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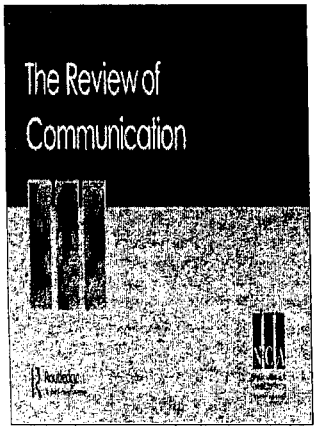


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# Intellectual and Conceptual Resources for Visual Rhetoric: A Re-examination of Scholarship Since 1950

Lester C. Olson

*This essay articulates a history of visual rhetoric scholarship during the last half century by describing the nomenclature employed by speech and communication researchers for designating germane scholarship, by specifying some landmark moments, and by identifying recurring patterns in the intellectual and conceptual resources. Because the pluralism of definition and emphasis are invaluable for ongoing projects in visual rhetoric, the essay is less concerned with identifying a center that holds visual rhetoric together than focal points for substantive conversations and dialogues to advance current visual rhetoric scholarship. The conclusion suggests some open-ended questions concerning components of one overarching question: How might the study of visual rhetoric be better institutionalized within colleges and universities in the United states?*

In the United States, research into visual rhetoric has flourished in colleges and universities for over half a century now. Those of us who study visual rhetoric are in the midst of an intellectual movement that is both broad-based and deep. By that, I mean that the study of visual rhetoric now spans multiple disciplines, and it often engages some of the most important technological developments of our lifetimes. Visual rhetoric scholarship is rich in its critical, philosophical, and historical ramifications across the humanities and sciences. In the United States, the historical roots of the burgeoning interest in visual rhetoric since 1950 are rich and varied; they were intellectual, technological, social, political, and economic.

Among the intellectual roots, Kenneth Burke's *A Rhetoric of Motives*, initially published in 1950, defined rhetoric as symbolic action in ways that raised several possibilities for visual rhetoric scholarship. Consequently, Burke influenced generations of intellectuals (Burke, 1950/1969). In addition, a 1971 collaborative statement entitled "Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism" set priorities which further advanced scholars' contributions

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in visual rhetoric. The Report commented on an intellectual movement underway in communication and speech departments across the nation. The Report advised:

> Rhetorical criticism must broaden its scope to examine the full range of rhetorical transactions; that is, informal conversations, group settings, public settings, mass media messages, picketing, sloganeering, chanting, singing, marching, gesturing, ritual, institutional and cultural symbols, cross cultural transactions, and so forth. (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 225)

This statement, along with earlier intellectual contributions, set the academic scene for subsequent work by scholars on what today is regularly referred to as visual rhetoric.

Additional roots nourishing the development of visual rhetoric scholarship were political, social, and economic. During the 1960s and early 1970s, because of dramatic protest techniques employed across the United States and abroad throughout the Vietnam War years–when the 1971 Report was written–rhetoric scholars recognized that traditional definitions of and approaches to rhetoric were much too limited to account for contemporaneous endeavors to influence beliefs and actions in public life. More fundamentally, because of a proliferation of new, highly visual media technologies with profound ramifications for communication, academic interest in visual rhetoric deepened noticeably. Photography, film, television, the World Wide Web, and digital technology, for instance, transformed the ways in which speeches and other messages were recorded and conveyed to their audiences, while also making visual evidence–both archival and contemporaneous–readily available to communities of scholars. In the wake of such nineteenth-and twentieth-century visual technologies, academic researchers became increasingly interested in pictorial records, visual components of messages, and the culturally-shaped practices of viewing them.

Further, some researchers recognized that attention to symbolic aspects of visual artifacts, sometimes referred to as vernacular or material culture, provided a way to document histories of the poor and working classes, African Americans and other racial minorities, women, gay men and lesbians, and other understudied populations and cultures. Histories of communication practices could be recovered by examining the symbolic objects that members of such social groups had used and left behind. For instance, consider a fresco, which has been dated and is thought to have been made sometime between 300 AD and 600 AD. It was made of mineral pigment and lime plaster by an ancient Teotihuacan culture in Mexico. (To view this artifact, please see The Art Institute of Chicago's website at http://www.artic.edu/artaccess, where the fresco is located in "Ancient Indian Art of the Americas", "Rain priest fresco.") This fresco depicts a rain priest's speech rendered in pictorial symbols including sea shells and plants. The fresco reminds us that certain culture's speeches were recorded pictorially, not linguistically. Another strong example of such artifacts consists of numerous symbolic belts from the Iroquois confederacy and other indigenous tribes and leagues. Constructed from white and purple beads made from oyster shells, these symbolic belts preserved records of speeches, treaties, and other historical events so

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that knowledge of them could be transmitted from generation to generation within these likewise quintessentially American cultures. (To view some illustrative examples of particularly important wampum belts, please see http://kstrom.net/isk/art/beads/wampum.html).[1] Artifacts such as these demonstrate that the study of visual rhetoric presents tantalizing prospects for rhetoric scholars, including those who still consider speeches and orations to be the central or defining focus of the discipline.

