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VISUAL RHETORIC

If it has not already, visual rhetoric will burgeon into a pedagogical tool necessary for effective teaching in the twenty-first century. Though the term traditionally evokes visual stimulation and image analysis (photographs, advertisements, paintings, comics, cartoons, etc.), visual rhetoric aptly describes almost everything we see. For example: if I typed this presentation in this font and color, you might assume that I'm a fun loving guy, who enjoys being silly and laughing with friends; *or if I used this font and colour, I might appear as one whose predilection is to scribe with a quill or a Montblanc pen.* From political cartoons to typography, visual rhetoric is prevalent in all realms and levels of modern society.
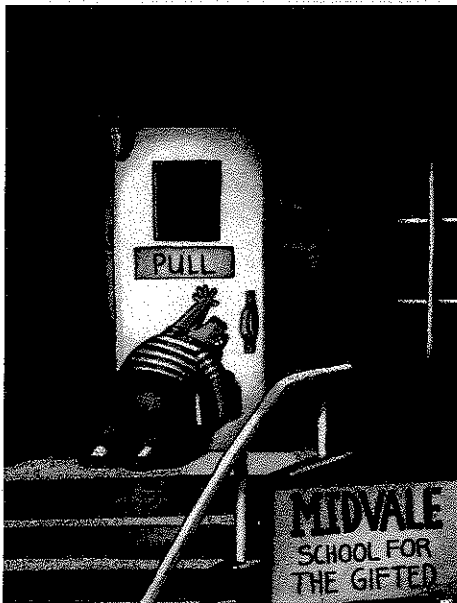
Even though we live in an overwhelmingly visual world, academia still favors written word, thus evoking a sense of boredom and monotony when it comes to class and essays (Jane: "What are you doing tonight, John?" John: "I have to write a paper for my composition teacher. It's on some boring book, I'm not going to have any fun doing it!"). By analyzing images from iconic photographs to different types of fonts, visually concentrated lesson plans and essay assignments can break the anticipated ennui of the school routine (I wonder what John would say now).

Mary Hock notes, "Historical studies of writing technologies have demonstrated how all writing is hybrid—it is at once verbal, spatial, and visual. Acknowledging this hybridity means that the relationships among word and image, verbal texts and visual texts, "visual culture" and "print culture" are all dialogic relationships rather than binary opposites" (630-631)

Addressing images, text formats, and the ever-important relationship between word and image serves not only as a comfortable and familiar vehicle that can veer a student toward the exclusive "Club Critical Analysis," but visual rhetorical analysis also posits the class and its participants in real life rhetorical situations. The image-laden society we find ourselves instructing in encourages us to reinterpret and portray rhetoric as a combination of its roots, oratory and written word, and its present, visual and textual representation.

"Captions:" Begin by examining a caption to a photograph, a word bubble in a comic, or words printed onto an advertisement. After analyzing surface level visuals (people, places, expressions, physical location within the image, lighting, texture, medium, etc.), bring the discussion "outside" the image. Evaluate audience, historical context, and the ethical, logical, and pathetic appeals. In what ways can this visual be more persuasive? Following this question, ask your students to rewrite the caption (or create a caption if one is lacking), text, dialogue to make it more effective. Would you start with the wordless and move towards the hybrids, or would you shift from the text/image to the text-less?

Advertising the Argument: Advertisements remain one of the easiest and most accessible routes into studying visual rhetoric; applying them to composition studies creates an opportunity for students to analyze something they often see. Diana George writes, "She [a student in George's class] tells the class that in her research she learned of the reasoning for the design" (1430). George's student designed a flag that symbolized her argument. Offering students the opportunity to advertise their own argument can

possibly increase enthusiasm; more importantly, such an assignment can illustrate the dynamic bond between word and image.

Aesthetic Separation: Ralph Steadman's graphics in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are scattered throughout the novel, yet their physical position is loosely associated with the corresponding moments in the text. What are the rhetorical effects of noting that the press box is run by carnivorous lizards on page twenty-eight, and then finding its subsequent illustration on page thirty-four? Is Thompson reinforcing his argument? Does Steadman limit your imagination?

Slowing Down the Argument: J. Anthony Blair raises a keen point: "Television commercials today show between one and four dozen different moving visual images in a 30 second spot. We have no trouble processing that much visual information, whereas it would be impossible to express 30 different propositions verbally in 30 seconds" (51). Analyzing the editing in television commercials can expose how an argument builds. Whether six or thirty seconds long, transforming a commercial into a slow moving flipbook parses out the components of the advertiser's appeals and modes of persuasion.

Localizing the argument: One of the tougher and more prevalent habits plaguing introductory paragraphs remains the "epic" opening sentence: "Since the beginning of time, people have compared the road to life." Keeping students on and engaged with campus life or local culture can hone their argument to something accessible and immediate with a relatively specific audience and context. The photograph below is from the Samuel Dorky Museum of Art.
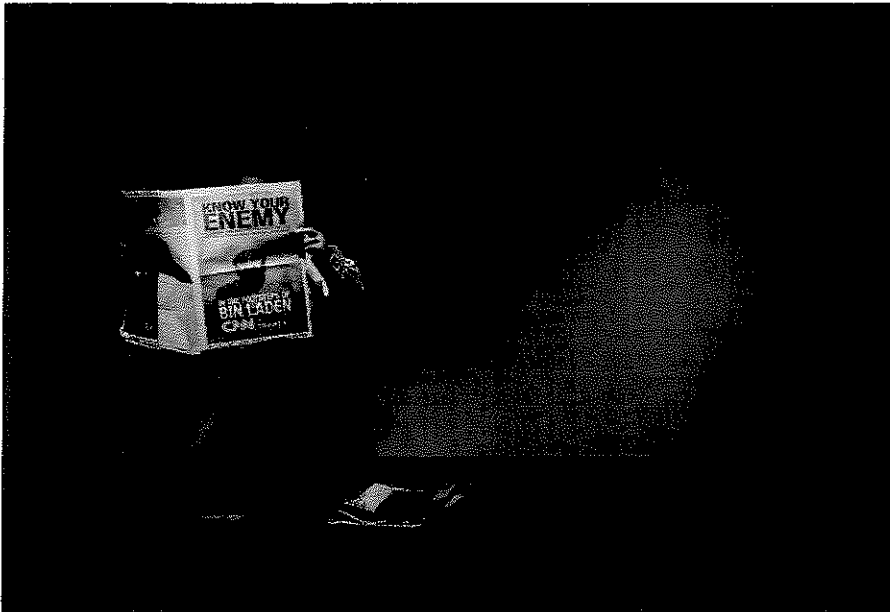
Thomas Albrecht, News/Print (image from performance), 2007.

How would a composition teacher at SUNY New Paltz go about analyzing this photograph?

Questions:
Is visual rhetoric as effective as traditional rhetoric?
How important is visual rhetoric in the composition classroom?
The future of the visually rhetorical essay?

Works Cited
Blair, J. Anthony. "The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments." *Defining Visual Rhetorics*. Ed. Marguerite Helmers and Charles A. Hill. Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2004. 51. Print.

George, Diana. "From Analysis to Design: Visual Communication in the Teaching of Writing." The Norton Book of Composition Studies. Ed. Susan Miller. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.1429-1449. Print.

Hocks, Mary E. "Understanding Visual Rhetoric in Digital Writing Environments." *College Composition and Communication* 54. 4 (June 2003): 629-632. *NCTE*. Web. 20 Feb. 2011.