

## DIGITAL IMAGES AND CLASSICAL PERSUASION

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The digitization of images inevitably strips away their context and allows the machine, or rather its programmer, to define new contexts.

—Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space*

### Introduction

The abilities to digitize and contextualize images on the computer required, through the late 1980s, some degree of mathematical expertise. Digital graphics are really pictures made by equations and were originally constructed piece by piece. Now, however, the ease of digitizing photographs and drawings has made the Web's graphic landscape much more accessible to the average person. Thus, the statement by Bolter that begins the chapter now has added implications. Where once only words were malleable enough to be widely wielded as a rhetorical tool, in the latter half of the 1990s the digital image became prevalent, easy to manipulate, and consequently, easy to recontextualize, meaning that now just about any image is available to any computer user for any occasion. To use Bolter's terminology, the "interpenetration" of textual and pictorial space in digital environments, especially the World Wide Web, has increased markedly, so that the predominance of the digital image now rivals that of the digital word. Indeed, a number of thinkers have noted the digital image's ascendancy in communicating information via the computer.<sup>1</sup> But how are we to think about, to analyze the rhetorical dimensions of these images? Both static and moving images can be intensely affective, of course, as print, film, and television have taught us; but what model can we use to assess the persuasive impact of the image in the realm of information technology—specifically, in environments like the Web, a realm where there is an interdependence between text and graphics, as well as an interactivity between reader and writer/programmer/rhetor?

Many have turned to postmodernism to theorize the digital medium in general. The gist of such theorization is that the characteristics of new media like the Web—collage, hypertextuality, multimodality, and nonlinearity, for instance—enact the postmodern *texte*. The focus of this thinking tends to be on aspects of chaos and fragmentation represented by such digital media. But one can also approach these media from another viewpoint, focusing on them as integrative, intertextual, and complex. Notable among those who have approached digital media from this angle are Gunther Kress, Jay David Bolter, Richard Lanham, and Kathleen Welch. The latter two authors, though they sometimes make use of postmodern theory, have successfully used classical rhetoric as their foundation for analyzing computer media. Lanham (1993) discussed digital textuality, including some focus on the digital image, in these terms back in *The Electronic Word*. More recently, Welch (1999) has explored how Isocratic rhetoric may provide a way to think about modern video-based communication, a category in which she includes computers. This chapter owes a debt to these others, and proceeds in their spirit, but focuses particularly on using classical rhetoric as a way of thinking about the persuasive power of computer-based images.

### Why Refer to Classical Rhetoric?

There are good reasons for looking at the digital image in classical terms. In a general sense, as Lanham (1993) contends, few models provide a “frame wide enough” to explain the “extraordinary convergence of twentieth-century thinking with the digital means that now give it expression”; therefore, he continues, “to explain reading and writing on computers, we need to go back to the original Western thinking about reading and writing—the rhetorical *paideia* that provided the backbone of Western education for 2,000 years” (51). Because, with increasing bandwidth, images have become ever more integral to the computer-based reading and writing process since Lanham wrote this passage, I would argue that what he says applies to images, as well. Moreover, as Welch (1999) puts it, classical rhetoric is pertinent to the new communication technologies because “classical Greek rhetoric” is “intersubjective, performative, and a merger of oralism and literacy” (12), and these qualities are common to the technologies in question. I would add to her assertion that these qualities are especially common to the realm of Web-based presentation. For instance, as I shall discuss later, images on Web sites act as part of an argument by parataxis, which, as Eric Havelock has maintained, is characteristic of oral rhetoric, the heart of the classical system (see Lanham 1991, 108). Finally, there is good reason to redeploy classical rhetoric to examine the persuasive value of digital images because, as I intend to show by presenting

the thoughts of some of its most notable thinkers, classical notions provide us with excellent, codified ways to think about the persuasive efficacy of images and words as interdependent and interactive things.

### The Image and Classical Rhetoric

It might be extremely difficult to have a true argument, with the give and take that “argument” implies, using *only* visual images. Yet the potential of the image to move its viewers was recognized by ancient rhetoricians, and thus a correlation between it and verbal imagery has been an important component of persuasion since classical times. The theoretical basis for seeing images as modes of persuasion lies in Aristotelian rhetoric, which stipulates that the speaker’s ability to arouse emotion in his audience and his ability to cultivate an impression of credibility with them are, in addition to evidence and logic, extremely important persuasive elements.

In practical terms, the precedents for the use of images and imagery to instill emotion or credibility can be found in two slightly different classical traditions. One tradition, stemming from Aristotle and continuing with the early Greek orator Gorgias, concerns the affective similarity of images and words: In his *Encomium of Helen*, Gorgias equates the emotive power of the image with that of persuasive speech. The other tradition, most famously associated with the Roman writer Horace, emphasizes how the poetic image can be persuasive: In discussing poetry’s instructional potential, Horace mentions the similarity of poetry to pictures. This Horatian idea became very popular among literary critics and rhetoricians, especially those of the Neoclassical era. In fact, as is exemplified in the theories of the eighteenth-century rhetorician George Campbell, these slightly different traditions of Gorgias and Horace appear to have mingled together over time, so that poetry, visual images, and persuasive speech and composition became interdependent. In the age of the pixelated image, which has given rise to everything from television advertisements to hypermedia, the rhetorical principles codified by Aristotle are still important: Fluency with images and their use has become crucial to controlling credibility and creating emotional appeal, and even, to some extent, logical appeal.

