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Visual Rhetoric

o Problematizing

There is a growing recognition of the ubiquity of images and of their importance in the dissemination and reception of ideas, information, opinions. These are the processes that lie at the heart of all rhetorical practices, social movements, and cultural institutions. So far many scholars have called for a collaborative effort to discipline the study of visual phenomena into a new field, variously labelled visual rhetoric, visual culture studies or “image studies”.

Nevertheless definitional questions are being continuously raised about what rhetoric is and does, and how visual can be treated. Their basic natures are not agreed upon so it seems sensible not to strive for a narrow definition of visual rhetoric but propose a framework in which its aspects could be seen as paradigmatic possibilities. As visual can either consist of analyzing representational images, studying the visual aspect of every human creation or studying the process of looking, rhetoric may also be defined as strategic maneuvering (action), meaning constitution (discourse) or a mode of knowing (logic). In view of this varied assumptions, we need to be cautious when describing “visual rhetoric” as a discipline. Thus, we may agree to use the term what Mitchell proposed to categorize visual culture studies. “Indiscipline” for visual rhetoric has the capacity to describe the cross disciplinary work done in the field. “If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices, ‘indiscipline’ is a moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question.” (Mitchell, W. J. T. “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture” *Art Bulletin*, 70/4. 1995. 540-544, p.541). Visual rhetoric as an indiscipline is a site of convergence and conversations across disciplinary lines, a field focused on transdisciplinary problems to which a visual expertise can be brought.

Visual rhetoric is not freed from the verbal and not bound to the visual. It is the indiscipline of the mediation that occurred between the verbal and the pictorial. (Scholars of visual rhetoric tend to reject any clear boundary and demarcation line between “visual” and “verbal”). Texts are being born as results of the blending of the two and they will call for not only visual but hybrid literacies.

o Concepts of Visual Rhetoric

It the core of the rhetorical tradition (or in the core of its understanding) we find the ‘word’. Considering rhetoric as an aspect of symbolic action in general, however, we can claim that it is not exclusively about and of the verbal. What and how broadly we regard rhetoric will strongly effect our (critical) understanding (and teaching) of visual rhetoric. Here the struggle is to draw on the rhetorical tradition – its theory, criticism, pedagogy – to illuminate visual texts.

Endeavouring to be general, apart from the little consensus about what visual rhetoric is, we state two principles that are considerably agreed upon. These are the following: (1) Visual rhetoric is and deals with a mode of communication. (2) Visual rhetoric is meaningful as a result of the (re)production of what is seen in visual imagery. We may also claim that visual rhetoric is clearly rhetorical in the sense that its messages engage us in questions of meaning-making, belief, value action and community forming. In the meanwhile, though, we should repeatedly question whether it is rhetoric in a traditional, classical sense.

On the basis of definitions of rhetoric and the role of imagery three approaches ('doing', 'becoming', 'knowing') to visual rhetoric will be dwelt upon:

1. In which imagery is treated as a visual mode of address strategically produced to persuade an audience. It is another form of rhetoric where the device to persuade is not verbal but the view of persuasion is Aristotelian.
2. In which imagery is a fundamental grounding for reality not simply a mimetic representation of it. Here the visual is not treated as an effect of the eye or a consequence of cognition but as a constitutive part of subjectivity and an embodied understanding of rhetoric.
3. In which visual rhetoric is conceived of as a way of knowing. It is premised on the idea that images operate according to their own unique codes, syntax and grammar. For this perspective images are not merely devices of persuasion but essential forms that make thought and thinking possible.

○ **Addressing Fundamental Notions**

Presuming that visual rhetoric is a key to visual, digital and hybrid literacies of the world around us, two terms (and the processes and products denoted by them) should be focused on particularly: persuasion and argumentation. Questioning the significant difference between verbal as rational and visual as emotional persuasion and denying the impossibility of visual arguments the presentation will provide a visual rhetoric frame to talk about these two phenomena.