



The Potentials of Visual Rhetoric in Communication

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ABSTRACT

This paper defines the concept of visual rhetoric from the perspective of the receiver in the communication continuum. It then sets out the theoretical framework in the art of visual thinking which suggests that certain information reaching the eye are capable of being exaggerated or overblown in style to influence the viewers or receiver's feelings and perception. The structure of visual rhetoric is viewed as a subset of communication theory and described in comparison to oral rhetoric. Six fundamental goals of the visual rhetorician which include attention gaining, sustenance of interest, recognition, effective storage, recall and persuasion and their potential application in communication are considered. The ways in which visual rhetoric can be expressed within the framework of the universal laws of composition to enhance communication are also discussed. The conclusion draws together the major points and considers their implication for visual communication theory.

INTRODUCTION

In the art of public speaking, a rhetorical speech is one which is characterized by language that is sometimes elevated, declamatory, flowery, or overblown in style for the purpose of gaining attention and appealing to passion. Rhetoric or oratory is therefore, a form of communication commonly associated with oral language. This paper examines how the rhetorical approach in oral communication is applicable in the visual communication domain, as demonstrated in the fine and applied arts, graphics and kinesics.

Visual communication is concerned with what we see in reality and how the things we see affect our perception i.e. how we feel. Perception is defined here as the mental image of the environment received through the senses (Hewish 1967). Real objects can be perceived through viewing, touching or smelling, whereas graphic (visual) representations are perceived through viewing alone. In nature, the difference between what we see and what

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actually exists can be quite incongruous. For example, a perspective arising from a straight road would normally give the illusion of the road touching the sky at the horizon where it is artistically referred to as the vanishing point. But in reality, the vanishing point only characterizes the limitations of human vision. For sure, in nature and mathematically too, parallel lines should not meet, but often the information reaching the mind from the eye is clearly on the contrary. Similarly, on a sunny day, a mirage observed on the high way is normally not water but an illusion of it, caused by the interaction of intense heat and sunlight.

Visual rhetoric

Visual rhetoric is the art of visual thinking in which the information reaching the eye is exaggerated or overblown in style to influence the viewer's feelings or perception. A typical example is found in classic perspective representations in art works. Visual rhetoric is the visual equivalence of rhetoric in speech. One of the oldest theories of visual thinking which remains valid till date states that the art of manipulating what we see to impact on our perception is not merely a psychomotor skill, but a form of cognition (Arnheim 1969). In this form of cognition or visual thinking, some effects such as persistence of vision and after image which elevates visual information constitute natural forms of visual rhetoric. Photographic memory which is a special cognitive skill used in recalling details of images immediately after they were seen can also be facilitated through visual rhetoric.

Therefore, in the same way as an orator carefully arranges his speech stressing certain words orally and through gesture, the visual communicator, also, manipulates signs, symbols, pictures in any pictorial composition to influence visual scanning which involves the process of identifying an element or unit from a larger composition with a view to grasping the summary of the visual message. This technique is commonly practiced in the design of handbills, posters and billboards. Thus, visual rhetoric and illusionism are employed in communication for attention gaining and enhancing ability to recall information. This communication strategy becomes an accepted norm in the field of advertising in particular, as well as in the theatre of persuasion in general.

Visual rhetoric viewed from the perspective of the receiver

Theoretically, it is presumed that a target audience is present in every communication chain. This presumption is also applicable to the visual communication chain, even though it would seem rather incongruous to apply the audience concept in the context of visual communication. Subsequently, in order to understand the target audience in a visual rhetoric sequence, it would seem more accurate to refer to spectators and viewers rather than audiences.

