

# THE RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF A DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPH

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## ABSTRACT

**This article consists of three sections. In the first section, the theoretical foundations of rhetorical analysis as applied to visual messages is explicated. In the second section, the approach is illustrated by means of an example drawn from a photographic essay on streetchildren. In the third section, some difficulties with the application of rhetorical analysis to documentary photographs are discussed. It is theorized that straight documentary photographs are essentially open texts and that even though the structural data uncovered in the course a rhetorical reading might point towards a preferred interpretation, decisions about the author's persuasive intent with the image can only be made if the creative controls of the medium have been employed rhetorically.**

## INTRODUCTION

In an article on the parallel histories of anthropology and photography, Pinney

(1992:91) remarks that just as anthropology is discovering its status as anthropography, photography is in the process of discovering that it is a languagebased photology and photogrammar. Pinney notes that this coincides with Derrida's themes of 'the pictorialization of writing and the grammaticalization of the image' (in Brunette & Wills, 1989:100).

In an attempt to grammatize the image, various models for literary analysis have to date been adapted and applied to the pictorial message. An example would be the adaptation by Peters (1978:47) of Roman Jakobson's communication model for literary texts (1960). Similarly, in an article of 1970, Jaques Durand proceeded from the standpoint that literary figures of speech such as simile or metaphor have their visual equivalents and compiled an inventory of possible visual rhetorical occurrences.

In the present article, the work of Durand is discussed in some detail. The aims of the article are threefold: (i) to explicate the theoretical basis of a structure-oriented or rhetorical analysis of the pictorial message as suggested by Durand and others, (ii) to illustrate the approach by means of an example drawn from an essay of social documentary photographs on streetchildren in Johannesburg and (iii) to identify and discuss some difficulties and potential pitfalls when applying Durand's framework, which was originally designed with print media advertising images in mind, to documentary photographs.

## THE RHETORICAL APPROACH

The origins of the rhetorical approach lie with the ancient Greek philosophers Protagoras and Aristotle, who developed rhetoric as an art form in public speaking (Metallinos, 1995:289). Rhetoric in the general sense is referred to by Freese (1975:xi) in an introduction to Aristotle's "The 'Art' of Rhetoric" as the use of language in such a manner as to impress the hearers and influence them for or against a certain course of action. According to de Beer (1991:56), the rhetorical interpretation of a written message involves reading:

"... with an eye on the argumentative structure of the text, its persuasive power: power and authority, desire and truth. Along with this one must consider its place among other texts. All these cross references are part of the structure of argumentation and persuasion. Oppositions and relations between the words in an argumentative framework stand in a direct relationship to meaning." (de Beer, 1991:156).

The application of a linguistic type of rhetorical analysis to visual texts is, however, recent. Metallinos (1995:289) cites the work of Burke (1950) as a starting point, whereas Burgin (1990:70) claims that an approach to still photography modelled on rhetorical analysis was first systematically applied by Durand (1970) in the area of advertising images.

A central feature of a rhetorical reading of the image is that, similar to the rhetorical interactions between words in a literary context, the emphasis is in the first instance on the visual oppositions and relations (or visual interactions)

between the individual visual elements (or visual sub-structures) of which the image is comprised. By this is meant that a rhetorical critique aims to uncover the persuasive structure of an image by first breaking it up into visual building blocks or visual component parts. Seen from this standpoint, a rhetorical reading of a visual message is always structure-oriented, or concerned with the composition and construction of the image, as well as whether the medium and underlying structure support or undermine the strength of the visual (Curtiss, 1995:26).

## THE VISUAL ELEMENTS OF AN IMAGE

According to Eco (1990:36), the individual visual elements of a pictorial message may be classed in terms of their configurational complexity. Eco suggests three categories, namely visual figures, signs and semes. Figures, such as dots, lines and other autonomous marks, are the least complex structural components of an image. As a general rule, visual figures are more easily recognized in chirographical (handgenerated) than in mechanical (apparatusgenerated) images, because the former are built up from autonomous marks, whereas the visual elements of a mechanical image are usually generated simultaneously (Hard af Segerstad, 1984:217).

