When I travel, I am usually oblivious to my surroundings; I am either engaged in conversation or engrossed in a book. But during one recent trip (motivated, I think, by a loud clap of thunder), I picked up the tri-fold manual that explains procedures in case of in-flight emergency. What immediately struck me about this document was that, aside from a few words on the cover specifying the name of the airline and the model of the airplane, its messages were conveyed entirely by visual images. This makes sense, of course, since most airline companies cannot assume that their entire clientele reads English, yet they must ensure that their entire clientele understands the required emergency procedures. The rhetorical functions of these images, then, were to 1) identify the objects required for safe evacuation, 2) reveal the locations on the plane in which these objects could be found, and 3) illustrate the processes for using the objects effectively. And I must say that the images fulfilled these rhetorical functions both effectively and efficiently—I understood all of the emergency procedures covered in the manual after just briefly scanning the document. As I glanced at the reverse side of the tri-fold manual, I noticed one dense panel of written instructions for the same objects and processes described visually on the front. These written instructions were not immediately accessible and, in case of a real emergency, surely would have failed in their rhetorical intent, since reading the verbal instructions would have not only taken longer but would also have created more opportunities for misinterpretation.

At this moment, I became interested in the rhetorical functions of images; I became interested in “visual rhetoric.” The fact is, the nature of documents is changing. Even documents that convey their messages by words alone are exhibiting more access strategies, visual techniques for guiding readers through blocks of text: emphasizing important words and
phrases through **bold**, *underlined*, or *italic* script; beginning new sections with **Highlighted Headings**; using • bulleted lists and color to draw readers’ attention to particular areas on a page.

But more and more often, documents convey part or all of their messages through images. Donis Dondis points out that “Print is not dead yet, nor will it ever be, but, nevertheless, our language-dominated culture has moved perceptibly toward the iconic” (7). In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger writes, “In no other form of society in history has there been such as concentration of images, such a density of visual messages” (129). And in *Seeing Is Believing*, Arthur Asa Berger notes that “Visual communication is a central aspect of our lives, and much of this communication is done indirectly, through symbolic means: by words and signs and symbols of all kinds” (1). Visual images are commonplace in all aspects of contemporary public discourse and will surely become still more dominant in the near future.¹

What does this trend toward visual communication mean in the context of education? Barbara Maria Stafford warns that “the explosion of multimedia—that unstable collage of video, audio, text, and graphics collected within an electronic interface—raises serious questions concerning the kinds of training needed to navigate meaningfully through a blurred and fluid informatic realm” (71). We need to take these questions seriously, I believe, and investigate answers that will apply to our teaching, research, and administrative lives.

In many conversations, I have heard colleagues and friends admit that visual communication is ubiquitous in public, private, and even academic discourse, but (they always say), “What can I do? I teach *writing*. What role could images possibly play in the *writing* class?” My reply is often unsettling at first, partly because I say it in a tone of feigned indignation: “Writing? I don’t teach *writing*. I teach *rhetoric*.” My indignation may be feigned, goading my interlocutor into an entertaining argument, but I am also quite serious about the statement, and, laying aside my feigned indignation, I explain why. Writing, most of us would agree, is restricted to verbal representation (we do not write paintings or photographs). *Rhetoric*, on the other hand, is not bound to a particular mode of representation; it is inherently (or at least potentially) multi-representational, and it may be practiced in any medium, *including* writing.

In *Writing the Future*, Gunther Kress argues that “multimodal” documents, ones that incorporate more than one “mode” of representation (image, text, sound, and so on), presently dominate communication, and the ability for students to critically consume and effectively produce
images, especially in combination with text, has become crucial to the success of rhetorical instruction. Multi-representational rhetoric (not representationally restrictive writing) provides an adequate conceptual framework within which to incorporate instruction in all modes of representation, and it is only within a rhetorical framework, I suggest, that we can take Stafford's warning seriously and begin to answer the questions that emerge from the ubiquitous presence of image communication.

**Communication Technologies**

Transformations in communication technologies change both the messages produced and the people who produce them. The most recent transformation, the rise of electronic communication, has brought about two distinct trajectories in rhetorical scholarship, one focusing on verbal electronic communication and the other focusing on visual electronic communication. It is important to note, however, that proponents of the first trajectory (verbal) do not necessarily disagree with proponents of the second trajectory (visual), and *vice versa*. The difference is mostly one of emphasis, not kind.

