

# Visual Rhetoric: Parallels and Intersections of Rhetoric and Design Studies

Jason Tham

Department of Writing Studies  
University of Minnesota, Twin Cities

Rhetoric and design studies have much in common. In the last 50 years, the reciprocal relationship between rhetoric and design has been a central inquiry to many interdisciplinary scholarships (Bonsiepe, 1961, 1965; Buchanan, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2001, 2007; Foss, 2005; Kaufer & Butler, 1996; McKeon, 1971, 1987; Sheridan, 2010). These works theorize rhetoric to be a type of design, while arguing that design is rhetorical. More recently, there is an emergence of a theoretical framework called *visual rhetoric* that aims to study and describe visual communication using the language from the rhetorical tradition. As a scholar of technical and scientific communication, a growing field in which visual rhetoric is considered a critical competency, I am interested in exploring how rhetorical and design scholarships inform this recent development. This paper presents a brief overview of the connections between rhetoric and design studies with an eye toward their parallel traits that lead to points of intersection that inform the conception of visual rhetoric. The paper concludes with an application example that uses color as the object of study, and poses three potential questions for future research.

## RHETORIC

From ancient Greece through the Renaissance, rhetoric was a key component in education. Rhetoric originated as the art of public speaking. According to Aristotle, who was among the first to provide a systematic account of rhetoric, rhetoric is the ability to see what is possibly persuasive in every given case (*Rhet.* I.2, 1355b26f, translation from Kennedy, 1991). Among many theories and concepts, the rhetorical tradition is known for its Five Canons, namely invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery, all to be used as guides for effective communication. Invention is the development of an idea through research and thinking process. Arrangement refers to the organization (more fondly known today as “the flow”) of an argument. Style determines the tone and manner of the argument (e.g., formal, funny, or ferocious). Memory deals with the way of which the presenter prepares for the reception of the argument. And delivery concerns the presentation of the argument. Although the Five Canons are traditionally specific to oral communication (i.e., speech), modern scholars use them as practical guides for creating and delivering compelling written and visual communication as well.

Because rhetoric examines so attentively not just the *what* but also the *how* of language—the methods and means of communication—it has sometimes been

discounted as something only concerned with style or appearances, and not with the quality or content of communication. Indeed, a basic premise for rhetoric is the indivisibility of means from meaning, that is, how one says something conveys meaning as much as what one says. Given that rhetoric studies the effectiveness of language comprehensively, including its emotional impact (pathos), as much as its source credibility (ethos) and propositional content (logos), it is necessary to artificially separate content and form for one to see how language and thought work together (Silva Rhetoricae, 2015).

In its long and vigorous history, rhetoric has continued to play an important role in persuasive communication despite technological advancement. From analog to digital, from discrete to networked, and from tethered to wireless media, changing technologies add to the riches of rhetoric while challenging it to adapt to new communicative environments. Cristina de Almeida (2009) explains:

From its beginnings in Antiquity, classical rhetoric was expanded from a discipline pertaining solely to the art of speaking to include the art of writing once printing became widespread during the Renaissance. Similarly, in the age of mass media, the art of combining words and images into arguments represents one further step in the

evolution of human communications. (p. 187)

Furthermore, rhetoric permeates all aspects of the humanities, including cultures and literature, music, philosophy, religion, history, and fine arts. It is not uncommon to find that modern curricula fuse rhetoric as an integral component across disciplines to emphasize the values of rhetorical and critical thinking skills. A rhetorical perspective to thinking about a subject such as design means examining the subject through the lens of a time-tested, scholarly yet highly practical system.

## DESIGN

Similar to rhetoric, design studies is a cross-disciplinary field that encompasses graphic or visual arts, architecture, civil or environmental engineering, communication and information infrastructuring, web and digital experience design, product and apparel design, theatrical (sounds, lighting, and sets) design, fashion and costume design, process and system design, etc. Design studies is a common major in higher education and postsecondary institutes around the world. Design education is typically offered through a 4-year college curriculum, which emphasizes a more rigorous liberal arts and general education requirements than its counterparts, the professional arts and design institutes (generally known as art schools), which focus on more career-specific trainings for their students.

