CHAPTER ONE

The Psychology of Rhetorical Images

Charles A. Hill

The range of visual elements that could be considered rhetorical is vast, as evidenced by the many types of visuals that are examined and analyzed in the chapters of this volume. The rhetorical analysis of visuals could be extended even further, to include types not directly addressed in this volume, including landscapes and public memorials. It is exciting and important that the field of rhetoric is taking account of so many different types of visuals, partly because doing so helps us understand how rhetorical elements work in forms of expression that are not obviously and explicitly persuasive. For my purposes in this chapter, I will concentrate on representational images—visuals that are clearly designed to represent a recognizable person, object, or situation—while recognizing that such images constitute only a subset of the types of visual elements that could be productively examined as rhetorical elements.

Most rhetorical studies of images, including many of the ones in this volume, focus on a specific genre, medium, method of distribution, or rhetorical purpose for which images are often used. Most of the insights now available to us about the rhetorical nature of images have come from these types of studies. In this chapter, though, I intend to approach the rhetorical study of images from a slightly different direction. I begin with a question that is both broad and simple in its formulation: How, exactly, do images persuade? In other words, how do representational images work to influence the beliefs, attitudes, opinions—and sometimes actions—of those who view them? To be sure, many practitioners (e.g., advertisers, political consultants, and other professional persuaders) instantiate, in their daily practice, a variety of principles about how to take best advantage of the persuasive power of representational images. Any good undergraduate course in marketing, advertising, or public relations includes some discussion of specific methods for using images to influence viewers’ opinions, beliefs, and actions. These principles and methods are based mostly on past practice, and sometimes on experimental studies that demonstrate the relative effects of a number of variables on the persuasive-
ness of visual appeals. But a full theoretical treatment of visual persuasion will involve not only identifying individual variables that appear to strengthen visual appeals in certain situations, but also attempts to explicate the processes by which images exert their rhetorical influences.

Cultural studies of visual rhetoric constitute one type of attempt to understand how visual appeals operate. In these types of studies, scholars analyze the ways in which culturally shared values and assumptions are utilized in persuasive communication, and how these shared values and assumptions influence viewers’ responses to mass-produced images. The psychological approach that I take in this chapter is not meant to replace or to compete with cultural or textual studies, but merely to address the phenomenon from a different perspective. Neither is it meant to denote a set of processes that are entirely distinct and separate from the cultural and social processes that are explored so well in some of the other chapters in this volume, for psychological processes and cultural practices are inextricably linked. At the very least, cognitive processes may be said to be the mechanisms through which the influences of culture operate. Therefore, although it may be useful to explicate them separately, psychological and cultural influences on individual response and action are not, in reality, distinct and separate. While I take psychological processes as my starting point for this discussion, I also discuss the influence of shared cultural values in an attempt to demonstrate how the cultural and psychological work together in the persuasive process. Ultimately, a comprehensive theory of visual persuasion will need to incorporate the insights gathered from a variety of viewpoints and methodologies, including cultural, psychological, and textual studies, and attempt to explicate how the mechanisms identified by these different methodologies work together in the production of, reception of, and response to persuasive images.

To ask how images work to influence viewers’ beliefs, attitudes, and opinions is ultimately to ask about the nature of images and about how people respond to them. Conventional wisdom says that representational images tend to prompt emotional reactions and that, once the viewer’s emotions are excited, they tend to override his or her rational faculties, resulting in a response that is unreflective and irrational. Psychological research suggests that this conventional explanation of the rhetorical power of images is broadly accurate in outline, though inadequate for explaining how persuasive images work.

More importantly, the simple description of the power of rhetorical images as “emotional” has contributed directly to the relative neglect of such images by the fields of rhetoric and argumentation, a neglect that has only recently begun to be corrected. Argumentation scholars, especially, have always been concerned not just with describing the ways that persuasion can occur, but also with discovering and promoting methods of persuasion that are epistemically useful and valid (van Eemeren 38). If images, by their nature, prompt irrational and unreflective responses, then they are best avoided rather than studied closely, and they certainly have no place in the classroom, where the goal is to help students develop useful and sound reasoning habits.