### The Aristotelian Basis for Linking Images and Persuasion

One reason Aristotelian rhetoric provides a good basis for discussing the image as a persuasive tool is that Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric is broad enough to encourage it: He defines rhetoric as the art of finding “in any given case the available means of

persuasion” (*Rhetoric* [1984b], bk. I, chap. 2.). In the years since he wrote those words, our “available means” have expanded considerably, especially with the advent of electronic gadgetry like the computer, which has evolved from a solely mathematical tool into, as Richard Lanham (1993) has proclaimed, a rhetorical medium.<sup>2</sup> In this respect, Aristotle’s definition of the different means of proof available to the orator provides the most important means of discussing the persuasive image. Besides nonartistic proofs, or what we would call “hard evidence,” Aristotle specifies that three artistic forms of proof are also important to argument: *logos* (an appeal to reason), *pathos* (an appeal to the emotions), and *ethos* (the appeal implicit in the speaker’s character and credibility). Although he felt that only “the bare facts” *should* be weighed in any kind of decision and that a plain rhetorical style should suffice, Aristotle grudgingly conceded that because of the “defects of the hearers” such things as artistic appeals are necessary (bk. III, chap. 1). Accordingly, he devotes much of his discussion in the *Rhetoric* to examining artistic forms of appeal, their delivery, and how they may affect the psychology of a given audience. In this context, he discusses the effects of images rendered in words. “Prose writers must,” he says, “pay especially careful attention to metaphor,” for it gives writing a “clearness, charm, and distinction as nothing else can” (bk. III, chap. 2).

The source of the image’s power is clearly in its emotional appeal. As Aristotle points out in his *Poetics*, “Though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art, the forms for example of the lowest animals and of dead bodies” (1984a, chap. 4). The source of the image’s emotional appeal clearly depends on its mimetic quality; but it also depends significantly on the artist’s manipulation of the image, on its rendering, not *just* on its “realistic” imitation of nature. This is why one may have no familiarity at all with the original object rendered in an image and still experience emotion when viewing the image. The emotion “will be due,” says Aristotle, not to the realistic imitation of the object, but “to the execution, the coloring, or some similar cause” (chap. 4). Aristotle’s own analysis of images and imagery is evidence not only of their similar emotional effects and potential persuasive value, but also of the necessity for a critical awareness of affective elements common to both, such as their execution, context and structure.

### Gorgias: Linking the Persuasive Power of Words and Images

Although Aristotle’s advocacy of the rhetorical use of artistic appeal, and therefore of images and imagery, is grudging, for other orators of Aristotle’s era, such as the Sophists, artistic proof, images, and the corresponding use of imagery were very important. Gorgias, a Sophist who lived just before Aristotle began writing, put heavy

emphasis on artistic elements such as delivery, style, and artistic modes of proof. His *Encomium of Helen* illustrates how he sees the image as a potential means of persuasion. In this work, Gorgias tries to exonerate Helen of Troy of starting the Trojan War by showing how her flight to Troy with Paris could be seen as a matter of compulsion. He begins by considering the possibility that Paris raped her and argues that she could not have put up an effective resistance in such a case. He uses this argument as a premise to set up his succeeding contentions that, just as physical strength can ravish the body, so words and images can ravish one’s reason. Gorgias argues that speech “has the form of necessity,” and that, because it can “ravish” the mind, it is like magic or drugs in its effect on people (1972, 52). He proves this through some examples, the most central being that what Aristotle would call artistic appeal is sufficient to persuade a crowd to accept an argument for something that is logically false. Basing his reasoning on the affective power of poetry, Gorgias observes, “A single speech, written with art but not spoken with truth, bends a great crowd and persuades” (53). At this point one can recognize what Gorgias is getting at in his own speech. If a false speech relying on art—that is, on *ethos* and *pathos*—can “constrain” the soul and blind one to *logos*, if a whole crowd can be swayed against reason by “artistic” means, then, implicitly, Helen should surely be considered blameless for what her culture would consider perfidious and unreasonable behavior.

Having illustrated the persuasive power of words, Gorgias then compares this power to that of images. He points out that “frightening sights” are capable of “extinguishing and excluding thought” and thus causing madness (1972, 53–54). Hence, he reasons, we must conclude that images and words are effectively equal; they are both able to “ravish” the soul, to cause blindness to reason and law. As he says, the emotion that is created by images is “engraved upon the mind” and “is exactly analogous to what is spoken” (54). Thus, Gorgias ultimately equates the persuasive power of the image to that of words. Moreover, as one can see by his arguments and examples, the thing that makes the two equal is their effect upon the emotions. (It is notable that he does not limit susceptibility to emotions, words, and images to women such as Helen but gives examples that include all people.)

