Visual Rhetoric and the Special Eloquence of Visual Form

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In *What Good are the Arts?*, literary critic John Carey suggests that “literature…is the only art that is capable of reasoning…[and that] paintings…are locked in inarticulacy.”¹ His view of eloquence is a very narrow one indeed. Carey’s prejudice for the written over the visual exemplifies a widespread prejudice. Insisting that visual entities are form without meaningful substance not only encourages narrowly defined analysis based on superficial aspects of visual form, it perpetuates a separate, but not quite equal status for visual entities—and it masks the working of what I would like to call visual rhetorics. Traditionally, rhetoric has been defined as “the art of effective or persuasive speaking or writing.”² Such a definition suggests several obvious questions whose answers will help contextualize the approach proposed in this talk.

**Visual Rhetorics**

In an essay entitled “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory,” Sonja K. Foss explains that “visual rhetoric is the actual image or object rhetors [or designers] generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating.”³ I would, in fact, suggest that the form, creation, and use of visual artifacts don’t necessarily present blatantly persuasive information; they offer audiences communicative data that both reflect and influence an array of cultural themes. In this way, visual artifacts are involved in the generation of cultural belief systems—a profoundly rhetorical function.⁴

² Oxford English Dictionary, 1.
⁴ This paper focuses on design artifacts as rhetorical structures. In particular, I hope to demonstrate that the visual form of artifacts is profoundly rhetorical. But how does such a perspective square with the significant verbal rhetorical element of “persuasion?” The Oxford English Dictionary defines the verb “to persuade” as “to cause (someone) to believe something.” New work in visual rhetorics, however, has expanded this definition to include construction of meanings from visual entities that are not, as visual rhetorician Charles A. Hill explains, “obviously and explicitly persuasive.”⁵ I would suggest that the form of visual artifacts doesn’t necessarily present blatantly persuasive information; it offers audiences communicative data that both reflect and influence an array of cultural themes. In this way, visual artifacts are involved in the rhetorical generation of cultural belief systems.

⁵ This work is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts (2004-2006).
If visual artifacts are structured according to rules, patterns, and principles that resemble those of verbal rhetoric, then rhetorical analysis would be an invaluable tool for the interpretation of this material. Foss argues that visual rhetoric also refers to a “perspective scholars take on visual imagery or visual data.” Foss, in fact, defines visual rhetorical analysis as “a set of conceptual lenses through which visual symbols become knowable as communicative or rhetorical phenomena.” The ways that artifacts are used also generates meaning, and these user-generated meanings depend a great deal on the visual form of an artifact. In their Introduction to the collection *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, Marguerite Helmers and Charles Hill explain that

One of our projects as visual rhetoricians is… studying material as rhetoric. What does the character of a texture of pencil on paper or a smooth and reflective wall with names etched into its face impart to the meaning that the spectator takes from the object?

The material entities Hill and Helmers cite, the “character of a texture of pencil on paper” and “a smooth and reflective wall with names etched into its face,” are formal qualities of the corresponding visual artifacts. Designers take it for granted that such properties are part of visual form, and designers consider the ways that an audience might construe meaning embodied in this form. Design scholarship, however, has yet to fully embrace visual form as rhetorical. A main goal of my proposed research approach is to position the material of visual form front and center in its role as a visual rhetorical text.

This critical methodology augments existing approaches for visual scholarship in literary criticism, visual culture studies, and design history. The discipline of visual culture studies embraces a theoretical approach developed in response to nineteenth-century so-called reflectionist, object-focused art historical models. In *Visual Culture: The Reader*, Jessica Evans and co-editor Stuart Hall point out that the evaluation of the aesthetized object in art history has been superseded by analysis of “visual metaphors and terminologies of looking and seeing” in cultural studies. Since Evans and Hall’s book came out in 1999, visual culture studies has focused on a common litany of themes—“the society of the spectacle and the simulacrum; the politics of representation; the male gaze and the possibility of a female gaze; the ‘mirror stage’: fetishism and voyeurism; the reproduction of the image.”