Attention to such artifacts and other sorts of material culture–objects which were not records of speeches–enacted a democratic impulse in scholarship that intensified in the wake of a centuries-long political process of broadening voting rights to include working-class men, African Americans, and women. These nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century political developments impacted ongoing changes in the demographic make-up of college and university teachers, whose voices and perspectives now regularly emphasize messages produced by understudied populations and cultures. In addition, because race, sex, age, certain disabilities, and other factors are ordinarily visible features of individuals and demographic groups, some researchers' engagement with visual rhetoric scholarship has been enhanced by their interest in visible and invisible communities, or dominant and relatively vulnerable social groups–including diverse minorities' visual symbolism and social stigmas. A powerful expression of this interest with regard to race, for instance, is Shawn Michelle Smith's 2004 book, *Photography on the Color Line: W. E. B. DuBois, Race, and Visual Culture*, even though she does not mention "rhetoric." Last, but not least, evolving understandings of "public" and "private" in the United States helped to make material or vernacular culture in the home and elsewhere captivating to scholars of visual rhetoric. As a related development, previously taboo and sensitive topics came into public consideration in numerous ways, including via visual rhetoric scholarship.

As a consequence of over half a century of scholarship since 1950, there is now a wide variety of ways of naming the terrain regularly designated by the recent expression "visual rhetoric." I am using that expression here as a shorthand to emphasize culturally-shaped practices of seeing in their relationship to historically-situated processes of rhetorical action. Like other ways of naming the terrain, "visual rhetoric" is not unproblematic, because, for instance, reading is a highly visual activity. Yet most visual rhetoric scholarship is concerned primarily with symbols other than words, even though words regularly are elements of the analysis and even though one important body of scholarship concentrates on word–image relationships. So I do not want to be misunderstood as implying either that there is a consensus on how to name the area of study or that "visual rhetoric" is evidently the best of all options. I am using "visual rhetoric" as a shorthand mainly because it is inclusive language and because, since the turn of the millennium, it appears with increasing regularity in recent research across a range of disciplines. "Visual rhetoric" does not appear to have been used frequently as a central, organizing term before 1990. During May 2006, an electronic search of the Communication and Mass Media Database located a total of 150 articles and reviews concerning "visual rhetoric," none of them with a publication date before 1964 (see http://www.ebscohost.com/ehost).

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Fully two-thirds of those articles and reviews (101 out of 150) were published after 2000. (Incidentally, of the remaining one-third published before 2000, almost half–24 out of 49 essays–were printed between 1990 and 2000; before 1990, only 25 essays used "visual rhetoric" as a featured term.)

In what follows, I will articulate a history of visual rhetoric scholarship by describing the nomenclature employed by speech and communication researchers for designating germane scholarship, by specifying some landmark moments in its history, and by identifying recurring patterns in intellectual and conceptual resources during the last half century. Because the pluralism of definition and emphasis is valuable for ongoing projects in visual rhetoric, I am less concerned with identifying a center that holds visual rhetoric scholarship together than I am with focal points for substantive conversations and dialogues to advance current scholarship with all its diversity and promise. Towards the conclusion, I will concentrate on the ongoing process of instituting the study of visual rhetoric in higher education. My concluding comments will suggest some open-ended questions that, I hope, will initiate collaborative, collective conversation among visual rhetoric scholars concerning components of one overarching question: How might the study of visual rhetoric be better positioned and developed within colleges and universities in the United States? I believe that collective engagement with that question might better position visual rhetoric in higher education while strengthening pedagogy in the area. I will endeavor not only to "size up" visual rhetoric scholarship, but also to "up size" it.[2]

## Nomenclature for Visual Rhetoric Scholarship Since 1950

Let me begin with the numerous, sometimes synonymous but almost always overlapping, names for visual rhetoric, to which I now turn in the spirit of sketching a necessarily broad history of the nomenclature, landmarks, and key concepts. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that my account will tend to foreground scholarship in speech and communication departments and that the story is more complex. I hope others will feel welcome to round out this preliminary sketch by reference to specific, additional essays and books that merit inclusion in a revision of this history-in-process. At present, useful perspectives on the development of visual rhetoric scholarship can be found in essays by Richard B. Gregg (1985), Diane S. Hope (2006), and Lawrence J. Prelli (2006), who discuss visual rhetoric scholarship against the background of symbolic inducement, visual communication, and rhetoric of display respectively.

In 1950, Kenneth Burke employed the expression "rhetoric of symbolic action" in his influential book, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, which was reprinted in 1955 and 1969. The impact of this book on subsequent generations of scholars was deep and abiding. The bulk of visual rhetoric scholarship in the 1960s and 1970s certainly was influenced by Burke's writings, which continue to be useful today. His views on the comic and tragic frame, for instance, have been featured in Adrienne Christiansen and Jeremy Hanson's 1996 essay on ACT UP and the rhetoric of AIDS activism as well as Anne Demo's 2000 essay concerning the Guerrilla Girls' comic politics of subversion. My first publication

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on visual rhetoric in 1983 featured Burke's concept of identification to study Norman Rockwell's "Four Freedoms," while other scholars–both before then and afterward–have drawn on a wide range of concepts from Burke's writings. For instance, Gregory Clark's 2004 book *Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke* featured his concepts of identification and representative anecdote.