Although he spends much time discussing the specific emotion of fear, Gorgias does not limit the appeal of images to this emotion: Images, like words, can create great desire, too. He demonstrates this in the last section of his *Encomium*, in which, in reference to the physical beauty of Paris, he argues that visual images—especially beautiful works of art—can cause irresistible desire for whatever they depict: “whenever pictures perfectly create a single figure and form from many colors and figures, they delight the sight, while the creation of statues and the production of works of art

furnish a pleasant sight to the eyes. Thus it is natural for the sight to grieve for some things and to long for others” (54). Gorgias uses this example concerning artworks to show how Helen of Troy’s longing for the delightful sight of Paris might have forced her into fleeing with him every bit as effectively as the druglike words or physical ravishment he referred to earlier.

Besides the overt purpose of exonerating Helen, Gorgias’s discussion of the power of the image is meant to make his Greek audience—who are proud of their powers of reason, who indeed consider those powers the mark of their superiority to barbarians—aware of the sway that other modes of persuasion may have over that of reason. In essence, he is doing what a modern teacher might do in helping her students dissect the emotional appeal of a visual advertisement: showing the audience the power of something they might have considered inconsequential and, in the process, making them cognizant of their own susceptibility to it. Through such a process of exposition, both Gorgias and the modern rhetorician attempt to enable their listeners to defend themselves against *and* to use this kind of power. Understanding the image, in other words, means comprehending its dichotomous possibilities: Its persuasive power might add to an argument, but its force and nonrational nature can distract one from a message’s logical appeal, or its lack thereof. I will return to this idea in the later sections of this chapter.

### Horace: Linking Poetry, Pictures, and Persuasion

As we have seen, Gorgias points to the emotional force of poetry when discussing the power of persuasive speech. This is not coincidental. Indeed, Richard Lanham (1991) reminds us that “rhetorical theory has . . . often in its history overlapped poetics,” most clearly because of “the area where the two bodies of theory overlap—the connotative, suggestive, metaphoric use of language,” but also because their purposes have so often coincided (131–132). As Lanham notes, Cicero maintained that the main functions of rhetoric were to teach, to please, and to move. Similarly, Cicero’s contemporary, the Roman writer Horace, maintained the same mixture of persuasive, didactic and pleasing functions to be essential to poetry. As he argues in his *Ars Poetica*, that poet “has gained every vote who has mingled profit with pleasure by delighting the reader at once and instructing him” (1929/1978, 479).

More importantly, he is also the most famous classical source of the idea that poetry imitates visual images, though that idea may extend as far back as the fifth-century Greek poet Simonides (Adams 1971, 67). Horace’s notion, expressed in his *Ars Poetica*, equates poetry and pictures (*ut pictura poesis*) (1929/1978, 481). Although this notion

was not really meant to promote the power of visual imagery as much as to show how poems may be appreciated for different attributes, succeeding generations of poets and rhetoricians came to consider *ut pictura poesis* a dictum, encouraging the functional elision of words and images. The endurance of Horace’s implicit idea of marrying the didactic, the poetic, and the visual provides a good example, along with Gorgias’s linking of statues, desire, and persuasion, of the strength of the crossover between rhetoric, poetry and the visual arts.

### The Adaptation and Blending of Horatian, Gorgian, and Aristotelian Concepts

Horace’s concepts linking poetry, the visual image, and didactic purpose became especially popular among neoclassical thinkers (Adams 1971, 73). One such thinker, George Campbell (1719–1796), talks at length of the use of imagery in rhetoric, and in doing so expands both on Gorgias’s implicit linking of images, rhetoric, and poetry and on Horace’s linking of poetry, painting, and instructive persuasion. In Book I of his *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Campbell asserts that “an harangue framed for affecting the hearts or influencing the resolves of an assembly, needs greatly the assistance both of intellect and of imagination,” and that it is best to seize the attention of one’s audience by appealing first to the imagination (1963, 2). The best way to do this, he contends, is through poetic imagery. Because Campbell considers poetry “one mode of oratory” (3), the methodology he encourages is one that connects this poetry-as-oratory directly to painting:

The imagination is addressed by exhibiting to it a lively and beautiful representation of a suitable object. As in this exhibition, *the task of the orator* may, in some sort, be said, *like that of the painter*; to consist in imitation, the merit of the work results entirely from these two sources; dignity, as well in the subject or thing imitated, as in the manner of imitation; and resemblance, in the portrait or performance. (3, emphasis added)

As one may see from this passage, imitation of the thing depicted is paramount. There are three reasons for this.