The first trajectory treats electronic communication as a new *verbal* medium. In Jennifer Daryl Slack and Fred Fejes' *The Ideology of the Information Age*, the contributing authors assume that the mass of information contained in and conveyed by new communication technologies is inherently alphanumerical. Further, James Strickland and Stephen Bernhardt both characterize computer-mediated communication as a newly shaped and textured (but nevertheless primarily verbal) medium. And Mark Poster argues that "an adequate account of electronic communications requires a theory that is able to decode the *linguistic* dimension of the new forms of social interaction" (5; emphasis added). While Poster relies mainly on postmodern theories of decentered and dispersed subject(ivitie)s to explain new verbal modes of interaction and their effects on those who communicate with them, others (re)turn to Walter Ong's extension of the orality-literacy thesis. These scholars contend that new modes of electronic communication, from e-mail to the Internet to television (or, as Roger Silverstone puts it, "television's textuality" [151]), have pulled us into a period of secondary orality, which, for all its associations with image technologies, remains a verbal construct (Close, Payne, Silverstone, Welch). While this first trajectory in rhetorical scholarship is useful in its own right, it nevertheless neglects a crucial function of electronic communication technologies—namely, the ubiq-
uitious incorporation of visual images into all forms of discourse, both public and private.

The second trajectory in rhetorical scholarship on electronic communication examines how new technologies have moved modern communication more and more toward visual modes of representation. Stafford writes,

Early twentieth-century modernism was characterized by printed manifestos, by a conceptual abstraction, by painted word games, by alphabetic and numbered collages and calligrams, by what one contemporary architectural critic [Anthony Vidler] has termed "the writing of the walls." Conversely, the late twentieth century is a media age of vocal, aural, and, above all, optical rhetoric: of television cinematics and video spectacles, of interactive computer displays, of performance art, procedural art, fractal and math art, holography, and of that hyper-advertisement, the blockbuster exhibition. We are awash in entertainment and information presented sensorily. (22)

Although image communication has been around since prehistoric humans first painted animals on cave walls (Müller-Brockmann), only recently have new communication technologies for the mass reproduction of images (powerful computers, image scanners, the Web, and even enormous collections of public domain clipart) begun to make visual communication ubiquitous. Look at any public bulletin board on any university campus in the country and you will see text-based flyers completely overshadowed by visually appealing ones. Not long ago, it would have cost a small fortune to mass produce flyers with color images and graphics. Now all one needs is a scanner and a color printer, both of which are sometimes even available free of charge at campus computing facilities and public libraries across the country. Businesses that used to send computer mockups of important documents to professional printers, at great expense, now have in-house desktop publishing centers where employees produce their own glossy documents, complete with scanned images, and print and bind them without ever leaving the premises.

There are scholars who argue that visual communication, because of its ubiquity in modern popular culture, will utterly supplant verbal communication, that a sea change will occur (or has already) in the nature of messages and the minds that produce and consume them—and words will lose out, become unfashionable, outmoded. This sea-change theory of transformation finds its genesis, I believe, in Marshall McLuhan's (and his collaborators') landmark studies of media and culture. In the opening
The medium, or process, of our time—electric technology—is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and reevaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted. Everything is changing—you, your family, your neighborhood, your education, your job, your government, your relation to "the others." And they're changing dramatically.

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways. The alphabet and print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, a process of specialism and of detachment. Electric technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement. It is impossible to understand social and cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media. (8)

For McLuhan and Fiore, shifts in the dominant technologies of communication do not just change the messages that are produced; they also change the very minds of the people who produce the messages. Within this framework, "electronic circuitry," McLuhan and Fiore argue, is "an extension of the central nervous system" (40). One technology completely takes over and the other recedes into oblivion, and heaven help those who try to solve new problems with old technologies or with old modes of thinking associated with those technologies. Thus, as early as 1967 (the year *The Medium is the Massage* was published), McLuhan and Fiore had already identified a sea-change, a radical shift in technology, psychology, culture, and communication based on the parallel and causative shift from print to electronic media.

While the sea-change theory of visual communication technologies has produced interesting results, its conclusions are often weakened by the obvious and persistent coexistence of oral and literate modes of communication that remain intact despite claims of an inescapable visual worldview. Further, if we accept the sea-change thesis, then we eliminate any significant need for instruction in the use of new technologies, since the technologies themselves use us. In other words, we become the vehicles through which technologies manifest their logic, and if we are
hard-wired to communicate in the ways that technology prescribes for us, then a pedagogy of such communication is redundant at best.

