Visual rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is a means of communication through the use of visual images and texts. Visual rhetoric encompasses the skill of visual literacy and the ability to analyze images for their form and meaning.[1] Drawing on techniques from semiotics and rhetorical analysis, visual rhetoric examines the structure of an image, and the consequent persuasive impacts on an audience.[1]

This includes an understanding of the creative and rhetorical choices made with coloring, shaping, and object placement.[2] Visual rhetoric emphasizes images as sensory expressions of cultural and contextual meaning, as opposed to purely aesthetic consideration.[3] Visual rhetoric has been approached and applied in a variety of academic fields including art history, linguistics, semiotics, cultural studies, business and technical communication, speech communication, and classical rhetoric. Visual rhetoric seeks to develop rhetorical theory in a way that is more comprehensive and inclusive with regard to images and their interpretations.[4] Although the use of images as a form of communication is not a new concept, recent technological advancements have made the mass production and distribution of images much easier.[5]

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History and Origin

Originating in Ancient Greece, rhetoric has been widely discussed for thousands of years. Sophists first coined the idea as an abstract term to help label the concept while Aristotle more narrowly defined rhetoric as a message's potential to influence audiences.[6] Linguists and other researchers often define rhetoric through the well-known five cannons of rhetoric. Over time, this definition has evolved, expanded, and raised serious debate as new digital mediums of communicating have developed.

Visual rhetoric's first mentioning (1977) brought to light a new way to evaluate other communication means, showing the relevance of traditional rhetorical theories to the still photographic medium.[7] Barthes explained visual rhetoric generally as the implied and interpreted messages from the work, yet these bigger messages often extend beyond the initial superficial interpretation.[7] Visual rhetoric uses a variety of tools to hook readers within its mediums (e.g. gifs).[8] Although similar in nature, one striking difference between visual and classical rhetoric is the newfound outlook on Aristotle's original cannons. Linda Scott created a newfound audience by constructing new cannons exclusive to visual rhetoric[8] Instead of closely monitoring the content, as with the initial five...
cannons. Scott’s focused on the visual medium’s ability to invent and argument, arrangement of the item, and all coupled with a meaningful delivery of presentation. Since its inception, popular studies have appeared in published works to discuss the role of visual rhetoric in many facets of human life, especially advertising.

The term emerged largely as an effort to set aside a certain area of study that would focus attention on specific rhetorical elements of visual mediums. Historically, the study of rhetoric has been geared toward linguistics. Visual symbols were deemed trivial and subservient and thus, were largely ignored as part of a rhetorical argument. As a result, modern rhetorical theory developed with a significant exclusion of these visual symbols, ignoring the field of visual rhetoric as a separate area of study. Scholars of visual rhetoric analyze photographs, drawings, paintings, graphs and tables, interior design and architecture, sculpture, Internet images, and film. From a rhetorical perspective, the focus is on the contextual response rather than the aesthetic response. An aesthetic response is a viewer’s direct perception with the sensory aspects of the visual, whereas with a rhetorical response, meaning is given to the visual. Every part of the artifact has significance in the message being conveyed; each line, each shading, each person has a purpose. As visual rhetoricians study images and symbols, their findings catalyze challenges to the linguistic meaning altogether, allowing a more holistic study of the rhetorical argument to emerge with the introduction of visual elements.

Related Studies

Composition
The field of composition studies has recently returned its attention to visual rhetoric. In an increasingly visual society, proponents of visual rhetoric in composition classes suggest that increased literacy requires writing and visual communication skills. Visual communication skills relate to an understanding of the mediated nature of all communication, especially to an awareness of the act of representation. Visual rhetoric can be utilized in a composition classroom to assist with writing and rhetoric development.

Semiotics
Visual rhetoric is closely related to the study of semiotics, which is the study of the use of signs and symbols and their meanings. Semiotic theory seeks to describe the rhetorical significance of sign-making. The central idea of the theory is that a sign does not exist outside of a contextual experience, but it only exists in relation to other signs, objects, and entities. Therefore, the sign belongs to a larger system, and when taken out of context of other signs, it is rendered meaningless and uncommunicable. The parts of a semiotic are divided into two parts: the material part of the sign is known as the form of expression, the meaning of the form of expression is known as form of content. In semiotic theory, the expression only has meaningful content when existing in a larger contextual framework.