First, Campbell believes the use of images can provide a means of comparison for an audience and thus work upon their sense of reason. Thus, there is a precedent for considering images as a form of *logical* proof: “The connexion . . . that generally subsisteth between vivacity and belief will appear less marvelous, if we reflect that there is not so great a difference between argument and illustration as is usually imagined”

(1963, 74). This is because “reasoning,” as he sees it, “is but a kind of comparison” (74). A second reason that a “painter-like” exactness of imitation is important—as is a poetic ability to create these word-images—is that imagery can produce a deep and persuasive affective response, which “assumes the denomination of *pathetic*” (4). Ultimately, Campbell says, “The ideas of the poet,” expressed in this painterly way, “give greater pleasure, command closer attention, operate more strongly on the passions, and are longer remembered” than ideas expressed by more mundane writers (74).

So powerful are poetic images that they may serve to provide great sway to oratory; for, “when in suitable coloring [these images are] presented to the mind, [they] do, as it were, distend the imagination with some vast conception, and quite ravish the soul” (1963, 3). Here, we see a clear debt to Gorgias, as Campbell presents imagery as irresistible to the emotions, even going so far as to use Gorgias’s terminology of “ravishment.” Also, Campbell’s classification of imagery under two different categories of argument, logical and emotional, follows Aristotle’s system of rhetoric.

### Analyzing the Web-Based Image

How are Horace’s and Gorgias’s precedents for blending the poetic, imagistic, and oratorical and Aristotle’s ideas of rhetoric applicable to modern electronic images? I would like to propose the following analytical system. Using Aristotle’s notions of rhetoric as a starting point for discussing modern digitally based presentations, one can argue that images on an electronic screen can serve as a form of *logos*, or rational proof, especially when they consist of such things as charts and graphs. For as Campbell might say, such images serve as a means of comparison (of data and so forth, in modern contexts) and thus, of rational judgment. Also, in this mode, images can augment textual information via parataxis, that is, by being placed next to such information as a coordinate, supportive structure. Accordingly, and because the Web is intertextual by nature, some consideration of how well the text and graphics interrelate is important.<sup>3</sup> In terms of *logos*, this consideration is especially important, because digital graphics are sometimes used to replace written text.

There are also the appeals to *pathos* and *ethos* to consider. Just as Campbell, Gorgias, and Horace saw more value in the *pathetic* aspects of the image, so the persuasive value of the digital image is perhaps more evident when one considers it in terms of *pathos* and *ethos*. This is especially true because the latter of these terms has expanded, with the evolution of rhetoric, to signify the rhetor’s general credibility, rather than just serving to denote moral character. As Campbell’s essay exemplifies, *ethos* and *pathos* have usually been seen, in a classical sense, as dependent upon the nature of the images

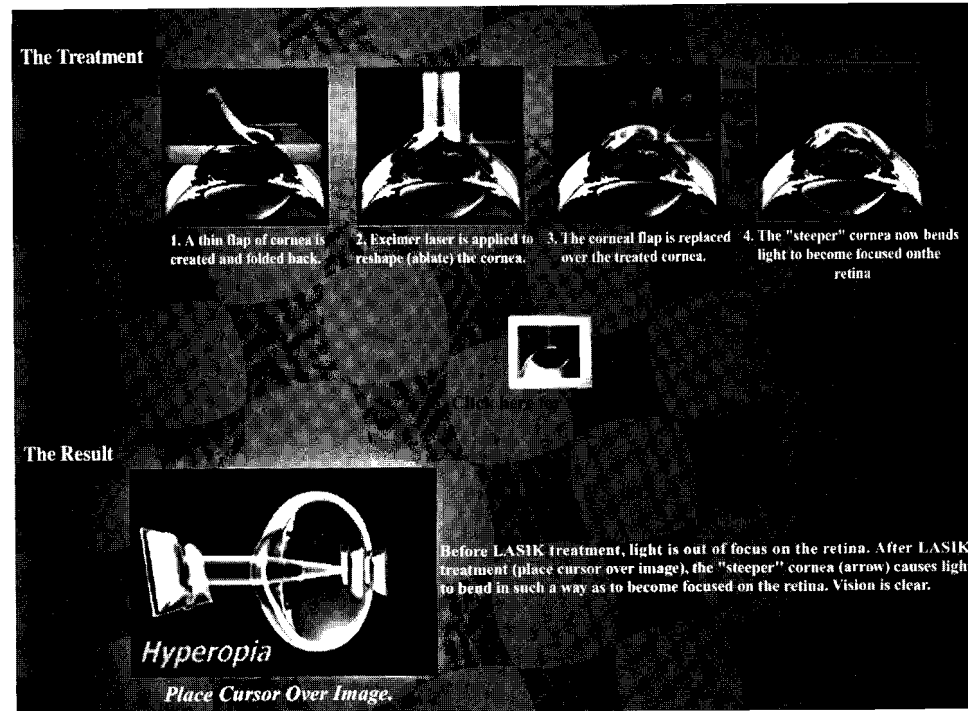
the speaker “draws” with words, as well as on such things as hand gestures, facial expressions, voice modulation, clothing, and other subtleties. On the Web, however, as with printed compositions, these nonverbal cues are usually absent. Thus, part of the judgment of the speaker’s character and credibility becomes contingent, instead, upon the visual images she composes, chooses, and presents on the screen. Her choice of graphics and their nature, arrangement, and movement (if they are animated) not only are important to instilling the proper emotion in the audience (and thus elemental to *pathos*) but are also part of what the audience uses, consciously or unconsciously, to decide if she, and hence her presentation, are authoritative and believable (and thus integral to *ethos*).