Most recently, however, scholars have argued that each new communication technology that emerges into prominence does not supplant previous technologies, but is instead incorporated into the system of prior technologies creating a complex hybrid (see Brummett 21-30, Faigley “Material”). Further, as Barry Brummett points out, the new age of electronic communication is marked, more than any other age, by multiple media that enable image communication—including television, cinema, computers, cameras, just to name a few—each with its own unique qualities that make any totalizing description of them thoroughly problematic (22). Thus, it is simply not enough to study the rhetorical effects of images in contemporary public discourse; one must also study the effects of what Kress and Theo van Leeuwen call “multimodal discourse,” or the discourse that results from a complex interaction of oral, verbal, and visual modes of representation, all coexisting within the boundaries of a single document.

The New Public Discourse
It is a common argument that the mass media have increased social homogenization and reduced critical participation in democratic processes and public discourse (see, for example, Aronowitz; Birkerts; Ewen and Ewen; Ohmann; Phelan; and Postman). While some scholars define “mass media” in its broadest sense—Stanley Aronowitz, for example, includes newspapers in his list of culprits—others, such as Neil Postman, isolate one facet of the mass media, its use of visual images, and oppose this facet to verbal media in what has become an archaic nostalgia for the printed page. This nostalgia for the past, and the conservative preservation of its values despite utterly changing contexts, is a common kind of knee-jerk response to any new technology. We see it in Plato’s response to writing, and we see it in public responses to the newest postmodern technologies like virtual reality and cloning.

Yet, there is perhaps an even deeper source of tension in the print-image controversy, a religious tension that associates images with pagan idolatry (“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,” Exodus 20:4) and language with Christianity (“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God,” John 1:1). In fact, during the seventeenth century, “literacy was seen as a weapon in the Protestant arsenal fending off Catholic idolatry” (Stafford 48). John Phelan, however, points out that the history of Christianity tells a very different story:
Notwithstanding Old Testament condemnations of images as pagan, with the enlistment of Paul of Tarsus in the already somewhat Hellenised band of Apostles, it was inevitable that salvation would eventually be identified with beatific vision and that Christianity would out-pagan the pagans in a profusion of images that culminated in the sermon in stone, the cathedral, still being built all over the world. And of course for centuries European art was the art of religious images. Although particularly true of Christianity, the image seems close to the heart of all religions, from Buddha to mandala to lotus—even for Islam and Israel, barring human likenesses. The longest lived religion to date was encoded in the image alphabet of Egypt. Our best and deepest thoughts as a civilization are based on “the seeing thing”—the image. (7)

However, despite his ardent belief in the past importance of images, Phelan is more skeptical of modern images because, he believes, they are being mass reproduced and thus removed from their originating contexts. Phelan writes, “The new industrialized image is obliterating political space and cultural time and with them our respect for—perhaps even our notion of—truth. This is what we rightly fear” (8). Fully contextualized images, like those produced before what Walter Benjamin calls the age of mechanical reproduction, are useful, trustworthy, true; but mass-produced, a-contextualized images erode political space and reduce participation in democratic processes.

During the early 1960s, at the dawning of the new media revolution, Daniel Boorstin lamented that Americans’ extravagant expectations and impatience with the dullness of the actual world had resulted in a kind of national self-deception, a deluded reliance on media(ted) (planned, planted, incited, dramatic, repeatable, cost effective, uncomplicated, convenient—not spontaneous or natural) pseudo-events. Pseudo-events are not real. They exist, instead, in “the world of our making; the world of the image,” and through the technologies that produce these pseudo-events, we have learned, to our own detriment, to “speak the language of images” (6, 181). Half serious and half joking, Boorstin muses, “Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God’s purpose in him; today we look for his press agent,” and magazines, radio, advertising, television, movies, and photographic manipulation are the primary culprits (45). These media, Boorstin argues, are not informing Americans of real events, but merely entertaining them with abstract, a-contextual sound/sight-bites.

Yet, far more powerful (and, some would say, more insidious) communication technologies have emerged since the publication of
Boorstin’s book. We must keep in mind, for example, that the Internet and the World Wide Web were not in general use until the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the real power of virtual reality is yet to be realized. These still-emerging and evolving media have given rise to a new wave of conservative rhetoric. But the arguments against image-culture remain largely the same.