In the late 1960s, Phillip K. Tompkins wrote a book review essay on what he termed the "rhetorical criticism of non-oratorical forms." This naming had the disadvantage of defining an area of study by negation–by what it was not–not oratory. He began the essay, which concentrated on literature (specifically Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*), with an apology for the "clumsy" language. He explained that he had "borrowed" the expression "non-oratorical works" from a recent convention program (Tompkins, 1969, p. 431). "Nonverbal rhetoric," another expression from this period, likewise had the disadvantage of definition by negation, but it appears to have had more frequent use than "non-oratorical forms" in publications during the late 1970s and early 1980s. It was featured in a 1971 book, *The Rhetoric of Nonverbal Communication*, a collection of readings compiled by Haig A. Bosmajian. The preface alluded to "the turn to ritual, ceremony, symbols, demonstrations; the dependence upon communication, which takes us beyond words" (p. vi). Of the 25 articles and reviews that featured "nonverbal rhetoric" in the Communication and Mass Media Database as of May 2006, more than half were published between 1969 and 1979 with only intermittent uses since then.

In the early 1970s, Thomas W. Benson concentrated on what he initially termed "rhetoric of film" (Benson, 1974). Later, in the mid-1980s, he broadened his nomenclature to "rhetorical dimensions of media," as did Martin J. Medhurst, his coeditor of *Rhetorical Dimensions in the Media: A Critical Case Book*, published initially in 1984, and reprinted in 1991. Dedicated to Burke, this landmark book consisted of 17 essays and concluded with a 40-some-page bibliography of germane books and essays. The quality of the publications listed in the bibliography was uneven and it often included books and essays that did *not* meaningfully engage rhetoric, pertaining as they did primarily to a particular medium. Even so, this bibliography is still useful to anyone wishing to become familiar with scholarship on visual rhetoric before the mid-1980s (1984, pp. 365–407). The book and bibliography both organized the study of visual rhetoric by the type of medium: television, film, radio, graphic arts, music, magazines, public letters, and literature, suggesting strongly that the medium was especially fundamental to understanding visual rhetoric. As the essays concerning music indicate, the sense of rhetoric was capacious.[3]

The terms "symbols" and "symbolic" surfaced regularly in studies of visual rhetoric throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1974, for instance, Sol Worth and Larry Gross published an essay concerning what they called "symbolic strategies." In general, their essay inquired, "How do we distinguish 'natural' from 'symbolic' events, and how do we assign meaning to them?" (p. 27). By the early 1980s–probably before then–Richard B. Gregg employed the expression "symbolic inducement," a naming likewise influenced by Burke. This language identified the central focus of Gregg's 1984 book *Symbolic Inducement and Knowing: A Study in the*

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*Foundations of Rhetoric* and his landmark 1985 essay entitled "The Criticism of Symbolic Inducement," one of the few essays that provides a sustained historical account of the development of visual rhetoric and other symbolic studies.

In the early 1980s, other scholars were employing terms for visual rhetoric drawn largely from art history and designating specific art-historical techniques in the analysis of visual texts. In the early 1980s, for instance, Martin J. Medhurst wrote an influential 1982 essay concerning film in terms of what he called "rhetorical iconography." Likewise borrowing from art-historical vocabularies, I devoted my 1984 doctoral dissertation, subsequent essays, and two books to what I called "rhetorical iconology" and the "rhetoric of material culture." Neither expression, "rhetorical iconography" or "rhetorical iconology," has surfaced much in subsequent visual rhetoric scholarship, perhaps because the language is too tied to art-historical approaches. Since then, however, there have been regular references to material or vernacular culture, motifs, rhetorical icons, and iconicity in visual rhetoric scholarship, about which I will say more later.

By the early 1990s, yet another broad expression used to name visual rhetoric was "rhetorical dimensions of popular culture," a naming which may be exemplified well by Barry Brummett's 1991 book with that exact title. Concurrently, still other names for components of visual rhetoric during the 1980s and 1990s tended to emphasize specific rhetorical processes or a certain medium or media. These emphases may be exemplified in Sonja K. Foss's scholarship, focusing as she did in 1986 on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and in 1988 on Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, an iconic work in the women's movement. Foss's scholarship was among the earliest visual rhetoric research to feature feminist subject matter. It was also among the earliest to concentrate on rhetorical perspectives concerning public memorials and memorialization, an especially rich line of visual rhetoric scholarship that has been taken up by several accomplished public memory scholars (Biesecker, 2002; Blair, Jeppeson, & Pucci, 1991; Blair & Michel, 2000). Recent visual rhetoric scholarship pertaining to public memory has extended to displays in museum exhibitions (Hubbard & Hasian, 1998; Hasian, 2004; Taylor, 1998, 2003) and to U.S. postal commemorative stamps (Haskins, 2003), among other settings and media.

