Painting as Rhetorical Performance: Joseph Wright’s An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump

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“I expect pictures to have an effect on me,” comments the art historian James Elkins in The Object Stares Back. Elkins offers a phenomenological perspective, arguing that a work of art talks back to the viewer and forces an immediate reaction and a lingering revision that works through memory. In addition, a work of art may alter the viewer’s consciousness by posing questions. Elkins expresses a hope that “the effect will not wear off.” He writes: “I want to see something new and to have an experience I can remember years later. . . . If you spend time in front of a painted portrait, the figure’s mood will begin to change the way you feel. That new mood might become a part of you, recurring months or years later in very different circumstances” (41).

For many years, I have pondered Joseph Wright’s An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump. This eighteenth-century painting has worked its way into my courses and my consciousness. In this essay, I set forth a rhetorical analysis of the painting, one that is also influenced by semiotics and art history. Central to my argument about visual rhetoric is the figuring of aesthetic experience as a transactional experience located in specific social conditions. Guy Debord makes a similar point about the relationship of viewers to works of art in Society of the Spectacle. He argues that images enable the formation of communities of knowledge, for spectacle is “a social relation among people, mediated by images” (4). Not only does the viewer bring to the work a body of assumptions about the nature of art, the nature of viewing, and the form that art takes, the viewer is also changed in some way by the act of viewing and returns to the community bearing that knowledge.

Estella Lauter also encourages viewers to alter their understanding of aesthetic response and to set aside the dominant notion that encountering a crafted object is necessarily a meeting between unequal minds: the genius of the creator and the humble supplication of the observer. Using Gwendolyn Brooks’ “Two Dedications” as an entry into a discussion of...
different formations of response, Lauter notes that, traditionally, aesthetics "has charged us to think of any given work of art within a category called ‘Art,’ and to voyage out of our ‘commonrooms’ . . . to visit it in a place that is prepared for it, such as a museum; to dress ourselves up to meet its demand for a certain kind of attention." The demand for new clothes, for the hushed encounter in a special cloister of experience, removes art from the daily experience of people and from the human actions that accompany viewing: "sniffing, scratching, hugging, touching" (Lauter). As John Berger observes, powerful perceptions that "museums are full of holy relics which refer to a mystery which excludes" the majority of people actually suppress the body and the emotions as instruments of knowing, while at the same time imposing expectations for bodily conduct, such as avoiding wide gestures, loud voices, swift movement (24).

If, as Michael Ann Holly suggests, art is a question, this study of *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* is intended to answer questions and raise questions not only about the painting but also about studying visual rhetoric. Specifically, I explore three broad areas of inquiry and offer a method of studying visual rhetoric. What significance do visual images have for rhetorical analysis? How might a study of nonverbal material be conducted? Do visual explanations depend on the image or the viewer? In order to construct my argument, I have drawn insights from a recognizable group of postmodern writers who use methods similar to rhetorical analysis in order to study the intersection of context and affect. I seek to contribute to the study of visual culture by developing an interdisciplinary theory of historicized spectatorship. In particular, I argue that both lay spectators and professional, interested viewers understand Joseph Wright’s painting *The Air Pump* in terms of its subject, its exhibition space, the actions of other viewers, and the relationship of the painting to commodification.

An axiom of poststructural criticism is that, as Henry Krips notes, a text can "encompass a variety of nonlinguistic sign systems." As Krips explains, this view opens the field of images to semiotics and draws visual representation into what he calls "the fold of rhetoric" (186). Krips’ own analysis of Hans Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* opens with a useful rehearsal of theories of the gaze that draws on Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Judith Williamson. In the field of communication, Barry Brummett and Detine Bowers explore the Althusserian notion of interpellation, arguing that visual and verbal texts "call to readers to accept certain stances, roles, or interpretive strategies" (118).
These calls to subjectivity—to recognize that we are spectators engaged in interpreting the painting—are based on group identity, on socially produced gestalts of cultural experience (see Brummett and Bowers 120).

