CHAPTER

9

Theory of Visual Rhetoric

SONJA K. FOSS
University of Colorado at Denver

Visual rhetoric is the term used to describe the study of visual imagery within the discipline of rhetoric. As a branch of knowledge, rhetoric dates back to classical Greece and is concerned with the study of the use of symbols to communicate; in the most basic sense, *rhetoric* is an ancient term for what now typically is called *communication*. Visual rhetoric is a very new area of study within this centuries-old discipline. Not until 1970 was the first formal call made to include visual images in the study of rhetoric, which until then had been conceived exclusively as verbal discourse. In that year, at the National Conference on Rhetoric, convened by the Speech Communication Association, a recommendation produced by the conference participants called for an expansion of the study of rhetoric "to include subjects which have not traditionally fallen within the critic's purview; the non-discursive as well as the discursive, the nonverbal as well as the verbal" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 221). The participants went on to suggest that a rhetorical perspective "may be applied to any human act, process, product, or artifact" that "may formulate, sustain, or modify attention, perceptions, attitudes, or behavior" (Sloan et al., 1971, p. 220).

The embrace of Kenneth Burke as a rhetorical theorist by the discipline of rhetoric also contributed to the emergence of rhetorical scholarship on visual images. For Burke, symbolicity included not only talk but also all other human symbol systems, and he encouraged analysis of symbols in all of their forms, including "mathematics, music, sculpture, painting, dance, architectural styles, and so on" (1966, p. 28). The door to the rhetorical study of images swung open farther as rhetorical scholars such as Douglas Ehninger (1972), whose standing among traditional rhetoricians was undisputed, proposed a definition of rhetoric that did not privilege verbal symbols and was sufficiently broad to include the visual. He defined rhetoric as the ways in which humans "may influence each other's thinking and behavior through the strategic use of symbols" and suggested as appropriate subject matter for rhetorical study art, architecture, dance, and dress (p. 3). Current definitions of rhetoric continue to support the expansion of rhetorical study beyond its traditional concern for verbal texts. Definitions of rhetoric such as "the

social function that influences and manages meanings" (Brummett, 1991, p. xiv) suggest the easy fit between the visual image and rhetoric.

Although a natural affinity appears to exist between rhetoric and visual symbols, the inclusion of visual imagery in rhetorical study has not been the seamless process that the above narrative suggests. Proposals to expand rhetoric to encompass the visual were met at first with vociferous objections. Such objections included the concern that rhetoricians lack knowledge about visual images. Waldo W. Braden, for example, suggested that rhetorical critics simply are not trained to deal with images or other forms of nondiscursive rhetoric: "I argue that by inclination and training most of us are best qualified to study the speech or rhetorical act" (1970, p. 105). Another reason cited for the reluctance of rhetorical scholars to tackle the study of visual images had less to do with personal competencies and more with their desire to accumulate theoretical insights into rhetoric. This was Roderick P. Hart's position: "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." He suggested that, by studying the visual, "the cogency with which we as a field make theoretical distinctions will be severely opened to question" (1976, pp. 71–72). John H. Patton's response to proposals to study visual symbols was similar, and he advocated "the centrality of language in rhetorical theory" (1979, p. 143). He suggested that a redefinition of rhetoric to include nonlinguistic symbols represented a kind of rhetorical dislocation and a break from clear connections with a central theoretical core.

Other scholars of rhetoric suggested that imagery as a rhetorical form is tainted when compared to discourse in terms of its impact on public communication. Although these rhetoricians did not oppose the study of visual imagery, they privileged the study of discourse over the visual because of what they saw as the superior properties of discourse. Neil Postman, for example, argued that the visual epistemology of television "pollutes public communication" (1985, p. 28) and contributes to a decline in "the seriousness, clarity and, above all, value of public discourse" (1985, p. 29). Similarly, David Zarefsky suggested that rhetorical forms such as visual images "stand in for a more complex reality" (1992, p. 412), contributing to the deterioration of "a rich and vibrant concept of *argument*, of public deliberation" (p. 414). Kathleen Hall Jamieson asserted that images are particularly susceptible to a truncation of argument (1988, p. 240) and that the cognitive processing of images is less conscious and critical than the processing that occurs in the assignment of meaning to verbal discourse (Jamieson, 1992, p. 60).