Until recently, the scholar interested in the serious study of rhetorical images faced a problem. If one accepted the description of visual input as being largely “emotional” in nature, then rhetorical visuals would be largely dismissed as not worthy of serious study. The interested scholar would then be faced with the task of explaining that people respond to visuals in much the same way as they respond to verbal arguments, an assertion that would deny much of the psychological research into persuasive images, not to mention the everyday experience of nearly everyone who deals with images in persuasive contexts. (This perceived need has also contributed to the adoption of linguistic terms for the study of images in an attempt to capture for images some of the cachet that has largely been reserved for verbal elements, a tendency which has, I believe, led to some misleading assertions about the nature of visual communication.) Only recently, now that simple binary distinctions such as “emotional vs. rational” have been problematized in the theoretical literature and demonstrated as invalid by much of the empirical research into cognitive and neurological processes, has it become acceptable to treat rhetorical images as objects worthy of serious study without feeling the need to deny their largely emotional nature.

IMAGES AND RHETORICAL PRESENCE

As argued above, simply applying methods and concepts designed specifically for verbal language to persuasive images is not the most productive or accurate way to develop a methodology for the study of visual rhetoric; doing so often results in misleading (or sometimes simply useless) assertions about the ways in which persuasive images work. However, many rhetorical concepts already exist that were not developed exclusively for the study of verbal elements, and it makes sense to begin a study of rhetorical images by mining these concepts to see what insights they may offer that could be applied to such images. One such concept that seems especially applicable to the study of images is the concept of presence as discussed by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca (The New Rhetoric 115–120). Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca recognize that most rhetorical situations are complex, and often involve two or more advocates stating their respective cases, attempting to win adherence from audience members who are simply trying to determine what they should believe and how they should feel about the issue at hand. In many of these situations, the audience is faced with a bewildering array of elements to consider—elements that may include statistics, charts and graphs, anecdotes and other narratives, items of physical evidence, and abstract ethical and philosophical arguments. Each of these elements can be potentially important for convincing audience members to accept a particular viewpoint, but the in-
individual rhetor is faced with the danger that any particular element may be forgiven or get drowned out in a sea of information, anecdote, and argument. To counteract this danger, a good rhetor will attempt to prompt audience members to focus their attention on the specific elements that the rhetor thinks will most benefit his or her case.

Convincing people to change their minds or to take a stand, especially on important policy issues, can be exceedingly difficult for several reasons. For example, many controversial issues are very complex, and arguments about such issues may involve assertions about facts and principles that not every novice audience member may feel confident to evaluate. We also know that factors external to the argument can greatly influence the effectiveness of any rhetorical appeal. For instance, audience members will often be influenced by the tone in which the arguments are expressed and by various traits of the arguers that might influence judgments about their credibility and sincerity. And the effectiveness of any particular appeal on any complex issue will be greatly affected by how much the appeal supports or conflicts with the beliefs, values, and assumptions that the audience members already hold about relevant topics. Many psychological studies of persuasion have found that, when faced with opposing verbal arguments, a reader or listener will usually accept the one that reflects or reinforces his or her already-held opinions and assumptions (see, for example, Evans; Johnson-Laird and Byrne; Kuhn; Lau, Smith, and Fiske; Voss et al.). People often accept and come to defend a particular viewpoint, not because they have carefully thought through and evaluated the available alternatives, but because they identify with other people holding the same position (Burke) or because challenging or denying the position would challenge their own self-concept (Cederblom). With all of these factors coming into play, it is easy to see that any particular appeal, no matter how logically valid or relevant, may become insufficient, almost even irrelevant to the success of the larger argument.

The challenge for a rhetor defending any particular position or forwarding any particular proposal is to make the elements in the situation that are supportive of that position or proposal stand out for the audience members, to make these elements more salient and memorable. This can be done partly by the simple act of explicitly naming and pointing out those elements: "By the very fact of selecting certain elements and presenting them to the audience, their importance and pertinency to the discussion are implied. Indeed, such a choice endows these elements with a presence" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 116).