Before the study of visual rhetoric fully emerged in English studies, I began asking questions in my writing and rhetoric courses about various processes of interpretation that involved sources such as images that are not traditionally viewed as forms of persuasion. The first of these concerned narrative. If, as Walter Fisher argues, nonargumentative texts such as narratives could be considered persuasive documents, then what about poems? Poets of the Great War such as Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen argued strongly against blind patriotism and the glories of war. Similarly, certain paintings are arguably polemical. For example, nineteenth-century American painter Thomas Moran's sketches and watercolors of Yellowstone were instrumental in the effort to designate, through an act of Congress, that area as a national park (see Haines). In this case, the aesthetics of vision challenged lawmakers to preserve the beauty of the landscape. More overtly political works—such as Pablo Picasso’s Guernica or the disturbing works of the Australian painter, writer, and peacekeeper George Gittoes—are, of course, intended to be persuasive because they represent identifiable historic events and human rights violations. As Adena Rosmarin confirms in her study of genre and schema, artistic representation is as suasive as verbal representation: both begin “with a schema or premise that the painter [or writer] modifies to meet the demands of his purpose and audience” (11). The painting looks back at us, offering some idea of a creator and his or her social, political, economic, and cultural context for the creation. In this way a work of art is reflexive, always turning viewers back on themselves. Krips explains: “The medium or apparatus within which the images are created and circulate is treated as a device—in Foucault’s sense, a dispositif—for encrypting and projecting images onto the viewer. The image is taken as the site of a so-called gaze, a place where, by seeing a picture of themselves, viewers experience a reflexive form of self-scrutiny” (187).

The study of visual rhetoric offers an opportunity to develop a cultural poetic of viewing in which the viewer is situated in a web of competing expectations. The viewer is an agent capable of unpredictable choices, each of which affects the particular meanings of the art object at any point in time. I propose that any study of visual rhetoric must be interdisciplinary, offering what might be referred to as an “accumulated rhetoric” that
draws not only from rhetorical theory but also from art history, social history, reception theories, ethnography, film studies, and narrative theory.

Carole Blair and Neil Michel's work serves as the basis for this rhetorical analysis of The Air Pump exhibited in the National Gallery in London. They describe a tactile "rhetorical performance" in which the physical location of a work to be studied is synonymous with the concept of the rhetorical situation. The rhetorical situation—generally described as the context formed by the intersection of audience, purpose, and style—can be extended, as Blair and Michel observe, to encompass "the immediate setting of a discourse and the larger sociocultural milieu in which it is produced" (30). Their comments are suggestive for the study of painting, for a painting occupies a place in a museum or gallery where spectators encounter it. The discourse—in this case, The Air Pump—is located both in the eighteenth century (the time of production) and in the present (the time of reception). Thus, it is significant, as William Innes Homer notes, that studies in visual culture explore "looking and feeling," the types of experiences one has through the visual (8).

The subject of An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump is a popular eighteenth-century scientific entertainment: the demonstration of the air pump, a vacuum in which a white bird has been placed. At the center of the painting is a scientist, dressed in a loose fitting red robe, his silver hair untied. Gathered around him are eight members of an upper-class household: a finely-dressed young couple gazing at each other rather than at the air pump; a young man intently watching the scene; a father comforting two young girls while also pointing toward the air pump; an elderly man contemplating a skull in liquid that sits before him at the table; and a small boy, possibly a servant, who replaces the bird's cage at the window. It is night and the moon breaks from between clouds to illuminate the intimate scene. The group is gathered tightly around the table in a circle. The room is dark, illuminated only by a candle, invisible to the viewer, and the moonlight.

Critics have focused on two figures in the painting, drawing attention to their relationship. The first is the scientist, who looks directly at viewers. The second is the man, who stares contemplatively at the skull. The two seem to indicate that this painting takes as its subject the mutability of life. But what if we read this painting at the margins, focusing attention on the two girls, who turn away from the experiment, or on the couple, who ignore the experiment? And what of the bird itself,
Figure 1: Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734-1797, British. *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* (1768). Oil on canvas; 182.9 x 243.9 cm. Presented by Edward Tyrrell, 1863; National Gallery, London.
who draws the spectator’s affections toward its plight? The study of this painting begins, perhaps historically, with the painter, but our own reading must find a location. Do we begin with the frame? Do we move from the actions of the scientist to the reactions of the party gathered to watch the experiment? Do we deny our own reactions to the experiment? The framed picture, writes Meyer Schapiro, is a window onto a distant life (227). The golden frame of The Air Pump in the National Gallery, as well as the frame of this article, charge the viewer to see.

After Richard and Samuel Redgrave’s Century of British Painters (1866), critics who have either studied The Air Pump or touched on it as an illustration of eighteenth-century social practice have also emphasized the painting’s relationship to eighteenth-century science rather than to eighteenth-century art history.² As a realist painting, it attracts the eye to the subject rather than to the surface of the canvas. It is the subject matter that is unusual. Compared to the Gainsborough portraits that hang alongside The Air Pump at a recent exhibition at the National Gallery, the painting appears to be an oddity, attracting far more viewers because of its interesting choice of subject matter rather than the portraits that are shown with it and which are painted by more recognizable names in the history of art. Furthermore, the painting interpellates viewers as participants: the scientist gazes outward, enjoining us to engage in the experiment or to look away.