Unlike rhetoric, design scholars and practitioners have equivocal philosophies toward the purpose of design. AIGA, the professional association for design, defines design as “the art and practice of planning and projecting ideas and experiences with visual and textual content” (Cezzar, 2016). Design educator and pioneer of user-experience design, Don Norman, writes that design is “the practice of intentional creation to enhance the world,” “a field of doing and making, creating great products and services that fit human needs, that delight and inform” (2014). Currently director of the Design Lab at the University of California in San Diego, Norman urges for a human-centered, thoughtful, and integrative (theory and practice) approach to design and its education. Norman states that the state of design studies today, which focuses on creating artifacts, needs to be reconfigured to be more social, and more rooted in technology and science. Such sociotechnological approach is shared by William Miller of the Environmental Systems Research Institute in California, who contends that the purpose of design is “to facilitate life” (2004). Miller argues

that good design enables, empowers, and assists behaviors, rather than dictating them. However, there is dissensus among practitioners and scholars alike to a Normanian philosophy, one that aims to put users first and not to be designer- or system-centric. For instance, Jason Fried (2008) of Basecamp contends that designers should have treat themselves as users of their designed artifact (thus designing for themselves first before actual users, so to speak). Fried thinks that design should remain product-focused such that the users inform the design process, rather than driving it.

More recently, design education seems to be embarking on an “across the curriculum” effort that is common to rhetoric and communication studies, seeking to integrate design thinking into every discipline (Clayton et al., 2010). Such initiative creates opportunities for adopting mixed theoretical and methodological to research, work, and pedagogy. Among the more prominent is *visual rhetoric*, a recent framework born of the crossbreeding between rhetoric and visual design. Visual rhetoric conjoins design and rhetorical concepts to describe how images reflect, communicate, and even shape meanings. What may be most helpful in exploring how rhetoric and design studies inform visual rhetoric is to identify the points of connection and intersection between the two.

## PARALLELS

Many scholars have attempted to bridge rhetoric and design. According to Gallagher, Martin, and Ma (2011), both rhetoric and design are “two distinct fields of study intricately related as reflected in their assumptions, goals and function” (p. 27). The relationship between design and rhetoric is evident in that both disciplines “are rooted in cultural, economic and technological developments” (Alameida, 2009, p. 6). Designers translate concepts and ideas into a visual representation, by organizing and connecting elements into a structure. This arrangement of elements is done with an intended effect in mind—a goal. Since the communication between designers and viewers has defined purposes, design is essentially rhetorical. This intentional and deliberate production of meaning is the rhetorical function of visual design (Emanuel, 2010).

An important Aristotelian scholar, Richard McKeon builds on Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric as being unlike the various sciences, each with their own specific subject matter and methods. Rhetoric is rather understood as among the universal, *architectonic* arts (McKeon, 1971). According to

McKeon's view, our modern, technological age requires that rhetoric play an architectonic art, enlarged beyond preoccupation with speech and the written word to become an art of producing all things and arts. Even though McKeon himself does not explicitly link rhetoric and design, his vision established the framework within which scholars have made that connection. David Kaufer and Brian Butler's (1996) *Rhetoric and the Arts of Design* argues that rhetoric belongs among the arts of design. While Kaufer and Butler treat the relationship between rhetoric and design from a background in rhetoric, Richard Buchanan does the opposite. In "Design and the New Rhetoric: Productive Arts in the Philosophy of Culture," Buchanan (2001) argues that rhetoric is design limited to words, and that design is rhetoric with an unlimited palette. Buchanan applies the three rhetorical appeals of logos, pathos and ethos to understand how designed products persuade and influence us. Having argued that design is capable of playing the role of an architectonic art called for by McKeon, Buchanan concludes by laying out his understanding of design so conceived. Central to that understanding is his "four orders of design," namely, symbols and images, physical artifacts, actions and activities, and environments or systems. Operating as a rhetoric unrestricted to words, design can "dissolve the boundaries of old fields and disciplines and establish new ones that address current and emerging problems of cultural life" (Buchanan, 2001).