That the study of visual images continued and, indeed, now flourishes in rhetorical studies is because of a number of factors. Primary among them is the pervasiveness of the visual image and its impact on contemporary culture. Images in the form of advertisements, television, film, architecture, interior design, and dress constitute a major part of the rhetorical environment, and such images now have the significance for contemporary culture that speeches once did. As much as rhetorical scholars may feel nostalgia for a culture in which public speeches were the symbols that had primary impact, that culture is gone. To restrict the study of symbol use only to verbal discourse means studying a miniscule portion of the symbols that affect individuals daily.

The study of visual imagery from a rhetorical perspective also has grown with the emerging recognition that visual images provide access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse. Because theories of rhetoric have focused on and have been developed from the study of discursive symbols, they feature the dimensions of rhetorical processes that can be captured through discourse. Many human experiences, however, are unlike those captured by discursive symbols. Jean Y. 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. (1991, p. 4)

Human experiences that are spatially oriented, nonlinear, multidimensional, and dynamic often can be communicated only through visual imagery or other nondiscursive symbols. To understand and articulate such experiences require attention to these kinds of symbols.

Another force prompting the rhetorical study of visual imagery is the desire for greater comprehensiveness and inclusiveness in rhetorical theory. Hart (1976) was correct in suggesting that rhetorical theory has been created almost exclusively from the study of discourse. As a result, rhetoricians lack understanding of the conventions through which meaning is created in visual images and the processes by which images influence viewers. By situating visual imagery at the periphery of their rhetorical theories, rhetorical scholars have overlooked information about important communicative processes, resulting in inadequate, incomplete, and distorted understandings of symbols. Attention to visual symbols provides a more holistic picture of symbol use.

As a result of nascent efforts to explore visual phenomena rhetorically, the term *visual rhetoric* now has two meanings in the discipline of rhetoric. It is used to mean both a visual object or artifact and a perspective on the study of visual data. In the first sense, visual rhetoric is a product individuals create as they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. In the second, it is a perspective scholars apply that focuses on the symbolic processes by which images perform communication.

VISUAL RHETORIC AS A COMMUNICATIVE ARTIFACT

Conceptualized as a communicative artifact, visual rhetoric is the actual image rhetors generate when they use visual symbols for the purpose of communicating. It is the tangible evidence or product of the creative act, such as a painting, an advertisement, or a building and constitutes the data of study for rhetorical scholars interested in visual symbols. Visual rhetoric as an artifact is conceptualized broadly to include both two- and three-dimensional images such as paintings, sculpture, furniture, architecture, and interior design. The images included under the rubric of visual rhetoric are equally

broad in terms of their functions. Both aesthetic and utilitarian images constitute visual rhetoric—works of art as well as advertisements, for example.

Not every visual object is visual rhetoric. What turns a visual object into a communicative artifact—a symbol that communicates and can be studied as rhetoric—is the presence of three characteristics. In other words, three markers must be evident for a visual image to qualify as visual rhetoric. The image must be symbolic, involve human intervention, and be presented to an audience for the purpose of communicating with that audience.

Symbolic Action

Visual rhetoric, like all communication, is a system of signs. In the simplest sense, a sign communicates when it is connected to another object, as the changing of the leaves in autumn is connected to a change in temperature or a stop sign is connected to the act of stopping a car while driving. To qualify as visual rhetoric, an image must go beyond serving as a sign, however, and be symbolic, with that image only indirectly connected to its referent. The shape and color of the stop sign, for example, have no natural relationship to the act of stopping a car as it is being driven; these dimensions of the sign were invented arbitrarily by someone who needed a way to regulate traffic. A stop sign, then, counts as visual rhetoric because it involves the use of arbitrary symbols to communicate.

Human Intervention

Visual rhetoric involves human action of some kind. Humans are involved in the generation of visual rhetoric when they engage in the process of image creation—painting a watercolor or taking a photograph, for example. The process involves the conscious decision to communicate as well as conscious choices about the strategies to employ in areas such as color, form, media, and size. Human intervention in visual rhetoric also may assume the form of transforming nonrhetorical visual images into visual rhetoric. For example, trees are not inherently visual rhetoric. They become so only when human beings decide to use them as rhetoric, as when they are brought into homes to symbolize the Christmas holiday or when they are used on brochures by environmentalists to create appeal for environmental causes. Visual rhetoric, then, requires human action either in the process of creation or in the process of interpretation.