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5 Foss, 305.
6 Foss warns that the analytical response must be rhetorical and not merely aesthetic—even when considering such qualities as color, form, or texture. I would like to stress that form should not be taken to mean merely composition, line, texture, color, and other general formal features. This definition ignores the expressive possibilities contained in choices about formal elements. Each formal element of an artifact offers insight into the creative intent of those involved in the design of the artifact. In an aesthetic response, according to Foss, the viewer may enjoy color, view form, or other text. In a rhetorical response, on the other hand, she argues that “colors, lines, textures, and rhythms” in an artifact provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas. Such a distinction can be useful, although the dividing line is a delicate one. It is important to acknowledge here that there can be significant overlap between experiencing a texture as valuable and analyzing why this texture “feels” valuable. Foss, 306.
7 Helmers and Hill, 18.
8 Evans and Hall, 1.
Some recent research rethinks the notion that the material form of design artifacts is indebted to certain cultural constructs. Christopher Lindner’s fascinating collection, *Urban Space and Cityscapes: Perspectives from Modernism and Contemporary Culture*, presents a wonderfully cross-disciplinary series of essays that demonstrate the dynamic relationships among cultural forces, visual and verbal texts, and urban design. Other recent visual culture scholarship (typically work that’s grounded in historical analysis) recognizes the relevance of the material object. In their introduction to their collection *The Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture Reader*, the editors call for “attention to the formal elements and conventions of the material objects.” Although a number of the essays in this collection endeavor to insert the material object into the inevitable web of theoretical visual culture constructs, the rhetorical function of the form of visual artifacts itself is not central to the authors’ theses.

In our rush to champion theory that comes out of non-visual disciplines, I believe we’ve neglected possible theoretical approaches that embrace visual form. I sometimes wonder if our love affair with linguistic and cultural theory becomes a sort of self-aggrandizing attempt to ensure that visual research is perceived as rational and intellectual. This approach has tended to “verbalize” visual discourse in visual culture studies by positioning visual entities as part of a web of theoretical constructs. In such a world, we can lose sight of the power of visual form as a location of complex theoretical constructs in and of itself.

These approaches foreground the deeply intellectual character of the verbal contexts in which visual entities can be understood. At the same time, they miss opportunities to extract deep-seated visual rhetorical meanings from the use and form of visual artifacts—and the opportunity to raise visual analysis to equal status with verbal analysis. This scholarship inadvertently reinforces the notion that intellectual (and rhetorical) analysis is a purely verbal process. These sorts of verbally based scholarly approaches have merit, of course—they engage in intriguing verbal analysis of visual phenomena. Ignoring the layered communicative functions of visual artifacts themselves, however, shortchanges the very visuality these scholars attempt to appreciate.

My proposed approach considers design artifacts from a different vantage. While scholarship based on design theory elaborates the ways that cultural factors influence the creation, form, and use of design artifacts, and some recent work explores provocative ways to relate theory to the life and materiality of design artifacts, my research methodology puts design artifacts front and center by positioning them as visual rhetorical texts to be scrutinized. The meanings extracted from these artifacts may or may not concern the sorts of political and social issues commonly addressed in design theory. This process can tap into liminal cultural themes—including certain scientific and philosophical discourses not typically considered in design theoretical work.

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9 Fran Tonkiss’ 2005 treatise on social process and spatial form, *Space, The City and Social Theory: Social Relations and Urban Forms*, asks “How do social processes—such as political mobilization or economic change—take shape in the city?” Her particular focus shows how “debates in urban studies” relate to “wider concerns within social theory and analysis.”

Fran Tonkiss, *Space, the City and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), blurb, back cover.

In her groundbreaking book *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, art historian Svetlana Alpers points out that one misses the visual meanings in seventeenth-century Dutch art when it is interpreted according to the “model” of “rhetorical evocation” based on Italian art. Instead, Alpers taps into the symbiotic relationship between seventeenth-century Dutch art and contemporaneous Dutch natural science. She says:

The analogy to the new experimental science suggests certain things about art and artistic practice, and the nature of the established tradition of art suggests a certain cultural receptivity necessary for the acceptance and the development of the new science.\(^{11}\)

