



A Review of: "Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, & Diane S. Hope (Eds.), Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture."

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Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, & Diane S. Hope (Eds.), *VISUAL RHETORIC: A READER IN COMMUNICATION AND AMERICAN CULTURE*. Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008; 464 pp. ISBN: 9781412949194, \$57.95.

What does a rhetorical perspective bring to the study of the visual? This question is often answered by focusing on issues of audience and contingency and the importance of context. According to Kenney and Scott (2003) the possibility of “visual rhetoric” is based upon the “firm premise that the making and viewing of pictures is fundamentally a culture-based practice, just as is writing and reading” and that “culture is ‘present’ in all pictures, not just some of them.” They explain the previous lack of attention to visual images in rhetorical scholarship as tied to a peculiarly Western conception of visual images as iconic and indexical rather than arbitrary and conventional. Yet, as they seek to demonstrate, the basic operations (the “underpinning machinery”) underlying both verbal texts and imagistic artifacts is “convention and selectivity” making both “utterly situated in a particular moment and audience” and therefore, rhetorical (p. 22).

While the emphasis on audience and context is certainly important to a rhetorical understanding of the visual, the editors of *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture* offer, instead, symbolic action as the central organizing term for visual rhetoric scholars and scholarship. Indeed, Lester C. Olson, Cara A. Finnegan, and Diane S. Hope ambitiously set out to compile a collection of essays that demonstrates “the development of visual rhetoric in the communication discipline.” This collection is intended to serve as a foundation for teachers and students who wish to engage in rhetorical investigations of visual artifacts and texts. By identifying articles that have helped to shape visual rhetoric studies within the discipline of communication, the editors have, to a large extent, accomplished their goal. The book provides its readers a variety of options for entry into these types of investigations informed by the notion that, “above all, rhetoric is symbolic action.” This focus on symbolic action is particularly evident in the organizational schema the editors use to group the 20 reprinted essays. They also include several other helpful features such as: a short historical timeline in the introductory chapter, a substantive bibliography of examples of scholarly work in related fields of study, an essay introducing each section followed by a set of questions, and a “provocative” image at the start of each section to prompt discussion. Table 1 summarizes some of the main contributions and potential weaknesses of the book.

Section I, “Performing and Seeing,” is intended to illustrate rhetorical actions that “invite audiences to perform and to see in certain ways (and not others).” Reginald Twigg’s essay, “The Performative Dimension of Surveillance: Jacob Riis’ How the Other Half Lives,” leads off the section. It features an analysis of photographer Jacob Riis’ observations, descriptions, and photographs of working-class people’s lives. It is followed by Nathan Stormer’s “Embodying Normal Miracles,” an analysis of magnification technologies through the pro-life film *The Miracle of Life*. Next is Cara A. Finnegan’s essay titled, “Recognizing Lincoln: Image Vernaculars in Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture,” an analysis of how audiences spoke about Lincoln’s character based on a rare youthful photograph of the late president published in McClure’s magazine in 1895. The

Table 1 Main Contributions and Potential Weaknesses of *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in Communication and American Culture*

	Contributions	Potential weaknesses
Pedagogical Features	<p>Acts as a useful resource book.</p> <p>Provides students with five possible strategies of symbolic action for conceptualizing visual rhetoric.</p> <p>Features discussion questions at the end of each section.</p> <p>Selects “provocative” images at the beginning of each section to prompt discussion.</p> <p>Provides alternative tables of contents listed according to: 1) medium or 2) chronology of the artifact analyzed.</p> <p>Provides substantive bibliography for scholarship in allied visual fields.</p>	<p>Students often already have access to the articles via libraries and digital database collections.</p> <p>Categories may be limiting and somewhat confusing to students.</p> <p>Invention and rhetorical practice is somewhat de-emphasized.</p>
Selection & Representation of Featured Essays	<p>The essays provide access to more visuals than in original publications.</p>	<p>Quality of printed book is less than desirable: The paper and cover are very thin and there are no color images.</p> <p>Selection necessitates exclusion. Editors admit: “We had to leave out more than we have put in.”</p> <p>Selection criteria not readily apparent for inclusion/exclusion.</p>
Rhetorical Theory	<p>Gronbeck essay provides good introduction to visual rhetoric, its history, allied fields and implies general questions the field should be asking.</p> <p>Benson, closing essay, problematizes the field of visual rhetoric by opening up questions of agency and disjunction between criticism and practice.</p>	<p>Editors stop short of theorizing/ re-theorizing symbolic action.</p>

final essay in this section is Charles E. Morris III and John M. Sloop's "What Lips These Lips Have Kissed": Refiguring the Politics of Queer Public Kissing," an analysis of the visibility of queer sexuality and AIDS activism through an examination of performances of same-sex kissing such as Gran Fury's "READ MY LIPS" poster.