Presence of an Audience

Visual rhetoric implies an audience and is concerned with an appeal either to a real or an ideal audience. Visual elements are arranged and modified by a rhetor not simply for self-expression—although that may constitute a major motive for the creator of an image—but also for communication with an audience. The creator of an image can serve as that audience; the audience need not be external to the rhetor. As Burke suggested, "A man can be his own audience, insofar as he, even in his secret thoughts, cultivates certain ideas or images for the effect he hopes they may have upon him; he is here what Mead would call 'an "I" addressing its "me"'; and in this respect he is being rhetorical quite as though he were using pleasant imagery to influence an outside audience rather

than one within" (1974, p. 38). Even if the only audience for an image is its creator, some audience—and thus the implied act of communication—is present in visual rhetoric.

Visual rhetoric as artifact, then, is the purposive production or arrangement of colors, forms, and other elements to communicate with an audience. It is symbolic action in that the relationship it designates between image and referent is arbitrary, it involves human action in some part of the visual communication process, and it is communicative in its address to an audience. As a tangible artistic product, such a visual artifact can be received by viewers and studied by scholars as a communicative message.

VISUAL RHETORIC AS A PERSPECTIVE

The term *visual rhetoric* is used in the discipline of rhetoric to refer not only to the visual object as a communicative artifact. It also refers to a perspective scholars may take on a visual image or visual data. In this meaning of the term, *visual rhetoric* constitutes a theoretical perspective that involves the analysis of the symbolic or communicative aspects of visual rhetoric. Visual rhetoric as a theoretical perspective—or what might be called a *rhetorical perspective on visual imagery* to distinguish it from the other sense of *visual rhetoric*—is a critical-analytical tool or a way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images. It is a particular way of viewing images—a set of conceptual lenses through which visual images become knowable as communicative or rhetorical phenomena.

Visual rhetoric as a perspective is not a theory with constructs and axioms that describe specific rhetorical components of visual imagery; it is not composed of certain kinds of content or knowledge about visual imagery. In fact, the content that emerges from the application of the perspective is virtually limitless, bound only by the perspective's focus on how visual artifacts function communicatively. Because the perspective of visual rhetoric is relatively new in the discipline of rhetoric, the knowledge the perspective is beginning to produce about how visual images operate symbolically does not yet constitute a coherent theory. Relatively few studies have been done in which a rhetorical perspective has been applied to visual imagery, and it has been applied to such widely diverse and dispersed rhetorical dimensions, ranging from metaphor to ambiguity to argumentation, that identification of key constructs has not yet been undertaken. Neither have connections begun to be made among the key constructs as a result of the insights produced by the application of the perspective.

Key to a rhetorical perspective on images and what makes the perspective a rhetorical one is its focus on a rhetorical response to an image rather than an aesthetic one. An aesthetic response consists of a viewer's direct perceptual encounter with the sensory aspects of the image. Experience of a work at an aesthetic level might mean enjoying its color, sensing its form, or valuing its texture. There is no purpose governing the experience other than simply having the experience. In a rhetorical response, in contrast, meaning is attributed to the image. Colors, lines, textures, and rhythms in an image provide a basis for the viewer to infer the existence of images, emotions, and ideas. The visual rhetoric perspective's focus is on understanding rhetorical responses to images.

Another major feature of the rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is a particular conception of the audience for the images studied. Scholars who apply the perspective generally conceptualize the audience for the images they study as lay viewers. These scholars are interested in the impact of visual symbols on viewers who do not have technical knowledge in areas such as design, art history, aesthetics, or art education. They assume that viewers are individuals whose responses to images are not developed on the basis of art protocols or frameworks that privilege the art expert's knowledge of art traditions and conventions in attributing meaning to images. Lay viewers' responses to images are assumed to be constructed on the basis of viewers' own experiences and knowledge, developed from living and looking in the world. Scholars who adopt a perspective of visual rhetoric are most interested, then, in the ways in which visual symbols communicate to these lay audiences.

