Apple's 1997 advertising campaign, "Think Different." In the video commercial that is the focus of Shields's analysis, we see a series of seventeen images of famous innovators (Albert Einstein, Bob Dylan, Martin Luther King Jr., etc.), followed by an unidentified young girl, and concluding with the Apple logo. The voice-over narration salutes "the crazy ones," "misfits," "rebels," etc., and concludes, "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do. 'Think Different'" (283). Superficially, one could claim that this is an example of pictures aping the structure of a verbal argument. As the narrator delivers his recitation of all the worthy things that innovators do ("see things differently," "change things," "push the human race forward," etc.), the ad's visual part provides a concrete exemplar of the soundtrack's abstractions. However, as Shields's analysis shows, this way of interpreting the ad ignores a major component of its message.

At the same time that the images mirror the words, they also perform an entirely different function that has no counterpart on the verbal side of the divide. Because of perceptual habits cultivated by the dominant role of movies and other visual narratives in our visual culture, all viewers are primed to see sequences of images as bits of stories, even when those image are also connected in more symbolic or conceptual ways (as in this ad). Shields demonstrates this process with a highly erudite deconstruction of the relationship between two adjacent images in the Apple ad, of opera singer Maria Callas and spiritual leader Mohandas Gandhi. The archival footage of Callas shows her blowing a kiss. Shields identifies the one opera in Callas's repertory that featured a "dramatically significant" kiss, Richard Wagner's *Parsifal*, and notes that the intended recipient of that kiss, Parsifal, is a holy knight who achieves spiritual purity through fasting and self-renunciation—qualities which are also associated with our image of Gandhi.

From there, Shields goes on to make further intricate, albeit well-grounded, connections between this sequence and Apple's "1984" commercial, but, for our purposes, the essential point is his illumination of the double layer of significance and interconnection that is operating in the "Think Different" ad's sequence of images: on the one hand, an argument about thinking differently; on the other hand, a series of stories. The perceived narrative connections will clearly vary depending on each viewer's previous level of knowledge about each of the figures in the ad. Obviously, few viewers can be expected to know as much about the specific example of Maria Callas as Shields does. However, as Shields indicates through a quotation from one of the ad's creators, it is quite likely that this kind of open-endedness was a deliberate feature of the ad. Indeed, it is more than likely that such viewer-specific connections are actively pursued by advertisers. Advertisers are well aware that personalized narratives are unusually effective memory devices. Consequently, the fact that viewers may bring a narrative bias to images can be seen as an enhancement of—rather than an impediment to—the potential use of images in propositional constructions. One layer of meaning makes the argument; the other layer of meaning makes the argument memorable.

The capacity for such double-layered meanings may be less obvious when pictorial arguments are constructed by juxtaposing two or more images in a single picture, rather than in sequence over time. However, an essay by Robert Hariman and John Lucaites in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader contains a clear illustration of this possibility. As in their recent book, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy,* the authors frame this essay as a response to the ‘‘hermeneutics of suspicion’’ that has characterized some notable academic commentary on the role of images in the public sphere (175).[4] Their goal is to show that, while photojournalistic images may be ‘‘merely supplemental to the task of reporting the news’’ (176), they provide the public with opportunities for common spectatorship that are vital to the shaping of conceptions of civic identity. In this particular essay, Hariman and Lucaites examine AP photographer Nick Ut’s iconic image of Vietnamese children fleeing a napalm explosion. Their dissection of this image and its reception brings to light a host of disquieting details—such as the fact that the soldiers in the image’s background appear to be treating this gut-wrenching scene as a routine occurrence—but for our purposes, the more relevant part of the authors’ discussion has to do with a protest visual from a Web site by a Vietnam veteran, Ed Chilton.