In sum, I propose the following model, based on classical principles of rhetoric, to assess the persuasive impact of digital images:

1. Consider *logos*: How effectively do digital graphics work together with, or even replace, digital text to create an appeal to reason?
2. Consider *pathos*: As classical rhetoricians note, images are most powerful as a means of emotional appeal (which is why their cousins, metaphorical images, are so persuasive); thus, we should take into account how digital images work in concert with written text, or by themselves, to enhance the emotional appeal of digital messages. In particular, how effectively do the enhanced verisimilitude and vividness made possible by such digital innovations as 3-D, animated, computer-aided design (CAD), and interactive graphics and easily mastered, professional-looking layouts and fonts affect the emotional appeal of digital textuality? How do these enhanced graphic effects affect the reader’s perception of other modes of appeal, such as *logos* and *ethos*?
3. Consider *ethos*: How effectively do digital images work in concert with written text, or by themselves, to enhance the *ethical* appeal (credibility) of the makers of digital messages? In particular, how do the enhanced verisimilitude and vividness made possible by such digital innovations as 3-D, animated, CAD, and interactive graphics and easily mastered, professional-looking layouts and fonts affect the credibility of those who author digital texts?

### Test Case 1: An “Informational” Web Page

We can look at part of a Web page to see how these analytical criteria might be applied. A portion of a Web page designed to persuade people to consider getting Lasik surgery—a type of corrective surgery for the eye—is presented in figure 5.1. The series



| Figure 5.1 |

Portion of a Web page designed to persuade people to consider getting Lasik surgery.

of images at the top of the figure explains the surgical procedure and is an example of an attempt to use images as *logos*. Each image is paired with a caption, but it is the image, more than the caption, that carries the clearest explanation of the procedure. Phrases like "corneal flap," "excimer laser," and "steeper cornea" are explained visually rather than verbally. The captions merely help explain what is happening in the corresponding picture. Further indication of the predominance of the image in the explanatory process is the presence of a redundant, animated version of the surgical process, using the same four images, that one can access by clicking the animation button. Nevertheless, this page presents a good sample of intertextuality and parataxis at work. Is the page persuasive? Using our criteria, I would say it is. The pictures, aided by the words, act in concert to form the *logos* of the argument: that the surgical procedure is simple, straightforward, and clean. The pictures with their captions are eye catching

(which goes to *pathos*), easy to understand, and located at the top of the Web page, so that they are seen immediately upon its loading, all of which is an attempt to make the pictorially presented rationale easier for the reader to follow and is therefore important to *logos*. Additionally, the maker of this page has used both images and words to enhance the credibility (*ethos*) of the presentation. Though it is an advertisement by a doctors' office meant to generate business, it avoids any overt sales tactics: no flashy color scheme, no exhortations or radical-sounding claims. Rather, the colors are muted, with a relaxing blue as the dominant hue; the text is spare and clinical, and the illustrations have a professional, scientific appearance. This all seems calculated to instill emotions of relaxation and an *ethos* of trust in the doctors' professionalism.

### Test Case 2: Of Drugs and Magic—The Problem with Ravishing Images

As we have seen, rhetorical tradition recognizes the power of images and so promotes capturing the imagination of the audience quickly by using imagistic words. The digital age allows the same purpose to be served by a return to the source of power, by a creation of "lyrical" images that delight, enrage, frighten, or excite. It seems that Web sites increasingly use this approach, and therein lies a problem, as Gorgias and his descendant Campbell warn us. The image can be seductive to the point of distraction, and this can be detrimental for both the authors and the audiences of Web sites.

About two years ago, when I began teaching basic Web design in my technical writing classes, the surprising seductiveness of some of my students' home pages got me thinking about the whole issue of using digital images as rhetorical tools. So I would like to turn to an example from one of my beginning classes to begin examining the darker side of the digital image.

Early in the semester, I always ask my students to form groups of four or five people and to devise and post a simple home page on the Internet to which they will link their succeeding assignments. This home page must be about new scientific developments related to the mind and body. Rhetorically, the aim of the home page is to convince its visitors to stay and visit the other pages that students (eventually) post regarding these new developments. I expected, when I first tried this assignment, that these sites would be relatively unsophisticated in their rhetorical appeal and, because this was an intermediate composition class, in the development of their written content—and many of them were. But some of them astonished me with their reliance on, their preoccupation with, and the attractiveness of their graphics. Figure 5.2 shows an example of one of these home pages.