In addition, certain elements of rhetoric–especially argument, figures, and devices–have received sustained attention in visual rhetoric scholarship. In 1996, two special issues of *Argumentation and Advocacy*, edited by David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke, were devoted to "visual argument" with essays by several scholars, including contributions by David Fleming, J. Anthony Blair, Lenore Langsdorf, Cameron Shelley, and Gretchen S. Barbatsis. These special issues merit the attention of anyone interested in visual rhetoric, concentrating as the contributors do on a range of specific ways of conceptualizing visual argument. Margaret R. LaWare's 1998 essay examined visual arguments for ethnic pride, community activism, and cultural revitalization in Chicano murals located in Chicago. Cara A. Finnegan's 2001 essay explored what she called a "naturalistic enthymeme," employing language from classical argumentation that she drew on again subsequently in a 2005 essay defining "image vernaculars." Catherine H. Palczewski's 2001 keynote address at a major

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argumentation conference continued explorations of "visual argument," (subsequently published, 2002), as did her 2005 essay concerning anti-suffrage postcards. A parallel body of research in visual rhetoric has developed around specific rhetorical devices and figures, especially pictorial metaphor. Arthur Danto's 1981 book entitled *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* and Stuart Kaplan's 1990 essay illustrate sustained interest in pictorial metaphor (see also Edwards & Winkler, 1997; Olson, 1987). Additional researchers have concentrated on irony, metonymy, synecdoche, and other rhetorical devices or figures (Scott, 2004; Tom & Eves, 1999; Van Mulken, 2003; Willerton, 2005).

Other names for visual rhetoric scholarship exist and still others are now being promoted. Since the late 1990s, there have been essays by several writers on rhetorical icons or iconic images. For example, co-authors Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler's 1997 essay concerns what they call "representative form," a synthesis of iconic and ideographic features in readily recognized pictorial metaphors. A series of co-authored essays by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites since 2001 concentrates on what they name "iconic photographs" (2001, 2003, 2004). In addition, Bryan C. Taylor's 2003 essay examines what he calls "nuclear iconography." Moreover, "material rhetoric" sometimes has surfaced in visual rhetoric scholarship since 2004 (Dickinson, Ott, & Aoki, 2006; Rohan, 2004). This nomenclature has the appeal of being less cumbersome than some earlier language, such as "rhetorical study of material culture" or "vernacular culture" which I mentioned in my 1991 book. "Material rhetoric" has the appeal of concision, but it may have the disadvantage of reifying a process. Another recent name for germane scholarship is the "rhetoric of visual conventions," as in Charles Kostelnick and Michael Hassett's 2003 book entitled *Shaping Information: The Rhetoric of Visual Conventions*. Most recently, we have seen several titles that concentrate on digital media, as in Barbara Warnick's groundbreaking 2002 book, *Critical Literacy in a Digital Era: Technology, Rhetoric, and the Public Interest* (see also Warnick, 2005). Digital technology is currently generating extraordinary interest, to judge from the Communication and Mass Media Database. Having now completed a sketch portraying changes in nomenclature over the decades since 1950, I would like next to turn attention to dominant patterns characterizing visual rhetoric scholarship since 1950, noting in the process some factors inhibiting its development.

## Broad Patterns in Visual Rhetoric Scholarship Since 1950

Most visual rhetoric scholarship during the last half of the twentieth century consisted of conceptually-driven case studies of historically-situated events, featuring a particular medium and typically concerning a twentieth-century controversy or technology. Photography, television, and film have held the most attention over the decades, with the World Wide Web and digital technology rapidly emerging at present. Visual rhetoric scholarship regularly features special optical equipment and technologies ranging from stethoscopes and probes to ultrasound, MRI diagnostic imaging, and electron microscopes. Scholars' attention to technologies that enhance

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vision may be exemplified by Nathan Stormer's essay concerning fetal photography in a documentary film (Stormer, 1997). Some research has underscored how the routine performance of scientific inquiry depends on visualizing inferences (or abduction), as in Cameron Shelley's essay concerning a process called "demonstrative visual argument" (Shelley, 1996). Whether visual rhetoric scholarship has examined the sciences, the humanities, or the arts, it has concentrated regularly on technological developments that have fundamentally transformed visual culture and communication practices.

Since 1950, most visual rhetoric scholarship has evinced an abiding and predominant interest in twentieth-century communication technologies, events, and controversies, usually centering in the United States. Scholars' interest in relatively recent history was emphatically expressed in the broad priorities set up in the 1971 Report, presumably because of the widespread public unrest and civil disobedience that characterized the Vietnam War years. While identifying specific, academic priorities for the discipline, the authors of this Report asserted "[t]he imperative we feel to study contemporary rhetorical transactions" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 225). The authors averred, however, that:

> The emphasis on contemporary criticism or on historical studies which can illuminate the contemporary is in no way meant to denigrate historical scholarship which is simply aimed at forming perspectives on the past; rather, it reflects a deep concern for the pressing problems of our time. (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 225)

There is nonetheless a growing body of visual rhetoric scholarship that concentrates on earlier periods in history, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States, but also sometimes investigating visual works and interpretive practices from earlier centuries and other countries. In certain instances, such scholarship combines attention to twentieth-century technologies and earlier periods in U.S. history. For example, Judith Lancioni has examined documentary film techniques for focusing on elements of archival photographs taken during the Civil War (Lancioni, 1996). Regardless of the time period featured, however, the predominant emphasis in visual rhetoric scholarship has been on the recent past in western civilizations. Consequently, much could be gained in visual rhetoric scholarship were researchers to concentrate on communication practices in eastern civilizations, inter-cultural symbols as they migrate across national boundaries, and ongoing processes of globalization.