Presence, as the term is used by Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, refers to the extent to which an object or concept is foremost in the consciousness of the audience members. Skillful rhetors attempt to increase the presence of elements in the rhetorical situation that are favorable to their claim because they know that elements with enhanced presence will have a greater influence over the audience's attitudes and beliefs. But presence is not a binary phenomenon;
Such an argument assumes that people reflect on the nature of evidence to an extent that would prompt a line of reasoning something like this: "The starving child depicted in the photograph must be real, while the statistics could be inaccurate, misleading, or even made up. Therefore, it is rational to place more weight on the one ‘real’ child in the photograph." But empirical evidence, as well as everyday experience, suggests that powerful images do not prompt such rational reflection. Besides, we do not really disbelieve that the children in the statistics exist; yet somehow, the child in the photograph seems more “real” to us, and the photograph is much more likely to prompt a visceral, emotional response.

My point here is supported by the fact that visceral reactions to visual input are not limited to photographic images. In fact, rhetorical presence does not necessarily rely on actual seeing. In many rhetorical situations, displaying the actual object, person, or event under discussion—or a representational image of it—is not practical. In these situations, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca advise the rhetor to use concrete, descriptive words and specific terms in their verbal arguments, because doing so helps the audience members construct a mental image of the object or event being depicted: “The more specific the terms, the sharper the image they conjure up, and, conversely, the more general the terms, the weaker the image” (147). When direct visual perception of the desired element is not feasible, then using concrete language to help the reader or listener construct a mental image can be quite effective for enhancing the presence of the favorable rhetorical element. Words are symbolic, not indexical—they neither rely on nor prove the actual existence of the object, person, or situation that they purport to represent.

**THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RHETORICAL IMAGES: HOW VISUALS WORK TO PERSUADE**

Psychological studies have confirmed the common assumption that, in general terms, images tend to elicit more emotional responses while print messages tend to elicit more analytic responses (Chaudhuri and Buck). But this easy identification of the visual with the emotional response and the verbal with rational responses is clearly too simplistic. Some visual appeals are highly rational (e.g., bar graphs, line graphs and other visuals designed to demonstrate statistical relationships). And psychological studies demonstrate that words can also elicit highly emotional responses. In particular, these studies support Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca’s contention that imagistic and concrete words prompt emotional responses more than non-concrete and non-visual words (Campos, Marcos, & Gonzales). We commonly speak of readers constructing a "mental image" while reading a narrative or descriptive text, and neurological studies show that this occurs quite literally—i.e., reading a descriptive text can actually activate the same parts of the brain used to process visual images (Howard et al.; Rebotier; Sinatra). These mental images can result in emotional responses similar to those that are prompted by the viewing of actual pictures.

Because imagistic language can prompt mental imaging and therefore elicit emotional responses, it seems likely that using such language would increase the rhetorical effectiveness of the message. The relationship between the creation of mental images through reading text and the process of developing or revising one’s beliefs and attitudes based on these mental images has been studied by psychologists as the concept of vividness. In psychological studies, vivid information is identified as information that is emotionally interesting and concrete (Nisbett and Ross). (Of course, describing vivid information as “emotional” is a bit of a tautology, because one of the questions that psychologists study is whether such information prompts more emotional responses than non-vivid information.) Vivid information takes the form of concrete and imagistic language, personal narratives, pictures, or first-hand experience. Vividness is a matter of degree, of course, but the most vivid type of information would be an actual experience (being attacked, being involved in an accident, etc.), and the least vivid type of information would be information that one is exposed to by reading or listening to abstract, impersonal language and statistics. A comprehensive continuum of vividness might look something like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most Vivid Information</th>
<th>Least Vivid Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>actual experience</td>
<td>statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>moving images with sound</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>static photograph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>realistic painting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>line drawing</td>
<td>abstract, impersonal analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>narrative, descriptive account</td>
<td>descriptive account</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Several experiments have demonstrated, not surprisingly, that vivid information tends to prompt more emotional reactions than non-vivid, abstract information. (Scientists are allowed to take nothing for granted, so psychologists often seem compelled to experimentally test even rather obvious assertions.) In other words, the more vivid the information, the more likely it is that the information will prompt an emotional response from the receiver (Campos et al.). Vivid information also seems to be more persuasive than non-vivid information. In experiments, pictures have been demonstrated to be more persuasive than text and "personal case stories" built on personal narrative to be more persuasive than "abstract impersonal information"
(Block and Keller). In a study using a simulated jury trial, the participants tended to vote in favor of the disputant who presented his or her case using vivid (i.e., image-evoking) language (Wilson, Northcraft, and Neale).