## BODIES IN MOTION



If you're tired of better living through chemicals, here is a web site for you. This web site is specifically designed to enlighten its users about better living through a healthier mind and body. On this page is a link you to many other sites that give you specific instruction on exercises of the mind and body. This web site will even offer you incredible facts of better living through healthier living. If you enjoy your life, here is your chance to make it last longer.

0093

| Figure 5.2 |

The photograph of the running cheetah on this home page effectively "advertises" the rest of the site.

The photograph of the running cheetah on this home page effectively "advertises" the rest of the site in ways that reflect the classical criteria I have been discussing. Specifically, it reflects the three classical criteria that Campbell uses: The image draws attention, invites comparison, and generates emotional response. First, the image catches the cheetah in a dramatic full sprint, which creates attentiveness. The same is true of the color scheme: Hot oranges blaze on a light background. In addition to focusing attention, the image of the cheetah could also persuade by paratactical association: The vitality of the cheetah not only invites analytical comparisons to the viewer's own vitality (or lack of it), it is also pertinent to the exercise-and-health theme of the page (if one reads and understands the text, a problem that I will return to in a mo-

ment). In terms of modern Web design, figure 5.2 includes some other elements of what might be called a good "rhetorico-graphic interface": The links are laid out well; they are placed where the eye of an English reader will focus first—in the upper left of the page. Indeed, the clean layout and flashy picture might forge an emotional impression that could linger long after the reader has left the page. The problem, however, is that the image is everything to this Web page. Though the writing shows some flair for emotional appeal in the first two sentences, the grammar, structure and clarity suffer afterward. Thus the images on this page offer no real paratactical for the words they accompany.

I had watched the students as they created this page. Fairly inexperienced at using computers, much less Web design tools, they were entranced by the image they had found and the relative ease with which they could fashion a page around it. Perhaps influenced by our immersion in a highly televisual culture, they clustered around the computer that had the image and worked on it eagerly. When I ventured over to remind them that they had to include some text, too, I watched them assign it to one reluctant person in their group, who promptly decided to put it off until later and went back to the image of the cheetah. This problem was not unique to this particular group. I have found that images—including format, layout, and even fonts for written text—take up so much of my students' attention that the idea of useful content, whether based in image or word, suffers. One mark of this is that, though ours is a technical writing class, students are often shocked when I lower their grade for bad grammar on their Web sites (this could have to do with other factors, as well, I realize, but that is another chapter in a different book). Suffice it to say that I had a difficult time getting my students to see that though a good, vivid graphical image may be enough to make a person pause on a page, it takes more than that to keep her from leaving that page; it takes a good interweaving of text and image, along with usable content.

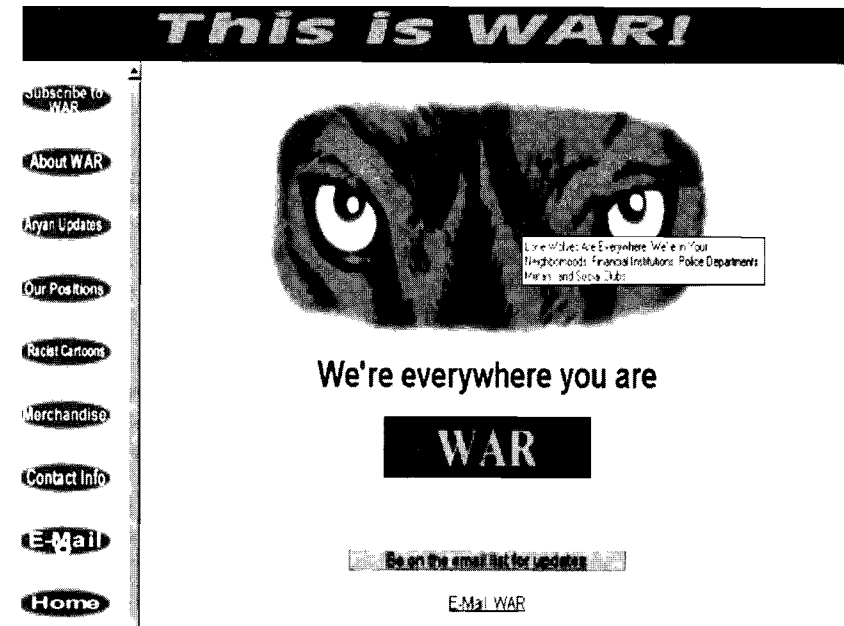
### Test Case 3: Defending Ourselves against the Dark Side of Persuasive Digital Images

This kind of experience with my students, which left me feeling somewhat like a character in *The Sorcerer's Apprentice*, has made me think that it would be a good idea to use a classically based, analytical system like the one I proposed earlier in this chapter to teach the principles of a visual rhetoric along with the elements of Web design. Teaching an awareness of the power and effects of images would provide students of Web design with a better sense not only of how to use them, but also of how to defend themselves against their power.

