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# Retoryki posthumanistyczne
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**REAKCJE / REACTIONS**

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## The monolith does not speak: More reasonable queries regarding the nature of our visual discourse(s)

## Milczący monolit: kolejne uzasadnione pytania o naturę dyskursu wizualnego

## Abstract

The ongoing popularity of visual rhetoric – as an object of study in disciplines ranging from Communication to English to Philosophy – is problematic on both theoretical and practical levels. Attempts to legitimate visual rhetoric are shot through with ambiguities predicated on disciplinary anxiety, no less with fundamental distortions of the historical development of rhetoric. This paper urges that the continued legitimation of visual rhetoric, while academically rewarding, places us further afield of the world of actual practice. A return to more traditional concerns, ones that focus on rhetoric as a practical spoken and written skill, might yield lesser glories but more value in terms of those who could use rhetoric most. It would require no less than a fundamental reevaluation of rhetoric's appropriate place in the realm of lived experience.

Niesłabnąca popularność retoryki wizualnej jako przedmiotu badań w dyscyplinach takich jak nauki o komunikacji, literaturoznawstwo czy filozofia rodzi szereg problemów zarówno natury teoretycznej, jak i praktycznej. Próby legitymizowania retoryki wizualnej obciążone są licznymi niejednoznacznościami wynikającymi z niepewności co do granic i tożsamości poszczególnych dyscyplin, a także z fundamentalnych zniekształceń historycznego rozwoju samej retoryki. W artykule postawiono tezę, że dalsze uzasadnianie i umacnianie statusu retoryki wizualnej, choć przynosi wymierne korzyści akademickie, oddala badaczy od świata rzeczywistej praktyki retorycznej. Powrót do bardziej tradycyjnych obszarów zainteresowania, koncentrujących się na retoryce jako praktycznej umiejętności mówienia i pisania, może nie prowadzić do równie spektakularnych osiągnięć teoretycznych, lecz potencjalnie przyniesie większą wartość osobom, które retoryki rzeczywiście potrzebują i z niej korzystają. Taka zmiana wymagałaby jednak zasadniczego przemyślenia miejsca retoryki w obszarze ludzkiego doświadczenia i codziennej praktyki społecznej.

## Key words

rhetoric, visual rhetoric, philosophy, aesthetics, semiotics
retoryka, retoryka wizualna, filozofia, estetyka, semiotyka

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# The monolith does not speak: More reasonable queries regarding the nature of our visual discourse(s)[1]

> ". . . the four-million-year-old black monolith has remained completely inert, its origin and purpose are still a total mystery."
> —Dr. Floyd, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968)

## Introduction

In 1971, the Speech Communication Association (SCA, now the National Communication Association) published *The Prospect of Rhetoric*. Flush with the imprimatur of the largest—then and now—organization dedicated to the study of rhetoric in the United States and Europe, and featuring a host of recognized scholars from Speech Communication and English, the book developed and maintained a devoted following in subsequent years. The book, however, featured twin tendencies: hope and anxiety as regards the future of rhetoric. A clear example of the latter is found in the contribution by rhetorical scholar Barnet Baskerville (1916-2000), "Responses, Queries, and a Few Caveats." In his essay, a general response to trends he saw as problematic and a specific retort to several of the other essays in the book, Baskerville bemoaned the seemingly endless ways in which people defined rhetoric. He feared that this trend was leading towards a "cult of unintelligibility" (1971b, 162). This was an ongoing concern for Baskerville. As he had urged earlier in the same year in "Rhetorical Criticism, 1971: Retrospect, Prospect, Introspect," Baskerville was critical of the trend, then only emergent in the United States though already being felt abroad, to push rhetoric beyond the spoken and written (1971a, 116).

In 2010, the edited volume *Reengaging the Prospects of Rhetoric* was published. It was meant to serve as a contemporary response to the 1971 text. Therein, I wrote a sympathetic addendum to Baskerville's concerns. In it, I argued.

1. This essay is dedicated to the memory of my father, Sam, and my friend and mentor, Robert Iltis. Each man, in his own way, helped me to understand what it means to *see* and what it means to *say*.