In the field of perceptual psychology, numerous laws of perception (Gestalt laws) have been identified which govern the viewing process of two or more visual elements (Pettersson, 1993:68; Bruce and Green, 1990:110). These apply mainly to the less complex elements of an image (i.e. visual figures) and are based on the observation that

a figure-ground relationship exists between the visual element itself and its background. By this is meant that the element and the background are not perceived simultaneously but sequentially. The most pertinent perception laws have been summarized by Zakia (1975:33) as follows:

1. The closer two or more visual elements of an image are, the greater is the probability that they will be seen as a group or a pattern (the law of proximity).
2. Visual elements that are similar in shape, colour or size tend to be seen as related (the law of similarity).
3. Visual elements that require the fewest number of interruptions will be grouped to form continuous straight or curved lines, such as a "line" consisting of closely spaced dots (the law of continuity).

When two or more autonomous marks (figures) interact, visual signs are created, such as the sun as a circle with radiating lines. More sophisticated visual signs (e.g. horse, wagon) are referred to as semes. Eco (1990:36) notes that semes are often also termed "images" or "iconic signs". A seme is the largest (most complex) visual elements that an iconic code of a pictorial message may possess. It usually contains a visual phrase such as "horse standing in profile viewed from below".

The above described three categories (figures, signs, semes) are not watertight, but a continuum is envisaged ranging from autonomous marks which are distinct from the code of transmission of the image, such as the dots of a newspaper photograph, to complex semes which do not contain overt cultural connotations and are

consequently not classed as an iconographic code, such as "pegasus" or "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse" (Eco, 1990:37)

## THE RHETORICAL INTER-ACTIONS OF VISUAL ELEMENTS

In the above cited article of 1970, Durand (in Burgin, 1990:70) defines rhetoric as "l'art de la parole feinte" (the art of fake speech) in the sense that figures of rhetoric aim to persuade by means of mock transgressions of accepted norms and conventions (of language, morals, etc). For example, with the rhetorical device of ellipsis in a literary context, the words needed to complete the construction or sense of a sentence are deliberately omitted.

Durand proceeds from the premise that literary figures of speech such as ellipsis have their visual equivalents. He identifies two dimensions of visual rhetorical interactions which may take place between the visual elements of an image. The first dimension concerns the nature of the rhetorical operations which may occur when an image is viewed. On this dimension, Durand describes four distinct operations, namely addition, suppression, substitutions and exchange. Burgin (1990:72) notes that these four operations are reducible to two fundamental ones (addition and suppression) because substitution is in essence suppression followed by addition (an element is suppressed in order to be replaced by another) and exchange is nothing more than reciprocal substitution.

On the second dimension, the rhetorical relations which may exist between two or more visual elements are de-

		RHETORICAL OPERATION			
		A	B	C	D
<b>RELATION BETWEEN ELEMENTS</b>		<b>Addition</b>	<b>Suppression</b>	<b>Substitution</b>	<b>Exchange</b>
	1 Identity	Repetition	Ellipsis	Hyperbole	Inversion
	2 Similarity of Form	Rhyme	NA	Allusion	Hendiadys
	3 Similarity of Content	Simile	Circumlocution	Metaphor	Homology
	4 Difference	Accumulation	Suspension	Metonymy	Asyndeton
	5 Opposition of Form	Zuegma	Dubitation	Periphrasis	Anacoluthon
	6 Opposition of Content	Antithesis	Reticence	Euphemism	Chiasmus
	7 Ambiguity	Anatanaclasis	Tautology	Pun	Antimetabola
	8 Paradox	Paradoc	Pretenion	Antiphrasis	Antilogy

**Table 1 : Durand's Inventory Of The Relations Between Visual Elements And Their Rhetorical Operation**

scribed. These may be characterized by identity, similarity, opposition or difference. According to Durand, two visual elements are identical when every aspect of each element is the same. The elements are similar when at least one aspect is identical and other aspects are disparate. Further, two elements are opposed if they belong to a paradigm with limited terms ( e.g. male/female) whereas two elements are different when they have nothing at all in common (they are uniquely unlike each other).