Throughout the last half of the twentieth century, an immense body of scholarship named the rhetoric of a specifically named genre, medium, or space–usually depending on the historical period featured in the specific studies. In fact, several other relatively early terms pertained to a specific medium or media. By the mid-to-late 1970s, for example, Bruce Gronbeck was concentrating on what he has variously called "celluloid rhetoric" or "electronic rhetoric," nomenclature which, at once, concentrates both on a specific range of media and a particular historical period (Gronbeck, 1978). Gronbeck's early scholarship concentrated on what he called "genres of documentary," especially featuring programming on television and

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in film. Benson's early work on "the rhetoric of film" likewise has this strength and limitation of featuring a specific medium and historical period (Benson, 1974, 1980, 1985, 1998; Medhurst & Benson, 1981).

A noteworthy shift in emphasis in visual rhetoric scholarship has placed interpretative practices of observing and seeing in the foreground rather than giving priority to the artifact or media. Although there has been a growing interest in the viewers' interpretative performances or interactions with symbolic expressions, there nonetheless has been a longstanding emphasis on contemporaneous viewers' diverse interpretations of visual artifacts during historical controversies, with attention to the timeliness of visual images as they circulated in specific moments. An emphasis on contemporaneous viewers' sensibilities and interpretive activities can easily be found in relatively early visual rhetoric scholarship in communication journals.[4] In fact, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to account for such scholarship detailing multiple perspectives on the exact same artifacts with attention to the eventfulness of pressing issues informing their uses at the time—in fact, struggles among contemporaneous partisans to shape various symbols' meanings—were earlier researchers unattuned to the diverse viewers' sensibilities and commitments as they actively interpreted whatever they saw.

In an influential 1994 essay, W. J. T. Mitchell has described the broad, cultural circumstances within which such visual rhetoric scholarship has flourished when he names "the pictorial turn" as a twentieth-century phenomenon. He asserts:

> In Anglo-American philosophy, variations on this turn could be traced early on in Charles Peirce's semiotics and later in Nelson Goodman's "languages of art," both of which explore the conventions and codes that underlie nonlinguistic symbol systems and (more important) do not begin with the assumption that language is paradigmatic for meaning. (p. 12)

Contemporary culture has become "totally dominated by images" (p. 15). Mitchell recognizes that the saturation of twentieth-century cultures with images has combined with anxieties concerning them, such as idolatry and iconoclasm, to make visual culture a preoccupation of contemporary life. Given Mitchell's thematic emphasis on audiences or spectators in characterizing "the pictorial turn"—"It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading" (p. 16)—it is unfortunate that his essay almost completely neglects germane visual rhetoric scholarship; the topic of "rhetoric" appears only in a list of germane disciplines in the introductory paragraph.

To be sure, it would be accurate to say that most of the early visual rhetoric scholarship tended to focus on a specific artist's oeuvre (e.g., Robert L. Scott's 1977 essay on Diego Rivera's murals) or a specific medium (e.g., Kathleen J. Turner's 1977 rhetorical perspective on comics). In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on the organizations and institutions that selected and circulated the images. For instance, Cara Finnegan's 2003 book *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* continued a tradition of featuring a single medium (photography),

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but she underscored institutional factors in the Farm Security Administration, the various magazines that re-distributed certain photographs, and the U.S. government. Visual rhetoric scholarship has sometimes featured pictorial images, or motifs, reproduced across an immense variety of media–mundane objects, high art, and illustrated reading materials–as they recur across national boundaries to disclose broad patterns of partisan engagement with them and contemporaries' underlying ideologies (Olson, 1987, 1990, 1991, 2004).

Recent visual rhetoric scholarship has tended to give greater attention to powerful visual symbols performed, enacted, or circulated by members of vulnerable communities. This attention is exemplified by Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop's 2006 essay on the politics of what they describe as "queer public kissing" between men. Among other images, their essay considers the graphic arts of a collective named Gran Fury, whose "READ MY LIPS" poster (1988) is now iconic in gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gender, trans-sexual, and queer communities. (The "READ MY LIPS" poster may be viewed at http://www.queerculturalcenter.org, where several of Gran Fury's posters are located in Gallery 5.)[5] Further examples consist of recent essays by co-authors Peter Ehrenhaus and Susan Owen (2004) and by co-authors Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca (2005) concerning the lynching and murders of African American men. These two essays examine such homicides as public, symbolic performances of white supremacist ideology and Black political resistance respectively. In addition, as an example of visual rhetoric scholarship concerning both feminism and environmental degradation, Phaedra C. Pezzullo (2003) focused on "toxic tours" in San Francisco calculated to resist "National Breast Cancer Awareness Month" insofar as it diverts attention from root causes of cancer.

Such essays illustrate relatively recent, burgeoning attention to the communication practices of women and feminists, sexual and racial minorities, and other vulnerable communities. In addition, essays such as these exemplify a broad trend in visual rhetoric scholarship that features "body argument" or "rhetorical bodies," "performances," and "experiential tours" in symbolic spaces, sites, or locations. In 1999, *Argumentation and Advocacy* published a collection of essays on "body argument" in two consecutive issues, which were edited by Gerard A. Hauser. These special issues included contributions from Kevin M. DeLuca, James L. Cherney, Thomas J. Darwin, Nathan Stormer, Christine L. Harold, Kathleen M. Torrens, and Amos Kiewe. Likewise, Jack Selzer and Sharon Crowley edited a 1999 anthology concerning what they call "rhetorical bodies," which is also the title of their book.