> Limitations can lead to refinement. They can also lead to rebellion. Some scholars within [speech] communication, anxious to shed their inhibitions, first reached out to nondiscursive artifacts, modifying the traditional by way of novel interpretations. . . . [this] tendency blurs the line between what is *rhetorical* and what is *rhetoric*. (Porrovecchio 2010, 158)

This paper serves as an extension of the concerns that I raised. Herein, I pointedly urge that the aforementioned tendency—in the States and in Europe, where some of the theoretical footing for the trend resides—to treat the visual as rhetoric (and not rhetoric*al*) serves to severely limit the applicability of rhetoric in the world of actual practice. This quibble over two letters [*al*] is not merely academic. It is, in fact, an important issue which scholars of rhetoric avoid at their peril or pursue at their pleasure. This paper argues the tendency engenders the former. Rather than demonstrate a realization of new possibilities, it tends to further distance the academic study of rhetoric from the people it seeks to serve. Rather than serving to slough off stagnant traditions, it is a misstep which awkwardly contradicts history so as to serve too many (ill-defined) ends. While no one doubts the power of the visual to augment our perceptions, it is doubtful that anthropomorphizing our creations yields more than traditional—historically grounded, classically informed—approaches suggest.

## Historical Footing: Slow Return

It helps to begin by presenting a series of premises. First, rhetoric can be visual; but not everything that is visual can be rhetoric. Quite a bit of what counts as traditional rhetoric involves, in a very basic sense, visual elements and cues. The texts we read, the speeches we view, most all of them involve ocular exertion. That said, rhetoric is often auditory in nature, relying on what we hear. Further, rhetoric can involve—especially in this mediated age—the merger of and/or tension between the two. Which leads to the second premise: the visual can always be rhetorical; but what is rhetorical is not the same as what is rhetoric. Put differently, that which *is* rhetoric is not the same as that which is *of* rhetoric; if one wishes to speak of things which display rhetorical tendencies, there is very little left to say. But scholars go further and collapse and conflate the two. I would assert that the key to understanding rhetoric lies in the nature of *utterances* (literally, that which is "out"; "outer"), not in plumbing the depths of various semiotic theories. As a linguistic unit of speech, an utterance—which, in turn, can be represented in written form—informs and supports the traditional approach to rhetoric as spoken and written discourse (in that order of priority) directed towards persuasion.

If one were to simply stop at the level of origin, the concept of visual rhetoric would seem laughable (and my argument would veer into a lax appeal to tradition). That said, it pays to recall the definition most often aligned with rhetoric. Aristotle

offers up the idea that rhetoric can "be [defined as] an ability, in each [particular] case, to see the available means of persuasion" (I, 1355b). He is locating rhetoric within the domain of the human; it is literally *proto*-logos at this stage. As George Kennedy comments, in introducing the above conceptualization of rhetoric:

> ... the actuality produced by the potentiality of rhetoric is not the written or oral text of a speech, or even persuasion, but the art of "seeing" how persuasion may be effected. In *Nicomachean Ethics* 6.4 Aristotle defines all art as a reasoned capacity (*hexis*) to make something and says that it is concerned with the coming-into-being of something that is capable of either being or not being. Art is thus for him not the product of artistic skill, but the skill itself. (2007, 37)

Clearly, the visual-as-visual demonstrates no ability to see anything, to exhibit any sort of skill in discerning what is and is not "of the art" or otherwise. And, while I again recognize that any appeal to this approach is doomed, I also recognize that it stood—with variations—as the template for most definitions of rhetoric for much of the history of the same.

Even approaches, seemingly and historically at odds with an Aristotelian sensibility, display qualities that are, upon further review, complimentary. The rehabilitation of the Sophistic moment, while more style-driven, comports easily with the contingent nature of Aristotle's *On Rhetoric*.[2] Calls to problematize the traditional framework of rhetoric—the rhetor and audience relationship, for instance—are not too far afield the source text(s) which they challenge.[3] The point is not to suggest that all these approaches reside within a stable spectrum. Rather, the point to be made is that they don't abandon the notion that rhetoric, perforce, involves utterance. More importantly, it involves *human* utterance predicated on a reflective consideration of what will constitute a persuasive act. The notion that Aristotle has faded is not in keeping with actual practice, and actual practice is an issue with which we will more actively grapple later in this paper.