Baesler points out that, although many studies have shown vivid evidence to be more persuasive than non-vivid information, several other studies have found no persuasive advantage for vividness. In fact, Frey and Eagly found that vivid text may be even less persuasive than non-vivid text under some circumstances. Such inconsistent results are not uncommon in persuasion research (as a glance through O'Keefe's review of the research makes clear), and such inconsistencies usually mean that more complex research designs are needed, designs that attempt to ferret out some of the dizzyingly complex relationships between the many factors that help to make up any rhetorical situation. The results of a study that utilized a more complex design than most (Smith and Shaffer) suggest that vivid language makes a persuasive message easier to comprehend and more likely to be remembered, but only if the vivid elements are clearly and explicitly relevant to the message itself. If the vivid images are not clearly relevant to the claim being made and to the particular argument being forwarded, then the images may make the argument more difficult to process and to remember by distracting the viewer from the argument being presented. And arguments that are incomprehensible or not remembered have no chance to influence a recipient's opinions or beliefs.

Overall, the more sophisticated research designs tend to support the notion that vividness enhances persuasiveness. Vividness itself, like any single persuasive trait, will not make a bad argument convincing, but it will, if properly employed, enhance the persuasiveness of a reasonably strong position. And operationally speaking, vividness is almost a direct synonym for visualization, whether one is creating mental images through the use of concrete language or actually presenting a visual image to a viewer.

Vividness, emotional response, and persuasion have all been shown to correlate with each other (Chaudhuri and Buck), but just asserting this fact does not explain why imagistic language and actual images are more persuasive than abstract verbal arguments, and it does not explain the role of emotions in this process. Researchers have proposed several models to try to explain exactly how this relationship between vividness, emotional responses, and persuasion works in the mind. For example, some psychological theories of persuasion distinguish between two types of cognitive processing: "systematic processing," which is "contemplative, analytic, and responsive to the argumentative quality of the message," and "heuristic processing," which "occurs whenever an individual relies on some shortcut decision-making rule to construct an attitude toward the persuasive advocacy." (Dillard and Peck 462). The very language that Dillard and Peck use to describe these two cognitive strategies indicates that they place a higher value on systematic processing. Certainly, instructors of argumentation would prefer their students to be "contemplative" and "analytic" when making a decision on a controversial issue and to attend to "the argumentative quality of the message" when deciding whether or not to accept the arguer's claim, and we would be disappointed (though not surprised) to find that our students were instead relying on "some shortcut decision-making rule" (462). Nevertheless, people tend to choose a heuristic processing strategy when one is available because it is faster than systematic processing and requires less cognitive work.

It is likely that verbal text, because of its analytic nature (being made up of discrete meaningful units) and because it is apprehended relatively slowly over time, is more likely to prompt systematic processing, while images, which are comprehended holistically and almost instantaneously, tend to prompt heuristic processing. Therefore, these psychological models might explain why vivid images tend to overpower verbal arguments in a decision among opposing or controversial claims. In short, because our minds prefer to take the fastest and easiest route to making a decision, and because images or imagistic texts offer shortcuts toward the endpoint of making a decision, then images (or, to a lesser extent, imagistic, concrete language) will prompt the viewer to make a relatively quick decision, largely ignoring the more analytical, abstract information available in verbal form.

**Vivid Information and Emotions**

But using terms like heuristic processing almost seems like a strategy to avoid discussing the difficult concept of emotions. And saying that people "choose" or tend to "prefer" to make decisions based on their emotional responses (if that is, indeed, what heuristic processing refers to) also seems misleading, since powerful, visceral responses to emotional images and vivid stories hardly seem like a choice that one has made. In short, although descriptions of cognitive laziness and a preference for cognitive shortcuts might be useful for helping to explain how images affect us, a full understanding of the rhetorical power of images necessitates a discussion of emotion. Vivid images are valued by rhetors and derogated by some argumentation theorists because they tend to elicit strong emotions, and we do not need to perform psychological experiments to know that strong emotions will often overcome and even inhibit analytical thinking.

