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The Rhetorics of Visual and Verbal Arguments

When one first examines an image and a verbal text, there is no clear connection between the two. The missing link between these two seemingly unassociated objects is that they both contain rhetorical arguments. It is argued that rhetoric really began to develop when the written world became popular in ancient Greece and it was thought that rhetoric was only possible through verbal and written communication. However, with the development of paintings, in particular religious ones, visual arguments began appearing in the spectrum of rhetoric. As the image has become more prominent in the modern era and the means of using it have drastically expanded, there are an increasing number of visual arguments. However, it is unclear whether arguments are better explained by verbal or visual context. For example, when presenting an embarrassing story and coming up with an argument for it, both a verbal essay and a visual comic were used to persuade the reader, however, it is still unclear which one was the more effective argument. To figure out this question, it is important to examine how persuasive the argument is, what the argument is and what the visual and verbal strategies are between the two.

To judge the effectiveness of verbal and visual arguments, one must look at how persuasive the argument is within its context. According to Anthony Blair, author of the article, "The Possibility and Actuality of Visual Arguments," persuasion can be defined as, "Argument which can cause a change in belief, attitude and behavior. This can be visual and verbal" (359). In the case of verbal arguments, such as a written moral story, the persuasion is found in the choice of words and how good the examples to back them

up are. This type of argument is most appealing to people used to more traditional because it is seen as an acceptable form of rhetoric and it is easy to present all sides of the issue in a verbal argument. Like with the moral story, it was not hard to give concrete examples and two different arguments within the written text. The visual argument, on the other hand, focus much more on giving arguments and rhetorical information in the simplest form possible. This is why objects like paintings, web images, comics, etc., are now being considered under the category of rhetoric and some people prefer the straightforward rhetoric of a visual to the more tedious verbal arguments. For example, Scott McCloud, author of the article, "Vocabulary of Comics," is an expert at using comics to present information considering that he uses a cartoon version of himself to narrate his visuals. On the subject of visual arguments and namely cartoons he states that when a cartoon is a simple image we can project our own ideas on to the image (McCloud 207). By not allowing the mind to be overwhelmed by loads of text, the visual argument allows the viewer to think on the information being presented to them and become more involved with the argument. For example, in the comic strip of the moral story, the images were all pretty simplistic because the point of a visual argument is not to have so much going on that the viewer is taken away from the main point. The only downside to the simple persuasion found in visual arguments is that they can really only cover one topic at a time and are a bit limited in their scope. Thus, both verbal and visual arguments possess persuasion; however, they implement this element in different ways.

The type of argument that was presented in both the verbal and visual arguments of the moral story was a linear argument. The verbal argument started by explaining the situation and then drawing conclusions from it. Basically, it went from one point to the

next in a clear and concise fashion that would allow the readers to follow it easily. This certainly is not as interesting as a visual argument; however, it presents all the information in one short piece of writing. The visual argument found in the comic strip also presents a linear type argument, going from one event from another in an orderly fashion including almost all the same information as the verbal argument. However, the visual argument in the comic strip is far more interesting because it presents its arguments with colorful imagery along with different fonts types, sizes and thought bubbles. According to Martin Solomon, author of the article “The Power of Punctuation,” different font sizes, types and punctuation marks give the argument a powerful auditory element as well as the normal image and verbal elements. This means that not only does the linear argument of the comic strip present the viewer with a variety of images; it also allows them to hear the tone presented in the argument as well. Thus, while both verbal and visual arguments had linear type arguments, there were elements found within their presentation that separated them from each other.

Like most things in life, visual and verbal arguments have pros and cons to them. The main strategy of a verbal argument is to present more information, including different points of view and examples, within a constructive, easy accessible text. Since this is the more traditional form of rhetoric, many viewers are probably more likely to accept this as a true form of rhetoric than the visual argument. Like with typography, there are those who think that modern forms of rhetoric are ruining what rhetoric really is and should not be accepted (Keedy 273). Even though these two types of persuasive arguments share the ability to prove a point or push an issue, the verbal argument is much easier to accept than the visual ones. The downside to a verbal argument, however, is that

they are far less interesting than images and comic strips. It is easy to say that many people now would rather get their information from images or comic stripes with a small bit of text than take the time to read through a long, dry essay. This is one of the visual argument's greatest strengths. According to Blair, visual argument is "communication without spoken words or verbal communication. This can include colors, symbols and images" (347-348). This means that visual arguments can be formed in a variety of ways that are far more appealing to the younger generation. They are also just as capable of incorporating traditional rhetorical strategies as their verbal counterpart. Keedy makes a similar argument when he discusses the changes and advancement of typography and he states, "Marshall McLuhan said that all new technologies incorporate the previous ones, and this certainly seems to be the case with type" (Keedy 274). This idea is relevant to visual arguments because even though they are not the traditional spoken or written arguments, they have the same capabilities to make these arguments. In addition, they are more appealing to most people than having to dig through a long text to find the information and they say more with less. For example, McCloud uses a simple cartoon character as the visual guide through his information. He is far more interested in making sure that the reader is able to absorb his points through his cartoon guide than in writing all his thoughts down in an essay. On the topic, he states, "But if who I am matters less, maybe what I say will matter more" (McCloud 208). Thus, by giving people a way to project their thoughts on to a simplified image, visual arguments hope to keep people interested and do more with less. The one large downside to visual arguments, however, is that they can only address a few arguments at a time, while verbal arguments can present several of them all in the same neat format. It is difficult to produce more than

one argument from a single image or cartoon than it is to type several of them into a single paper. Thus, verbal and visual strategies of rhetoric are both possible and plausible, however, neither one of them is an entirely perfect form of rhetoric.

Works Cited

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