In order to understand the characteristics of the receiver in the visual rhetoric continuum, an analysis of a specific medium, typically the poster is considered helpful. The poster or billboard is a typical medium of visual communication and a typical theatre of visual rhetoric which is capable of being displayed just about anywhere; the street, the highways, the city square, in the town hall, in the market place and in any public place where potential viewers may be targeted for persuasion. All over the world, posters have become a part of the visual environment simply because they are the most effective outdoor message deliverers (Horn 1976), and their effectiveness is due in part to the use of visual rhetorics. From the definition of visual rhetoric proffered earlier, certain factors are considered important in the present attempt to understand its characteristics particularly in the context of posters. The first is that the typical viewer in visual rhetoric milieu is to be found outdoors most of the time. The second is that the viewers of poster rhetorics are more heterogeneous compared to the blind (audio dependant) audiences in the audio communication chain. What may be deduced from this generalization is that whereas a negative correlation may be hypothesized between heterogeneity of target population and potency of media in the verbal communication chain, a positive correlation may be the case for visual media such as the poster which derives its potential power from the capacity to visually address a cross section of the heterogeneous population regardless of linguistic and cultural barriers. The visual medium is also strikingly different from audio-dependent media such as radio whose target audience is presumed to be homogeneous and monolingual. Conversely, visual rhetoric is an abstract language which, if properly articulated, can transcend the traditional barriers of mass communication such as those arising from cultural and linguistic differences. Through visual rhetoric, powerful ideas can be expressed in very subtle ways which are capable of having more enduring impact on the society. The techniques of visual rhetoric involve the manipulation of iconic and digital information to exaggerate the messages (as in the advertising of consumer products and public relations). It is less susceptible to the typical colloquialisms connecting the essential ideas of daily life functions and situations such as land, work, family, kingship etc. The effectiveness of visual rhetoric as exemplified by posters, billboards and handbills is as a result of its conformity with the principles of aesthetic order which are distinguishable from cultural symbolism. The two dimensional surface of a poster typically constitutes the theatre of visual rhetoric where iconic and digital signs are deliberately arranged in a harmonious composition to deliver powerful messages to the viewers. Horn (1976) notes that in the conventional style of poster making, the iconic signs (which are the critical elements for visual rhetoric) are represented by drawings, illustrations, photographic and abstract images while the digital signs (which are redundant in visual rhetoric) are represented by verbal descriptions in form of words, captions and slogans.

THE FUNDAMENTAL GOALS OF VISUAL RHETORIC

The fundamental objectives of the visual rhetorician is effective communication of information, and the iconic and digital signs constitute the primary tools used to achieve this objective in addition to his creative imagination and visualizing power, to communicate powerful information to viewers. The fundamental principles in any rhetorical statement are:

1. The principle of attention gaining
2. The principle of sustenance of interest
3. The Principle of effective recognition
4. The principle of effective storage of information
5. The principle of effective recall of information.
6. The principle of effective persuasion.

Persuasive visual rhetorical statements typically found in public relations and advertising media such as posters, hand bills and bill-boards are usually achieved through the successful implementation of these principles individually or in combination. A rhetorical visual is not concerned with simple fidelity, but the extension of fidelity to gain greater seductive power, Horn (ibid). Based on these principles, the visual rhetorician can devise a visual scheme deliberately intended to persuade the viewer to act in a certain direction in the same way as an orator manipulates verbal language in writing a speech to persuade the listener. A powerful rhetorical visual statement can underwrite human feelings in ways which are more profound than in speech because of its semi-permanent nature, which makes it a constant reminder on a particular message. The theory which holds that a picture is worth a thousand words is predicated in part on the power of visual rhetoric as demonstrated in the illustration of 'Fresh air' below.



Fig. 1: An illustration of a concept to demonstrate how a picture is worth a thousand words.

Source: Field Data

In addition to the mastery of the six basic principles enumerated above, a skillful visual rhetorician must begin with the selection of appropriate visual vocabulary from a social science perspective i.e. taking into consideration the social characteristic of the audience as well as the understanding of the local language in a much wider sense than linguistic grammar. The selection of the most appropriate visual vocabulary would specifically require:-

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1. A deeper understanding of how people express themselves in ways other than verbal language.
2. An understanding of what words, notions, and expressions are most frequent in their day-to-day interactions.
3. An understanding of the local connotations related to shape, colour, texture and form.

The technique of visual rhetoric

Drawing, painting and creative photography which were once considered by Renaissance artists in Europe as mere aesthetic tools have been redefined by 20th Century Art psychologists such as Gombrich (1960) as well as cognitive theorists in the 70s as processes of visual thinking which are fundamental skills in visual rhetoric, Hanks and Belliston (1977). The visual rhetorician employs these techniques to depict concrete and abstract concepts. In the process, a concept of visual rhetoric originates from the brain, a corresponding impulse is transmitted through the arm to the fingers and eventually registered by means of camera or drawing tools, as an intelligible icon. Because the sign thus registered is a product of cognitive and psychomotor skill, it is subject to expression at different levels of rhetoric. The oral equivalence of this cognitive process is one in which a concept of verbal rhetoric originates from the brain, it is then transmitted to the speech organs and eventually articulated through the mouth in a combined action of the lungs, vocal chords, teeth, tongue and lips resulting in different levels of flowery or overblown expressions.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY VISUAL RHETORICS