Scholarship on visual rhetoric has been flourishing, however it has been named, despite some difficulties, obstacles, or overt resistance, which I would like to consider next in this necessarily brief historical sketch. Certainly one factor that has obscured the half-century-long history of visual rhetoric has been the number of names, sometimes synonymous but almost always overlapping, such as: rhetoric of symbolic action, rhetoric of non-oratorical forms, non-verbal rhetoric, rhetorical dimensions of media or popular culture, symbolic strategies or inducement, rhetorical iconography or iconology, pictorial or visual persuasion or argument, pictorial

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metaphor, electronic or celluloid rhetoric, rhetorical icons or iconic images, material rhetoric or rhetoric of material culture, rhetoric of visual conventions, and digital rhetoric. Additional variations featured the rhetoric of a specifically named genre or medium, such as advertisements, architecture, atlases, cartoons, comics, films, maps, murals, paintings, photography, posters, prints, quilts, sculpture, symbolic bodies, television, and textiles, among many, many others.

Another factor inhibiting the growth of visual rhetoric scholarship has been the scattered range of disciplinary sites where the variously named versions of visual rhetoric scholarship have been produced, because this has made it challenging to locate and use previous contributions to the germane literature. Among these disciplines are American studies, art history, communication, English and composition, history, media, rhetoric, speech, and visual studies. Across such varied disciplines, researchers have proceeded with more or less conscious awareness of rhetoric's rich and diverse history, which provides invaluable conceptual resources for analyses of symbolic action. While each distinctive disciplinary sociology has enriched visual rhetoric scholarship, it has resulted in researchers proceeding with less than ideal awareness of each other's scholarship. A predictable consequence is that it sometimes seems as though it has been necessary to reinvent the pencil before sitting down to write, or the stylus before sketching.

These last factors were exacerbated by the virtual absence of well-institutionalized concentrations on visual rhetoric in academic departments—not to mention the absence of interdisciplinary programs or centers—that could have brought such an extraordinary range of scholars into conversation. It is possible here and there to identify collaborative efforts among some people at the same place. Examples would be the Pennsylvania State University and the University of Pennsylvania throughout the 1970s and 1980s. But these are exceptions rather than the norm. The absence of academic concentrations not only limited the ease of intellectual exchanges among engaged visual rhetoric scholars, it also circumscribed the facility with which the next generations of intellectuals could receive substantive undergraduate and graduate training in visual rhetoric scholarship.

Last, but certainly not least, stiff resistance to the very idea of visual rhetoric may be illustrated by Donald Bryant's 1973 denunciation of the terrain as excessively broad and the 1971 landmark Report as, in his words, "reckless" (Bryant, 1973, especially pp. 16–17). The intellectual reservations that Bryant articulated at the University of Iowa and that other scholars enacted elsewhere probably constrained explorations of visual rhetoric at the institutions where such prominent, accomplished academic leaders influenced their peers and generations of students. The disciplinary background against which visual rhetoric scholarship grew in speech and communication departments may be concisely summarized by the book cover of the 1982 second edition of Bernard L. Brock and Robert L. Scott's *Methods of Rhetorical Criticism*, which, I imagine, needs no further comment for the reader.

Despite the objections, research on visual rhetoric has blossomed. In fact, it is now free-flowering. Recent years have seen several germane collections of essays concerning visual rhetoric. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers' 2004 anthology,

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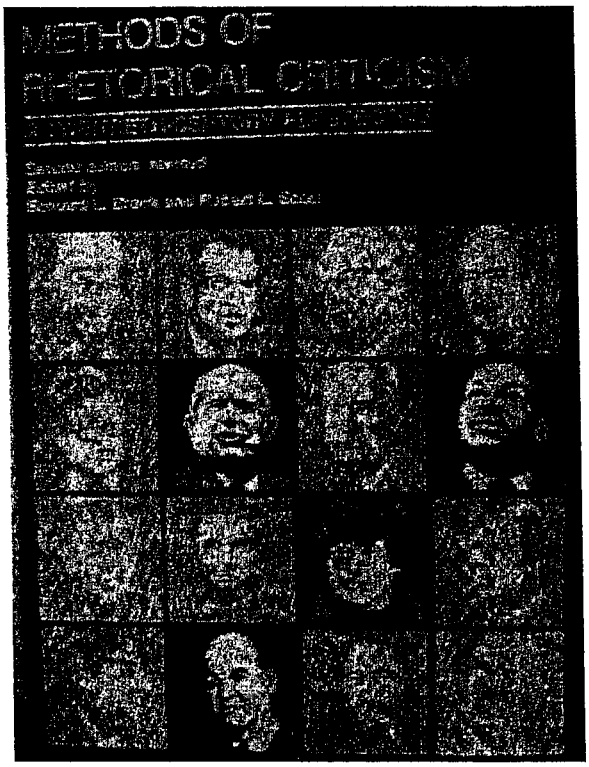


**Figure 1.** The book cover depicts 16 people in a four by four grid, from left to right, as follows: (first row) Dwight D. Eisenhower, Richard M. Nixon, Barry Goldwater, and Hubert Humphrey; (second row) Ted Kennedy, Nikita Khrushchev, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King; (third row) Edmund Muskie, Abraham Lincoln, "Rocky," and Jimmy Carter; (fourth row) William Buckley, Jr., George McGovern, Fidel Castro, and George Wallace.