Titled ‘‘Veritatis Vietnam,’’ the visual is a composite of three superimposed images: Nick Ut’s photograph, the American flag, and the face of Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York during the Vietnam War and strong supporter of U.S. involvement in that conflict. Hariman and Lucaites observe that this superimposition of images doesn’t merely compare the past with the present (i.e., the moment of the viewer’s confrontation with this image on the Web site where it is displayed). Rather, it fuses them: ‘‘[T]he image of terror and guilt now is always within the flag, an ineradicable part of the United States’s legacy’’ (186). But it seems perfectly appropriate to argue beyond their claim, and to say that, in addition to the *conceptual* fusion that they highlight, the image also invites us to see the figures of the children fused into the same *physical space* as the cardinal. Viewed in this light, the image becomes a portrayal of the cardinal--who is in the foreground--literally turning his back on the children in the background. In other words, once again we are dealing with an implicit story line. In contrast to some of the potential interpretations entertained in Shields’s analysis of the Apple commercial, this perception of a narrative connection between the cardinal and the children seems likely to have been intended quite consciously by the image’s designer.

Even when implicit narrative is not as prominent a factor, propositional sequences of images can accomplish another goal that is less available to words. This aspect of visual rhetoric is illustrated in Barbara Biesecker’s analysis of various commemorations of World War II, in another of the chapters in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader. In the course of this analysis, one of the texts Biesecker discusses is *The Greatest Generation*, Tom Brokaw’s best-selling collection of life stories of people who lived through the war and the depression before it. A major theme of Brokaw’s 1999 book was that this self-sacrificing and uncomplaining generation has been succeeded by social fragmentation and self-interest. Biesecker characterizes the book as ‘‘a vicious attack on today’s identity politics, using history as an alibi for a civics lesson that instructs its readership to turn a blind eye to the social differences that still make a difference’’ (162). Writing from a diametrically opposite perspective--but confirming Biesecker’s interpretation--a highly rated Amazon reviewer says,‘‘The one clear difference between that generation and subsequent ones can be summed up in two words: no whining.”[5]

After commenting on the book’s text, Biesecker turns her attention to one of the book’s major attractions, a series of over a hundred photographs assembled from the personal collections of the individuals featured in the book. In each case, there is at least one photograph taken before that person’s return from the war, and one taken long after. This type of visual structure--a series of contrasts, one after the other--has become a fairly stable rhetorical convention. Biesecker interprets it as an obvious attempt to authenticate the verbal text, but then she makes an additional observation. She notes that the book’s concluding seventeen vignettes feature fourteen white men, two white women, and one ‘‘model minority’’ (164), Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye. Interestingly, this observation is at odds with the lesson that Amazon’s favorable review derives from the book: ‘‘[T]hese people were far more diverse than we today have given them credit for. . . . Their values and lifestyles were about as diverse as those we find in our new century.’’[6]

If Biesecker’s implied interpretation is valid, this is a case in which the visual syntax undercuts the stated message of diversity. It is also a particularly apt illustration of an important principle: precisely because of its presumed lack of propositional properties, visual communication has an element of deniability that is absent from words. The implications that Biesecker sees in those seventeen vignettes are not spelled out verbally; if they were, they might have met with greater resistance from other readers. To return one more time to the topic of Obama iconology, it could be argued that a similar logic was present in the anti-Obama video in which his image was juxtaposed with those of Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. The ad’s verbalized message was that Obama is an even bigger star than they, but is not ready to lead the country. However, it doesn’t seem far-fetched to assume that the images were also intended to imply an unspoken analogy to other, less flattering qualities of Hilton and Spears than their stardom.

Are Pictures More Emotional than Words?