### **RHETORIC-DESIGN INTERSECTIONS: THE BIRTH OF VISUAL RHETORIC**

In *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen contend that "language and visual communication can both be used to realize the 'same' fundamental systems of meaning that constitute our culture, but each does so by its own specific forms, does so differently, and independently" (2006, p.19). Amid this claim, there seems to be conceivable commonalities between rhetorics and aesthetics, that there might be a way for theorizing the verbal and the visual using similar vocabularies or concepts. In fact, Kress and van Leeuwen were not the first to make such assumption; German designer Gui Bonsiepe (1961, 1965) had attempted to develop explicit transfer of the language of rhetoric to the visual dating close to 50 years ago. Against a rhetorical background, Bonsiepe has developed the first analogies for understanding visual design and rhetoric, sharpened design analysis vocabularies, and showed that designers use certain defined figurations in design to enable effective communication.

Although a natural affinity exists between rhetoric and visual design, the inclusion of visual imagery in rhetorical study has not been the seamless process many might assume. Proposals to expand rhetoric to encompass the visual were at first met with objections from within its field. Waldo Braden, for example, has suggested that rhetoricians are not trained to deal with visual images (1970). Another reason cited for the reluctance of rhetoric scholars to tackle the study of visual images has had less to do with personal competencies, but rather their desire to accumulate theoretical insights into rhetoric. Roderick Hart has said that,

To the extent that scholars deviate from traditional, commonly shared understandings of what rhetoric is—by including non-social, mechanically mediated, and nonverbal phenomena in the rhetorical mix—they are, to that extent, necessarily forsaking the *immediate* implementation of the theoretical threads derived in previous studies of human, non-mediated, problematic, verbal interchanges. (Hart, 1976)

Nonetheless, as we may observe today, the study of visual images has continued and now flourishes in rhetorical studies thanks to the pervasiveness of the visual and its impact on many aspects of contemporary culture (Foss, 2005). The study of visual imagery from a rhetorical perspective also has grown with the recognition that the visual provides access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of verbal discourse. To this extent, Jean Audigier explains that

discursive language has definite limits to its usefulness. Because it employs conventional meaningful units according to rules of grammar and syntax, because each word has a relatively fixed meaning and the total meaning of this type of discourse is built up along a linear and logical pattern, it can only refer to the neutral aspects of our world of observation and thought. But there is another side of existence which escapes the control of discursive language. (Audigier, 1991)

Visual rhetoric emerges as a framework to understand and articulate such experiences. According to Foss, visual rhetoric is used to mean both a visual object or artifact and a perspective on the study of visual data. Conceptualized as a communicative artifact, visual rhetoric is the actual

visual that rhetors create for the purpose of communication—a painting, an advertisement, or a chart that constitutes the data of study. While this aspect of visual rhetoric in its broadest term mirrors what is known as design, Foss argues that there needs to be three characteristics that turn the visual artifact into a communicative artifact. Visual rhetoric must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience in order to communicate with them (Foss, 2005, p. 144). This expands design beyond its aesthetic value to a utilitarian, purposive construction that serves particular communicative needs.

As a perspective, visual rhetoric constitutes a theoretical viewpoint that involves the analysis of the symbolic or communicative aspects of visual rhetoric. It is a critical-analytical tool for visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images. The key to a rhetorical perspective on images is its focus on a rhetorical response rather than just aesthetic one. For instance, colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an image would provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of the image, emotions, and ideas. A visual rhetorical perspective focuses on understanding such responses to images.

In short, visual rhetoric combines the artifact (design) and the way of viewing (rhetoric). Together, these senses of the term point to new ways of understanding how the visual operates rhetorically in contemporary culture. Visual rhetoric suggests the need to expand understanding of the multifaceted ways in which symbols—verbal as well as visual—inform and define human experiences.