*Defining Visual Rhetorics*, provides 14 essays by a range of established and newer scholars. This anthology has the value of bringing scholars from different disciplines, especially communication, composition, and English, into relationship with each other. Likewise, Diane S. Hope's edited collection entitled *Visual Communication: Perception, Rhetoric and Technology*, released in 2006, adds a wealth of materials in 13 interdisciplinary essays. Hope's introduction articulates a useful orientation to visual rhetoric scholarship against the backdrop of visual communication. Lawrence J. Prelli's *Rhetorics of Display*, which was also released in 2006, has a 20-page selected bibliography of visual rhetoric scholarship that I recommend as a useful resource. The collection's introduction likewise provides a useful orientation to a body of germane scholarship. More important, the 17 essays in Prelli's text range around the globe and over an immense variety of what he terms "rhetorics of display."

At present, Cara A. Finnegan, Diane S. Hope, and I are in the process of completing a contracted anthology of essays, *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*, that feature key rhetorical actions: performing

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and seeing, remembering and memorializing, commodifying and consuming, confronting and resisting, and governing and authorizing. It is a testament to the vitality of the research on visual rhetoric that we found the selection process to be time-consuming and difficult. We have featured 20 carefully selected essays which we believe are especially instructive for learning about visual rhetoric. As we comment collaboratively in the preface:

> We elected to focus on rhetorical actions because we believe this is the most useful approach for students of communication and rhetoric. In doing so we embrace what is now certainly a truism of rhetorical theory: that rhetoric is best characterized broadly as symbolic action. While individual instances of rhetorical practice might differ to the extent that they are more or less textual, oratorical, or visual, what is common to all rhetorical acts is that they all mobilize symbols to persuade.

## Intellectual Resources in Visual Rhetoric Scholarship Since 1950

Precisely because visual rhetoric scholarship is flourishing, it is impossible in a single essay to identify an exhaustive list of key writers whose concepts and theories have enriched scholarship on visual rhetoric since 1950. Examples of recurring intellectual sources would have to include, in alphabetical order, Rudolph Arnheim, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Walter Benjamin, John Berger, Kenneth Burke, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Suzanne Langer, W. J. T. Mitchell, Erwin Panofsky, C. S. Peirce, Susan Sontag, Barbara Stafford, Sol Worth, and, most recently perhaps, Michael Warner. Instances of key terms or concepts would include agency, appropriation, audience, author, body argument, circulation, commodification, consumption, display, dissemination, double binds, embodiment, enactment, fetishes, the gaze, genres, heterotopian space, icons and iconic, identification, image events, image vernaculars, interpellation, material culture, media ecology, metaphor, motif, panopticon, performance fragments, performative, pictorial indices, pictorial juxtaposition, production, public memory, reception, representative form, rhetorical bodies, scopic drive, semiotics, simulacrum, strategic ambiguity, surveillance, symbolic bodies, vernacular culture, and visual ideographs and ideology–to mention only a sample. As this list implies, visual rhetoric research is robust.

Some of these terms have multiple definitions and emphases in visual rhetoric scholarship. For instance, consider the terms "icon" and "iconic." Since C. S. Peirce's early definition of icon (which, as you probably know, he distinguished from indices and symbols in that an icon entailed an element of resemblance), this term has surfaced with various meanings over the decades. Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler, in criticizing me for my definition of the term icon, actually have a quarrel with Peirce, who coined the definition in question (Edwards & Winkler, 1997, p 289); I never mentioned "resemblance" in my definition of icon. A more recent definition of icon in a series of important essays by Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites–whose forthcoming book, *No Caption Needed* from the University of Chicago Press, I await with great interest–treats icon as an image that is immediately recognizable by

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practically everyone throughout a culture (Hariman & Lucaites, 2001, p. 7). One possible problem with such a definition might be that it focuses, as a consequence, on mainstream, dominant culture, since powerful images produced from within vulnerable communities seldom attain that level of recognition: the artists' collective Gran Fury, who produced the "READ MY LIPS" poster of two male sailors kissing, which I discussed above (Morris & Sloop, 2006, p. 11), or the HIV positive tattoos that Dan Brouwer focused on so well in his 1998 essay, would not rise to iconic status in the definition offered by Hariman and Lucaites, however salient they are to certain vulnerable populations. Icon, as defined by them, will tend to concentrate on mainstream, dominant culture. As this sustained example illustrates, it would be useful to reflect not only on the key terms in visual rhetoric, but the multiple meanings that those terms now have in the literature.

More important, it is my impression that, while we now have a wide range of conceptually-driven and historically-situated case studies, we do not have a substantive treatise that might accurately be described as a theory of visual rhetoric. Unless I am mistaken (and I might be), that important sort of scholarship lies ahead. I do not want to be misunderstood here. I am *not* saying that we lack rhetorical theories which are useful for studying practices of viewing and visual media. Nor am I saying that we lack theories of visual communication that are useful for studying rhetorical processes. Rather, to my knowledge, we do not at present have book-length, synthetic theorizing that centers on visual rhetoric. Where early scholarship tended to ask how, if at all, the resources of rhetoric were useful for analyzing, interpreting, and assessing visual media, more recent work has asked how understanding culturally-shaped practices of viewing might be useful for re-envisioning rhetoric. I am inclined to think that it is important to hold those two questions in constant relationship to each other in the process of developing theories of visual rhetoric. If you believe, as I do, that the most important rhetorical theories of the past tended to engage the most consequential developments of their time, theorizing visual rhetoric holds considerable promise for the present and future.