In more recent years, Postman has become one of the image’s most outspoken enemies. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman argues that the decline of print culture, with its accompanying rise of image culture, “has had grave consequences for public life, [and] we are getting sillier by the minute” (24). Postman equates images with entertainment and suggests that the function of public discourse in any visual culture is to tantalize the senses, not convey vital information. Images construct simple, uncomplicated, and limited messages that numb our minds, Postman argues, making us less and less able to read printed discourse, construct or understand linear and analytical arguments, and engage in the kind of critical public communication that democratic cultures require. Images massify us, and in *Technopoly*, Postman decries the technologies that are responsible for this dumbing down of modern American society. Postman writes, it is “certainly most unfortunate” that Americans have “embraced the computer” (107). Here, Postman agrees with McLuhan that out of new technologies (especially those used for public communication) emerge new cultural mindsets, new attitudes toward social interaction and political participation; yet, Postman’s reaction to this thesis is conservative, to say the least.8

Postman, Boorstin, and Phelan (among others) argue that the rise of mass mediated image culture has caused a decline in the kind of political participation that is enabled by print. Yet, literate political participation is not the only thing to suffer in the context of this new visual public discourse. Scholars in art studio, theory, and history note that this same mass mediated image culture has caused a decline in the political, particularly subversive, potential of art as well. In “Place, Position, Power, Politics,” Martha Rosler, writes,

What is the responsibility of the artist to society? It is an open question what role art might play in a society that has all but ceased recognizing the existence of a public arena in which speech and symbolic behavior address important questions for the sake of the common good. Even introducing these terms shows how outdated they are. Instead, the language of cost accounting anchors the discussion of the role of art in public life. This loss of sense of (united) purpose has provided an opening
for the right-wing to launch an assault on culture, with various rationales, including the rarely stilled voice of aestheticism, which prefers to see art as a transcendent, or at least an independent and therefore formalist, entity, with no social tasks to accomplish. (55)

The problem, as Rosler points out, is that the mass media(ted) image connects all images by association with capitalist market forces that overemphasize formal properties and thus drain art of any subversive potential. Recent attempts to dislodge art's imbrication in the institutions of the mass media have failed, and in many circles art is now considered little more than "a branch of the entertainment industry" (Rosler 57). Rosler writes, "The anti-institutional revolt was unsuccessful, and the art world has now completed something of a paradigm shift. The mass culture machine and its engines of celebrity have long redefined the other structures of cultural meaning, so that patterns of behavior and estimations of worth in the art world are more and more similar to those in the entertainment industry" (57). If even the most traditional art institutions (museums and galleries, for example) adopt evaluative criteria from the discourse of popular entertainment, then art's political power, its subversive potential, is thoroughly drained by the singular force of market value.

Cultural critic Douglas Kellner agrees with Postman, Boorstin, Phelan, and Rosler, at least initially, suggesting that the "artifacts of the culture industries have assumed tremendous cultural power; they are part of a cultural apparatus which has produced increasing privatization, commercialization, and reification of our culture that has led to a decline of individuality, community, citizenship and democracy" (79). However, while Postman would have us destroy our television sets and computers, Kellner promotes "the need to expand literacy and cognitive competencies in order to survive the onslaught of media images, messages, and spectacles which are inundating our culture. The goal will be to teach a critical media literacy which will empower individuals to become more autonomous agents, able to emancipate themselves from contemporary forms of domination and able to become more active citizens, eager and competent to engage in processes of social transformation" (63). Paul Messaris agrees, and in "Visual 'Manipulation,'" he writes that "the consumers of mass-produced images would be less susceptible to manipulation if they were more aware of how images are created" (182). Thus, while Postman would destroy the evil force of the mass media(ted) image, Kellner and Messaris argue instead for a critical literacy of this same evil force.
For scholars like Postman, the reaction against image communication derives from an archaic nostalgia for a past era of print culture in which folks sat around coffee tables discussing the day’s (printed) news and politics. But Kellner’s motivation derives, instead, from a Leftist political orientation that is characteristic of cultural studies approaches to visual culture. In “Cultural Studies: Reading Visual Texts,” Joel Foreman and David Shumway articulate the theoretical basis (ideology-and-critique) of the Leftist approach to image communication:

If the production and distribution of visual or verbal representations were equally available to all members of a society, then we might expect that society’s conflicts would be directly and unambiguously played out in them. The interests of each group would under such conditions presumably be clearly articulated for all to understand and acknowledge, if not necessarily respond to or accept. But the production and distribution of representations is controlled by the dominant group, and they use these representations to maintain and extend their hegemony. It is in the interest of the dominant not simply to express their interests, but behave as if their interests were shared by everyone. In order to convey this impression, the conflicts which characterize social life are best covered up. Under some governments, the production and distribution of representations are controlled directly, with censorship used to control or prevent any expression of oppositional interest from being circulated. In Western democracies, the decentralized power of corporations and other institutions also tends to limit what is available to see or read. However, such limitation is far from absolute. Oppositional perspectives are allowed to be expressed for a number of reasons, among them that those in power are not themselves unified and that there are profits to be made by exploiting the interests of the oppressed. (248)

I have four objections to this view of critical literacy. First, it ignores the fact that most forms of visual (and visual-verbal) communication, including advertising, television, and magazines, embody multiple and contradictory ideologies, not one single dominant ideology. Second, the popularity and availability of new communication technologies has made the claim that a “dominant group” controls media production utterly problematic. Third, the kind of literate practice encouraged by such a view of critical literacy is restricted to negative dialectical consumption. In fact, attempts at teaching students to produce image texts often meet with cynical criticism from the Left: “you’re giving conservative students powerful tools for maintaining hegemony,” or “you’re just giving dominant culture more material to co-opt,” or, worse yet, “you’re creating a
new regime of Nazis." Media texts are not mono(ideo)logical, and neglecting image production, in my view, leaves half of our work unfinished. And fourth, the critical literacy approach ignores what Marguerite Helmers calls the "transactional experience" of visual rhetoric, a dynamic process that is always "located in specific social conditions" and inevitably influenced by them (71). This approach, which I have elsewhere called the "critical aim of discourse," denies the inherently situated character of visual production and consumption, thereby (at times ironically) mystifying the social nature of visual communication.

Kellner and Foreman and Shumway focus on critiquing the manipulative messages that images carry in advertisements, and with this negative attitude comes two problematic assumptions about visual representation: first, that images (in advertisements and popular media of all sorts) do convey distorted messages through conventionalized representations of capitalist values; second, that images should convey accurate messages through unmediated representations of material objects. But Linda Scott objects:

When semiotic analysis is expanded into cultural criticism, the theoretical principle that pictures reflect reality often becomes the demand that pictures should reflect reality. Critics frequently chastise advertising images for distorting or misrepresenting things as they are. Such criticism pointedly overlooks the fact that pictures, like words, are often being used in ads to pose arguments, raise questions, create fictions, present metaphors, or even mount a critique—and are not intended (or read) as faithful copies of reality in the first place. (260)

The notion that images should re-present reality in a one-to-one correspondence, and that this is the only proper and ethical use of images, ignores their function as part of a larger symbol system. Images are rhetorical, Scott reminds us, and they simply cannot function in the way that many Marxist critics want them to function. We must keep in mind that reality is three-dimensional and images are two-dimensional; they are conventional (they require interpretation) even when they appear in the pages of National Geographic magazine.

Both Postman and Kellner clearly favor print over image. Postman believes that print culture is (good) political culture, and Kellner would have his students represent their critical knowledge of visual culture in written essays (a typical academic move, especially in composition studies). As Stafford puts it, "The totemization of language as a godlike
agency in western culture has guaranteed the identification of writing with intellectual potency" (5). However, Stafford clearly believes that this logophilia is destructive, and, revealing her indignation, she writes,

I have serious trouble with the deprecating rhetoric that stakes out bookish literacy as a moral high ground from which to denounce a tainted "society of spectacle." Contemporary iconoclasm, like early modern versions, rests on the puritanical myth of an authentic or innocent epistemological origin. Clinging to the Rousseauean fantasy of a supposedly blotless, and largely imageless, print ecology ignores not only contrary evidence from the past but the real virtues of colorful, heterogeneous, and mutable icons, whether on or off screen. (4)

And, she continues, "As a confessed enthusiast for images, then, I deplore the one-sided estimation of language that has installed it as the paradigm for depth, seriousness, thought, even our very identity" (8).

