TOWARD A VISUAL/VERBAL RHETORIC

by Ken Autrey

In an English course several years ago I had a student who was struggling with a research paper on Depression-era photographers. A Visual Arts major, Frank was interested in the powerful photographs of the poor and downtrodden by Walker Evans, Ben Shahn, and Dorothea Lange. His problem was the difficulty of finding the photographers' attitudes toward their subjects. We mulled over this for some time before arriving at an obvious solution: the photographs themselves offered copious information. Once Frank understood that he could include copies of some photographs and comment on how they suggest the photographers' attitudes, his problem was solved. I recall that experience with considerable humility. We both had assumed that research papers (even those concerning photography) had to be strictly verbal, and only after long discussion had we broken through to the visual solution. As an English teacher, my preoccupation with the written word had conditioned me to think of Frank's research as an exclusively verbal task, and it took time for me to acknowledge that he could profitably combine the visual and verbal.

As much as the pedagogy of writing has changed in the past two decades, English teachers, as well as educators in other fields, still tacitly assume that verbal and visual messages are separate entities. Actually, practical communcation often contradicts this false dichotomy. However, I believe that the current revival of interest in rhetoric provides a rubric under which we can correct the segregation of pictures and words in our classrooms.

Anyone who reads the newspapers will acknowledge the word "rhetoric" as popularly used is prejorative. The term often connotes "empty bombast" or "mere propaganda," particularly in public speaking. Rhetoric has always had detractors (one of the earliest being Socrates), yet its 2300-year history makes it one of the most enduring academic disciplines. Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), the greatest Greek rhetorical theorist, defined rhetoric as "the faculty of discovering in particular cases the available means of persuasion." For Aristotle and other early rhetoricians, skill in speaking was dependent upon presenting oneself as an admirable person *(ethos)*, understanding one's audience *(pathos)*, and finding and arranging ideas in a clear and appropriate manner *(logos)*. In theory and practice classical rhetoric was largely limited to oral persuasion in court cases and political deliberation.

Although rhetoric after the Romans lost some of its classical breadth, through the medieval era it continued with grammar and logic to constitute the trivium, the three-part foundation of education. Over the centuries rhetoric shifted in emphasis but continued until the twentieth century as a standard high school and university course in England and the United States. It appeared in curricula more often than any other language-related subject except Latin. Only in this century has rhetoric become subordinate to English and speech (both of which have only recently come into their own).

There are several reasons why, after centuries of prominence, rhetoric faded from view as the pivotal humanistic discipline. One reason was the growing scholarly interest in English and American literature. Another was the curriculum changes instituted by a few influential colleges, such as Harvard. But perhaps the major explanation is that by the late nineteenth century, rhetoric had lost its inclusiveness. Classical rhetoric had addressed methods of gathering ideas (invention) and organization (arrangement), as well as matters of style, memory, and delivery. However, by the 1860's rhetoric had for the most part been reduced to mere style (and for the elocutionists, to style and delivery). When rhetoric became too narrow, too specialized, it lost its relevance and power. We should be willing to profit from this lesson of history. In our own day, a rhetorical revival which fails to encompass the full communcative potential in our world, including the visual, is doomed.

A number of thinkers had addressed the need to revise this classical discipline in a way that has meaning for this century. (see Fogarty, 1959). I. A. Richards (1936) links modern rhetoric with his theories of meaning and suggests that an important purpose of rhetoric is to reduce misunderstanding. Kenneth Burke (1950) finds the basis for a new rhetoric in sociology and psychology. Like Richards, Burke is interested in reducing ambiguity in communication. He stresses the importance of human motives and says rhetoric is "the use of language as a sym-

Ken Autrey is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of South Carolina, Columbia, S.C.

bolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols" (p. 43). The theories of Richards and Burke shift the emphasis in rhetoric from persuasion to discourse of various kinds on the assumption that even informative or narrative messages propose to influence or change others in some way.

Although Richards and Burke are primarily interested in verbal language, we might readily apply many of their attitudes to visual language — or to situations in which both are used concurrently. If, as Burke suggests, rhetoric is a means of "inducing cooperation" or achieving "identification" among symbol-users, commercial advertising is only the most obvious of many types of visual/verbal rhetoric. If, as Richards claims, rhetoric is a way of reducing misunderstanding, we can readily find examples of pictoral or diagrammatic messages (often presented with words) which help to do just that.

The work of Walter Ong also offers a point of departure for a rhetoric of the multimedia age. Ong's interest in problems of literacy leads him to examine how speech, writing, and related technologies (print, television, tape recorders, etc.) influence one another and alter human thought. In his essay, "Literacy and Orality in Our Times" (1978), he states,

> "Because we live in a media-conscious world, we can make students aware of . . . what oral speech is and what writing is by contrast. This awareness can increase sensitivity to literature and to the problems of writing (p. 6)."

We might extend this to conclude that as students become aware of similarities and differences between visual and verbal languaging, their sensitivity to both will increase. Just as speech and writing influence one another, so do visual and veral communication systems. The movie script affects the film, and the film in turn changes the script.

The idea of visual rhetoric, perhaps an alien notion to many, is no doubt familiar to most readers of this journal. We increasingly find references to "the rhetoric of film" or "the rhetoric of cartoons." (Browne, 1982; DeSousa and Medhurst, 1982) However, we need to consider not simply the various types of rhetoric in isolation, as useful as these constructs might be. Rather, we need to think in terms of a broader, more generic rhetoric which acknowledges the dynamic interaction of various media. We may study or teach the rhetoric of politics, television, or fiction in isolation, just as we compartmentalize art (painting, drawing, design, sculpture, etc.) or prose (narration, description, satire, novel, etc.). But we should be mindful of two potential dangers in such compartmentalization: the tendency to interpret reality only in terms of the narrow categories we've devised, and the possibility that our expressive power will be limited by such categories. I believe that a broader definition of rhetoric would help to avoid these dangers.