Areas of Focus
While studying visual objects, rhetorical scholars tend to have three areas of study: nature, function, or evaluation. This is a primary focus of visual rhetoric because in order to understand the function of an image, it is necessary to understand the substantive and stylistic nature of the artifact. Function holds a somewhat literal definition—it represents the purpose an image serves for an audience. The function, or purpose, of an image may be to evoke a certain emotion. The evaluation of an artifact determines if the image serves its function.

Rhetorical Application
Visual rhetoric studies how humans use images to communicate. Elements of images, such as size, color, line, and shape, are used to convey messages. In images, meanings are created by the layout and spatial positions of these elements. The entities that constitute an image are socially, politically, and culturally constructed. The same image may represent different rhetorical meanings depending on the audience. The choice and arrangement of the elements in an image should be used to achieve the desired rhetorical effects and convey messages accurately to specific audiences, societies, and cultures.

The use of images is a conscious, communicative decision as the colors, form, medium, and size are each chosen on purpose. However, a person may come in contact with a sign, but if they have no relation to the sign, its message is arbitrary. Therefore, in order for artifacts or products to be conceptualized as visual rhetoric, they must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating.

In "The Rhetoric of the Image," French theorist Roland Barthes examines the semiotic nature of images, and the ways that images function to communicate specific messages. Barthes points out that messages transmitted by visual images include coded iconic and non-coded iconic linguistic messages. Visual rhetorical images can be categorized into two dimensions: meaning operation and visual structure. Meaning operation refers to the relations and connections between elements in visual images. Visual structure refers to the way that the elements are visually displayed.

Modern Application

Visual images have always played a role in communication, however the recent advancements in technology have enabled users to produce and share images on a mass scale. The mass communication of images has made spread of news and information a much quicker process. As a result, certain images may go "viral", meaning the image may have been shared and seen by a large number of audiences, and attracted mainstream media attention. Images are utilized in a variety of ways for a number of purposes. From business to art to entertainment, the versatility of images in popular culture have some scholars arguing words will eventually become outdated.

Advertisements

Advertisers know that their consumers are able to associate one thing to another; therefore, when an ad shows two things that seemingly different, they know that the consumer will find a connection between the two. Advertisers also find ways to make sure that the consumer creates a positive association between what they are selling and whatever they are associating their product with.

In advertising, there are nine main classifications for how ads incorporate visual rhetoric. These classifications vary in complexity with the least complex being when advertisers juxtapose their product with another image (listed as 1,2,3). After juxtaposition, the complexity is increased with fusion, which is when an advertiser's product is combined with another image (listed as 4,5,6). The most complex is replacement, which replaces the product with another product (listed as 7,8,9). Each of these sections also include a variety of richness. The most rich would be connection, which shows how one product is associated with another product (listed as 1,4,7). The next rich would be similarity, which shows how a product is like another product or image (listed as 2,5,8). Finally, the most rich would be opposition, which is when advertisers show how their product is not like another product or image (listed as 3,6,9).

1. Advertisers can put their product next to another image in order to have the consumer associate their product with the presented image.
2. Advertisers can put their product next to another image to show the similarity between their product and the presented image.
3. Advertisers can put their product next to another image in order to show the consumer that their product is nothing like what the image shows.
4. Advertisers can combine their product with an image in order to have the consumer associate their product with the presented image.
5. Advertisers can combine their product with an image to show the similarity between their product and the presented image.
6. Advertisers can combine their product with another image in order to show the consumer that their product is nothing like what the image shows.

7. Advertisers can replace their product with an image to have the consumer associate their product with the presented image.

8. Advertisers can replace their product with an image to show the similarity between their product and the presented image.

9. Advertisers can replace their product with another image to show the consumer that their product is nothing like what the image shows.