In fact, the transition away from this sort of logos-driven (many now slander it as intention-driven and logo-centric, as if the twin abilities to use logic and frame words is off-putting) is a relatively recent phenomenon. While it has purportedly yielded a dizzying array of new objects for study, there have been growing pains. In the States, the attempts to graft the nuances of European insight have been problematic. Like learning a new language, the rhetoric *about* visual rhetoric has occasionally demonstrated problems of translation. One reason? The rhetoric that is visual lacks the qualities of rhetoric as traditionally construed. So, it is up to those who have the ability to see the heretofore unnoticed gradations to shore up the breach. To wit, a picture of pasta actually speaks to these new agents of

2. For a useful review of the same, see: Poulakos, John. 2008. *Sophistical Rhetoric in Classical Greece*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

3. Lloyd Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (1968) is, by turns, both pragmatic (in the philosophical sense) and Aristotelian (in the contextual sense).

rhetorical change. But, as we shall see, pasta isn't quite as eloquent as those tired traditionalists hiding behind the pulpits of actual public speaking.

When one shifts to contemporary justifications, there is an interesting—and relatively quick—shift away from any connection to the aforementioned tradition. Sonja Foss suggested that the rhetorical evaluation of visual imagery is necessitated by: (1) a retreat from the time when "public discourse had primary impact", and (2) a realization that we need to explore "a great many of the symbols that affect us daily" (1994, 213). At this level, I have nothing with which to contend. People can, and should, and do, study the rhetorical dimensions of the visual. The history of rhetoric is rich in the study of the visual complementing and augmenting rhetoric-as-utterance. Taken further, the idea that one could study visual imagery with an eye towards "the influence of images on audiences and the way images are constructed to affect such influence" is a wonderful notion (Foss 1994, 214). Foss then makes a distinction between the *function* and *purpose* of an image. In choosing the former as against the latter, she does "not wish to suggest that the criterion for the judgment of an image is the intention of the image's creator" (1994, 215). If not for a purpose (one must assume to persuade?) what then is the point when one regards rhetoric-as-rhetoric?

Still, this is a study of the rhetorical functions of visuals. Foss's argument, even her suggestion that her schema can be used by those lacking adequate aesthetic training to talk about visual imagery, is strikingly traditional (1994, 222). It clearly locates the rhetoric within a more traditional framework even as it pushes against that framework in challenging authority, intentionality, and logo-centrism. But a significant change occurs in the works of Foss. By 2004, most of the qualifications of a decade-past are gone. Now, rhetoric has undergone the "pictorial turn", and the goal is "the study of visual images and material objects as rhetoric" (Foss 2004, 303). And, while she still labels visual rhetoric as a perspective, it is clear that a shift has occurred whereby the *perspective* is supplemental to the image as a communicative *artifact* to be examined. To wit, objects now do what traditional rhetors did: they communicate, they memorialize, and they create "feelings of warmth and coziness" (Foss 2004, 308).

These sorts of assertions fit snugly against the concerns that I registered in surveying the works of others fully overtaken by the swells of the supposed pictorial turn (Porrovecchio 2010, 158-62), works that trace back over a decade to the point when Foss still registered a traditionalist's hesitation; works, for instance, like "Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype", by Carole Blair, Marsha J. Jeppson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr. (1991). Regardless of the chronology of these scholarly revelations, there is at least the sense that something is amiss. As Foss notes, in arguing that critics and scholars

are breaking new theoretical ground, "current rhetorical theory cannot account" for what these same critics and scholars are finding (2004, 312). Is that perhaps because what the visual *does* doesn't, in fact, correspond to what these scholars want their rhetoric to do? Is it perhaps a suggestion that, beyond the realm of the visual-as-rhetorical, there needs to be new language and new theorizing? There is, it seems, a whiff of fiat in such assertions.

Some scholars resist the shift. Take, for instance, Robert Hariman and John Lucaites's *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (2007). As Paul Messaris (2009) points out—in a searching review of visual rhetoric at the end of the first decade of the new century—Hariman and Lucaites claim supplemental status for the photographic image, but also urge that said images do important work in the realm of deliberative democracy (Messaris 2009, 214). This is another fine point with which I have no qualms. In a case like this, the *–al* still remains an important bracket in the study of the visual. It comports well with the 90s-era Foss. But such resistance seems futile. In the vast majority of cases, post-00s, discomfort with tradition can simply be smoothed over; simply forging onward pervades works of this sort. Later in his survey, Messaris strikes an ambivalent note about this move from rhetorical analysis to claiming for the visual the status of rhetoric. On the one hand, he locates the visual firmly within the realm of tradition when he suggests that certain theorists treat the visual as a supplement, "as evidence in support of the argument in a written text" (2009, 219). On the other, and in keeping with those who have moved beyond Foss's earlier and qualified regard for the rhetorical in the visual, Messaris also makes gestures which so clearly humanize the image. He notes, for instance, that visual communication "has a wider arsenal of emotional devices at its disposal" (2009, 218).