This idea may be the most widely shared preconception about the differences between these two modes of communication. In discussions of broadcast news, it has become almost a commonplace that words convey the information while pictures arouse the emotions. According to the evidence contained in Thomas Ferstle’s *Assessing Visual* Rhetoric, aspects of this idea also seem to be reflected in pedagogical practices. Ferstle’s book is based on his PhD dissertation. In graduate school, he worked as a teaching assistant on a freshman composition course that included an assignment in visual rhetoric. Students were expected to combine images and words in this project. As an aspiring educator, Ferstle was concerned about the criteria used to evaluate the students’ visual compositions, and his dissertation was a study of how the teaching assistants in this large class conducted these evaluations. The study was based on detailed, open-ended interviews, in which the teaching assistants were asked to explicate the factors that they had used in assessing the verbal and the visual aspects of the assignments. According to these interviews, the introduction of a visual component made it difficult for the graders to apply traditional criteria such as clarity or coherence in their evaluations. Instead, they found themselves resorting to more ‘‘holistic’’ judgments based on emotional impact or aesthetic qualities. In short, they seemed to be reflecting, and perhaps reproducing, the prevailing cultural understanding of how pictures differ from words.

Even if it's true that, *in practice*, our culture associates images with emotion, is there any reason to think that one mode is more emotional than the other *in principle*? Doesn't it depend on how pictures or words are actually used? Isn't the history of verbal oratory full of utterances that are as soul-stirring as any visual display? ‘‘I have a dream’’;‘‘The only thing we have to fear is fear itself ’’; ‘‘Give me liberty, or give me death!’’ One of the reasons such questions are so difficult to answer is that emotion itself can be such a nebulous concept. However, it has become much less nebulous in recent communication research informed by cognitive science. From this perspective, while it remains true that any form of artistic communication can excite the emotions if used skillfully, it also seems true that representational images possess certain means of eliciting emotion that are not available to verbal language.[7] This is not the place for a detailed examination of that literature. Its implications for rhetorical scholarship may be better appreciated in the context of reviewing related research on visual rhetoric.

Caroline van Eck's authoritative, learned, beautifully argued study of early modern European visual art traces the influence of classical rhetoric on the theories and practices of Italian and English painters, sculptors, and architects. Her book begins with a well-documented demonstration of a point that she makes very insistently: far from being a recent invention, visual rhetoric is envisioned explicitly and in considerable detail in the work of several Greek and Roman writers, Aristotle not excluded. Van Eck's primary interest is in the Romans, such as Quintilian and Cicero, from whose writings she extracts a wealth precepts for the effective use of gesture, props, setting, and other visual variables that were available to classical oratory. Then, in a chapter titled ‘‘How to Achieve Persuasion in Painting: The Common Ground,’’ she investigates the adaptation of classical thought to the ecclesiastical art of the Italian Renaissance.

This is the part of her book that is most directly related to present-day cognitivist research on visual rhetoric (a connection drawn by me, not by van Eck herself). Van Eck notes, ‘‘In early modern Europe the main purpose of visual persuasion was to move viewers and incite them to virtuous action on the basis of emotional identification with what was depicted’’ (55). Drawing on a formula from Horace's *Ars Poetica*, Renaissance artists considered the basis or ‘‘*conditio sine qua non* of visual persuasion’’ to be ‘‘the identification of the viewer with what is represented, resulting in a sense of living presence’’ (56). This conception led to a number of specific visual strategies, including the following three: first, the inclusion in a painting of a character who observes the main action and exhibits the emotional reaction that the viewer is expected to have toward it; second, the use of linear perspective to create the illusion of a real space into which the viewer might be able to enter; and, third, the use of various *trompe-l'oeil* devices to create an illusion of continuity between the painting and the real space (usually, a church) in which it was exhibited.

All three of these strategies are in evidence in van Eck's first example of this aspect of Italian painting, a fresco of the Holy Trinity painted by Masaccio in the church of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Dating from the mid to late 1420s, this wall painting is often considered the first fully realized application of Renaissance formulae for linear perspective. It is a depiction of Christ on the cross, supported by God, and attended by the Virgin Mary, Saint John the Evangelist, and the worshipping figures of the Florentine husband and wife who had commissioned Masaccio's work. These last two characters are portrayed as if they were in the real space of the church looking into a niche enclosing the image's main subject, and the illusion of a real space within the image itself is enhanced by the use of very precise linear perspective. Standing by the side of the cross, Mary points at her son but looks out at the viewer ‘‘with a resigned gesture that accords with her expression of stoic forbearance’’ (17).