Each of these categories varies in complexity, where putting a product next to a chosen image is the simplest and replacing the product entirely is the most complex. The reason why putting a product next to a chosen image is the most simple is because the consumer has already been shown that there is a connection between the two. In other words, the consumer just has to figure out why there is the connection. However, when advertisers replace the product that they are selling with another image, then the consumer must first figure out the connection and figure out why the connection was made.

Visual Arts

Visual tropes and tropic thinking are a part of visual rhetoric. While the field of visual rhetoric isn't necessarily concerned with the aesthetic choices of a piece, the same principles of visual composition may be applied to the study and practice of visual art. For example, figures of speech, such as personification or allusion, may be implemented in the creation of an artwork. A painting may allude to peace with an olive branch or to Christianity with a cross; in the same way, an artwork may employ personification by attributing human qualities to a non-human entity. In general, however, visual art is a separate field of study than visual rhetoric.

Graffiti

Graffiti is a "pictorial or visual inscription on a publically accessible surface." According to Hanauer, Graffiti achieves three functions; the first is to allow marginalized texts to participate in the public discourse, the second is that graffiti serves the purpose of expressing openly "controversial contents", and the third is to allow "marginal groups to the possibility of expressing themselves publicly." Bates and Martin note that this form of rhetoric has been around even in ancient Pompeii; with an example from 79 A.D. reading, "Oh wall, so many men have come here to scrawl, I wonder that your burdened sides don't fall." Gross and Gross indicated that graffiti is capable of serving a rhetorical purpose. Within a more modern context, Wiens' (2014) research showed that graffiti can be considered an alternative way of creating rhetorical meaning for issues such as homelessness. Furthermore, according to Ley and Cybriwsky graffiti can be an expression of territory, especially within the context of gangs. This form of Visual Rhetoric is meant to communicate meaning to anyone who so happens to see it, and due to its long history and prevalence, several styles and techniques have emerged to capture the attention of an audience.

Visual Rhetoric of Text

While visual rhetoric is usually applied to denote the non-textual artifacts, the use and presentation of words is still critical to understanding the visual argument as a whole. Beyond how a message is conveyed, the presentation of that message encompasses the study and practice of typography. Professionals in fields from graphic design to book publishing make deliberate choices about how a typeface looks, including but not limited to concerns of functionality, emotional evocations, and cultural context.

Memes
Though a relatively new way of using images, memes are one of the more pervasive forms of visual rhetoric. Considered by scholars to be a subversive form of communication, memes are a style of rhetoric that “combines elements of the semiotic and discursive approaches to analyze the persuasive elements of visual texts.” Furthermore, memes fit into this rhetorical category because of their persuasive nature and their ability "to draw viewers into the argument's construction via the viewer's cognitive role in completing “visual enthymemes” to fill in the unstated premise.

According to a 2013 study by Bauckhage, et al., the temporal nature of most memes and their “hype cycles” of popularity are in line with the behavior of a typical fad and suggest that after they proliferate and become mainstream, memes quickly lose their appeal and popularity. Among the intrinsic factors of memes that affect their potential rise to popularity is similarity. A 2014 study conducted by researcher Michele Coscia concluded that meme similarity has a negative correlation to meme popularity, and can therefore be used, along with factors like social network structure, to explain the popularity of various memes. A 2015 study by Mazambani, et al. concluded that other factors of influence in meme spread within an online community include how relevant a meme is to the “topic focus” or theme of the online community as well as whether the posting user is in a position of power within an online setting. Memes that are consistent with a group's theme and memes that originate from lower-status members within the group spread faster than memes that are inconsistent and are created by members of a group that are in positions of power.

Scholars like Jakub Nowak propose the idea of popular driven media as well. Successful memes originate and proliferate by means of anonymous internet users, not entities like corporations or political parties that have an agenda. For this reason, anonymity is linked to meme popularity and credibility. Nowak asserts that meme authorship should remain anonymous, because this is the only way to let people make the statements that they want to freely.

See also

- Rhetoric
- Media influence
- Visual culture
- Media theory of composition
- visual literacy
- visualization (disambiguation)
- Visual communication

References


External links

- Visual Rhetoric in Social Campaigns
- viz.: Rhetoric, Visual Culture, Pedagogy
- Semiotics for Beginners
- Pictorial Semiotics


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