Drawing is viewed as one of the fundamental processes of intellectual selection in visual communication which leads to various forms of visual rhetoric simply because it is impossible for the human vision to perceive all things at the same time. Therefore, in visual rhetoric techniques, drawings are used as the first step in isolation of visual phenomena in an attempt to record visual truth. This is consistent with the theory of realism in which the literal or factual recording of visual information is captured. The theory of realism which may be conceptualized as primary rhetoric is concerned with the artistic ability of the communicator or rhetorician to rid himself of the pictorial conventions which he must have acquired through the influence of other people's work. It pertains to depicting something verily as one sees it, and not as one knows it, feels it, smells it or tastes it. This technique of visual rhetoric derives its power primarily from the ability to see things accurately and to depict them faithfully. It must be distinguished from the secondary rhetoric which is the art of identifying the characteristics of an object and exaggerating them to the viewer who otherwise would not notice them. Such

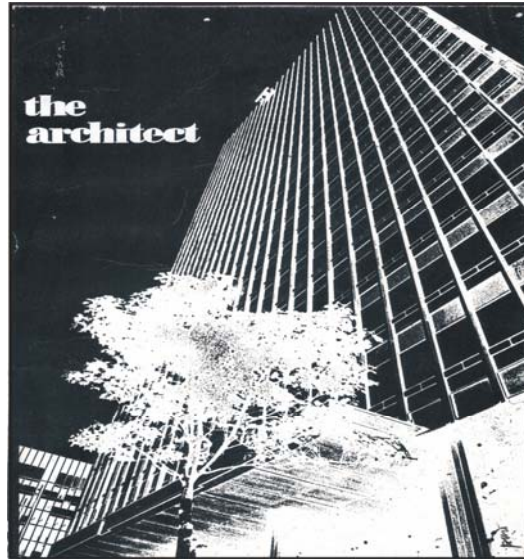
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characteristics range from beauty to functionalism. As Mc Kim (1981) puts it “to see clearly is poetry, prophecy and religion all in one”.

Secondary rhetoric techniques which are used to extend or exaggerate visual meaning include painting, photography and movies. Painting which is the art of using paint (water or oil-based) to produce pictures is an effective secondary form of visual rhetoric which draws its power from the emotional effects commonly associated with colours. Straight photography which is the use of still, video or television cameras to record objects, events or phenomena with the aim of depicting the high fidelity images which will amount to a rhetoric statement only if it captures an object or event which is a spectacle not commonly seen, for example, wild life beauty, a strange deep ocean creature, a supernatural phenomena etc. Seemingly, a normal photograph which is retouched with air brush and colour to accentuate the information on it will also gather rhetorical power. A typical example is found in modeling and advertising. The rhetorical power of such pictures lies in their indelible impact which makes them strikingly indelible and easy to recall.

One other effective tool in the hand of the visual rhetorician is experimental photography. Experimental photographic techniques such as solarization, direct exposure of objects on sensitive bromide paper, animation and the use of special lenses such as the fish eye and telephoto lens provide enormous possibilities for generating powerful visual rhetorical statements. Fig 2 is a photograph of a building shot with telephoto lens and exposed to solarization. The combined defiant perspective effect of telephoto coupled with the solarization makes a powerful rhetoric statement visually portraying an architectural feat. Hence the concept is appropriately used as the cover of a book titled “The architect”.

Film or video animation is yet another powerful technique for visual rhetoric. Animation is best defined as the art of impossible ‘worlds’. It is a unique theatre of entertainment and information which is completely under the control of the animator, who is actually the rhetorician. To the extent that the animator creates his characters and objects and makes them behave in any way he directs enables him to depart completely from nature to bizarre and surrealistic iconic concepts leading to the most powerful visual rhetorical statements at the secondary level. Thus, the entertainment value of animation lies in its capacity to make visual rhetoric statements which are ordinarily unattainable in nature. For example, the spectacle of a river flowing uphill or an animated bottle of beverage imbued with human attributes creates a powerful visual rhetoric often with a combination of humour and the bizarre to aid encoding and information recall. There are no limitations in the world of animation since whatever is imaginable can also be created. Through imagination unrestrained by preconceived ideas, the visual rhetorician is able to transport his viewers beyond the world of faithful appearance to a point of ecstasy, surrealism and entertainment.



© NL Exhibit 5

Fig. 2: A photograph taken with telephoto lens and solarized to achieve declamatory effects.