The efficacy of this last strategy--portraying a character who looks out of a picture at the viewer and displays the emotions that the picture is trying to elicit--was, of course, considered intuitively obvious by the writers who laid the foundations for Masaccio’s usage and the artists who subsequently embraced the convention in their own work. However, this is one area in which contemporary cognitive research allows us to arrive at a firmer conclusion. There appears to be good evidence in support of the assumption that emotional ‘‘mirroring’’ is an essential ingredient of adequate social functioning in real life, and that there is actually a neurobiological basis for this type of response.[8] In other words, in adapting this aspect of emotional response for pictorial purposes, the creators of images are using a rhetorical strategy whose efficacy is, in a sense, ‘‘guaranteed,’’ and eliciting emotion in a way that words cannot possibly replicate.

A similar argument can be made about the use of linear perspective and other illusionistic devices as means of drawing the spectator into the picture. As van Eck points out, one of the most central lessons that Renaissance artists drew from classical rhetoric was the importance of establishing a ‘‘common ground’’ between the speaker and the audience. By extension, pictorial perspective was considered a means of creating the illusion of a literal common ground--a space that the viewer might enter. Few topics in art history have generated as much confusion as the illusionism of linear perspective. Since as early as the 1920s, writers of various persuasions have been arguing that linear perspective is a cultural construction with little or no basis in anything that we could call ‘‘objective’’ or even ‘‘real.’’[9] In the face of mounting evidence from research on visual perception, such a position has become increasingly tenuous.[10] However, somewhat more recently, the idea of perspective as cultural construction has acquired a new twist, which is present in several of the essays in the Fleckenstein, Hum, and Calendrillo collection. Inspired by the writings of Martin Jay, among others, this view of ‘‘Cartesian perspectivalism’’ is premised on a series of assumptions--or perhaps ‘‘axioms’’ would be a better word--that are spelled out very lucidly in a chapter by Sue Hum.[11]

According to these assumptions, perspective creates a ‘‘detached observer’’ who ‘‘remains ostensibly disinterested’’ (109), thus taking on the ‘‘unmarked, normative position of Western civilization: a white, Eurocentric, middle-class heterosexual male’’ (111), becoming ‘‘complicitous with bourgeois ideology’’ (110), thus eliminating ‘‘deep differences, such as race, gender, class, and sexual-orientation’’ (111). That’s saying a lot for linear perspective, and it’s hard to see on what grounds we could either prove or disprove such a list of claims (were we so inclined). However, on the one issue that serves as the starting point for this chain of suppositions--namely, the idea that perspective somehow creates a detached observer--van Eck’s documentation of the historical evidence suggests that this argument is flat-out wrong. In its original context in fifteenth-century Italy, the immediate goal of perspective was to involve, not to disembody. In present-day visual media, illusionistic devices such as 3D or ‘‘invisible editing’’ create the common ground on which emotion can build and persuasion can take hold. To the extent that old and new illusionistic devices are based on the ‘‘built-in’’ properties of human vision, the media that employ them are--as with emotional mirroring-- doing something that words literally, physically, cannot do.

Are Words More Informative than Pictures?

In a sense, then, visual communication can indeed be considered more emotional than language, but only to the extent that it has a wider arsenal of emotional devices at its disposal. Is there a sense in which words are, conversely, more adept at conveying information? The two properties of language that are most often associated with that claim are its complex propositional syntax and its capacity for abstraction. While visual approximations of propositional syntax are, as we have seen, effective rhetorical devices, they cannot come close to the complexity of expression made possible by verbal syntax. When Sergei Eisenstein, luminary of early Soviet cinema and major theorist of film editing, predicted that filmmakers would one day be able to rewrite *Das Kapital* in the form of visual montage, he was essentially proving the opposite point through the preposterousness of his example.[12] If pictures can’t match the informational properties of verbal syntax, how do they stand with regard to abstraction? All words are abstract, and by virtue of that abstraction, they are means of organizing social reality and moving from the particular to the general. Many kinds of images--for example, all photographs--are concrete. However, pictures do have the capacity for abstraction, as demonstrated by directional arrows, some traffic signs, some computer screen icons, and so on. One of the notable strengths of the Fleckenstein, Hum, and Calendrillo collection is its inclusion of several chapters dealing with the use of abstract pictures for informational or scientific purposes.