Rhetorically, form and subject work together to persuade. In this painting, the subject of science and the realism of the technique work together to create what classical rhetoric would identify as an appeal to the emotions, or pathos. Even in Wright’s own time, audience members would have seen the Author of all (God) working in and through the machine, and would have experienced the emotional response sanctioned by Edmund Burke’s ideas on the sublime: the overpowering sensation of awe in the face of God’s work. Now, after horrific Nazi medical experiments on human subjects, the mass destruction wrought upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the persistent use of animals as subjects for scientific and commercial experimentation, today’s viewers may see that experimentation and technology are capable of mass destruction, supplanting the awe reserved for the divine with a sense of revulsion. Contemporary viewers might focus on the single bird, interpreted variously as a victim of imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, enterprise, or science.
Joseph Wright: Derby and the Air Pump

While critics cannot recover Wright’s exact intentions as he painted *The Air Pump*, it is possible to posit some of the conditions and predispositions of his life that might have affected the outcome. Wright was born in Derby, a market and industrial town northwest of London. Although he worked in London for a short time as a portrait painter and exhibited his paintings at London exhibitions, Derby was always his home. Among his many paintings of conventional portraiture are a series of scientific and industrial scenes, referred to as his “candlelight pictures” because Wright demonstrates the effects of light on the subjects of the painting. These candlelight pictures are also distinguished by their subject matter, which retranslated prescriptive artistic conventions of the time. Wright chose to illustrate the great movements in thought and experimentation taking place in the eighteenth century. His subjects of scientific, industrial, and rural workers are indicated by their titles: *A Philosopher Giving that Lecture on the Orrery; A Blacksmith’s Shop; An Iron Forge; Arkwright’s Cotton Mills by Night*.

*The Air Pump* was first exhibited in 1768. It received favorable reviews, was purchased by Benjamin Bates, and was immediately engraved (an essential process for the dissemination of paintings to the public and critics, and one that secured many artists’ reputations [Daniels, *Joseph* 42]). As Stephen Daniels notes, *The Air Pump* has a “complex genealogy” that brings together specific references to people and place with standard iconographic language (40). For example, the painting contains stock references to the erotic associations of caged birds and it encompasses portraits of Wright’s Derby neighbors.

Benedict Nicolson situates *The Air Pump* within the social and scientific circles of Derby in the mid-eighteenth century. His focus is clearly on the apparatus of the air pump and the popular lecture circuit of traveling scientists. As Nicolson points out, scientific instruments like the air pump were readily available and were “required to satisfy an ever-growing curiosity in natural phenomena” among the middle-class populace (112). This popular interest in the workings of nature gives us our first clue as to how Wright’s contemporaries would have viewed the painting. In public lectures, the workings of nature were used to illustrate the sublime powers of the “invisible hand” of God. In turn, these demonstrations would instruct spectators in the proper attitudes of awe and obedience to God, the Author of Nature and “the moral governor of the world” (Schaffer 26, 19).

In the mid-eighteenth century, the air pump was not a new instrument.
The first model was invented about one hundred years earlier by Otto von Guericke and was developed in England by Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke. Social reformer, minister, and amateur scientist Joseph Priestley, described his own purchase of an air pump in the 1750s, by which time they were inexpensive items, essential to any traveling scientific lecture. Not only did Priestley use the machine himself, but he also taught his students to conduct lectures for the entertainment of parents and friends. In a recent study of Wright, Daniels argues that spectacular display was seen as "crucial to securing the appeal of science," and thus many of the scientific displays of Wright's day came to be held in public playhouses or coffee-houses, where itinerant lecturers could perform for a broad audience (Joseph 38). Daniels adds: "Show business reached into most serious pursuits. Some lecturers in natural philosophy toured with apparatus fit for a fairground, incorporating planetaria, air pumps and steam-engines augmented by paintings, sculpture, automata, barrel organs and fireworks" (Fields 47).

Erasmus Darwin and Josiah Wedgwood, members of Wright's circle, were Freemasons, whose egalitarian philosophy united tradesmen, merchants, and squires in a distrust of royal and religious tyranny. The Freemasons themselves promoted and financed public improvements, such as schools, hospitals, bridges, and roads. Within this field of vision, the bird in the air pump becomes a symbol of oppression, its imprisonment signifying the need for freedom. The scientist is a Masonic figure, able to use science for a benevolent purpose, freeing the bird from its oppression in much the same way that the Freemasons would use science for benevolent purposes in the towns of Derbyshire.