**Ethics and Visual Rhetoric**

It is true that images, like any sign system, can have negative uses, can be used to exploit, manipulate, and oppress. Indeed, *rhetoric* has been accused of such potential throughout its twenty-five century history, beginning with the sophists, who have been called cheaters and flatterers by everyone from Plato to Kenneth Burke. More recently, too, the earliest representatives of the epistemic rhetoric movement (Robert Scott and Michael Leff, for example) were obsessed with the charge of unethical potential, expending great rhetorical energy to dispel this damaging myth about their anti-realist theory of language. To complicate the matter, *visual* rhetoric is often associated with the capitalist motivations and ethics-free methods of advertising, making it even more problematic than the methods of verbal manipulation often practiced by politicians and lawyers.

However, modes and technologies of communication, *qua* inanimate objects, cannot be described as ethical or unethical; only their users and the uses to which they are put can be described in this way, for if we ascribe the personality trait "unethical" to inanimate technologies of communication, then we automatically limit ourselves to understanding only half—the bad half—of visual rhetoric's uses. The study of ethics in visual rhetoric is important, of course; however, its study is no more important in visual rhetoric than it is in verbal rhetoric or teaching or everyday conversation. Ethics is a function of *use*, not an inherent quality of inanimate technologies, yet the study of the ethical use of images has,
to an extent, lagged behind the rapid rise of technologies that enable visual communication.

Arthur Asa Berger contends that giving students the critical capacity to recognize unethical uses of images (Kellner's goal) solves only a fraction of the problem. Indeed, unless we create a new generation of ethical image producers, our quest for a usable theory of visual rhetoric will be in vein. Berger writes, "Those who create images and symbols must think about the moral implications of what they do.... To the extent that seeing is believing, we must make sure that the images we create do not generate beliefs that are individually or socially destructive" (4). Images are not, by their very nature, unethical means of communication (any more than words are), and they no longer (if they ever really did) represent a single capitalist mass psychology. When we teach visual rhetoric, we ought to teach students to analyze both the negative and positive uses of images in communication and to produce images that promote positive cultural values. Regarding rhetorical ethics, then, what is true of verbal communication (or any kind of communication, for that matter) is also true of visual communication. Ethics and rhetoric should be taught hand-in-hand regardless of the medium that conveys the message.

While it may be true that the early history of image production, defined as it was by limited access and control (though the same can be said of print media), as we proceed into the twenty-first century the fear of the manipulative mass image becomes less and less founded. Many have recounted narratives of communication technologies' rapid growth and manifold increases in popularity and access during the past thirty years (see, for example, Faigley "Understanding"). As access to technologies of visual communication increases, there is a corresponding particularization, decentralization, and demassification of the image in public discourse (Stafford). "The media" (as though there is one locus of control) can no longer be described, in totalizing language, as "liberal" or "conservative" or anything else, and mass media(ted) images are now as decentered as the postmodern subjectivities who produce them.

In fact, some artists who have gained reputations through the art world's traditional institutions, yet who are also dissatisfied with the declining political potential of the museum and gallery scene, have taken to the streets. They accept the ubiquity of the new public discourse and enter it wholeheartedly, re-politicizing the public sphere. Rosler explains, "quite a few politicized artists who find their existence within the gallery-museum-magazine system use their fame to reach beyond it using
the tools of mass culture: the mass-circulation magazine, the billboard, the train station or airport wall, broadcast television" (60). Kenneth Cole began using issues-oriented advertising during the 1980s as a way to connect his products with progressive cultural values, and Henry Giroux explains the importance of award-winning photographer Oliviero Toscani’s use of the “United Colors of Benetton” ad campaign as a platform for visual rhetoric during the 1990s.

Any time a new noetic field emerges, there are those who look back on the old noetic field with longing and nostalgia. However, I argue that there is no productive reason to ban images from contemporary public discourse, just as there was no productive reason for Plato to ban rhetoricians and poets from his Republic. The mass media and recent technologies of image communication cannot be held responsible for the decline of public participation in democratic political processes, if such a decline has occurred. And while some uses of images in communication are marginalizing (just as some uses of words are marginalizing), there are also countless positive and, indeed, liberating uses of images in communication. When noetic fields shift, some people do get left behind, skilled in communication strategies that are no longer dominant. Images have not made us “silly,” as Postman suggests, but they certainly have changed the way we do and should think about writing and rhetoric. To suggest that all visual images should be critiqued, decried, or, worst of all, ignored is, quite simply, to misunderstand the nature of rhetoric, communication, and composition studies in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Throughout this essay, when I write of visual rhetoric and image communication, I refer only to pictorial or graphic representation, not the verbal representation of visual imagery (ekphrasis). Ekphrasis is a common term in literary studies; it refers to the ability of a writer to describe something so vividly that audience members develop a clear picture of it in their minds. While an important subject in its own right, it is different in kind and character from the rhetoric of visual images.