Source: Field Data

VISUAL RHETORIC EXPRESSED THROUGH THE UNIVERSAL LAWS OF COMPOSITION

The ability to visually articulate any object or concept to any good purpose requires practice as well as some understanding of the laws of composition and of nature. Visual articulation is the ability to clearly set down records of such things as one cannot easily describe in words for example, the shape of a snail shell. It is a skill which comes through several years of practice and is akin to learning a new language in which the hand rather than the mouth translates feelings almost instinctively. The visual communicator must have thorough command over his fingers to the extent that they can almost run effortlessly over the paper when drawing or painting any concept. At that stage, depicting the true shape of any concrete object from observation would be as effortless as writing a letter or speaking ad-lib. This mastery must also be accompanied by the understanding of some simple laws of arrangement of forms otherwise known as the laws of composition without which there cannot be unity in any visual presentation. Indeed, the object of any composition, be it visual, musical or tactile is to secure unity. This can be achieved in about eight different ways which have been identified and described by Graves (1951), and by many art educators such as Allen (1995),

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Garry et al. (2002), Hanks and Belliston (1997) as the fundamental laws of composition. And in view of their importance in understanding visual rhetoric, they have been simulated and presented next to show how the universal laws of composition are fundamental to the understanding of the theory of visual rhetoric in communication.

1. **The Law of Principality:** Every effective visual composition which consists of different elements can be unified into one whole by making one of the elements more dominant than all the rest. In other words a pictorial composition comprising many figures requires that one figure should stand principally above all the rest while the others relate in subordination to it. It is similar to the composition of musical melody in which a particular note is made to dominate the whole passage (see Fig. 3). The essence of the law of principality is that the dominant figure holds the eye rhetorically in the same manner as a dominant musical note or a flowery word in verbal rhetoric would hold the ear. The dominant element thus, serves as the anchor for the assimilation of the visual concept. The fluent visual rhetorician manipulates the law of principality to hold the attention of viewers in the same way as a good orator would articulate a speech to magnetise his listeners, or as a musician would arrange his musical notes to achieve a pleasing succession of sounds otherwise known as melody.

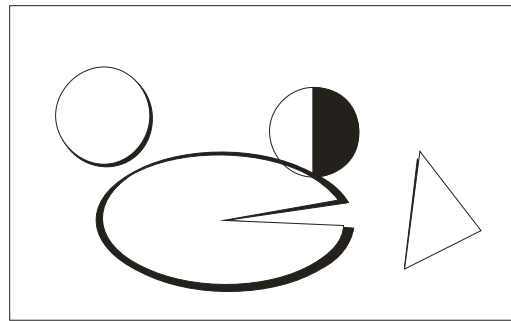


Fig. 3: A rhetorical composition in which a particular figure is given prominence over the rest, exemplifying the law of principality.

Source: Graves (1951)

2. **The Law of Repetition:** The law of repetition is the visual rhetoric gimmick in which a particular figure in a pictorial composition is repeated, not on equal status but subordinately as an echo, in order to heighten the unity of the whole.

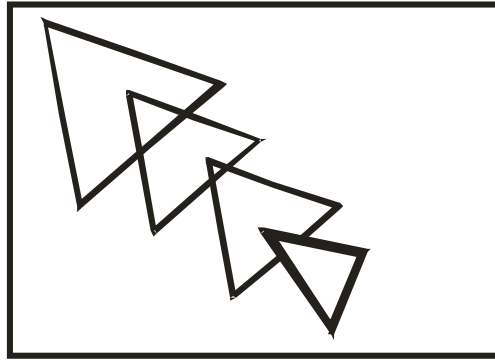


Fig. 4: Visual rhetoric expressed through the law of repetition as demonstrated by the echo of unequal triangles.
Source: Graves (1951)

4. The Law of Continuity: The law of continuity describes the visual rhetoric in which a number of objects are rendered in some gradual form of orderly succession to achieve a powerful perspective. A typical example of visual rhetoric through the application of this law is the rendition of the sky in which the clouds are seen in gradual succession to depict a horizon, ad infinitum. In applying the law of continuity, each feature in the composition may retain its form and characteristic but in combination, the whole must unite in one symphony of perspective.



Fig. 5: The law of continuity as demonstrated by the orderly succession of clouds, fading further and further away in a horizon, ad-infinitum.

Source: Rishante (2007), *The Grammar of Visual Communication*

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4. **The Law of Curvature:** Curves are very powerful tools in the hands of visual rhetoricians. A curve is a line which connotes movement, grandeur, beauty and direction which are easily harnessed by the rhetorician to convey powerful visual meanings which are strikingly different from those normally represented by straight lines. The most powerful curves are those which change their direction as they proceed (e.g. a winding river) unlike those which maintain a constant direction (e.g. an arc). Nature is the best example of modulated curves while man-made objects are replete with monotonous curves.