The above listed rhetorical relations are further divided into relations pertaining to the form and content of a visual element. Stroebel and Bruno (1995:323) point out that even though form and shape are sometimes used interchangeably, form refers to the three-dimensional nature of the subject matter depicted whereas shape concerns the outline only. The content of a visual element on the other hand refers to the subject matter (or referent) depicted. When two elements are

the same in the content relation and opposed in the form relation, or the same on the form relation and opposed on the content relation, false homologies are created which Durand terms paradox and ambiguity respectively.

Making use of the above explicated two dimensions, Durand compiled an inventory of possible visual rhetorical occurrences, reproduced here as Table 1. As regards the implementation of the inventory, he writes that:

“...the most original ideas, the most audacious advertisements, appear as transpositions of rhetorical figures which have been indexed over the course of numerous centuries. This is explained in that rhetoric is in sum a repertory of the various ways in which we can be "original". It is probable then that the creative process could be enriched and made easier if the creators would take account consciously of a sys-

tem which they use intuitively" (in Burgin, 1990:81).

premises and arguments which an image may contain.

It is pointed out that Durand refers to rhetorical figures only and does not mention rhetorical premises or rhetorical arguments, a distinction which has been made by Eco (1990:37). Eco holds that pictorial rhetorical figures may be analyzed utilizing literary norms (e.g., metaphor, rhyme), whereas visual rhetorical premises and arguments rely on connotations of emotion and taste on the part of the viewer in order to come into being. For example, an image of a woman and a man looking lovingly at an infant could connote "family" and may become the premise for a visual argument such as "a nice happy family is something to appreciate" (Eco, 1990:38). In other words, the fundamental rhetorical interactions as described by Durand (1970) may be regarded as the building blocks for the advanced visual

## AN EXAMPLE OF A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS

The mechanics of a rhetorical critique are best illustrated by means of an example. The image chosen for this purpose is a social documentary photograph (Photograph 1) drawn from a photographic essay on street children in Johannesburg. In its original viewing context, the photograph was not published as such but formed part of an exhibition of original photographic prints. The image was displayed without a caption. The main rhetorical features of the image are as follows:

- The brick wall in the photograph contains many autonomous horizontal and vertical lines, which are either identical or similar. The addition of identical lines (A1 in



Photograph 1

Table 1) and similar lines (A2 and A3) results in visual repetition, rhyme and simile respectively. The addition of similar elements (cement lines, bricks) in close proximity to each other creates a visual pattern according to the law of proximity.

- The relation between the parking meter pole and the lower part of its shadow suggests a similarity of form (A2) but an opposition of content (A6), because an object and its shadow belong to a limited paradigm. When the pole and the lower part of the shadow are viewed sequentially, visual allusion (C2) and euphemism (C6) occur. As the head of the parking meter is not in the frame, but its shadow is, a suppression of an opposition of form, or dubiation (B5) occurs. When the shoes of the street child are viewed sequentially (from left to right or right to left), there is a similarity of content and an opposition of form, as the shoes are pointing in opposed directions, resulting in visual metaphor (C3) and periphrasis (C5). The grass on the pavement is comprised of lines with no particular order amongst them. This absence of order is termed visual accumulation (A4).
- When viewed sequentially, the rhetorical interaction between the tilted head of the streetchild and the bent shadow of the parking meter is a visual pun (C7), because ambiguity arises out of the simultaneous difference of content and similarity of form between the two elements.