## Conclusion: Sketching a Future for Visual Rhetoric Scholarship

Having briefly sketched in necessarily broad terms an overview of the nomenclature and having identified some patterns, landmarks, and key concepts that recur in visual rhetoric scholarship, I would like to conclude by suggesting some open-ended questions that, I hope, will result in collaborative conversation concerning one overarching question: How might the study of visual rhetoric be better positioned and developed within colleges and universities in the United States? To my knowledge, this question has not received systematic consideration in any publication pertaining to the arts and humanities or liberal arts. An electronic search for germane materials pertaining to this question yielded only one essay (Brumberger, 2005), which concentrates on the curriculum of a business school rather than arts and humanities or liberal arts. There was, to be sure, an early 1982 essay by Sonja K. Foss, which developed a "resource unit" for teaching about "rhetoric and the visual image"

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in one undergraduate course. Otherwise, to my knowledge, there is no extant scholarship concerning the matter of institutionalizing visual rhetoric in higher education. Here are some further questions concerning components of that larger concern:

1. What might a systematic curriculum in visual rhetoric include in higher education at the introductory and upper-level undergraduate levels, as well as the graduate curriculum for both the M.A. and the Ph.D.?
2. What conceptual and theoretical resources might be most useful to students at these various levels as they are prepared for basic competence and advanced scholarship in visual rhetoric?
3. What training in archival research might be especially valuable to people who seek introductory and advanced training as experts in the history of visual rhetoric?
4. What education in the history of visual technologies and their uses is necessary to help undergraduate and graduate students understand and appreciate the ramifications of changes in visual culture over time?
5. How might concentrations on visual rhetoric be designed so that undergraduate and graduate students receive a systematic education that grounds them well in rhetoric at the same time that it makes them thoroughly familiar with cultural practices of viewing and interpreting images?
6. What varieties and constellations of faculty expertise would be particularly desirable in relationship to each other in instituting concentrations on visual rhetoric in academic departments?
7. How might the study of visual rhetoric be positioned advantageously in relationship to other components of departments as well as other entire departments, disciplines, centers, programs, and the like? For instance, how might we enter into meaningful conversation with scholars in American history and American studies who concentrate on what they often call "visual culture" and who seem to be interested in the symbolism, but who do not draw explicitly on rhetoric in their work?

Additional concerns around institutionalizing visual rhetoric extend to the need to hold regular conferences centering on visual rhetoric, and for journals that dependably feature the scholarship in ways that ground current work competently in its history. Instituting listservs, websites, blogs, and other online sources would improve the range of resources for training our students and for undertaking the research better ourselves. It would be prudent at this time for those who are interested in visual rhetoric to reflect on these and other aspects of the systematic institutionalizing of visual rhetoric, because collaborative, collective work is likely to strengthen research, teaching, and general expertise in visual rhetoric.

In closing, I have no illusion that this essay has exhausted or definitively accounted for the range of nomenclature for visual rhetoric, its intellectual and conceptual resources, and landmark moments in its history. It is one person's perspective subject to revision. This account is partial in that it has tended to foreground scholarship in

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speech and communication departments in the United States. Certainly other disciplines have contributed to the study of visual rhetoric both in the U.S. and abroad. Moreover, as people like Colette Nativel are teaching us, there were earlier periods in the history of rhetoric wherein rhetoric ranged across the arts of painting and architecture–for instance, the Renaissance. Despite these and other limitations, I hope that this brief sketch of an historical perspective will spark a lively conversation among those of us engaged in remembering our past to get a sense of the present and to shape the future. I invite others to add their voices to underscore additional factors that a history of visual rhetoric scholarship might encompass. More important, as we look to the future, I hope that scholars will enter into substantive discussions that not only "size up" visual rhetoric, but also engage in conversation that has the potential "up size" it, by conscious reflection on the process of better institutionalizing the study of visual rhetoric in higher education.

## Notes

[1] Numerous wampum belts are reproduced in photographic records available in microfilm (Jennings, 1985). Their ritual uses are discussed at length by an eighteenth-century American colonist, whose depictions reflect a white, British American's understandings of them (Colden, 1727/1755).

[2] This essay is derived from a conference paper presented on a panel entitled "Sizing Up Visual Rhetoric Scholarship" at a meeting of the Rhetoric Society of America, Memphis, TN, during May 2006. The theme of the conference was "Sizing Up Rhetoric."

[3] Barry Brummett's 1985 book review of Medhurst's and Benson's anthology, which Brummett characterized as "a collection of media criticism done from a rhetorical perspective" (p. 272), suggests noteworthy institutional factors in colleges and universities at the time of its initial publication.

[4] For instance, the central objective of the 1971 Report was expressly to call for a shift in the very definition of rhetoric scholarship away from featuring the types of artifacts or media studied toward concentrating instead on the perspectives taken toward the artifacts or media. The collaborative statement advocated "a shift in traditional emphases" in scholars' definitions of rhetoric scholarship, from featuring the nature of the "material studied to identifying it by the nature of the critic's inquiry" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 220).

[5] Materials pertaining to Gran Fury's poster and other graphic works pertaining to AIDS activism may be found in Crimp and Rolston (1990, p. 56).

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