A rhetorical perspective on visual imagery also is characterized by specific attention to one or more of three aspects of visual images—their nature, function, and evaluation. The study of the nature of visual imagery is primary; to explicate function or to evaluate visual images requires an understanding of the substantive and stylistic nature of those images.

Nature of the Image

Essential to an application of a rhetorical perspective is explication of the distinguishing features of the visual image. Description of the nature of the visual rhetoric involves attention to two components—presented elements and suggested elements. Identification of the presented elements of an image involves naming the major physical features of the image. At this stage, the scholar describes such presented elements as space, which concerns the mass or size of the image; media, the materials of which the image is constructed; and shapes, the forms featured in the image. The scholar then identifies suggested elements, which are the concepts, ideas, themes, and allusions that a viewer is likely to infer from the presented elements, as, for example, the ornate gold leafing found on Baroque buildings might suggest wealth, privilege, and power (Kanengieter, 1990, pp. 12–13). Analysis of the presented and suggested elements allows the scholar to understand the primary communicative elements of an image and, consequently, to develop a meaning the image is likely to have for an audience.

Function of the Image

A second focus for scholars who take a rhetorical perspective on visual imagery can be the function or functions the visual rhetoric serves for an audience. Scholars who focus on function attempt to discover how the image operates for its viewers. *Function*, as it is used in this perspective, is not synonymous with *purpose*, which involves an effect that is intended or desired by the creator of the image. Scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on visual images do not see the creator's intentions as determining the correct interpretation of a work. Not only may the scholar not have access to biographical or historical evidence about the intentions of the creators of images, but the creators may not be able to give clear verbal accounts of their intentions and even may be mistaken about what motivated them. In addition, a privileging of creators' interpretations over

the interpretations of viewers closes off possibilities for new ways of experiencing the image. Once an image is created, scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on imagery believe, it stands independent of its creator's intention.

The function of an image from a rhetorical perspective is the action the image communicates (Foss, 1994). The function that a painting of Elvis on velvet serves for an audience, for example, may be to memorialize the late singer. The interior design of a living room may function to create a feeling of warmth and coziness. The function of an abstract sculpture may be to encourage viewers to explore self-imposed limitations. These are the kinds of functions that scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on visual imagery seek to discover and explore.

Evaluation of the Image

A third area in which scholars may focus as they apply a perspective of visual rhetoric is evaluation. They may be interested in assessing an image, which can be done in a number of ways. Some scholars choose to evaluate an image using the criterion of whether it accomplishes the functions suggested by the image itself. If an image functions to memorialize someone, for example, such an evaluation would involve discovery of whether its media, colors, forms, and content actually accomplish that function. Other scholars choose to evaluate images by scrutinizing their functions, reflecting on their legitimacy or soundness determined largely by the implications and consequences of the functions. Such an assessment is made according to scholars' reasons for analyzing an image—to discover whether the image is congruent with a particular ethical system or whether it offers emancipatory potential, for example. A scholar analyzing a trailer house covered with a siding of plastic "rock," for example, might suggest that it mocks nature and encourages a disconnection from it, functions inexcusable in a world where this kind of disconnection is severely damaging the earth's resources. Whatever criteria are used, scholars who adopt a rhetorical perspective on images and choose to focus on evaluation are interested in improving the quality of the rhetorical environment by discriminating among images.

Studies of images from a rhetorical perspective—whether focused on nature, function, or evaluation—assume one of two forms. Some scholars deductively apply rhetorical theories and constructs to visual imagery to investigate questions about rhetoric and to contribute to existing rhetorical theories generated from the study of discourse. A second approach involves an inductive investigation of visual images designed to highlight features of the visual images themselves as a means to generate rhetorical theory that is expanded to include the visual.

DEDUCTIVE APPLICATION OF THE RHETORICAL TO THE VISUAL

Scholars who apply a rhetorical perspective to visual imagery deductively use visual imagery to illustrate, explain, or investigate rhetorical constructs and theories formulated from the study of discourse. They begin with rhetorical constructs and theories and

use them to guide them through the visual artifact. Underlying this approach is the assumption that visual images possess essentially the same characteristics that discursive symbols do. Consequently, the visual image is treated as a language-like symbol, and, in most of the deductive studies, discursive artifacts could have been used just as well as visual ones to investigate the rhetorical processes being explored and with similar outcomes. The result of these studies is a contribution to a rhetorical theory focused on verbal discourse. The influence between artifact and theory in these studies is unidirectional; the theory affects the understanding of the artifact, but what is discovered in the artifact has little effect on the nature of the theory. It remains a theory that describes symbolicity discursively, and analysis of the visual artifact largely affirms the discursive features of the theory.