With all due respect, the visual has nothing with which to dispose or obtain. This uncomfortable vacillation between the visual-as-rhetorical and the visual-as-rhetoric also betrays a larger concern of mine. In so doing, Messaris sets up what will be a significant focus of my conclusion. As he pleads, in a nod to those who don't wander the abstract halls of academia: "To a reader unfamiliar with the study of rhetoric, this seeming neglect of deliberate persuasion might seem puzzling. However, in the world of rhetorical scholarship, it is, of course, an old story" (Messaris 2009, 210). This is not only a curious gloss on the hesitation marks I noted previously. No, this also suggests that—regardless the real or feigned pedigree of the scholarship in question—the theory of visual rhetoric is reducible to being done for the sake of those who assert that the visual is rhetoric. Put more simply, this rhetoric of the visual is merely rhetoric for rhetoricians' sake.

## Visualizing symbolism: Signs of ocular exertion in the spectacular *audio*-torium

Before we can deal with that concern, however, we need to deal with a parallel issue: the assumption that unstable or arbitrary meaning justifies or warrants the shift from (human) rhetoric-as-utterance to (non-human) rhetoric-as-visual. While the previous section relied primarily on American texts, it is the case that those texts relied on the bona fides provided by European scholars. Both seem anxious to assert a hermeneutics of *ambiguity*. It seems, however, that the master key to both is *anxiety*: a worry about the world we live in, our status in relationship to that world, and the limitations of what we can do relative to both. It would be poor form to simply suggest that history is overripe with examples of thinkers—Prodicus of Ceos, Cornelius Tacitus of Gallia Narbonensis, F.C.S. Schiller of Corpus Christi, Everett Lee Hunt of Swarthmore—who, noting the same contingent and complicated nature of meaning, got on with it and kept working. So, I will instead offer some observations relative to this curious anxiety as found in source texts for rhetoric-as-visual.

Roland Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image" operates as a signal text for those who indulge in visual rhetoric. But one can pick and choose as one sees fit. Consider the following:

> Today, at the level of mass communications, it appears that the linguistic message is indeed present in every image: as title, caption, accompanying press article, film dialogue, comic strip balloon. Which shows that it is not very accurate to talk of a civilization of the image—we are still, and more than ever, a civilization of writing, writing and speech continuing to be the full terms of the informational structure. (Barthes 1977, 155)

These caveats are important when considering the artifact he in examining: a picture with text. The literal (or linguistic) messages being examined are rather cursory: labels on pasta and grain and can, a caption below them. But is *cursory*—in what is denoted or connoted—the same as *incidental*? It is interesting to note that, at the level of the linguistic meanings, no outside work is needed. Even the suggestion that the company name implies (connotation) "Italianicity" is within the realm of what other users of signs-as-words/representations-as-utterance would find, no less because the caption running along the bottom draws our attention to that fact. Much the same when one takes in the denotation of the image(s) *within* the image; sometimes an onion is just an onion. That said, the connotations of the image(s) are reliant on the meanings that Barthes implies they hold. His rhetoric is at work in justifying the move from *anchorage* (text as guide) to *relay* (text and image interacting). What the image means independent of the text is what it represents, nothing more or less. What the text means independent of the image is what it states, nothing more or less.