In the course of a wide-ranging survey of various forms of scientific visualization, such as X-rays, maps, and spectroscopic read-outs, Don Ihde makes a useful distinction between two large categories of pictures: on the one hand, what he calls ‘‘isomorphic images’’--pictures whose contents we can recognize on the basis of our everyday perceptual habits--and, on the other hand, ‘‘non-isomorphic images’’ whose interpretation requires familiarity with a specific code. He illustrates this distinction by recalling his first encounter with Ice Age cave paintings: while he was immediately able to recognize the shapes of animals, he was completely baffled by ‘‘some abstract marks in ochre reds, somewhat like spears’’ (33). Ihde’s broader point is that the latter type of image is essentially language-like: it is read, not perceived, and, in its scientific uses, its properties are closer to those of language than to those of isomorphic pictures.

However, Ihde may be overstating this similarity. While it is incontestably true that certain kinds of visual abstraction cannot be interpreted without specialized knowledge, it by no means follows that such abstractions adhere to a totally arbitrary code, as in the case of language. In a penetrating discussion of the differences between language and abstract scientific visuals, Alan Gross points out that the latter characteristically retain some element of ‘‘isomorphism’’ or analogy to the objects or processes they are meant to help us understand. However, the analogy is selective, highlighting only those features that are crucial to thehypotheses that are being considered. Moreover, as Gross convincingly illustrates through a detailed look at diagrams used by Charles Darwin, such pictorial abstractions are so vital to the development of science that it makes no sense to make a greater claim for pictures or words in assessments of scientific advances: ‘‘[O]nly the fusion of words and pictures can overcome the limitations of each in disclosing and explaining relevant aspects of the world’’ (62).

Gross's vigorous defense of abstract images is a bracing corrective to conventional views on these matters. But what about fully concrete, photographic images? Perhaps one reason for the traditional dim view of their role in informational media is that we expect our information to come in readily digestible abstractions. When confronted with the density of detail that photographs are capable of, we demand voice-over or captions to tell us what we're seeing. Perhaps the least persuasive essays in the two edited collections are those that try to impose a reductive interpretation on the variety and flux of the images that they are ostensibly analyzing. In the lead chapter of the *Visual Rhetoric* reader, Reginald Twigg offers his views on a number of images from *How the Other Half Lives*, Jacob Riis's landmark account of New York tenement life in the late 1800s. One of the images Twigg discusses is of a family from Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic) engaged in cigar-making in their home. In the version that appears on page 113 of the Barnes &Noble edition of this book (a variant of the image presented in Twigg's essay), the parents perform their tasks sitting next to each other at a work table, while the family's two boys look directly at the camera. The older boy, who also appears to be working, has a baleful expression on his face. This boy is barefoot, but in other respects, the members of the family appear to be wearing adequate clothing. The room has two large windows, which are both partially open, providing a view of another building across the street. In the background, we see what appears to be a sideboard, and several indistinct objects hang on the walls.[13]