Section II, "Remembering and Memorializing," seeks to present a variety of ways Americans have sought to make memory visible "in order to define their relationship to the present." The first two essays in this section feature analyses of photographs that have been put to use in different forms: "The Rhetoric of the Frame: Revisioning Archival Photographs in The Civil War," an analysis of the popular Ken Burns documentary *The Civil War*, by Judith Lancioni and "Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons," an analysis of the appropriations by editorial cartoons of the famous photograph of U.S. Marines planting a flag on the island of Iwo Jima in 1945 by Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler. The next essay features an analysis of a particular commemorative site, the Civil Rights Memorial in Montgomery, Alabama: "Reproducing Civil Rights Tactics: The Rhetorical Performances of the Civil Rights Memorial" by Carole Blair and Neil Michel. The last two essays in this section are Barbara Biesecker's "Remembering World War II: The Rhetoric and Politics of National Commemoration at the Turn of the 21st Century," a study of a variety of artifacts produced in the 1990s that construct late twentieth-century public memory about World War II and Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites' "Public Identity and Collective Memory in U.S. Iconic Photography: The Image of 'Accidental' Napalm," an analysis of the photograph of a naked young girl, running down a road in Vietnam, badly burned from a Napalm attack.

Section III, "Confronting and Resisting," looks at how agents (especially politically marginalized agents) can powerfully resist or challenge existing norms through visual rhetoric. The section begins with "The Precarious Visibility of Self-Stigmatization: The Case of HIV/AIDS Tattoos," an analysis of tattoos of self-stigmatization that publicly declare a person's "serostatus—HIV antibody positive," by Dan Brouwer. This is followed by Margaret R. LaWare's "Encountering Visions of Aztlan: Arguments for Ethnic Pride, Community Activism, and Cultural Revitalization in Chicano Murals," an analysis of mural art and how it shapes community identity and Anne Teresa Demo's "The Guerilla Girls' Comic Politics of Subversion," an analysis of the posters and theater of the feminist art activists. The section concludes with Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca's essay titled "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till," an analysis of the juxtaposed photographs of Emmett Till as a smiling young man and of his brutalized remains within the context of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Section IV, "Commodifying and Consuming," offers three essays that illustrate the extent to which visual rhetoric is embedded in our decisions to buy, sell, and use "products, ideas, beliefs and social relationships." Essays in this section include: "The Force of Callas' Kiss: The 1997 Apple Advertising Campaign, 'Think Different,'" an analysis of a marketing campaign for Apple computers, by Ronald E. Shields; "'Put Your Stamp on History': The USPS Commemorative Program Celebrate the Century and Postmodern Collective Memory," an analysis of the U.S. Postal Service's self-promotion through commemorative postage stamps, by Ekaterina V. Haskins; and "Memorializing

Affluence in the Postwar Family: Kodak's Colorama in Grand Central Terminal (1950–1990),” a study of Kodak's large color display of family photographs, by Diane S. Hope.

Section V, “Governing and Authorizing,” offers essays that examine how the rhetoric of visual images informs activities that warrant, justify or sanction practices of high-powered leaders. The first essay in this section is “Benjamin Franklin's Pictorial Representations of the British Colonies in America: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology,” a comparative analysis of two images by Benjamin Franklin produced a decade apart, by Lester C. Olson. The next two essays in the section examine visual images of presidents and presidential candidates. They are Keith V. Erickson's “Presidential Rhetoric's Visual Turn,” an analysis of presidential photos from several administrations and Shawn J. Parry-Giles' “Mediating Hillary Rodham Clinton: Television News Practices and Image-Making in the Postmodern Age,” an analysis detailing one particular instance when NBC recycled visual footage of Clinton for a newscast. The final essay focuses less on images of leaders and more on imagery used by leaders. It is Dana L. Cloud's “‘To Veil the Threat of Terror’: Afghan Women and the <Clash of Civilizations> in the Imagery of the U.S. War on Terrorism,” an analysis of photographs during the 2001–2002 “War on Terror” depicting women from Afghanistan.