Virtually any theory or construct from rhetorical theory can serve as a guiding analytical tool in the deductive analysis of images. Lester C. Olson (1990), for example, studied Benjamin Franklin's commemorative medal *Libertas Americana* as epideictic, deliberative, and apologetic rhetoric, while David S. Kaufer and Brian S. Butler (1996) applied the rhetorical canons of invention, organization, style, delivery, and memory to image design. Greg Dickinson (1997) analyzed the town of Old Pasadena using the construct of memory; Janis L. Edwards and Carol K. Winkler (1997) explored editorial cartoons of the photograph of the flag raising at Iwo Jima using the construct of appropriation; and Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr. (1991) used the concept of public memorializing to explicate the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Electronic media, in which visual images often predominate, also have been the subject of studies designed to explore rhetorical theories or constructs in visual data. Janice Hocker Rushing (1986) analyzed space fiction films using the concept of myth; Kathleen Campbell (1988) applied the strategy of enactment to her analysis of the film *The Year of Living Dangerously*; and Karen Rasmussen and Sharon D. Downey (1991) used dialectical disorientation to explore Vietnam War films. In all of these studies, scholars applied a rhetorical theory or construct generated from discourse to visual data to generate insights into that rhetorical theory.

A more detailed example of the deductive application of a rhetorical perspective on visual images illustrates such an approach. Lawrence W. Rosenfield (1989) analyzed New York City's Central Park using the rhetorical construct of epideictic rhetoric. He applied features of epideictic rhetoric to the park such as repose, rhetorical sensibility, emblem and allegory, and ornamentation. Despite his focus on a visual artifact, the language in his analysis remained strikingly rooted in the discursive, a characteristic feature of the deductive approach to a rhetorical perspective on images. His discussion of repose included the statement, for example, that "[o]rators needed temporary respite from the cares of events, not to rest but to rejuvenate themselves. . . . The garden revitalized its user for a return to public activity" (1989, p. 239). His analysis of rhetorical sensibility included an exploration of the paradox of rhetorical sensibility that involves mutual influence: "the orator influences the audience by adapting to it. The Renaissance garden also fostered mutual dependence" (1989, p. 241). In epideictic rhetoric, he continued, the "rhetorician must capture the topic's essentials in a few instantly recognizable, highly suggestive strokes. . . . Likewise, the garden dweller was expected to move among and pause to gaze at a series of scenes whose mimetic features and continually altered aspects would bring vividly to mind ancient legends and reminders of noble deeds" (1989, p. 246). Rosenfield's application of the concept of epideictic rhetoric, a type of discursive rhetoric,

to the visual artifact of Central Park produced results typical of deductive studies of images: Affirmation of the features of epideictic rhetoric and an understanding of the park very much in line with a discursive conception of the construct.

INDUCTIVE EXPLORATION OF THE VISUAL TO GENERATE THE RHETORICAL

A second approach to the application of a rhetorical perspective on visual imagery is the investigation of the features of visual images to generate rhetorical theory that takes into account the distinct characteristics of the visual symbol. Scholars who pursue this route begin with an exploration of visual images and operate inductively, generating rhetorical theories that are articulate about visual symbols. An assumption of scholars who proceed inductively from visual images is that visual images are different in significant ways from discursive symbols, and they are cautious about importing rhetorical theory developed from the study of discourse into the realm of the visual because of these differences. As Haynes suggested, "the fundamental conceptualizations of rhetorical process are dominated by the thought patterns and belief systems of literate culture" (1988, p. 72), and he reminds rhetorical theorists of the cognitive biases underlying rhetoric's focus on discourse.