Many psychologists consider emotions to be a cognitive recognition of and response to a physiological reaction to some external stimulus (Dillard and Peck). In other words, when we recognize (perhaps on some preconscious level) a potential danger, that recognition results in a range of physiological responses (our hair standing up on end, increased adrenaline flow, etc.). Our brain recognizes these responses and interprets them in a way that we recognize and label as an emotion (e.g., anger, fear, sadness). According to some theories, then, an emotion is little more than a recognition of these physiological
responses (de Sousa 40, 51). (De Sousa recounts William James’ famous dictum, “We do not weep because we are sad, but rather we are sad because we weep.”) These physical responses that we call emotions are generally considered to be evolutionary adaptations that help us deal quickly and decisively with dangerous situations.

It’s relatively easy to understand how some of the more basic emotions (e.g., fear, anger) might be evolutionarily designed to help us deal with sudden potential dangers. Emotions such as these arise quickly and claim all of our attention; it is virtually impossible to ignore them or, in many cases, to even think about other matters until these emotions have been resolved. If the purpose of the emotional response is, as some psychologists believe, to direct our attention to a nearby danger, then it makes sense that we would be programmed to react quickly and decisively, without taking the time to analyze the situation and evaluate all of the information that might be potentially relevant. (By the time we accomplished such an analysis, it might be too late to eliminate or avoid the danger.)

When we hear or read a description of a far-away danger (far away in either location or time or both), then we have the luxury of taking our time in deciding whether or how to act. But when we are exposed to visual information, our body reacts much as it would if the danger represented in the image were actually present. Our evolutionary response kicks in, and we are prompted to make a quick decision and to take action without an extensive amount of analysis. In evolutionary terms, the existence of realistic representational images has been a relatively recent development, so the tendency to respond differently to emotional stimuli that are clearly representational images—and therefore posing no immediate danger—rather than actual, nearby dangers has not yet developed.

Although the primal emotions may be a result of an evolutionary response to personal danger, the specific stimuli that trigger these emotions can be personally and culturally conditioned. For example, fear is perhaps the most primal (and, evolutionarily speaking, the most useful) emotion of all. But the specific stimuli that trigger fear (i.e., what one is actually afraid of) will vary widely across cultures and even across individuals within a culture. As Patricia Greenspan puts it, emotions tend to “spill over and to fix on objects resembling their appropriate objects in incidental ways” (18), resulting in some highly idiosyncratic fear responses. (I know several people who report being deathly afraid of circus clowns.)

Evolution can explain the existence of the more basic emotions, but it seems clear that powerful cultural forces help to define such complex emotional responses as guilt, love, and envy, and even more so when we consider even more complex concepts, such as nationalism and prejudice—concepts that are based on conscious reasoning of a sort, but that also rely on emotional responses for their power and that, I would argue, are largely defined by their attitudinal emotions. (Similarly, there are certainly denotative definitions of concepts such as motherhood and freedom, but definitions that do not include a consideration of the emotional responses culturally bound to such words cannot fully describe what they mean to us.)

These concepts, which we might call cultural values, are continually exploited in persuasive discourse for the emotional weight they contain. In many persuasive appeals that use images, the images elicit emotions largely because these images instantiate one of these values, and evoking one of these cultural constructs causes the emotions that are linked to it to be instantiated. Because of the evolutionary origin of emotional responses (as responses to signs of immediate danger), those of us who have internalized the value are prompted to respond instantaneously and without the benefit of a sustained rational analysis, even though the emotional complex we are responding to is culturally determined.

Professional persuaders—politicians, attorneys, marketing experts, etc.—exploit the linkage between emotions, values, and particular images by creating associations between those images and abstract values that the persuader wishes to make more present to the audience. We commonly say that a waving flag can stir “feelings of patriotism.” However, patriotism is an abstract and complex concept that I am calling a “value,” not a feeling. In actuality, a three-way relationship is being brought to bear, between the image (the flag), the value of patriotism, and the emotions that are schematically linked to that value. So an emotional reaction can be prompted even by abstract symbols of complex concepts. Once the association between a particular image and a value is created and internalized, the image becomes a symbol for the abstract value and can be used to trigger its associated emotions. This helps explain the immense amount of emotional attachment that many Americans have with the American flag, an attachment that has even led to attempts to make desecration of the flag a federal crime—and that has made the Ground Zero 9/11 photograph the dominant symbol of the 9/11 tragedy.