Without discussing any of these material details, Twigg makes the following claim: ''While on the surface the image looks benign--merely a hard-working family earning its living--its metonymy contains many elements subversive of middle-class ideals''(27). Because of the contrast between this family and the ideal middle-class family that (presumably) springs to the viewer's mind from a perusal of this image, this family was ''appropriated'' by Riis to ''naturalize the middle-class family and its attendant gender, generational, and age relations by 'illustrating' the 'dangers' of any subversion of it'' (28). Maybe this is true, but then again, maybe it isn't. How would we know? How does Twigg know that this is what the image meant to Riis or to any of his viewers? Here are some of the things Riis's text says about the Bohemian cigar-makers: ''In the Bohemian quarter [the tenement] is made the vehicle for enforcing upon a proud race a slavery as real as any that ever disgraced the South.''[14]

> But what of his being an Anarchist, this Bohemian--an infidel--I hear somebody say. Almost one might be persuaded . . . to retort: what more natural? With every hand raised against him in the old land and the new, in the land of his hoped-for freedom, what more logical than that his [hand] should be turned against society that seems to exist only for his oppression? . . . Naturally the Bohemian loves peace, as he loves music and song. As someone has said: He does not seek war, but when attacked knows better how to die than to surrender.[15]

These are selective quotations, from a book that veers almost frenetically from denunciations of the ''greed of capital'' to the most appalling racial stereotypes.[16] How does Twigg know that it is Riis's bourgeois, prejudiced voice that speaks through the image of the Bohemian cigar--makers, rather than the angry, exploitation-hating voice that could easily be mistaken for that of an impassioned rabble-rouser? More important, why is Twigg so sure that only one of these voices can adequately contain the image's possible meanings?

Photographs as Proof

Both Twigg's and Biesecker's essays deal with photographs that were used as evidence in support of the argument in a written text. Somewhat surprisingly, though, this aspect of visual rhetoric--the use of photographs as proof--is not a major theme of any of these books. Perhaps visual scholars have grown weary of the somewhat repetitive debate that has attended the development of computerized photo-manipulation: on the one side, concerns about potential fakery; on the other side, reminders that all photographs present a selective version of reality.[17] However, the *Visual Rhetoric* reader does include two chapters in which the evidentiary power of images is a central concern, and both chapters make important contributions to the general topic.

Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca describe the emotional impact and social aftereffects of an image of grotesque violence: the photograph of Emmett Till's dead body lying in his coffin. After the open-casket memorial service that his mother had insisted on, the photograph of his horrifically mangled face was published in *Jet* and in several other newspapers and periodicals. Harold and DeLuca document the impact of that image by citing the experiences of several now-prominent African Americans whose lives were affected profoundly when they saw it. Perhaps the most striking of these is the following statement by Molefi Kete Asante, a leader in the development of African American studies as an academic discipline: ‘‘My life's pilgrimage, in many respects, has been to seek liberation from the moment of Till's death’’ (263). However, with respect to the difference between images and words, the two most significant findings of this study are as follows. First, even though African Americans living outside the South had heard verbal accounts of the perils that black people faced there at the time, it was the photograph that ‘‘allowed viewers to become witness to what for many had existed only as rumor and legend’’ (264). Second, the venue where the photograph first appeared in print, *Jet* magazine, contributed significantly to its truth value. According to a former associate of the magazine, ‘‘People in the black community have said for years, there's a motto: ‘If it wasn't in *Jet*, it didn't happen’’’ (269). In a sense, that says it all: on the one hand, a photograph does provide a truth that language can't; on the other hand-- somewhat contradictorily, perhaps--the guarantor of that truth is the photograph's source (i.e., not the medium itself).

However, the tragedy of Emmett Till occurred more than half a century ago. In a world of digital media, how have attitudes towards photography been influenced by the development of more efficient methods of image manipulation? As noted, digital imaging is not a major theme of these books. However, by delving even further back into the past, Cara Finnegan's chapter in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader provides a fascinating case study of one way in which people's beliefs about photographic truth can be shaped by changing circumstances. Finnegan's chapter examines viewers' responses to a photograph of Abraham Lincoln that was published for the first time in *McClure's* magazine in 1895. According to his son, who gave the original daguerreotype to *McClure's,* this was the earliest known photograph of Lincoln. Moreover, this was not the Lincoln that the public of 1895 was familiar with (or that we are familiar with today), but a much younger man very different in his appearance. Finnegan points out that the best-known early portrait of Lincoln, taken in 1857, shows him as ‘‘a raw frontier lawyer having what may only be described as a bad hair day’’(65). In the newly discovered daguerreotype, on the other hand, he was immaculately attired and groomed (and beardless), with a ‘‘dignified, reserved’’ expression (65).