It seems that anchorage is the only condition which admits of the possibility of rhetoric and that relay is either: (a) anchorage misconstrued, or (b) mistaking the rhetorical nature of imagery for rhetoric. The necessity for utterance is obvious if one engages in a bit of a mind game: stripped of the caption and the labelling, what possible message could the image send? Multiple interpretations, to be sure. But an image has no frame from which to utter. Though open to challenges, semioticians such as Charles S. Peirce have made this observation (even when Peirce has been used to argue against himself on this very point). To be clear, this argument is predicated on a limited logo-centrism that can be framed as such: in cases of persuasion, the utterance is a necessity. Semiotician Winfred Noth grappled with this very issue in *The Semiotic Review of Books* (1995). His conclusion lends merit to my argument that imagery is rhetorical, but not rhetoric: "The result of our study was that pictures *can be used to* assert or to deceive about facts from the semantic, syntactic, and with certain reserves, also from the pragmatic dimension" (italics mine; Noth 1995, 12). Which returns us to the puzzle box of pasta. Does the image—with text/utterance taken into consideration—attempt to persuade us to buy the product or produce? No. Might it lead us to want said product or produce? Perhaps.[4]

But that is an *aesthetic* response. As with the welcoming embrace of freely, if questionably applied, semiotic theory, it often seems that scholars of the visual want to supplant aesthetic judgment with an equally vague notion of *rhetorical* judgment. To what end? I suppose the observation (and I pun here) of instability implies a wider theoretical spectrum than aesthetics would endure. Here again, though, this seems to conflate both forms of judgment in service to the assertion that rhetorical theory can take on aspects of other discrete theoretical categories at will. As designer and artist Joe Doucet argues in David Keep's "Redesigns for Living", aesthetics is the "form, color, and typography" by which a designer/creator "craft[s] the message of the object" (2014, 17). A popular definition of this sort complicates any scholarly attempt to push rhetoric past its traditional limits. A definition of this sort also threatens to bring low high theory by doing two important things. First, it raises up popular tokens for consideration. Second, it recognizes as useful those discrete categories—actual use vs. theoretical consideration, popular practice vs. scholarly musing—that the blur of visual rhetoric seeks to obfuscate.

The actual rhetoric at play exists beyond the frame of the *advertisement* (literally, "calling attention to"). It is found in what Barthes believes he sees in the signs

4. Does the company selling Panzani products want us to buy their product? Of course. But the statement that their products are "de luxe" (in the advertisement) is even further from rhetoric than their again-current slogan: "Des pâtes, oui, mais des Panzani!"/"Pasta, yes, but Panzani!" (see https://www.panzani.fr/histoire-de-la-marque-panzani). The difference is not trivial. The former frames the nature of the product; the latter is a declarative statement that directs the consumer towards that product.

themselves; in other words, Barthes's rhetoric is what attempts/frames persuasion by way of his utterance. He is attempting to persuade us to see what he sees. Barthes is seemingly aware of this. In reducing "the rhetoric of the image" to the development of a pattern of connotations, he stresses that this pattern can "only be established" on the basis of extant categories derived from the "Ancients and the Classics," and only then based on what "one will find" (Barthes 1977, 161-62). His foils in crafting his rhetoric about the visual are the selfsame ones that justify negating his rhetoric about the same.

Michel Foucault's "This is Not a Pipe (*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*)" operates in a slightly different key than that of Barthes's. Rather than tease out the provocative nuances that seem to reside between the denotation and connotation, he intends to ward off finality of any sort. Foucault's gaze hesitates to such a degree that he is "not even certain of [t]his certainty" (Foucault 1976, 8). Regarding what? Two versions of the same premise: a visual depiction of a pipe and a textual claim that it is not that which it is, of which the second example "visibly multiples the deliberate uncertainties" by introducing a visual depiction of the same pipe below the first depiction, enclosing it in a frame, on a stand, placed on a wood floor (Foucault 1976, 6). For all his concern and worry, the argument he crafts reduces to this: "to disturb all the traditional relations of language and image" (Foucault 1976, 10). Which is to say, disrupt the assumptions underlying theories of correspondence, the stability as relates to signifier and signified. Rather than seeing the gap as a puzzle to confront and work through, Foucault represents it as the paradoxical seat of meanings:

> ... in this broken and drifting space, strange relations are formed, intrusions occur, sudden destructive invasions, the fall of images among words, verbal explosions which crack the draws and smash them into pieces. (Foucault 1976, 14)

So it goes. Foucault has posited that the emphasis of tradition has been mistaken. If rhetoric "exploits the superabundance of language" (1976, 9), his thought puzzle shows that the superabundance of language exploits rhetoric insofar as representation is concerned. There is much to be had in this description: a creative work of art meant to provoke thought, a provocateur meaning to do the same, and a need to pause before the force of language and the power of the image. His argument is, again, his rhetoric. In spite of *that* (or, more in keeping with his point, because of *it*), he has found a new way to say a few very old things; namely, that words can be interpreted to mean different things, that they can affirm and negate depending on context.