Building Connections: The Transfer of Emotions

Discussions of rhetorical presence do not generally take into account psychological research on vividness and emotion, and psychological research reports do not mention the work of Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca. But both rhetorical theorists and psychologists studying the process of persuasion are essentially addressing the same questions, attempting to explain why certain types of assertions tend to have extraordinary persuasive power in a rhetorical situation, sometimes to the point of crowding out other, seemingly relevant and important information. No matter which methodology or theoretical lens they apply to this phenomenon, scholars seem to agree on two things. First, persuasive elements that instantiate strong emotions in the audience tend to
have an extraordinary amount of persuasive power. Second, this phenomenon seems to be related to visual perception. Information that is expressed either in visual form or in a verbal form that promotes the construction of mental images is more likely to instantiate these emotions and to be given additional persuasive weight.

But using images to persuade is not, of course, as simple as showing the audience an image and reaping the benefits that result. In fact, Kjeldsen argues that the persuasive power of vivid images is short-lived, and it is not really effective for convincing someone to change his or her beliefs over the long term. Surely there are situations in which someone succumbs to an emotional appeal, only to have his or her newfound conviction fade as the triggered emotions fade. In other words, an emotional appeal will often result in a new conviction or acceptance of a controversial claim only so long as the triggered emotions last. For many persuasive purposes, this will render an emotional appeal useless and may even result in a backlash if the audience member later begins to feel that he or she has been emotionally manipulated.

But many persuasive messages are part of long-term persuasive strategies; the most obvious examples are political and advertising campaigns. The producers of such campaigns may have no expectation that any particular message will convince the audience members to vote for the desired candidate or to buy the product being sold. Instead, they expect that the series of messages will work together, constructing an overall image and set of schematic relations that will convince the audience member to take the desired action. The objective in such campaigns is not to prompt a powerful temporary response, but to build up, over time, a schematic connection between the product or candidate and a set of positive values that will prompt the reader to think favorably of the product. The overall goal is to prompt members of the target audience to develop positive feelings toward the product or the candidate (and a political candidate is, in essence, the “product” that a political campaign attempts to sell). This can be accomplished by continually displaying visual associations between the product and some object or symbol that is already schematically tied to a positive value (thereby taking advantage of the emotional responses that are already associated with that value).

For example, an insurance company may include the famous picture of marines raising the flag on Iwo Jima in its promotional literature, in the hope that the image and the emotions that it evokes in the viewer will become associated with the insurance company. As Kenneth Burke points out, using the image allows the company to appropriate these emotions and values without having to explicitly argue for their relevance (87). Since the relationship between the insurance company and the attitudes and feelings associated with the image is not stated, there is no explicit argument to be refuted, and the implied connections are not likely to be questioned or challenged. (In chapter 2 of this volume, Anthony Blair makes a similar point in his discussion of the Pepsi commercial “with the giggling children and frolicking puppies.”) Such connections can be developed through verbal argument, especially through the use of concrete visual language, but using actual images (which increases the level of vividness and, therefore, presence) is almost universally considered by professional persuaders to be advantageous when it is feasible to do so.

What makes such identifications insidious is precisely the fact that we usually don’t think about them. Roy Fox claims that advertisers generally don’t want to persuade people to buy their products, because persuasion implies that the audience has given the issue some thought and come to a conscious decision. Instead, advertisers want to transform people. They want to compel people to buy a product without even knowing why they’re buying it—as a visceral response to a stimulus, not as a conscious decision. And this is best done through images.

This description of the development of an automated, unthinking response sounds suspiciously like classical conditioning, in which animals are trained through repetition to associate an emotional or autonomic response to an initially unrelated stimulus. Unflattering images of Pavlov’s dogs salivating at the sound of a bell come to mind, and many of us would no doubt like to think that we are not so easily manipulated. Nevertheless, classical conditioning has been shown to work in humans, and research with advertisements has demonstrated the phenomenon that psychologists call affect transfer, wherein an emotional response from an unrelated object or event is transferred to the product being sold, simply by showing an image of the product, followed by an image of the emotional object or event, and repeating the procedure many times (Kim and Allen). Again, what bothers many of us about this procedure is that our attitudes, opinions, and even our actions are influenced without any conscious processing on our part. In fact, most people are probably convinced that such manipulations do not work on them. But advertisers and political consultants know otherwise.