As S.S. McClure, the magazine’s publisher, had anticipated, the publication of Lincoln’s photograph (reproduced in halftone from the daguerreotype) generated tremendous interest from readers, swelling the magazine’s circulation and eliciting an outpouring of letters to the editor. Sifting through this correspondence, Finnegan eventually draws our attention to one particular pattern: the attempt to draw conclusions about the young Lincoln’s personality on the basis of his physical appearance and expression. As Finnegan puts it, the letters are based on the assumption that there was a ‘‘direct correspondence between Lincoln’s image and his ‘natural traits’’’(67). She quotes one of several highly educated letter-writers, the president of MIT, who wrote,

> The present picture has distinctly helped me to understand the relation between Mr. Lincoln’s face and his mind and character. . . . To my eye it *explains* Mr. Lincoln far more than the most elaborate line-engraving which has been produced. (62)

Where did this belief in a ‘‘direct correspondence’’ between image and character come from? According to Finnegan, here we have a case of scientific trends influencing picture perception. The late nineteenth century was a time of belief in the ‘‘science’’ of physiognomy--the theory that the physical shape of one’s face is related to one’s personality. It would appear that the interpreters of Lincoln’s portrait were incorporating this belief into their attitudes towards photography.

Methodological Post-Script

I have tried to show that, taken as a whole, the essays and analyses in the four books under consideration here provide productive answers to certain basic theoretical questions about visual rhetoric. These questions are all concerned with the means of persuasion available to images and, more specifically, the differences between images and words in this regard. Having looked at theory, it may be useful to end this review with a brief comment about evidence and method. After I had read Cara Finnegan’s study of responses to the photograph of Abraham Lincoln, I was somewhat surprised to find that interest in scientific physiognomy has recently experienced something of a revival, albeit on grounds that are more attuned to contemporary attitudes toward biology, psychology, and scientific evidence.[18] At the same time, students in some areas of communication and psychology are being exposed to ‘‘softer’’ versions of physiognomic theory, in the form of hypotheses about such things as the facial indicators of mendacity.[19] An experimentally inclined researcher might be able to concoct a test of Finnegan’s theory using such viewers.

Finnegan herself has elsewhere made it clear that she does not consider that type of empirical research to be a necessary component of the study of visual rhetoric, and she may be right.[20] Still, there are many ways of buttressing an argument with evidence, short of conducting a full-blown empirical test. The most convincing studies in these four books are those--such as Finnegan’s--that look at how real people responded to the images that the writer is analyzing and theorizing about. We live in an age that expects grand claims to be made about the power of images, and the less obvious those claims are, the more some people are impressed by them. In such an intellectual climate, theory may need a bit of evidence now and then to keep flights of fancy under control. That evidence need not take the form of verbal testimony. One of the strongest theoretical chapters in the *Visual Rhetoric* reader is Janis Edwards and Carol Winkler’s analysis of the Iwo Jima flag-raising image, using various cartoon parodies as clues to the meanings it has had in American visual culture. All the same, having spent an entire essay highlighting the powers of images, it is somewhat sobering to be reminded how effectively a well-crafted verbal comment can express a viewer's response.