## DISCUSSION

The components of the visual pun (C7) in Photograph 1, i.e. the shadow and the streetchild, may be regarded as building blocks for possible visual premises and arguments, in the sense that a viewer may attach connotations (or implied meanings) and personal associations (see Pettersson, 1995:137) to them. The same applies to the other visual rhetorical interactions in the image.

At this point there is an area of overlap between rhetorical and semiotic analysis, which deals with the relationship between the visual signs of an image and the meanings which these signs may generate, as well as the way signs are formulated into a communicative code (Metallinos, 1995:291; Fourie, 1980:95). By an area of overlap is meant that a reader may attach significance to the structural data uncovered in the course of a rhetorical analysis. In Photograph 1, for example, the bent shadow could be seen as signifying or as standing for a phrase such as "something gone wrong" or "a deviation from the usual path" similar to the way in which the cry of a baby may signify hunger (Sless, 1986:2) or a cloud may be a sign for rain (Fourie, 1980:96). The visual pun in Photograph 1 might consequently give rise to an arbitrary signification along the lines "the future life of the streetchild will always be 'bent' due to present poverty, neglect and lack of guidance".

In the introduction it is stated that one of the aims of this article is to identify and discuss some difficulties and potential pitfalls when applying Durand's framework, which was originally designed with print media advertising images in mind, to documentary photographs. Burgin (1990:79), who illus-

trates Durand's approach by means of advertisements from English magazines, notes that:

"Our recognition of a good advertising photograph has little to do with its efficacy in the service of a product. It is rather the recognition of that organized richness of signification, combined with a foregrounding of the device, which may lead us to make the attribution 'aesthetic' in respect of any particular message whatsoever, whether it be visual or verbal and regardless of its institutional context. It is therefore not to be supposed that rhetorical analysis is suited only to advertising images" (Burgin, 1990:81).

Even though both advertising and documentary images may possess varying grades of rhetorical encoding, a fundamental difference between them is that images which form part of an advertising campaign are as a general rule classed as closed texts, whereas documentary photographs are usually considered to be open texts (Watson & Hill, 1993:135).

In the case of a closed visual text a preferred reading is envisaged by the author(s) of the image. For example, a print media advertisement discussed by Burgin (1990:79) depicts four identical photographs of a passenger car. Each image has a different caption (Family Shopping car, Practical Estate car, Luxury Saloon, Overnight Sleeper). Burgin argues that the visual repetition becomes ambiguous by the application of differing captions, which results in antanaclasis (A5 in Table 1), comparable to the literary equivalent, whereby the same word is repeated with a different signification. An example would be "In thy youth learn some craft, that in thy old age thou mayest get thy living without craft" (Burgin,

1990:78). In the above advertisement, the rhetorical mechanism of antanaclasis is utilized in order to ensure that a preferred reading along the lines "this car is versatile" occurs with almost any viewer, but especially one targeted by the campaign, who is presumably literate.

In an illiterate audience on the other hand, the rhetorical interactions of a closed text which relies on a text anchor (or caption), as illustrated in the above example, might easily lead to aberrant or unintended interpretations due to the inability of the audience to read and understand the accompanying caption. A further example would be a visual depicting a tablet with moving legs and the caption "Don't let your pills run out", which could generate a large variety of unintended interpretations in an illiterate audience. In a literate audience, on the other hand, the same visual may be regarded as an engaging, humorous way of getting a message across.

In contrast, with an open visual text there are no correct or envisaged readings and the viewer is invited to contribute proactively towards shaping the meaning of the visual. In an open text such as Photograph 1, the rhetorical interactions between the visual elements are usually inherent to the subject matter depicted and are not intentionally induced by the author of the image.

In the case of Photograph 1, the photographer merely recognized the visual pun and other rhetorical interactions contained in the scene consciously or unconsciously and recorded them utilizing straight or pure documentary technique. By this is meant that an attempt was made to produce an unbiased record of what would have existed in the absence of

the photographer and to provide substantially the same visual experience that the original subject would have elicited (Fergus-Jean, 1995:223). This was achieved by means of direct framing, extensive depth of field and an avoidance of pictorial distortion.