### **COLOR: A CASE OF VISUAL RHETORIC**

To demonstrate the intersectionality of visual and rhetorical methodologies, I review here a study in visual rhetoric that uses color as the object of study. Color is arguably the most direct, impactful design element. Beyond its use in conventional paintings and fine arts (Wei, 2015), it is becoming more common to find in professional and technical communication contexts where color plays a crucial role in enhancing persuasion. As a result of research in display techniques, the application of traditional and emerging rhetorical approaches, and the democratizing effects of data design technology, the use of color in data displays (e.g., charts, graphs, maps) has changed profoundly over the years. Studies have investigated how colors are applied in different business communication settings to perform persuasion, including PowerPoint or presentation visual aids (Cyphert, 2004), product advertising

(Barnes, 1990), e-commerce and virtual environments (Marcus, Guttman, & Atwood, 1999; Garber & Hyatt, 2003).

According to John Courtis (2004), the specific role of color in business communication, such as financial reporting, is a neglected field of enquiry. In surveying 100 annual reports in Hong Kong, Courtis (2004) has found that color usage is related to profitability change. Through a perception questionnaire administered to senior undergraduate accounting students, Courtis examined how color affected subjects' investment decision. Results show that some colors are associated with more favorable perception formation and with more investment allocations. Evidence suggests that color may not possess neutral effects in business communication and can influence perception formation and investment judgments.

Courtis' study has brought together design and rhetoric by examining the persuasive power of color in a specific context that is business. It is a clear case of the application of visual rhetoric as the theoretical framework devised by Foss (2005) situates color as both a persuasive product and a springboard for analyzing persuasion. Courtis' study weighs on the former but also provides an investigation of how color as a design element influences human behaviors.

### **EMERGING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND DIRECTIONS**

From exploring the relationships between rhetoric and design studies, one might learn that there are many researchable questions emerging from the exploration. Here I propose three questions and potential research directions for visual rhetoric scholars:

1. How might scholars and practitioners facilitate the development of a more integrated theory of visual rhetoric that embraces design in its various forms, including graphic arts, architecture, virtual engineering, technological interfaces, and mundane objects? This might involve a revisionary approach to consolidating the histories of design and communication, focusing on the intersecting points in which both fields complement one another.
2. How are emerging technologies challenging existing methodologies or inviting new approaches to studying the roles of design in

rhetoric, and vice versa? How might the humanities partner across disciplines with natural or applied sciences, social sciences, and computer sciences to create interdisciplinary data collection and analysis methodologies in response to the new dimensions of visual rhetoric today (e.g., wearable technology)?

3. Although visual rhetoric has grown to be a richly developing area of study within both communication/rhetoric and design studies, the scholarly journals that deal specifically with visuals still tend to fall outside the boundaries of rhetorical studies, such as *Visual Communication*, *Photographies*, and *Visual Communication Quarterly*. While communication journals such as *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric Review*, *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, and *Review of Communication* have demonstrated openness to visual rhetoric research, there still lacks a common space for rhetoricians and designers to review, discuss, and expand

visual rhetoric together. How might it take to create a scholarly platform for such purposes?

## CONCLUSION

This paper has endeavored to show the reciprocal relationship between rhetoric and design, both in theory and practice, through a developing framework called visual rhetoric. Arguments have been emerged in support of the observation that rhetoric and design share critical characteristics, that design is innately rhetorical, and that rhetoric is a type of design. The paper has also included a brief case of visual rhetoric that uses color as its study object to exemplify visual rhetoric theory at work. Further directions for that exploration have been suggested concerning the development of a more integrated theory of design, the possibility of creating cross-disciplinary research methodologies to answer the challenges in studying visual rhetoric amidst emerging technologies, and the need for making a common space for rhetoricians and designers to publish works on visual rhetoric together.