Using images to develop connections between initially unrelated concepts does not necessarily involve the use of emotional subject matter (Kim and Allen), and images can even be used to prompt sustained, analytical thinking (Scott). Images, like verbal text, can be used to prompt an immediate, visceral response, to develop cognitive (though largely unconscious) connections over a sustained period of time, or to prompt conscious analytical thought. This is not to say that there is no meaningful distinction between the rhetorical use and cognitive processing of images and verbal text—far from it. Rather, although verbal discourse can be used to prompt listeners and readers to create “mental images,” to instantiate values and stir up strong emotions, actual images tend to be more efficient forms for accomplishing these goals. This is what excites professional persuaders and frightens many academic scholars about rhetorical images.

But rather than continuing to avoid consideration of rhetorical images, we must come to terms with them. By applying relevant theoretical concepts and
psychological research to the study of persuasive images, we can learn more about how and why images are so rhetorically effective. Perhaps more important, we may learn how to use images to prompt sustained reflective thinking instead of using them to discourage it. Simply avoiding the study of rhetorical images is not only impractical (because they are so ubiquitous), but doing so would, in effect, constitute an effort to banish emotional and aesthetic concerns from the study of rhetoric and communication.

Rhetorical images are ubiquitous, powerful, and important. We need to embrace them, not only as scholars, but also as educators, and teach students to use them effectively and responsibly. Doing so does not require us to abandon our intellectual values, but perhaps to re-examine them a little, to reflect on the assumptions behind them, and perhaps to express and apply those values and assumptions a bit more carefully and thoughtfully.

NOTES

1. Discussing presence as a matter of holding up objects to look at or of prompting listeners or readers to construct a "mental image" may make it seem as if presence applies only to actual physical objects or people. However, presence can also be imbued in abstract ideas or values, either by explicitly invoking them or by creating a relationship between the idea or value and a concrete image or object, as I discuss later in this chapter.

2. See Ronald de Sousa, The Rationality of Emotion, for a description and critique of the physiological theory of emotion. De Sousa argues that emotions are rational more so than physiological constructs. My own view is that the range of constructs that we classify as emotions—everything from panic and rage to envy and nostalgia—cannot be explained by any one set of processes. There may be some common mechanisms involved in all types of emotions, but feelings of nostalgia or envy over another’s material wealth are clearly more culturally defined than the more primal moment of panic that might be triggered by the sight of a snake in one’s path while walking in the woods. Yet we typically label all of these responses as different types of emotions.

WORKS CITED


CHAPTER TWO

The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments
J. Anthony Blair

This book is about visual rhetoric, and this chapter is about visual arguments. I take it as part of my task, then, to address the relationships among these three: rhetoric, argument, and the visual. How can there be visual arguments when arguments as we usually know them are verbal? And if there can be visual arguments, what is their rhetorical aspect? Because arguments are supposed to be tools of persuasion and rhetoric is often thought of as including (but not exhausted by) the study and use of the instruments of persuasion, I begin by exploring the relationships among rhetoric, argument, and persuasion. Then I turn to the difficulties and opportunities that present themselves when considering visual argument in particular. The chapter ends by taking up the question: What does being visual add to arguments?

Rhetoric and argument have been associated since antiquity, and in that connection arguments have traditionally been thought of as verbal phenomena. Aristotle, one of the earliest in European culture to study rhetoric systematically, identified the art of rhetoric with knowledge of modes of persuasion (Rhetoric 1354r 13-14). The method of persuasion, he held, is “demonstration,” and demonstration’s instrument is the enthymeme, which is a form of argument (Rhetoric 1355r 5-6). An Aristotelian enthymeme is an argument in which the arguer deliberately leaves unstated a premise that is essential to its reasoning. Doing so has the effect of drawing the audience to participate in its own persuasion by filling in that unexpressed premise. This connecting of the audience to the argument is what makes the enthymeme a rhetorical form of argument. But next, Aristotle took it for granted that the agent of persuasion is the orator, and from that it follows on his conception that the principal tool of persuasion must be the orator’s medium, namely, language. So, according to one of the earliest and most influential accounts, the material to which rhetoric is to be applied is verbal argument.

The conception of rhetoric as essentially about speech has remained with us to this day, although it has become more and more contested. As recently as