The photographic medium, however, also allows for numerous creative controls, such as selective focus, double exposure, digital manipulation and others (see Lester, 1995:84; Messaris, 1994a:188), which could have been employed to encode the image rhetorically. With snapshot aesthetics, for example, a photographer may intentionally mimic careless framing, tilted horizons etc. in order to mock conventional rules of composition which have been handed down from painting (Zakia, 1995:725). It would consequently be incorrect to consider the photographer as the author of the rhetorical interactions contained in Photograph 1. The photographer is only the communicator or conveyor thereof.

The obverse of the above described potential pitfall, whereby authorship of the rhetorical interactions could be erroneously attributed to the photographer, has been described by Sless (1986:83). Sless argues that an elimination of authorship by the reader of the image may occur, making use of a photograph by American art photographer Edward Weston to illustrate the point. According to Sless, the main reasons for an elimination of authorship are firstly ignorance on the part of the viewer and secondly that the photograph is displayed in a misleading context. The photograph by Weston, which depicts a tuberous vegetable against an evenly black background, may be appreciated as an example from the "straight photography" movement in photography history (see Jeffrey, 1989:147) by a reader with the

necessary background knowledge. However, should the same image be displayed in a botany textbook it may also be read as a neutral, clinical representation during the making (or taking) of which no overt creative controls were employed. Sless (1986:83) writes that "to read the photograph as an image in a science text is to all but obliterate the photographer, who is reduced to the level of an instrumental agent".

Whether an erroneous attribution or elimination of authorship takes place in the course of a rhetorical analysis of a photographic message such as Photograph 1 depends primarily on the visual literacy of the interpreter of the image. Visual literacy in the general sense concerns an ability to read, understand and appreciate visual messages (for a more comprehensive definition see Baca, 1990:65).

An aspect of visual literacy which seems especially important in view of the above discussion is production literacy (Messaris, 1994b:180, see also Russell, 1994:366), which refers to a heightening of interpretational awareness due to production experience in a particular medium (e.g. photography, watercolours, videography etc.).

In the context of a rhetorical analysis of the documentary image, a heightened interpretational awareness implies that the viewer possesses a comprehensive knowledge of the expressive possibilities or creative controls which the photographic medium offers. Production experience gained in the field of photography (especially in the area of documentary photography) would then enhance the ability of the viewer to maintain a precise distinction between visual rhetorical interactions which are inherent to the subject matter depicted and those which have been intention-



ally induced by the creator of the image, and consequently to make accurate decisions about whether the image is to be read as an open, partially open, partially closed or predominantly closed text.

## CONCLUSION

It has been argued in this article that documentary photographs are as a general rule classed as open texts and that even though the data uncovered in the course a rhetorical reading of the documentary image might point towards a preferred interpretation, decisions about the author's persuasive intent with the image can only be made if the creative controls of the medium have been employed rhetorically.

In the case of straight or pure documentary photographs, which aim to minimize the use of pictorial controls such as distortion and selective focus, a rhetorical analysis is then limited to the visual rhetorical interactions which are inherent to the scene depicted, as opposed to those which have been intentionally induced by the creator of the image.

It would appear, then, that the above quoted claim by Burgin (1990:81) that rhetorical analysis is not only suited to advertising images, holds true in the sense that rhetorical analysis can be utilized to reveal accurately the "organized richness of signification" which a documentary image may contain.

In the above discussion it has been mentioned that an area of overlap exists between rhetorical and semiotic analysis because a viewer may attach significance to the visual rhetorical relations and operations of the image. The structural data uncovered during a rhetorical reading of the documentary

image may of course also be taken as a point of departure for other types of reading, be they linguistically based or not. Examples would be deep viewing (Pailliotet, 1994) as well as a visual criticism modelled on the pragmatics of Habermas (Craig, 1994).

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