Indeed, there are already numerous examples of dangerous, image-centered arguments proliferating on the Web. Perhaps Aristotle said it best when he noted, as I mentioned earlier, that “the defects of the hearers” are what make images so powerful and useful to rhetoricians. The reason that my students are easily awed by fancy-looking images lies partly in the wizardry that those images convey. They look so professional, so polished, so authoritative—yet they are so easy to manipulate, and it is so easy to learn how to do so. Not surprisingly, there is a negative side to the relative ease with which one can learn how to create impressive images in digital formats. Graphics sometimes lend undue credibility to otherwise weak arguments. Even sophisticated typography and layout, graphic elements that were, before the digital age, available mainly to professional publishers, can have this result. *NBC Nightly News* ran a segment on July 19, 2000, about the fact that rumors spread on the Internet are often granted more credibility than they are due. This effect was attributed not only to the speed of rumor propagation allowed by electronic media, but also to the persuasive effect of simply seeing something in print (let alone with polished graphics) in a public venue. If an electronic document *looks* like one that has been published on paper, then, for many people, it carries the same authority. Thus, even the form and “look” of the print on a Web page can have a credibility-increasing effect. One could argue that this “print effect” occurs not only because people are conditioned to put great trust in documents that are publicly disseminated, but also because people have been socially conditioned for over 500 years to place great credibility in the typographical forms that publishers have used. Now, with electronic fonts, those forms are available to anybody.

Thus, the *ethical* effect of electronic print is at least partially a function of the fact that, like calligraphy, electronic fonts are as much art as they are signifiers of sound and words.<sup>4</sup> Alphabets are, in essence, abbreviations of figural metaphors (think of the evolution of Chinese ideograms, for example) and, in the digital realm, there are multitudes of fonts, designed specifically for the screen, each with its own expressive style. Web designers have already begun using these fonts and other tricks of typography for their power to affect. The Web page of a well-known hate group (figure 5.3) provides an example of how images, including typography, when interlaced cunningly with textual content, can lend undue credibility and dangerous emotional force to a site.

The methodology of this Web site is to pitch its “product” without an appeal to logic, but instead to create a sort of sublime experience, a persuasive, horrifying, visual poem. If Gorgias is right, we have a particular emotional susceptibility to fearful images. Hate mongers know this and make use of it. The rumor and the frightening image are two of their favorite devices, and this is another reason to encourage an understanding of the workings of visual rhetoric. The main rhetorical appeal here is to



| Figure 5.3 |

Portion of the Web page of a well-known hate group.

*pathos*, to the emotion of fear; but, ironically, it is clear from the way the images and text are constructed that the primary aim in making the Web page fearsome is to provide an aura of power, and therefore lend credibility, to the group itself. So, ultimately, the central aim of the composite image of this Web page is to affect *ethos*. The topics in the menu bar are dominated by links that provide contact and ideological information for prospective members. Most importantly, the huge image of a wolf’s eyes, in conjunction with the text under it that reads, “We’re everywhere you are,” is meant to give a false (I hope) sense of ubiquity and power to any secret racists who visit the site. This paratactic tie between the text and image is reinforced by the interactivity between them. When one uses the mouse to roll the cursor over the image of the wolf, textual elaboration pops up regarding “Lone Wolves”—evidently a metaphor for members of the group. This pop-up text reads, “Lone Wolves are everywhere. We’re in your neighborhoods, financial institutions, police departments, military, and social clubs.” Not only is the message contained in the image-word combination meant to convey power and, therefore, *ethical* effect, but so is the very sophistication of the page;



the Java-based rollover function appears as a surprising, subtle—and chilling—piece of technological legerdemain.

This brings us to the secondary purpose of the page: to instill fear and intimidation in any enemies of the group who may view it; thus, its images also have a *pathetic* dimension. The typography conveys this; the font is boldface, italicized, and red to provide an image of aggressiveness, and the word “war” is written in capital letters. The Web designer’s choice of a sans serif font could be seen as an attempt to accentuate the aggressive effect, as serif fonts tend to slow the eye down. The picture of a wolf’s eyes and the hot, red-based colors convey aggressiveness. The kind of “published” look that this site has would have been more expensive to attain in printed pamphlets and much more difficult to disseminate before the advent of the Web. Now that it is so easy to disseminate images and messages such as the one in this Web site, it is doubly important that we pay attention to how graphics and text interact in the networked environment.

### Overuse: A Limit to the Digital Image’s Persuasiveness?

The persuasiveness of digital images may be limited, paradoxically, by their own power and ubiquity. Complex, graphics-heavy Web sites take a long time to load and are not very “degradable”; that is, they do not look good on older browsers and computers. This limits accessibility to these sites. But perhaps the biggest limit to the rhetorical power of graphics, even on pages where their density is not a problem, is that they can distract the reader from the logical appeal of the Web site. A recent study done at Ohio State University found that, regardless of whether a Web site’s fonts and other graphic images have authoritative *form*, people had trouble understanding and focusing on the site’s content. The strong *pathetic* effect of digital images can distract one from any kind of *logos* that the site might convey. One of the students in the study complained about this: “There are all these great graphics, and it takes concentration to home in and focus on the actual information” (Greenman 2000, 11). Part of this student’s problem also had to do with hyperlinks, which are, technically, a type of graphical image: He found himself “struggling to digest the information on a Web page before being lured away by links to other pages.”