Although debates continue about the precise ways in which visual images differ from discourse, some features of visual images clearly require attention to different elements and a different treatment of those elements from what discourse does. For example, images do not express a thesis or proposition in the way that verbal messages do; they appear to do so only because viewers attribute propositions to them. Images also lack the denotative vocabulary that characterizes visual imagery. To identify the smallest independent units of a visual image that would correspond to words is difficult, if not impossible. Even if agreement were reached on the definition of the minimal units within one image, these minimal units do not have the independent meanings and are not the uniquely differentiated characters that words are. Another difference between verbal and visual symbols is that language is general and abstract, while images are concrete and specific. Verbal discourse is able to deal with *book*, for example, as an abstract and not simply a unique concept, while images are tied to a physical form that requires them to deal in particularities.

As a result of such differences between visual images and discourse, scholars who take an inductive approach to the study of images focus on the qualities and functions of images to develop explanations of how visual symbols operate. They assume that these differences make enough difference so that rhetorical theory has to be developed anew from visual symbols if it is to be relevant to and take into account the dimensions of visual forms of rhetoric. Examples of this approach to the study of visual imagery include Kanengieter's (1990) exploration of the process by which messages are formulated from architecture; Kaplan's (1992) work on visual metaphors to distinguish visual from language-based metaphors; Foss's (1993) exploration of the construction of appeal in visual images; Chryslee's (1995) analysis of the process of viewership by which a rhetorical response to nonrepresentational art is developed; and Lancioni's (1996) discovery of

techniques by which visual argument is created in archival photographs. Some scholars who employ the inductive approach seek to discern the meaning of particular visual symbols in an effort to discover how the process of meaning construction works in visual imagery. Foss's (1987) analysis of body art was an effort to discover how audience members organize and interpret the works to make them meaningful, and Reid (1990) analyzed Hieronymus Bosch's painting *The Hay-Wain* in an effort to derive meaning from the idiosyncratic work.

A study by Chryslee, Foss, and Ranney (1996) provides a detailed example of an inductive, image-based approach to the rhetorical analysis of images. Their objective in the study was to discover key elements of the process of visual argumentation. They began with the premise that although rhetorical theorists know a great deal about the process of argumentation as it occurs in discourse, virtually none of this knowledge is applicable to visual argumentation because of the properties that distinguish visual imagery from discursive symbols. They analyzed three images—the Eames shell chair; the Central Police Headquarters building in Columbus, Ohio; and a photograph of a dead German soldier from World War I—as data from which to begin to describe steps in the inferential process of using reasons to arrive at claims. Their analyses of the images revealed four elements involved in the process of developing a claim from an image. Presented facts are the physical data and features of an image and include design elements such as form, style, and medium. Feelings are affective states evoked in the viewer by an image. Knowledge is technical, cultural, or historical information accumulated by the viewer through experience or learning. Function is the use for which an image is employed outside of its form as an image. The argumentation process in each of the images makes use of these elements in different ways, and the authors suggested factors that may account for these variations.

As a perspective, visual rhetoric constitutes an approach to the analysis of visual artifacts. Its focus is on understanding the communicative dimensions of images through attention to their nature, function, or evaluation. The deductive and inductive approaches that are options in the perspective produce equally useful but different kinds of results. The deductive, rhetoric-based approach offers ease of connection to rhetorical theory. Because it begins with rhetorical theory and applies existing theory to visual data, theoretical connections are easily made between the visual and the verbal in the development and elaboration of rhetorical theory. The inductive, image-based approach, on the other hand, offers rhetorical expansion. Because it begins with the characteristics of images and builds rhetorical theory on the basis of those characteristics, this approach has the potential to expand rhetorical theory beyond the boundaries of discourse and to open up possibilities for recognizing the different kinds of epistemologies that underlie different kinds of symbolicity.

CONCLUSION

Visual rhetoric, as it is employed in the discipline of rhetoric, has two meanings. One refers to visual images themselves—visual communication that constitutes the object of study. The second meaning references a perspective or approach rhetorical scholars

adopt as they study visual rhetoric. Together, these two senses of the term point to the need to understand how the visual operates rhetorically in contemporary culture. Visual rhetoric, as communication data to be studied and as an approach to those data, suggests the need to expand understanding of the multivarious ways in which symbols inform and define human experience and constitutes a call to expand rhetorical theory, making it more inclusive in its encompassing of visual as well as verbal symbols.

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