## REFERENCES

- Almeida de, C. (2009). The rhetorical genre in graphic design: Its relationship to design authorship and implications to design education. *Journal of Visual Literacy*, 28(2), 186- 198.
- Audigier, J. (1991). *Connections*. New York, NY: Lanham.
- Barnes, J. H. (1990). Using color preferences in magazine advertising. *Journal of Advertising Research*, 100–110.
- Bonsiepe, G. (1961). Persuasive communication: Towards a visual rhetoric. In T. Crosby (Ed.), *Uppercase* 5, 19–34.
- Bonsiepe, G. (1965). Visuell/verbale rhetorik (Visual/verbal rhetoric). *Ulm*, 14/15/16, 22-40.
- Braden, W. (1970). Rhetorical criticism: Prognoses for the Seventies—A symposium: A prognosis by Waldo W. Braden. *Southern Speech Journal*, 36, 104-107.
- Buchanan, R. (1985). Declaration by design: Rhetoric, argument, and demonstration in design practice. *Design Issues*, 17(3), 3-23.
- Buchanan, R. (1990). Myth and maturity: Toward a new order in the decade of design. *Design Issues*, 6(2), 70-80.
- Buchanan, R. (1995). Rhetoric, humanism, and design. In Buchanan, Richard and Margolin, Victor, (eds.). *Discovering design: explorations in design studies*, 23-66. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Buchanan, R. (2001). Design and the new rhetoric: Productive arts in the philosophy of culture. *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 34(3), 183-206.
- Buchanan, R. (2007). Strategies of design research: Productive science and rhetorical inquiry. In Michel, Ralf (ed.). *Design research now: essays and selected projects*, 55-66. Boston, MA: Birkhäuser.
- Cezzar, J. (2016). What is graphic design? *AIGA*. Retrieved from <http://www.aiga.org/what-is-design/>
- Clayton, G. M., Radlinska, A., Comolli, N., & Wojcik, T. Integrating design education across the curriculum using impromptu design projects. Fall 2010 Mid-Atlantic ASEE Conference. Villanova, PA, USA, October 15-16, 2010.
- Courtis, J. (2004). Colour as visual rhetoric in financial reporting. *Accounting Forum*, 28(3), 265-281.
- Cyphert, D. (2004). The problem of PowerPoint: Visual aid or visual rhetoric? *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67(1), 80-84.
- Emanuel, B. (2010). Rhetoric in graphic design (Master Thesis). Retrieved from: <http://graphicdesignrhetoric.tumblr.com>

- Foss, S. K. (2005). Theory of visual rhetoric. In *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media*. Ken Smith, Sandra Moriarty, Gretchen Barbatsis, and Keith Kenney (Eds.), 141-152. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Fried, J. (2008). Why we disagree with Don Norman. Retrieved from <https://signalvnoise.com/posts/904-why-we-disagree-with-don-norman>
- Gallagher, V. J., Martin, K. N., Ma, M., (2011). Visual wellbeing: Intersections of rhetorical theory and design. *Design Issues*, 27(2), 27-40.
- Garber, L., Hyatt, E. (2003). Color as a tool for visual persuasion. In L.M. Scott, R. Batra (Eds.), *Persuasive imagery a consumer response perspective*, 313–336. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Hart, R. (1976). Forum: Theory-building and rhetorical criticism: An informal statement of opinion. *Central States Speech Journal*, 27, 70-77.
- Kaufer, D. S. & Butler, B. S. (1996). *Rhetoric and the arts of design*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kennedy, G. A. (1991). *Aristotle, on rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Kress, G. & van Leeuwen, T. (2006). *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design (2e)*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Marcus, A., Guttman, E., Atwood, M. (1999). Visual design for E-commerce and performance tools. *ACM Human Factors in Computing Systems: CHI '99 Extended Abstracts*, 112-113.
- McKeon, R. (1971). The uses of rhetoric in a technological age: Architectonic productive arts. In Bitzer, Lloyd F. and Black, Edwin (Eds.). *The prospect of rhetoric*, 44-63. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Miller, W. (2004). Purpose of design. Retrieved from <http://www.wrmdesign.com/Philosophy/Documents/PurposeDesign.htm>
- Norman, D. (2014). State of design: How design education must change. *LinkedIn Pulse*. Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20140325102438-12181762-state-of-design-how-design-education-must-change>
- Sheridan, D. (2010). Fabricating consent: Three-dimensional objects as rhetorical compositions. *Computers and Composition*, 27(4), 249-265.
- Silva Rhetoricae (2015). What is rhetoric. Retrieved from <http://rhetoric.byu.edu/Encompassing%20Terms/rhetoric.htm>
- Wei, Z-Q. (2015). On color rhetoric in painting language. *Journal of Liupanshui Teachers College*, 27(5), 40-43.