Casual Web users are not the only ones troubled by how its hypertextual nature reinforces a focus on the *pathetic* appeal of images over any form of logical content. At least one Web designer anticipated the complaints of the students in the Ohio State study. Writing in 1998, Jeffrey Veen lamented that “designers add links by inserting harsh blue underlined scars into the patterns of the paragraphs. The result? An overbearing distraction to the reader’s subconscious. Suddenly, that reader must decide: Do

I stop here and click on to this link? Do I finish the sentence and come back? Do I finish the story and scroll back to the navigation element? It’s a headachy mess” (1998a, lesson 3, 1). Note that, like the classical authors we have discussed, Veen sees the attraction of the image as a factor of the “subconscious, and so of *pathos*.”

The limits to digital graphics that this study exposes appear to inhere not only in the very *pathetic* power of such images, which distracted students from logical appeals contained in digital pages, but also in two other problems: the well-known difficulty of reading material on a computer screen, and an issue of image saturation. The second of these problems is particularly important: Because images in a Web environment are so emotionally appealing, they tend to be used too abundantly. As a result, as this study showed, they marginalize meaning carried in written text (which is what students in the study were asked to focus on). As Kress (1998) has pointed out, the marginalization of text by images is increasingly common in all types of printed media, and this practice has carried over to the Internet. The result appears to be an increasing reliance on digital imagery that is ever easier to manipulate and a consequent obstruction of logical appeal by emotional appeal in the digital realm. The more that this happens, the shallower the overall rhetorical appeal of digital messages becomes.<sup>5</sup>

### Conclusion

Bizzell and Herzberg (1990) mention that Plato thought rhetoric “made a virtue of linguistic facility” by drawing attention to “the material effects of [language’s] style and structure” (1165). Similarly, one could say that the integration of electronic media into the persuasive endeavor has made a virtue of digital facility by drawing attention to the material effects of graphical style and structure. When a Web site’s images are especially polished, pleasing, and well arranged, its readers often cannot help but be attentive—and even impressed or moved.

The dominant effect of graphical elements may be leading to the adaptation of an advertiser-centered model of Web design, with its profusion of flashy images and persuasive appeals that work on a subconscious, emotional level, rather than on a rational one. The media critic David Shenk (1999) is skeptical about the image-rich environment of new media. He thinks that the moving image, as presented on television, and transferred thence to the Web, insidiously distracts from the substance of any message. He does not see images (he points to television as the model for the cybernetic image) as enhancing the message in any way. Shenk says, “Images captivate us effortlessly, and are difficult to filter out” (6). As an example, he uses Wim Wenders’ 1991 film *Until the End of the World*, which depicts a world addicted to neurologically stimulating images.

He notes that “Wenders calls this ‘the disease of images,’ the problem where ‘you have too many images around so that finally you don’t see anything anymore’” (5). The question that arises from Shenk’s discussion, with regard to teaching, is: If we encourage students to include images (especially moving ones) in their Web work, are we discouraging appeals to rational thought (*logos*)? Perhaps, if, as Bolter (1991) says, “The digitization of images inevitably . . . allows the . . . programmer, to define new contexts” for them, the real answer to this question is that we must learn to build better contexts, ones in which images work in conjunction with rational thought (72). We can begin doing this by learning to understand the rhetorical context of digital images better, and a redeployment of classical notions such as those I suggest here could prove a great help.

#### Notes

1. Kress (1998) notes that there is, in “information technology circles,” the acute awareness of a “trend towards the visual representation of information which was formerly coded solely in language” (77); see also Brown et al 1995, as well as Tufte 1990; Lanham 1994; and Stevens 1998, especially chap. 11.
2. This is a formulation that Lanham (1993) mentions in various, slightly different ways; see xii and 31, especially.
3. There are numerous sources of information on the interrelation of graphics and text on the Web itself; one that is particularly helpful because of the breadth of its articles is a Web site for designers called Webmonkey <hotwired.lycos.com/webmonkey>; see especially Frew 1997; Veen 1998a, 1998b; and Nichols 2000. My thanks, also, to Karin Kawamoto, Webmaster and technical writer, for her input on these matters.
4. See Lanham 1993, chap. 2, for a very interesting and detailed discussion of the connections between digital typography and art, as well as of art and rhetoric in the general digital realm.
5. Also, in reference to the marginalization of text by graphics, it seems that Web designers need to come up with some kind of adjustment to reduce the level of distraction hypertext links present to readers. Veen (1998a) mentions various solutions, including two interesting, low-tech ones: *remarginalize* some of the images by moving the hyperlinks to the margin of the text, so that they become like annotations, or move them all to the end of the document. He notes that these solutions have been tried by various companies, like the *New York Times*, but does not say how good the results have been.

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