I can hear at least one ringing objection now: "If we push the meaning of rhetoric too far beyond its traditional association with verbal persuasive discourse, it loses its usefulness as a term." On the contrary, a careful redefinition of rhetoric can render the term more useful. I propose that we think of rhetoric as verbal, visual, and/or gestural discourse intended to induce understanding or change for a particular audience and situation.

There are several reasons why such a redefinition would help. First, it would reiterate what every successful writer and painter knows: that the crucial idea-gathering stage in composition is by no means an exclusively verbal endeavor. It is often as visual and right-hemispheric as artistic or scientific creativity, even though the final product may be linear. About his novel, *A Generous Man,* Reynolds Price says, "I did feel the characters very much creating themselves as the story created itself from day to day; . . . ." (1972) Other writers, artists, and scientists echo this observation. Ideas often emerge through intuition. Isaac Asimov (1971) refers to "The Eureka Phenomenon", the sudden insight which leads to scientific or artistic achievement. This does not mean that we should teach students to surrender themselves to chance, waiting for divine enlightenment before doing their work. It does mean that a rhetorical theory which assumes that thinking is always verbal, linear, and methodical flies in the face of experience. Rhetorical invention must be conceptualized as a visual/verbal process; when we isolate certain techniques for visual and others for verbal tasks, we underestimate the brain's complexity.

Fortunately, recent attention to invention in writing points to the usefulness of a number of visual techniques: map-making, sketching, diagramming, and pictoral brainstorming, for example. Also, there are now more involved visual/verbal approaches; Richard Young and Alton Becker (1970) have developed the "tagmemic matrix" as a means of generating ideas for writing. This heuristic procedure makes use of the physical concepts of particle, wave, and field as adapted from Kenneth Pike's linguistic theories. While this system results in verbal data, it relies on the writer's ability to visualize.

A second argument for a visual/verbal rhetoric is found in recent research on revision strategies in writing which shows that once a project is underway, the rhetorical choices of experienced

writers unfold in a complex web of decision-making and goal-setting. (e.g., Flower and Hays, 1982). Far from being a methodical and linear process, the business of inventing, arranging, and revising is at its best recursive and speculative, with adjustments constantly being made on several mental levels at once. The traditional principles of verbal rhetoric cannot suggest the complexity of invention and arrangement in writing any more accurately than a paint-by-numbers kit can explain how Picasso created "Guernica" (an excellent example of visual rhetoric). This does not mean we should give up trying to find out how humans think as they draw or write or sculpt. It means that our rhetorical theory and instruction must reflect the operations of experienced communicators, however complex.

Adding to the non-verbal, intuitive nature of invention and the research on how composers follow through with their rhetorical efforts is a third rationale for a verbal/visual rhetoric: in our age visual and verbal messages are so commonly intertwined that to persist in teaching the two skills in isolation is to undermine our credibility in the eyes of students who watch television, read magazines, and see all around them the togetherness of words and pictures. I. A. Richards uses the term "interanimation" to describe the interaction of words in context (1936). Likewise, visual and verbal messages constantly interanimate one another. So the products, as well as the processes of rhetoric often embody both modes. Many of Aristotle's ideas remain valid today, but he was not working and thinking in a visual context; he was not anticipating the presentation of messages by television, flip chart, brochure, cartoon, or magazine. Thus, while we study Aristotle and subsequent rhetorical theorists, we must recognize that the goals and environment of their rhetoric were unlike ours.

There are of course disciplines in which visual/verbal rhetoric is already a reality. In video or print journalism, for example, the words and pictures must complement one another. The fact that these media project the most prominent rhetorical messages in our culture is all the more reason for teaching a visual/verbal rhetoric.

Attempts to find a rhetoric relevant to the twentieth century; current efforts to recognize the role of visualization in creating even verbal messages; research pointing to visual tactics underlying verbal processes; the inadequacy of purely verbal instruction as often found in our schools — all of these point to the need to rethink our presuppositions about this ancient discipline.

Aristotle states that the study of rhetoric can equip us to refute and defend positions, to couch our messages in understandable terms, and above all to seek out truth. Through rhetoric we make ourselves and our ideas known to others. yet if we adhere to outmoded limitations, refusing to acknowledge both the realities of the communicative process and the multimedia nature of the messages around us, we preserve only the musty and prejorative connotations of rhetoric. And we thereby reinforce the skepticism of students who may sense, far better than we, that the most effective messages are often concurrently visual and verbal (not to mention musical).

The concept of a visual/verbal rhetoric suggests the need to reexamine the compartmentalization of our curriculum. A Department of Rhetoric could well include artists, sociologists, writers, psychologists, photographers, historians, and philosophers. But the point is not to devise new departments; rather, we must revise our ways of thinking. A visual/verbal rhetoric also implies change in our teaching. Rather than writing an essay in Freshman Comp 101, painting a picture in Art 316, and speaking on Marxism in Political Science 404, a student might be assigned a specific rhetorical problem which could be solved using the multiple visual and verbal tools at her command. This would muddy our neat curricular divisions but would be more reflective of the way communication works beyond the classroom walls.

Much more could be said (or shown) about the implications of a visual/verbal rhetoric. I have done little more here than to point tentatively (and in words) to some possibilities. I am convinced, however, that the study of rhetoric is essential and worth the trouble it will take to rethink its components.

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