Defining Wright as part of a circle infused with a "new spirit" of science and industry, Nicolson notes that the audience assembled in The Air Pump is probably most like the types of middle-class residents who Wright knew, not a group of professionals, but a group of "uninstructed" yet "eager" students, including "women and young children who, though they may be watching entranced, can understand little more than that a bird may die unless something is done to save it, or that the planets revolve round the sun" (112). The pathetic rendering of the children in the painting draws on conventional artistic language and representation and uses the children to enhance the emotional response of the spectator. As Daniels points out, in the eighteenth century birds were "conventional emblems of courtship" in literature and visual media (Joseph 40). Lorenz Eitner notes, "Caged birds are a common symbolical device in the art and literature of the eighteenth century. In the art of the Rococo [this image]
had a remarkable variety of meanings,” doubling ideas of possession and loss in erotic art (15-16). Wright had adopted this language for his own double portrait of *Mr. and Mrs. William Chase*, a painting that pre-dates *The Air Pump* by four years. In this portrait, Mrs. Chase holds a white parrot on her finger, while her husband gazes fondly at her and the bird. The scene illustrates the bliss of a successful courtship. The bird (representing man, woman, and the libido) is free to fly but prefers to stay close to home. Mr. and Mrs. Chase gaze at the bird as if grateful to it for their good fortune.

Wright explores the pathos of the caged bird in a later painting, *Synnot Children*, painted twelve years after *The Air Pump*. In this portrait, the children argue over a pet bird—most likely a dove—the traditional Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit. It has been taken from its cage by one of the Synnot boys, who looks directly at the spectators, making us complicitous in the scene, addressing us and seeking our judgments, just as the scientist looks at us from *The Air Pump*. The boy's golden curls and rich satin drapery class him with the painted angels of the Renaissance (with which Wright would have become familiar during his trip to Italy in 1773). He wears a look of triumph on his face, while his brother grabs for the bird, stretching not only his arm forward to grasp the bird, but his entire body. Their sister, the youngest of the three, looks toward the spectators with a most imploring gaze. She has crossed her hands over her heart as if to indicate that it is breaking, a gesture that also alludes to the required posture of the unbaptized before the altar of Christ in the Anglican Church.

As with *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*, the message of *Synnot Children* is both secular and sacred. If we note that the oldest boy’s right hand is raised in an ecclesiastical gesture over the dove’s head, we may conclude that his sister grieves for him, a boy now with the angels, or that he is a representation of the Christ that lives in all persons of God. Yet, we may also compare the actions of the boys in this painting with a dark passage from Samuel Richardson’s epistolary novel *Clarissa*, in which the seducer Mr. Lovelace compares his habitual cruelty toward women with his earlier play as a child: “We begin, when boys, with birds; and when grown up, go on to women; and both perhaps, in turn experience our sportive cruelty” (qtd. in Eitner 16).

By the end of the eighteenth century, however, the nature of the representation changed. At first, the spectacles demonstrated the natural order of the universe and positioned humans as part of that divine order, cogs in the vast machine of the cosmos. By the last decades of the century,
Figure 2: Joseph Wright of Derby, 1734-1797, British. *Synnot Children* (1781). Oil on canvas; 152.4 x 125.8 cm. Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by Mrs. Michael Hawker, Founder Benefactor, 1980. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.
however, the revolutionary spirit that was infusing Europe and America rewrote the impact of the scientific lecture. Natural spectacles such as earthquakes and thunderstorms were equated with storms of rebellion. Immanuel Kant and Adam Smith were instrumental in pointing out that humans were not powerless in the face of nature, nor were they naturally intended by any divine maker for slavery and oppression (Schaffer 33, 26). At this point, the reading of the bird in the air pump would have changed. Rather than abstaining from judgment, audiences would see, as Ronald Paulson suggests, that “the struggling bird in the air pump implies a free one” (189).

What the Scientist Saw
In his study of The Air Pump, Daniels calls the face of the scientist “one of the most haunting expressions in eighteenth-century art” (Joseph 41). His gaze draws us into the picture, and, as Paulson observes, we are reminded of Velasquez’s Las Meninas (188). Las Meninas is a complicated painting about vision in which the members of the Spanish court are having their portraits painted. Yet the portrait painter and his subjects look outward toward the audience. Only by searching into the far recesses of the salon do we see the mirror that reflects what we cannot see: we occupy the space of the King and Queen of Spain. The painter and his subjects look not at us, but at the King, the ultimate holder of the gaze. In his well-known analysis of the painting, Foucault writes about the shock produced in the spectator who realizes that he himself is the “image forever invisible to himself.” The eyes of the painter in Las Meninas are like the eyes of the scientist in The Air Pump. In Foucault’s words, “they place the spectator in the field of their gaze” and “force him to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable” (5). The viewer of The Air Pump is drawn into the picture as the ninth member of the evening lecture and thus becomes complicitous in the potential taking of life. The gaze invites us in and challenges us to assume either a position of scientific inquiry or one of utter horror.