So, what gives rise to these provocative notions? Let's dig a bit deeper into the past. At first glance, there is nothing of value in my reference to Siegfried Kracauer.

A brilliant and complex thinker, his musings on the nature of spectacle seem to operate as rejoinder to my flailing. Kracauer's (1995) *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (*Das Ornament der Masse: Essays*), are complicated challenges to the capitalist modes of production. He preaches a way through, and beyond, the false reason (*Ratio*) of the distractions and distortions of his time. Yet, in localizing his complaints around "The Mass Ornament" (the title of his 1927 essay), he provides an analogical foil for my project. To my mind, the spectacle of visual rhetoric as currently constructed, operates as an academic form of the same. The stage plays and dancing girls of Kracauer's time are the visual manipulations—the distortions of rhetoric—of ours. They trade in "aesthetic interest" as opposed to reason; they substitute formal complexity for the appearance of the same (Kracauer 1995, 76).

Granted, this is a lower key form of production; it is the academic practice of rhetoric operating as a micro- or beta-form of the State. As with all practices predicated on acceptance and not inquisition, a cult of agreement secures and tends the visual garden. It is also the case that transmission/dissemination reconfigures the academic relationship: the keepers of the visual truth (academics) give to the mass (students) that which is necessary to maintain the illusion of coherence. To question or challenge the message or the method is to place oneself outside the wall. I was mindful of this issue in introducing my 2010 response to Baskerville, suggesting that my argument—after sly references to the bands Supertramp and Slade and the contemporary scholar Joshua Gunn—was doomed to failure and "admitting defeat" (Porrovecchio 2010, 153).

But is defeat really the sum result of all this, Kracauer's and mine, musing? Is the previous analogy too brittle to stand? Those who champion visual rhetoric—operating within concentric circles of English, Speech, Philosophy, Critical Studies, Visual Studies—have a vested interest in protecting the mechanisms which sustain them: the documents and declamations that purport to *show* what the visual *says*. That which distracts from the process of production aids the same. As Kracauer goes on to state in referencing the visual vacuum created by the Tiller Girls:

> The *Ratio* that gives rise to the ornament is strong enough to invoke the mass and to expunge all life from the figures constituting it. It is too weak to find human beings within the mass and to render the figures in the ornament transparent to knowledge. Because this *Ratio* flees from reason and takes refuge in the abstract, uncontrolled nature proliferates under the guise of rational expression and uses abstract signs to display itself. It can no longer transform itself into powerful symbolic forms, as it could among primitive peoples in the era of religious cults. This power of a language of signs has withdrawn from the mass ornament under the influence of the same rationality that keeps its muteness from bursting open. . . . It is the *rational and empty form* of a cult, devoid of any explicit meaning, that appears in the mass ornament. (1995, 84)[5]

5. The Tiller Girls were a series of popular dance troupes started in the late-1880s that were noted for their complicated choreography.

Tracing back to the mystical reasoning for the rise of visual rhetoric (*turns* of the pictorial sort seem only to occur in the halls of academia), one can—and should—see parallels. No less the point that Kracauer concludes with: that such movements "flee from reality" and reason, avoiding a better path by resisting/ignoring "historical context" that threatens the project (1995, 86). Where the anxiety is located in any of the previously suggested locations/positions—the world, the academy, or the person—matters little. That it places things outside of context is reason enough to be anxious as well.

## Rhetoric unbound: The obelisks we obey (at our peril)

To be clear, I have no investment in boxing the ears of my peers. Point in fact, I have not the stature nor the temperament to do so. Thus, I must assume these ideas will be met with genial (or less than genial) annoyance or silence. Visual rhetoric, as an idea, has taken flight in academia. It ranges across disciplines, pushes past cultural borders, and has been established as worthy of academic standing. Here too, though, I have questions. What, beyond academia, does the concept of visual rhetoric do? Respectfully, nothing. Let me explain. The visual obtains rhetorical force only via utterance. Whether discussed in academic journals and hallways, or inscribed thereupon in advance of such chatter, the visual, as a symbol/object of longing, will continue to resist the project of speaking to us. Like the Monoliths of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), particularly the Tycho Magnetic Anomaly-0 which greets viewers at the start of Kubrick's film, the visual sits and waits. Actually, that is untrue. The visual waits for nothing. Because it is nothing outside our interpretation of it insofar as rhetoric is concerned. We are much like those primates who swarm the monolith, staring at the blank slate in the hopes of understanding.