An outstanding illustration of this possibility is included in Charles Morris and John Sloop's article on queer public kissing. The article as a whole is an engaging discussion of the underappreciated importance of man-on-man public kissing as a political performance that is ‘‘central to the prospects of a queer world’’ (80). Although the authors argue this point in detail and support their argument with a variety of good evidence, the most compelling expression of their argument--to my eyes, at least--comes at the very beginning of the chapter, where they quote a filmmaker/reviewer's reaction to a scene in which the two dudes of *Dude, Where's My Car?* engage in a lengthy tongue kiss (for narrative reasons that are too complicated to bother explaining). Here is the reviewer's comment:

> The actors neither overplay nor underplay the moment and show no visible trace of disgust or regret afterward. I was almost in tears. This one scene does more to advance the cause of homosexuality than 25 years of gay activism. (80)

And, one might add, this one comment does more to prove Morris and Sloop's point than many pages of academic discourse.

Notes

[1] Two excellent predecessors of the books reviewed in this essay are Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers, eds., *Defining Visual Rhetorics* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004), and Carolyn Handa, ed., *Visual Rhetoric in a Digital World: A Critical Sourcebook* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004).

[2] Sol Worth, ‘‘Pictures Can't Say Ain't,’’ in *Studying Visual Communication*, ed. Larry Gross (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 162-84.

[3] Andrew Malcolm, comment on ‘‘Is the New Yorker's Muslim Obama Cover Incendiary or Satire?’’ *Los Angeles Times* blog, comment posted July 31, 2008, http://latimesblogs.latimes. com/washington/2008/07/obama-muslim.html/.

[4] Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-24.

[5] Stan Vernooey, ‘‘An Impressive and Moving Story,’’ review of *The Greatest Generation by Tom Brokaw*, Amazon.com, August 19, 2001, http://www.amazon.com/greatest-generation-tombrokaw/ dp/0812965213/ref-pd-bbs-sr-1?ie-utf8&s-books&qid-1220216702&sr-8-1/.

[6] Vernooey, ‘‘Impressive and Moving Story.’’

[7] David Freedberg and Vittorio Galese, ‘‘Motion, Emotion, and Empathy in Esthetic Experience,’’ *TRENDS in Cognitive Science* 11 (2007): 197-203.

[8] Giacomo Rizzolatti and Corrado Sinigaglia, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions and Emotions*, trans. Frances Anderson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chapter 5. See also Marco Iacoboni, *Mirroring People: The Science of How We Connect with Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 3-27.

[9] The originator of these ideas is usually considered to be Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1927/1991), 27-45. The erudition displayed in Panofsky's historical references seems to have blinded most of his readers to the shaky logic of some of his arguments, such as the idea that straight-line perspective is an arbitrary convention because it doesn't replicate the curvature of the retina. The most extreme exponent of the train of thought that Panofsky set in motion is probably Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1976), 3-44.

[10] The most thorough theoretical refutation of the idea that perspective and other photorealistic conventions are arbitrary constructions comes from the writings of J.J. Gibson, posthumously collected in James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1986), 267-302.

[11] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[12] See Richard Taylor, ed., *The Eisenstein Reader* (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 79.

[13] Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*, intro. Dail Murray (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1890/2004).

[14] Riis, *How the Other Half*, 107.

[15] Riis, *How the Other Half*, 115.

[16] Riis, *How the Other Half*, xxii.

[17] For a comprehensive review of these issues, see Julianne H. Newton, ‘‘Influences of Digital Imaging on the Concept of Photographic Truth,’’ *in Digital Media: Transformations in Human Communication*, ed. Paul Messaris and Lee Humphreys (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), 3-14.

[18] ‘‘Facing the Truth: The Shape of Your Face Betrays How Aggressive You Are--If You Are a Man,’’ *The Economist*, August 23, 2008, 70.

[19] Paul Ekman, *Telling Lies: Clues to Deceit in the Marketplace, Politics, and Marriage* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). See also Paul Ekman and Erika L. Rosenberg, eds., *What the Face Reveals: Basic and Applied Studies of Spontaneous Expression Using the Facial Action Coding System (FACS)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 201-16.

[20] Cara A. Finnegan, ‘‘Review Essay: Visual Studies and Visual Culture,*’’ Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90 (2004): 234-56.

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