Akira Lippit offers additional insight into the gaze as it is directed to animals, remarking that “a performative statement ‘it’s only an animal’ transforms other beings into things” (59). Following this insight, I might suggest that, with respect to The Air Pump, the scientist’s gaze makes us complicitous in a performance of violence. Because contemporary culture has been influenced by almost two hundred filmed versions of Mary Shelley’s novel Frankenstein, reading the scientist and his influence over the scene is a much different process today than it was in Wright’s time.
Victor Frankenstein, the tortured protagonist of Shelley’s tale, represents the dangers of taking scientific and technological innovations too far. *Frankenstein* has become a warning that technology can wreak havoc, primarily because scientists have been represented as divorced from the social realm of ethics and moral responsibility. Frankenstein, however, is a type found in many works of literature and art. Roslynn Haynes identifies six stereotypes of scientists that have recurred in literature, the press, and visual representations since the Middle Ages: the alchemist; the stupid virtuoso (“out of touch with the real world”); the Romantic (“the most enduring stereotype,” she notes); the heroic adventurer; the helpless scientist; and the idealist (3-4). Most of these stereotypes are still popular today, affecting how we read scientific information and how we predict the behavior of scientists. These socially constructed notions of the scientist lead us to interpret Wright’s natural philosopher in uniquely contemporary ways, especially inasmuch as he is surrounded by familiar gothic symbolism.

As an emblem of scientific development, then, Frankenstein is a Romantic-era ideal, the scientist working apart from nature, actually struggling to carve a position that is unique. Anne Mellor comments that Frankenstein “engages in a concept of science that Mary Shelley deplores, the notion that science should manipulate and control rather than describe, understand, and revere nature”—in other words, science that adheres to a Newtonian conception of divine order (100). As Lisa Nocks explains, Frankenstein “denies to his creature the benefits of nurturing, identity, companionship, and compassion,” and in so doing reanimates his own humanity as monstrous (139). In a post-*Frankenstein* reading of *The Air Pump*, our own humanity is made monstrous by our tacit acceptance of the experiment on the bird. Is Wright, as Paulson suggests, working with perception, playing with the spectator’s instincts for visuality and understanding? Paulson asserts that one can view but not “see”—that is, admit the “inner light” of knowledge. In depicting the various types of light that are cast on the scene—the moonlight, the candlelight behind the scientific apparatus, the absence of light in the murky background—Wright perhaps asks us to place ourselves in the scene. Do we turn away as the young girls do, refusing to admit scientific knowledge and rationality into our realm of perception? Or do we nod solemnly, recognizing in the experiment the forward movement of progress?

**In the Rooms They Come and Go**

*An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* is in the Sackler Room in the east
wing of the National Gallery in London, whose catalogue lists such contents as "Reynolds, Gainsborough, Constable, Turner," but not Wright. The featured painting, centrally positioned opposite the entrance to the gallery, is George Stubb's dramatic full-length portrait of the chestnut stallion *Whistlejacket*, which has become something of a signature piece for the Gallery inasmuch as it appears on T-shirts, refrigerator magnets, and mouse pads. When I inquired where I might find *The Air Pump*, a guard immediately directed me to *Whistlejacket*, which is visible from several galleries away. The Sackler Room is, like the rest of the National Gallery, quietly and sumptuously decorated. Its walls are papered in a deep green William Morris patterned wallpaper. Rich golden cornices and arches reach about twenty feet to the frosted glass ceiling. The natural light that is filtered through the ceiling is an important asset in viewing the twenty-five paintings that line the walls. The floors are wood, stained dark. The gallery has the airy, open ambiance of the Victorian train stations, a place of passage and rest, a secular cathedral as architect Robert Stern might term it. An oblong red leather bench invites visitors to savor the room and contemplate its contents. The postures of gallery goers are restrained; they saunter at a measured pace with arms folded.

*The Air Pump* is on the audiotour of the National Gallery; as a consequence, patrons who have requested headsets are likely to stop in front of the painting because it is part of their tour. Of twenty-seven people I timed who stopped before the painting in one ten-minute period, only one was wearing a headset. It is reasonable to conjecture, therefore, that people do not stop in front of *The Air Pump* solely because of its inclusion on the audiotour; there must be other, compelling reasons to find this painting interesting.

