



Overview: Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy

Introduction

Are you trying to “read” a picture or “write” a web-site? Have you been asked to evaluate or reflect on a symbol or visual image? Hopefully, this handout and the others in this series will give you a place to think about how the elements of communication and persuasion are embedded in texts you don’t just read but see. Images, not just words, provide us with information and change the ways we think, reason, and act. They can *speak* to us in powerful ways.

The simplest definition for visual rhetoric is the use of visual images to communicate meaning. It is also important to note that visual rhetoric is not just about superior design and aesthetics. It is also about how culture and meaning are reflected, communicated, and altered by images. Visual literacy involves all the processes of knowing and responding to a visual image as well as all the thought that might go into constructing or manipulating an image. In other words, visual literacy is the ability to “read” and “write” images and the meanings those images communicate.

Identifying Fundamental Elements

According to [The On-Line Visual Literacy Project](#) at Pomona College, some of the fundamental elements of visual composition include shape, direction, texture, color (hue and saturation), value (presence and absence of light), scale, dimension and motion.

Donis Dondis identifies these visual elements as the building blocks from which a visual space is created, organized syntactically, and expressed metaphorically. These are the components, then, of visual rhetoric—a rhetoric tied in to being visually literate.¹

Using Principles of Perception

Principles of perception and visual interpretation are at work in media and film studies, cultural studies, art, literature, photography, electronic media, and in public events such as concerts, sports events and other venues.

¹ Donis A. Dondis, *A Primer of Visual Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1973), 15.

According to Caryn Talty in her *Kairos* article [Teaching a Visual Rhetoric](#):

Theorists of hypertext such as George Landow and Jay David Bolter tend to emphasize the associational character of (hypertextual) writing. ‘Connectivity’ of texts and ideas takes precedence over the linear assumptions of print forms” (142). Simply put, the author of a Web site understands that he or she has no control over the depth, breadth, or route a reader will take when viewing his or her site. The control is not in the writer’s words, but with the reader’s choices. This altered attitude about the roles we must play in order to communicate, the considerations we must have about the written and visual word, and the importance of disseminating information in a reader friendly manner makes us better writers.²

In addition to producing traditional texts, it’s important to pay attention to electronic spaces, their form and function, in the academy. “By privileging composing as the main site of instruction,” says John Trimbur, “the teaching of writing has taken up what Karl Marx calls a ‘one-sided’ view of production and thereby has largely erased the cycle that links the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of writing.”³ In other words, Trimbur wants us to pay attention not only to the process of writing, but to how writing is consumed. Learning more about visual rhetoric can help us produce documents that speak more readily to their intended audience. It can also help us to evaluate visual images we encounter in any variety of settings, whether on TV, in magazines, on billboards, or in the classroom.

Employing Visual Metaphors

Just as important as any other aspect of visual rhetoric is the use of visual metaphor and the recognition that we often use visual metaphors as a way of understanding the world.

Robert N. St. Clair in [Visual Metaphor, Cultural Knowledge, and the New Rhetoric](#), provides this example of the way metaphors function as cognitive models, or ways of knowing:

A teacher who sees students as fragile human beings is using metaphor. He treats them as eggs and is afraid to hurt them. He does not want to see them crack. Another teacher may have a different metaphor when dealing with children. He may see the classroom as a battlefield. He wants his students to hit the target. His approach is one of toughening up the student for battle. They must combat the real world. Metaphors tell us much about those who use them. They provide insight into how these individuals view the world.⁴

Questions to ask about an assignment then might be:

- As a creator or evaluator of a visual text (whatever medium or form it takes) do you see a visual metaphor at work?
- How might the arrangement, content, symbolism of the visual text provide the basis for a metaphor that grants access to a larger meaning, or to a cognitive model/concept/way of looking at the world?
- What experiences from your own life are evoked by the image?
- What emotions are provoked in you by the image?

What can you SEE the author might be SAYING through the elements of design in this image?

² http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/7.3/response/Visual_rhet/ctalty2002pt3.html.

³ John Trimbur, “Composition and the Circulation of Writing,” *CCC*, 52:2, December 2000, 190.

⁴ <http://epistemic-forms.com/Visual-Thinking.htm>. The article’s references are listed at <http://epistemic-forms.com/Visual-metaphor-references.html>.

Handouts in the Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy Series

Overview: Visual Rhetoric/Visual Literacy
Writing about Comics and Graphic Novels
Writing about Film
Writing about Paintings
Writing about Photography
Writing with Maps
Using PowerPoint and Keynote Effectively
Creating Scientific Poster Presentations
Crafting and Evaluating Web Sites

Banner images:

1. Duke University Writing Studio homepage, <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio>;
2. NASA Goddard Space Flight Center Image, *The Blue Marble*, 2002, http://visibleearth.nasa.gov/view_rec.php?id=2429;
3. Claude Monet, *The Regatta at Argenteuil (Régate à Argenteuil)*, 1872;
4. Duke University Writing Studio handout “Using Powerpoint and Keynote Effectively,” <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/documents/powerpoint.pdf>;
5. Duke University Writing Studio handout “Writing About Comics and Graphic Novels,” <http://uwp.aas.duke.edu/wstudio/resources/documents/comics.pdf>;
6. Orson Welles, *Touch of Evil* (1958).