Alpers argues that the mindset behind Van Eyck’s detailed work (Figure 1) is cut from the same cloth as the discourse that encouraged the invention of microscopes and telescopes in Holland.\(^{12}\) A traditional art historical reading would focus on iconography, such as the dog standing for faithfulness and the knotted rope symbolizing the knot of marriage. Alpers looks for the cultural meanings in the imagery, such as the scientific and ocular precision of the concave mirror. She suggests that “northern viewers [would] find it easier to trust what was presented to their eyes in the lens, because they were used to pictures being a detailed record of the world seen.” \(^{13}\) Alpers is not saying that the scientific thinking of the time—which includes Kepler’s description of the eye and mapmaking—was “a source for or influence upon the art.” Rather, she points “to a cultural ambience and to a particular model of a picture that offers appropriate terms and suggests strategies for dealing with the nature of northern images.”\(^{14}\)

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\(^{12}\) Artist David Hockney theorizes that around 1430, artists like van Eyck, Caravaggio, Lotto, Vermeer, and Ingres began secretly using cameralike devices, including the lens, the concave mirror and the camera obscura, to help them make realistic paintings. Hockney and Falco presented their case in a 75-minute documentary film, which gave no documentary evidence of optical instruments, but instead showed how the paintings gave themselves away. The suspect paintings, they showed, are too correct to have been "eyeballed" or drawn freehand. The armor, eyes, lutes and clothes in them look too real. But these paintings are also too incorrect - they have parts that are out of focus, like photographs, or they have multiple vanishing points, telltale signs that the artist focused and refocused his lens to capture different parts of his picture, or they have a preponderance of left-handed drinkers, suggesting that a reversing lens was used. Some actually contain depictions of optical devices. Van Eyck’s "Arnolfini Wedding," for example, shows a convex mirror whose concave side might have acted as a lens that projected an image onto a flat surface.

\(^{13}\) Alpers, 25.

\(^{14}\) Alpers, 26.
Barry Curtis likewise proposes that design historians need to tap into the cultural and historical narrative moments inherent in the form and use of design artifacts. Curtis suggests methodologies for design historical research that foreground the visual narrative of design objects in their historical contexts. He explains that: “The work of design historians is to restore meanings that have become inscrutable with the passage of time.”

In his forthcoming essay “Dinosaur Design,” Curtis discusses the ways in which the design of dinosaur imagery has shifted in relation to changing technology. Although dinosaur imagery is not traditionally considered design, I suggest there is a lot to be gained in the discipline from attending to the often-spouted (sometimes defensively) design adage that most everything is designed. I wonder if, by approaching other visual work—film, for example—as design created in a cultural context, we can expand the horizons of the field and produce some significant interdisciplinary work. One key to this, of course, is to tap into the cultural rhetoric generated in the creation and use processes of such artifacts. Curtis explains that the readings of dinosaurs evolve in response to shifts in cultural currency. He says:

Dinosaurs are an example of design that, for the last one hundred and seventy years, has been responsive to new scientific information… whereas dinosaurs once resembled degenerate reptiles, they progressed to be analogised to grand engineering projects, and are now understood in terms of ecology, software and animation.\(^\text{16}\)

Curtis points out that images of dinosaurs are subject to the same forces that shape all design objects and their interpretation. Dinosaur images are particularly fascinating, Curtis contends, as we have no foolproof way of knowing how they actually looked. He suggests that design historians must seek out “conjunctural” meanings in order to fully comprehend the artifacts we research.

\(^{15}\) Curtis, “Dinosaur Design.”
\(^{16}\) Curtis, “Dinosaur Design.”
Jane Webb’s forthcoming essay “The Essential Outline: John Flaxman and Neoplatonism in Early Nineteenth-Century Manufactures” does precisely what Curtis proposes. In this article Webb examines “the transmission of Renaissance Neo-Platonic theory” into the work of early nineteenth-century artist/designer and British Royal Academician John Flaxman. (Figure 3) According to Webb, Flaxman believed that his line drawing technique allowed him to capture and visually represent the Neoplatonic “essential form” of any object—including his own designed objects. She explains that Flaxman’s illustrations were echoed in “the popular graphics contained in pattern books for manufactures, that pared down the designs of Classical works to a simple outline, providing the designer with a repository of archetypes from which to select and draw.”17 Webb examines “Flaxman’s method of anatomical study and the evocation of Neo-Platonic geometry as an example of the ideal of artistic and manufacturing design in the period.”18

Figure 3. John Flaxman, A scene from the Iliad in which Thetis brings armour to Achilles who is draped in mourning over his dead friend Patroclus. What is immediately apparent from this image is that Flaxman’s graphic work was completely reliant on the accuracy of a very simple outline to portray all the necessary details of the narrative, and Science and Art drawings, 1868. These images and other outline drawings had become part of an institutionalized design education system in which studying by copying had become the central system of instruction.