Many people enter the room as if looking for *The Air Pump*. Very few people pass it by, perhaps because of its location. As patrons enter the room from the adjoining gallery, *The Air Pump* is the first large canvas to the right. Just inside the door is Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral from the Meadows*, a painting familiar to many, which quite a few visitors notice and then step back to study it as a whole. On the right of *The Air Pump* are two smaller canvases in a corner: Reynolds's *Anne, Countess of Albemarle* and Gainsborough's *Mrs. Sarah Siddons*. To its left is Gainsborough's full-length portrait, *Dr. Ralph Schomberg*. These three portraits are classic portraits of the British school. Gainsborough's *Dr. Ralph Schomberg* uses light tints, and his subject is depicted with his body turned to the left and thus away from the wandering visitors. Despite having been a
prominent physician in Bath in his day, his name is no longer familiar. Rather, his portrait is a specimen of a type, a "Gainsborough." Because it is situated between these portraits, *The Air Pump* draws attention to itself as an unusual group portrait. As we have seen, at least two of the members of the evening party were friends of Wright. More strongly, however, the painting has the allure of a narrative. Something is happening in the painting, an action is taking place: the contemporary eye, thoroughly educated by television, is pulled past the iconic status of the painting as a work of art and toward the narrative.

My observations of crowd movements from two visits revealed that the painting had a consistent group of between eight and ten people viewing it. Many began at a distance but then crowded in for a closer look. It seemed typical for people to look at the painting, then move to the left to check the explanatory card beside the painting. The gallery's explanation highlights the story that is *in medias res*: "A lecturer demonstrates to a family audience the creation of a vacuum. A white cockatoo (in fact an exotic bird unlikely to have been used in this experiment) is imprisoned in a glass flask from which the air is being extracted by the pump until the bird can no longer breathe. The darkness, dramatically illuminated by candlelight, is not necessary for the experiment, but is characteristic of Wright's interest in rendering such contrast of light and shade." After reading this explanation, viewers returned to a center point, looked up toward the central figure of the scientist, backed away three to four steps, moved close again, and talked to their companions. Many smiled at the painting on first looking at it and continued to smile as they considered it. A noteworthy number of viewers spoke languages other than English, but even these viewers were drawn toward the center of the painting, making gestures at the scientist and his air pump. Because the painting is very dark, some shifted position to bring to light particular details.

A man seated next to me on the chaise turned to his companion and compared the painting to photography, gasping finally, "It's fantastic." He valued the realistic slice of life and the resemblance of this painting to familiar visual forms such as photographs or film. His talk took the form of narrative explanation and focused on what "they are going to do" to the bird. A colleague who joined me at the gallery after thirty minutes noticed that the painting draws attention, although he noted with a questioning shrug that Wright is a "nobody." He also noted that the boy closing the curtain, face half-shrouded in darkness, gives him "the creeps." "That's famous," someone in the crowd noted loudly, moving forward to the
painting. It was a man with children who summed up the narrative for the children, all the while pointing to the scientist and his air pump, mirroring the gesture of the father in the painting itself. “Each person is telling a story,” the father related in a heavy London accent. “These two aren’t interested; and he can’t believe it; and he’s thinking about it. The little lad, he’s curious.”

The spectators’ commentary about the painting falls into four categories: factual questions, such as “what kind of bird is it?” or “what’s in the glass jar?”; narrative explanations, as in “The kids don’t want to look”; artistic appreciations, such as “It’s pretty good actually, trying to capture different attitudes. One’s curious, resigned”; and morally evaluative statements, as in “It’s cruel what they’re doing, going to pump the air out of that vessel and kill the bird.” Clearly, the museum is an instructive space, used to teach history, social relationships, art appreciation, and, in this case, perhaps morality. The patrons are drawn into the scene by its realism (“like photography”); the gaze of the scientist holds a power over the viewer; the plight of the bird in the glass also elicits piteous response. The realism of the painting can be compared to twentieth-century photography and cinema, and the gothic nature of the subject matter affects us emotionally. According to William Bemrose, nineteenth-century biographer of Wright, the realism of Wright’s paintings has continued to dupe audiences. Bemrose recounts the anecdote of a farmer from Derby visiting the 1883 exhibition of Wright’s work at the Derby museum. Looking closely at the painting The Boy Blowing a Bladder, the farmer is said to have strenuously argued to his wife, “Ah tell yer t’blither iz put behind t’picter, that’ns a raal blither” (53-54). The image is a problem, as W. J. T. Mitchell argues. We live in an age of ‘spectacle’... ‘surveillance’... and all-pervasive image-making,” he contends, yet images are “unsolved,” demanding a persistence of vision in which we return to the text again and again (13). Although Eve Bannet discusses postmodern texts and their demands on the viewers, her comments on reading could be applied to works of art deriving from many eras and styles and the patterns of spectators such as the Derbyshire farmer in Bemrose’s anecdote:

[Powerful texts are able to] make the reader look **at** them and to work at them, actively involving him in their construction or recreation. As Barthes points out, the difficulty and indeterminacy of such texts prevents the reader from consuming them at a gulp and throwing them away. The reader cannot simply glance through... He must come back to the text
again and again; he must brood on it; he must relate to it as a puzzle or a game, in which he participates by deciphering the allusions, by reconstructing the relations between different parts, by seeking the significations which govern the form. (8-9)