A different sort of confusion extends beyond our hallowed halls, seeping into the world beyond the walls of our erudition. To wit, the larger world struggles to understand the machinations of the academy. So, too, the nature of rhetoric. It is not without significance that the main contemporary medium of communication, the internet, is replete with references to rhetoric . . . *as rhetoric* in a traditional sense [if you are reading this, I can wait for you to go and check]. Granted, that usage is often tempered by a set of misunderstandings almost as old as rhetoric itself. On the one hand, those who use the term often interpret it to mean "bad argument"; on the other, people still struggle to apply rhetoric to their daily lives. Both offer opportunities for academic scholars and teachers of rhetoric. Here, again, there is anxiety though. Many balk at reducing the study of rhetoric to an education in skills for daily life, even if that is the foundation from which the

study of rhetoric sprang. They would rather delight in the abstractions of proto--Platonism (or shrill criticisms thereof), than sully their pedigrees with arguments betraying a Sophistic or Aristotelian bent.

More simply put, one must affix the term "visual" to the classical art to obtain anything approximating a justification for its inclusion in the same. I think it is a charitable and accurate assessment that this reflects concurrence within the cult of academia, and resistance without. But is that the charge we are best served to meet? I argue it is not. The far larger project with which we should properly struggle is returning rhetoric to a seat of relevance in the world of actual practice, to push back against continued misunderstandings of rhetoric-as-rhetoric that persist since the time of Ramus, and to reintegrate a humane art into the fabric of life—the political, religious, social, and even personal—and the world of lived experience, even if it is often digitally degraded and/or enhanced. We should concern ourselves more with what practitioners like Doucet have to say. We should spend less time wondering what mountains, walls, and quilts are arguing, even if it is only ever us arguing about what they mean (which is a far different thing).

Such a shift would, of necessity, involve the visual as *rhetorical* in those other ways I mentioned previously. It won't, I urge, involve spinning further tales of the visual-as-rhetoric as against the vulgar, though reasonable, notions which so clearly resist such flights of fancy. To my mind, it muddies the waters to persist in ascribing to the visual—*as visual*—the qualities of rhetoric in a world so out of sync with such sentiments. Moreover, it places rhetoric of the academic sort outside the realm of shared experience and further behind the walls of our own sense-making. I recognize that this line of reasoning pushes me dangerously close to the sort of anti-intellectual sentiment that so many academics argue they are confronting and challenging. So much the better. The world of actual practice is a complicated and contingent place. Rhetoric should serve to aid in easing our way through the challenges we find in digital places and meat spaces. Pardon the pun, but *the writing is on the wall* for academic rhetoricians. And we should pause before we finish writing our sentences.

I conclude with a rather pathetic parlour trick. Reflect on all the objects you have seen or touched. Reflect further on the persuasive import of their utterances. If not for a distortion of the eyes or the ears, you have never had more than a passing sense—an aesthetic revelation perhaps, maybe even a momentary jolt of the uncanny—that the visual speaks to you and urges you to change course or take action. But others—*human* others, I should add—have and will continue to speak to you about the visual. They will urge you to believe it does this thing or that, that it stands in for these and those. Simply put, the *rhetoric* in visual rhetoric is human and exists outside of it. None of which denigrates the power of

the visual. If anything, it places the visual back into happy accord with history. While that may yield lesser glories than those currently obtained, it resets the balance between Kracauer's *ratio* and *reason*. Set hard against the need for human investment (no less creation), the visual returns to its place as a symbolic force [to] create-d, propogate-d, debate-d, and even negate-d, by the power of *logos*. A power, I humbly suggest, we reclaim as ours and ours alone. You can turn away from the speaker. You can recoil from the images on screens both large and small. But you can't turn away from the fact of agency, no less the reasoned or irrational provocations of an agent, when it comes to what rhetoric can and cannot do.

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