

Chapter 1

Visual Rhetoric: A Multi-Disciplinary Review of Recent Literature

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ABSTRACT

This literature review traces recent scholarship on a particular form of communication that uses images for persuasive purposes: visual rhetoric. Disciplines within the purview of this literature review include writing studies, speech, communication, education, and marketing as well as, to a limited degree, anthropology, information science, art history, architecture, and design. The chapter will discuss three main theoretical constructs which ground scholarship in this field: rhetoric, iconology, and semiotics. The chapter will then explore how the Sister Arts tradition has been evoked as a potential model for interdisciplinary scholarly work; describe the propensity for social justice in writing studies pedagogy; identify convergence and divergence in scholarship on visual rhetoric that hold promise for new avenues of interdisciplinary research; and introduce scholarship in education and information science that sheds new light on the topic.

INTRODUCTION

Multiple disciplines in the applied arts, humanities, and social sciences value visual communication as a significant area of research. Visual communication, in general, views visual images as tools of reasoning that variously engage us on the screen, on the street, in a book, or in a built environment. A long history of scholarship links the development of visual communication to technologies of communication, from pre-history cave paintings to pictographs, from manuscripts to the printing press, from telecommunication to digital media.

This literature review traces recent scholarship on a particular form of communication that uses images for persuasive purposes: visual rhetoric. It focuses upon scholarship that has emerged across the disciplines in the last decade or so. Readers interested in the historical trajectories of the scholarship will

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be interested in excellent literature reviews by Olson (2007) for speech and communications, Kenney and Scott (2003) for consumer and marketing research, and George (2002) for writing studies pedagogy.

Disciplines within the purview of this literature review include writing studies, speech, communication, education, and marketing as well as, to a limited degree, anthropology, information science, art history, architecture, and design. Any and all gaps in the genealogy are acknowledged by the author as her own and constrained by her areas of research—art history and design, cultural studies, museum studies, and writing studies.

Given the objective of this volume, this chapter understands an audience familiar with multimodal learning and production, one who embraces the design of visual media as worthy of scholarly inquiry (Ragsdale, 2009; Borghini et al., 2010). Rather than proselytize, then, this chapter visualizes a reader who has come over to the other side, someone familiar with the history behind the earlier binaries linking “words to high culture and the visual to low, words to production and images to consumption” (George 2002, p. 31).

Distinct patterns have emerged in the past decade. For example, in terms of methodology, social sciences privilege empirical research, while humanities privilege analysis subjected to discursive reasoning. A shared desire for interdisciplinary research is implied, but little evidence of shared methods exists. However, there are some areas of convergence across disciplines. An art historian, information scientist, and communications scholar, for instance, promote visual literacy as fundamental to the ability to communicate in “The *Cultural Image Literacy Assessment: One Hundred Images Every American Should Know*” (Emanuel, Challons-Lipton and Baker, 2014). Additionally, neuro-psychological research on visual imagery and its insights into human cognition hold promise of shared research and new theoretical constructs.

A study of the literature in writing studies specifically suggests two trends: First, an emphasis on social justice and visual rhetoric that might at this point be regarded as a scholarly and pedagogical subgenre in its own right; and second, an anxiousness and lack of familiarity with visual media that contrasts with the confidence displayed in analyses of more traditional prose-based texts.

After a brief overview of disciplinary scholarship on visual rhetoric, the chapter will discuss three main theoretical constructs which ground scholarship in this field: rhetoric, iconology, and semiotics. The chapter will then explore how the Sister Arts tradition has been evoked as a potential model for interdisciplinary scholarly work; describe the propensity for social justice in writing studies pedagogy; identify convergence and divergence in scholarship on visual rhetoric that hold promise for new avenues of interdisciplinary research; and introduce scholarship in education and information science that sheds new light on the topic.

BACKGROUND

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 metaphor, electronic or celluloid rhetoric, rhetorical icons or iconic images, material rhetoric or rhetoric of material culture, rhetoric of visual conventions, and digital rhetoric.—Lester C. Olson, “Intellectual and Conceptual Resources of Visual Rhetoric: A Re-examination of Scholarship Since 1950” (2007)

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