Despite their interest in the text of the Astronauts Memorial at the Kennedy Space Center, Carole Blair and Neil Michel found in their persistent viewing of the memorial that during the first several days they also began to notice something else—other visitors. They found that most of the people are not contemplative as they stand before the memorial, some wonder what it is, and others ignore it. From their subsequent observations of the Kennedy Space Center Visitor Center, then, Blair and Michel develop an argument for a rhetorical method that considers actual audiences, one that forges a link between cultural study, ethnography, and rhetoric, which they accuse of treating audience experience “in only perfunctory or assumptive ways.” Blair and Michel explain: “Had we not paid attention to that audience, we might have promoted, however inadvertently, the compellingly naive assumption that, since the Space Mirror ought to provide a fulfilling commemorative experience, that it actually does” (68).

Accordingly, I have made two trips to the National Gallery in London to study audience reaction to The Air Pump. I have come to realize that the exhibition space and the entry points into the gallery are as necessary to forming an interpretation as the elements of the painting itself. Entrances to the gallery act as frames for the visit. Citing the work of architectural critic Charles Jencks, Carole Blair, Marsha Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci note that “architecture really is a verb, an action,’ . . . that the presence of a structure is itself a message” (267). Thus, any building asks something of those who cross into it. The threshold itself is a liminal experience in the way described by anthropologist Victor Turner. After crossing the threshold, the voyager/subject encounters a world substantively different from the familiar, everyday surroundings. In sum, having dressed in ceremonial clothes for gallery-going and left the commonrooms of home behind, the subject enlists the help of guides to find a pathway through the unfamiliar landscape and to emerge with a new understanding of self and world.

The grandest, most formal entrance to the National Gallery, founded in 1834-38, is from the Admiralty Arch, which leads from Buckingham Palace to Whitehall. This places the visitor at the foot of Nelson’s Column, and it is a grand, formal, and imperial way to contextualize the
Gallery. Looking up from the column toward the Gallery fills the spectator with a sense of awe. This is a serious path toward discovering history and empire; this is the path of ritual, spectacle, history, and procession. As if to reward this walk, the main entrance to the National Gallery is formidable. On a slight hill rising from Trafalgar Square, the gallery is a commanding neoclassical edifice. Two sets of stone stairs rise to the entrance, which, high above the road and the common rustle of the square, is guarded by eight classical columns. National art galleries are founded on powerful nationalist ideologies and, with the specific design features of the museums as great public spaces, it is difficult to escape the mood of reverence that is imposed on spectators. In his work on the development of museums, Tony Bennett discusses the rationale for the arrangement of works within the National Gallery, echoing others who have claimed that the arrangement is one that expresses a particular need for "instruction in the significance of art...[and art's connection] with the history of manners, morals, and government" (167).

If, however, a visitor stops at the Gallery after a morning of shopping in Covent Garden from Orange Street just off of St. Martin's Street (both are very small alleys), the immediate context is far less grand. The ticket booths, movie theaters, neon lights, and restaurants of Leicester Square lie just to the north. This area is far more carnivalesque, more engaged with commerce and tourist exploitation. In Leicester Square one can pick up all sorts of tourist information, from flyers announcing performance times for musicals, to London Walks brochures, to the artistry of tacky postcards. Thus, from Orange Street, the National Gallery is an oasis of taste and calm, a realization that one comes to by contrasting it to the commodification and commercialization of the old London streets in the surrounding area.

Visual Explanations
A study of present-day reception should attend to the position of the observer, particularly noting whether that observer is a trained observer. The judgments of a trained observer—published in professional journals or through the transcript of a session at the museum—yield different insights into the meaning of an artwork at a specific time. The trained observer has access to research methods and historical documents that inform his or her judgments. The ordinary observer does not. Yet, the problem with observation is that it can force the observer of the observers into making suppositions about others in the gallery that may be erroneous. While observers could be journalists, fiction writers, poets, gallery
owners, or painters, there are no spoken or visual cues that identify them as such. Perhaps one of those observers gathered before the Wright painting in the National Gallery on a day when I visited was Shelagh Stephenson, the playwright and author of *An Experiment With the Air Pump*, a family drama based on the painting which premiered in London in 1997. Or, perhaps one of the visitors was Iain Pears, the critic and novelist who integrated Robert Boyle's experiments with the air pump into his 1998 mystery *An Instance of the Fingerpost*. One common fallacy about audience observation is the assumption that observers are "non-authoritative others" and that we have a privileged position in regard to knowledge and commentary. Of course, even trained observers can occupy different subject positions, as "lay" observers or trained inquirers.