18 Webb, “The Essential Outline.”
This process allows Webb to outline “a specific model of [manufacturing] design practice” based in “the context of [an] evolving design culture...in Britain in the 1830s.”

Webb offers fascinating connections between early nineteenth-century Neoplatonist thought and the Neoplatonist rhetoric that structured Flaxman’s design and his design process. These insights help manifest Webb’s engaging thesis, which proposes that Neoplatonist philosophy was a verbal catalyst for the visual language of early manufacturing design. Webb has sought out the sorts of “conjunctural” meanings—meanings that are specifically apparent at a particular time—that Curtis describes above.

As we try to imagine the practice of a more rigorous design analysis, it would be helpful to begin by addressing intentionality—how and why artifacts and objects are created and used in the way that they are. Conscious motivation is just one possible way of discussing a rhetoric of design. There’s always motivation or intention in design—even if the designer is unaware of what that motivation or intention is. The design process involves imagining the form and function of an artifact that is to serve a purpose for a group of users. This process typically includes abstract conceptualization of the overall “meaning” of an artifact in light of its client’s goals, its function, and its target audience. The final form and ultimate use of an artifact reflects this process. “Reading” an artifact as a rhetorical “text” in its broad cultural context allows one to extract various intentions and motivations that even the designer may not be aware of.

Tapping the visual rhetoric of design artifacts confronts and confounds accepted norms by demonstrating that visual phenomena function as powerful information sources in their own right. This visual narrative both expresses and transforms culture and plays a significant role in what Marguerite Helmers calls the “dissemination and reception of information, ideas, and opinion-processes that lie at the heart of all rhetorical practices, social movements, and cultural institutions.”

What, you might be wondering, would this sort of analysis entail? In a forthcoming essay, I discuss how the visual depictions of cone-shaped rays of light that are prominent in turn-of-the-century fantasy illustrator Sidney Sime’s illustrations are very suggestive of Victorian ideas about the concentrated power of light rays in the new x-ray technology (Figure 4).

In the late nineteenth century, x-rays were understood to be a modern diagnostic tool. At the same time, late nineteenth-century interest in and fear of the ghostly images of the body’s interior produced by x-rays resonated with discomfort at the inability to keep the invisible under wraps. Indeed, concentrated rays of light straddle a fine line between their ability to illuminate or to disintegrate an object. The horrible skin diseases contracted by early radiologists were tangible proof.

19 Webb, “The Essential Outline.”
21 “Supernatural Selection: Sidney Sime’s Weird Science,”
Sidney Sime’s light rays look like popular depictions in which x-rays appear as cone-shaped visible light. Sime might not have consciously intended that his light rays conjure up thoughts of x-rays in his audience. He’s likely to have internalized widely accepted ideas about the “form” of x-rays and engaged them for affective purpose. Sime utilizes late nineteenth-century ideas about how these invisible rays might look in order to emphasize revelatory and destructive power in his illustrations. In this image, a ray of light dooms three adventurers who have come to collect a golden box filled with beautiful poems from a castle. Unexpectedly, someone in an upper chamber of the castle “in the night’s most secret hour, lit a shocking light, lit it and made no sound.”\(^{22}\) This silent, concentrated ray of visible light, which streams down from a window, is so frightening and powerful that the three fall or jump over the edge of the earth.\(^{2}\) Sime thus reinforces for the viewer that white colored, cone shaped forms (sometimes emanating from hidden sources) represent powerful light rays, including x-rays.

Let’s return for a moment to Svetlana Alpers’ statement that seventeenth-century natural science was not “a source for or influence upon the art.” Instead, Alpers offers the more subliminal, but much more sublime influence of “a cultural ambience and… a particular model of a picture that… suggests strategies for dealing with the nature of northern images.”23 I’m likewise calling for a renewed visual culture of the object—for a new focus on visual form as a site of rich rhetorical material. I hope this research approach will add to existing scholarship that utilizes verbally based theoretical approaches to visual phenomena. At the same time, I’m convinced that addressing the rhetorical power of visual artifacts can contribute to the body of design historical discourse.

Works Cited


Tonkiss, Fran. Space, the City and Social Theory. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005.


23 Alpers, 26.