2. Writing teachers are so wary of visual communication, in fact, that even when advertising is the subject of analysis, many focus only on written copy, minimizing the importance of images to the overall effect of the ads. See, for example, D’Angelo, Kehl, and Purvis.

3. There is a potential confusion of terminologies here for those who are familiar with Janice Lauer’s use of the term “multimodal” to describe rhetoric and composition as a disciplinary formation. In Lauer’s usage, the term multimodal designates composition studies’ “employment of several modes of inquiry such
as historical, rhetorical, and empirical to study problems of literacy and its facilitation" (45). For Lauer, then, multimodal refers to modes of inquiry; for Kress, it refers to modes of representation. In this essay, I follow Kress' usage of the term.

4. For an argument against using secondary orality as a metaphor to explain certain aspects of electronic communication, see Faigley, *Fragments* 201–04.

5. Some scholars still argue that limited access to technology reifies class-based inequities. See, for example, Moran and Olson.

6. But, in some important contexts, including corporate and academic ones, the capacity of technologies to alter the visual appearance of documents precedes many communicators' understanding of the effects these technologies have on the meanings conveyed in their documents. Patricia Sullivan of Purdue University describes the problem:

Through most of printing history, the creation of text and the publication of text have been handled by separate groups. . . . Thus, many of today's publishing writers have been well insulated from the process of producing the published text and from designing pages, activities now carried out by editors and graphic artists who interface with the typographers and production personnel. As a result, writers have not needed to think carefully about how the look of the page will affect the meaning of the text. For them, the meaning of the text has resided solely in the content of the words.

But the gap between the manuscript and the printed page is closing. Through the technology, first through the development of the desktop publishing software and now, increasingly, through the standard word-processing package, the writer is entering an era where the published page is more directly under her or his control. This innovation has profound implications for writers, for writing, for the teaching of writing with computers, and for theories of electronic writing. (43–44)

Further, Nancy Allen points out that this closing gap can create unexpected problems. There are times, for example, when the person who creates an ethically problematic image does so, not out of ill will or greed, but out of an over-enthusiastic desire to use all of the visual effects that are available via new technologies, and, related to this, out of ignorance of the negative impact these effects can have on viewers (93). New and powerful technologies are now available to virtually any communicator, but communicators must be aware of how these technologies, and the visual effects they produce, influence the very meanings generated by their documents.

7. For an interesting public debate on religious aspects of the print-image controversy, see Paglia and Postman. The two biblical passages quoted above also prompt Paglia and Postman's dialogue.

8. See Brummett (18–36) for a critique of Postman's media determinism.
9. For an extensive bibliographical essay on the “critical-literacy-as-antidote-to-visual-manipulation” approach to a variety of visual media, see Messaris’s “Visual Literacy.”

10. Rutledge calls these unethical uses of image communication “visual doublespeak.”

11. In A Rhetoric of Motives, Burke claims that the sophists “systematically ‘perfected’ . . . the Art of Cheating” (50–51), and in the Gorgias, Plato compares rhetoric to cookery, arguing that it is mere flattery and not a true art (sec. 463, et passim).

12. In Interfaces of the Word, Ong defines a noetic field as the dialectical intersection of “exterior technological devices that affect the word,” such as writing or video, and the “internal” ways in which humans “shape, store, retrieve, and communicate knowledge” (44).

University of Alabama
Birmingham, Alabama

Works Cited


Kellner, Douglas. "Reading Images Critically: Toward a Postmodern Pedagogy." Postmodernism, Feminism, and Cultural Politics: Redrawing Edu-


W. Ross Winterowd Award

The W. Ross Winterowd Award is given for the most outstanding scholarly book published in composition theory each year. The award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd, who has presented it to each year’s recipient at the annual CCCC Convention since 1989. JAC readers are invited to nominate books for this award by sending a letter of nomination to Lynn Worsham; Department of English; University of South Florida; Tampa, FL 33620-5550.