Figure 3: Leicester Square, April 1999. Photograph by the Author
The context in which the artwork is interpreted is neither ahistorical or value-free; rather, it is located in particular beliefs that take place in specific cultural moments. Rhetorical study often makes static assumptions about audience, persuading readers that because a discourse "ought" to provide a fulfilling experience, that discourse actually "does" provide that experience (Blair and Michel 68). Dynamic meanings may result from positioning a trained critic's readings alongside the readings of potentially less trained readers. This point has also been made by Thomas Rosteck, who suggests that the study of rhetorical performance must include "local, immediate, and particular" aspects of culture that come together to achieve certain results on a specific occasion (227). As Eugene Walter notes, "The whole synthesis of located experience—including what we imagine as well as the sights, stories, feelings, and concepts—gives us the sense of a place" (2). Walter refers to these different experiences with space and place as a concentration on "expressive space" and "located experience," both of which are apt terms for considering the relationship of gallery goer to museum space and to the subject matter of paintings (9, 2). Expressive space and located experience refer not only to the architectural design of space but also to the stories one tells about those spaces and the emotions one experiences within them. Both are linked to ideology, the accumulated beliefs and predispositions of a culture and historical moment.

The initial reactions to the painting that I recorded in the National Gallery were all emotional, even though their articulation was more detached. The narrative explanations were fostered by an emotional reaction that extrapolated the ending of the narrative to be a cruel and unjust punishment visited on the bird. The gallery goers assumed that the bird would die. The interpretation that the actions were "cruel," offered by an anonymous spectator is an emotional reaction to the experiment, something that a contemporary viewer is likely to find in the painting, but, as I argue, an eighteenth-century viewer would not. The artistic appreciation of the painting as either "famous" or "fantastic" expresses a satisfaction with the painting that is unarticulable. Neither were followed by a justification of why the painting might appeal to the spectator. Perhaps, as John Berger asserts, the spectator is reminded "that it is a famous painting of which somewhere one has already seen a reproduction" (21). In this case, *The Air Pump* is famous, not because of its subject matter or because of the ethical questions that it raises, but only because it has been reproduced. The satisfaction of the spectator is a particularly contemporary satisfaction that one is in the presence of a culturally ratified and
reproduced original, "the original of a reproduction" (Berger 21).

Blair and Michel conclude their article by stressing that a rhetoric of visual images must include attention to "a real audience." The smiles of enjoyment—the nods, the repeated glances, or (as in the case of one of my colleague) the shivers of disquiet—are indications of emotional, pre-articulate, nonverbal response to Wright’s painting. Yet, it was the comment of my colleague that reminded me of my initial reaction to the painting; there is a mysterious shrouded atmosphere cast over the scene that, in our post-Frankenstein, post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima consciousness, causes us to interpret the painting in a very modern way. These gothic elements (the darkened room, the heavy plinth over the door, the leaded window, the moon breaking through heavy cloud) are what John Reider might call a “founding myth” in our consciousness—stock portents of evil and foreboding (27). If, as Paul O’Flinn observes, Frankenstein is a text that may be “ceaselessly rewritten, reproduced, refilmed and redesigned,” it is possible that The Air Pump may exert a fascination for us because it, too, has been rewritten in our consciousness through a legacy of exhibitions and implicit comparisons with the popular image of the “mad scientist” at work in his darkened lab (194).

The kind of analysis of visual culture that I propose must situate the observer between expert and layperson, between history and ephemera. A reading of The Air Pump must find a location in space and in time. Keeping in mind that the context of display is as important as the historical context of production, the critic cannot deny the standards of critical practice acceptable to the field, nor can he or she avoid the reading and study that have prompted the investigation. Critics operate within their own gestalts of cultural experience as much as the gallery goer who ambles into the National Gallery on a Good Friday with his or her two children, pausing to take in the odd significance of An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump.

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Notes

1. The range of writers working in fields aligned with rhetoric is vast and includes the following: Geertz, Linenthal, Phelan, Pratt, White, and Wood.

2. Among the critical articles on Wright published between 1900 and 1990, see Buckley, “Joseph” and “English”; Cummings’ “Joseph”; Gage; Robinson; Rosenblum; Stewart; Shurlock.
Works Cited


——. *A Blacksmith’s Shop.* 1771. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven.

——. *An Iron Forge.* 1772. Tate Gallery, London.

——. *Mr and Mrs William Chase.* 1762-63. Private collection.

——. *A Philosopher giving that Lecture on the Orrery, in which a lamp is put in place of the Sun.* 1766. Museum and Art Gallery, Derby, England.