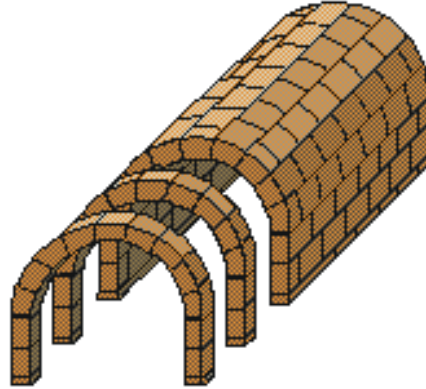


Fig. 6a: The law of curvature in man-made objects as in architecture.
Source: Encarta Encyclopaedia, Microsoft Corporation 2009.



Fig. 6b: The law of curvature in nature as found in the branches of trees, sea shells, etc (Source: Adapted from Advance Learners Dictionary, 6th Edition, p.210).

5. **The Law of Radiation:** Whenever lines radiate from a particular source in a given composition they automatically unite the different parts into a whole. It implies that all the different features are bound together by a central

tendency. The boughs and branches of trees are classic examples of this law. In visual rhetoric the law of radiation may be skillfully employed to stress or emphasize a point.

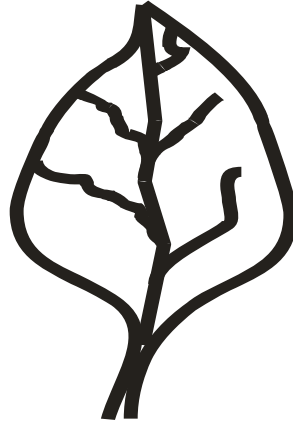


Fig. 7: The law of radiation illustrated by nature (Source: Field data)

6. The Law of Contrast: There is hardly anything in terrestrial existence that does not have its opposite or its antithesis. By bringing the opponent of an element near it, the visual rhetorician creates a powerful statement. The difference between the white and black on a gray scale is perceived as violent until the intermediate shades of gray are brought into play. Visual contrast serves the same rhetorical purpose as when a counter current is introduced into musical passage. It is a veritable element of communication in the hands of both musical and visual composers for making forceful statements. A rhetorical poet introduces contrast through the creation of bad or inferior lines. For if all the lines in a poetic composition were equally weighty or melodious, the sheer weight of melody would in itself constitute boredom.

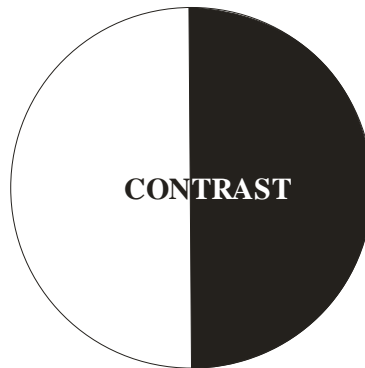


Fig. 8: Visual rhetoric expressed through the law of contrast (Source: Graves (1951).

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7. The Law of Interchange: The law of interchange also known as the law of alternation is a gimmick in which contrasting visual elements are compelled to unite by borrowing a little bit of the characteristic of each other. It is a form of forced unity where all the elements in a composition retain their original opposing characters and yet are compelled to unite through an interplay of forms rather than through harmony of greys, pointillism, interface or overlaps. In visual rhetoric, the law of interchange is applied in design when an interjection or exclamatory effect is desired. This type of visual rhetoric is commonly found in the design of traffic signs because of their potential power of identity.

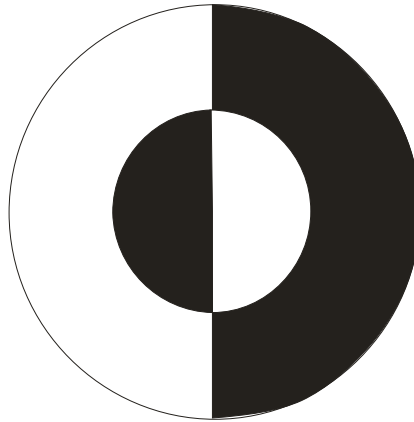


Fig. 10: Visual rhetoric of interjection
Source: Field data

CONCLUSION

The emerging theory of visual rhetoric cuts across information and communication in the print and electronic media, and needs to be subjected to further empirical investigation considering its importance in communication. Properly articulated it has great potential to extend the frontiers of communication paradigms leading to more specialized forms of visual communication. Its importance in an ever-growing universal media culture will be fully appreciated if it is studied as a form of visual thinking and not simply a technical ability or psychomotor skill. The principles of visual rhetoric as well as the ways in which they are expressed through the universal laws of composition presented in this paper are not exhaustive, but are designed to illustrate the enormous possibilities which exist in this field for further study.

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