In their discussion of the essays chosen for the collection, the editors acknowledge that selection necessitates exclusion, admitting “we had to leave out more than we have put in.” This confession raises questions about how to best represent or conceptualize the field of visual rhetoric in general. Is it possible to develop a collection of visual rhetoric essays that adequately represents the state of the scholarship in this area? The editors deal with this question by foregrounding their organizational schema and by clearly stating that the collection is not meant to be definitive or canonical. Still, some of their decisions appear somewhat arbitrary, perhaps because they don't clearly articulate their selection criteria. For instance, four of the five essays in the “Remembering and Memorializing” section, the largest of the five sections, center on war-related memorials and photographs. As a result essays on museums, non-war-related commemorative public art, and other, more vernacular, forms of remembrance and contexts for memorializing are left out. To mitigate limitations such as this, the editors provide suggestions for additional readings at the end of each section.

Grouping the essays into five categories of symbolic actions “that recur in visual rhetoric” provides students a window into the practice of visual rhetoric from a critic's perspective. Indeed, the essays included in the section titled “Confronting and Resisting” clearly illustrate how and to what effect such actions are accomplished visually. However, some of the other categories seem limiting and potentially confusing. For instance, one could argue that the first section, “Performing and Seeing,” is just as easily if not better exemplified by some of the essays from other sections (e.g., Blair and Michel's essay about the materiality and therefore performativity of the Civil Rights Memorial). This, in addition to the lack of clearly stated selection criteria, makes it seem as if the organizational schema was generated inductively from the selected essays rather than the selection of essays being informed by a careful conceptualization of symbolic action as it is currently understood and applied in the study of visual rhetoric. If the desired approach is inductive and generative, students might be better taught that each essay provides its

own take on symbolic action and that criticism, like the artifacts it interrogates, is itself unique and artistic. The alternative tables of contents provided by the editors (choice of medium and chronology) could be used to encourage students to make their own connections between the various essays. To their credit, the inclusion of these alternative tables of content indicates that the editors were mindful of this limitation.

While they claim, justifiably, that a distinctive feature of the book is the inclusion of more illustrations in some of the reprinted essays than in the original versions, unfortunately, none of these illustrations is in color. Printing costs most likely dictated this decision but in an age of digital media where images can be accessed readily on the Web, there needs to be some incentive to owning (or having students purchase) a printed collection of critical pieces and high-quality printing is undoubtedly one of those incentives. Clarifying and highlighting the benefits of collecting essays in book form might include not only the conceptual/organizational/theoretical benefits but also the visual and material benefits that are possible and that go beyond a reading list that might also be accessed digitally.

In his interesting and insightful closing essay, Benson points out one of the differences between the emerging field of visual rhetoric and that of public oratory, namely, the citizen as spectator. He explains that, unlike critics of public oratory, most critics of visual rhetoric are not teaching students how to produce the texts (photography, filmmaking, design, etc.) but only how to act as “a consumer, an agent by proxy at best.” Benson argues further that this “disjunction between criticism and practice” results in criticism that is forced to return to themes of “stigmatized identity, crippled agency, distraction, diversion, nostalgia, self-exhibition, exclusion, and the manipulation of collective memory.” He raises the question as to whether and how scholars of visual rhetoric might address this tendency. This is an important question, particularly for rhetorical critics who agree that, no matter the object of study, rhetorical criticism is both an art and a practice. In our view, while agency has undergone a fracturing in the era of postmodernity, there is value in holding onto it in our theorizing and criticism as a creative possibility that continues to provide “equipment for living.” Critics and students of visual rhetoric need to consider how their insights may serve to illuminate themes and possibilities that enhance agency in the face of forces that would tend to cripple it. If, as the editors and authors indicate, symbolic action is a useful way of organizing our thoughts about visual rhetoric, we would argue, in accord with Benson, that the next step for students and scholars who read and use this book is a consideration of how visual rhetorical studies may serve to open up or lead to a rearticulation of agency.

Reference

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