to see our students as individuals and to understand that they all have
unique literacy challenges and strengths. Without such help, I doubt that
I would have even completed my bachelor's degree. Now, I am whistlin'
and crowin' from the podium in my own classroom, showing my students
and anyone who will listen that we outspoken hens do come to good ends.

*Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence J. Prelli, ed. (Columbia: U of South

Reviewed by Diana George, Virginia Tech University

Sometime after the fall of Pol Pot in 1979 and until 2002, a visitor to Tuol
Sleng (the Phnom Penh high-school-turned-torture-and-death-house-
and-then-museum) would have seen a remarkable map of Cambodia. As
many as 300 human skulls of those killed at the site had been used to form
the shape of that country. Even after the map was disassembled, some
skulls have remained, now placed on shelves behind glass—an arrange-
ment much more in keeping with the kinds of displays we are used to
seeing in natural history museums, except that these are hardly ancient
ancestors.

Outside Phnom Penh in Choeung Ek, at a spot still known as The
Killing Fields, a Buddhist stupa rises above the field where thousands of
men, women, and children were slaughtered. The stupa is filled, on every
level, with human skulls (more than 8,000 altogether) behind glass so that
only as the visitor comes closer and the interior sharpens do the skulls
begin to take shape, does the viewer understand what she is seeing.

At the former Khmer Rouge prison Wat Sauphy, deteriorating rooms
remain bare except for piles of skulls and scattered bones of the dead from
that site.

At a roadside stop outside Siem Reap and only a few miles from
Ankgor Wat, a dusty, open air museum displays land mines dug up, most
of them along the border that separates Thailand from Cambodia. The
mines are rusty and stacked like so much junk on makeshift shelves partially enclosed by a torn, army-green tarp. The smallest are not even the size of tuna cans and meant only to take a foot or leg. Larger Claymore mines still carry the instruction in English, “Front facing enemy.” Children’s stories and drawings are tacked to the shelves and line the space like a school art project on parents’ night.

I visited friends in Cambodia in 1999, and although these sights stunned me, I haven’t let myself think of them for a very long time. I wasn’t quite sure, then, how to respond to the physical presence of the skulls of human beings killed during my lifetime now on display in the way an art object or anthropological specimen would be on display. I wasn’t even sure if they worked as the stark warning they were surely meant to be; however, they remain for me the most powerful and politically charged moments I have ever spent at a memorial site.

How, then, do they function? These aren’t your everyday re-creations of history that Americans are used to visiting—places like Fort Wilkins in Copper Harbor, Michigan, where local history buffs play the roles of nineteenth-century soldiers and where visitors can peek in at real-seeming bread that lines shelves in the nicely swept, rebuilt bakery. At Appomattox Courthouse, reconstructed slave quarters look, as I heard one visitor remark, “not too bad.”

Where, then, does the tourist place the kick in the stomach that the Cambodian exhibits use to shock us into a reality we cannot imagine? How do families and friends of the dead respond to seeing their remains set in artwork, lying in abandoned rooms, even arranged carefully behind glass? Certainly, the displays are not without controversy in Cambodia, where many Cambodian people have long objected to them, believing that the dead cannot rest until they are properly honored, while others argue just as rightly that violence buried is violence forgotten.

In his *Rhetorics of Display*, Lawrence J. Prelli, with the help of nearly twenty contributors, takes on the challenge of addressing how visual displays such as these “rhetorically manifest the ways that phenomena, persons, places, events, identities, communities, or cultures appear before those who become audience to them” (1). If, as contributor Cheryl R. Jorgensen-Earp argues, “sites of public tragedy take on an atmosphere of the holy” that “generate[s] both an expectation of memorialization and
a constraint upon the discourse and action deemed appropriate to the site” (42–43), then we can only understand the workings of a site like those I’ve described above in terms of the extent to which they break from rhetorical expectations.

There is little constraint here. The presence of the skulls, some have argued, is physical “proof” that these events actually occurred. They cannot be forgotten or ignored as long as we can see the results. And yet, the very number of skulls gathered and on display in the spaces where the murders occurred imparts that “atmosphere of the holy” that Jorgensen-Earp notes. As Prelli explains, “Meanings manifested rhetorically through display are functions of particular, situated resolutions of the dynamic between revealing and concealing” (2).

Rhetorically, how one makes sense of displays like these that go far beyond the _memento mori_ so common in Western Renaissance art and early American gravescape has much to do with relationship—that between audience and object; between event and place; between politics and memory. These exhibits do not remind us that we are all mortal. Instead, they force the viewer to confront a level of human brutality that, more often than not, remains unspoken in even the most striking memorials marking tragedy. As Richard Morris writes in his contribution, “When deliberately located in sanctified public space, memorials and the traditions to which they belong endeavor to speak to present and future generations not only of how and why that past ought to be remembered, but also of how and why the present and future ought to be shaped and lived” (204). Morris is writing here of church and town graveyards, but it is clear that that same dynamic works in state monuments and memorials like these.

Written by prominent scholars in communication and rhetoric, this extensive collection of essays can feel nearly exhaustive in both its scope and its volume. Prelli calls it “the first book-length work that offers a conceptually focused perspective on rhetorical studies of display” (1), and for the most part it does directly address the rhetorical dimension of visual displays ranging from memorial and museum to national parks, maps, illustrations, photojournalism, bodies, race, dissent, and more.

Individual essays are particularly useful in constructing a rhetorical frame for understanding display. Among those, I would point to James
Michael Ferrell's on the function of nineteenth-century illustrations to establish what he calls "a rhetoric of sympathy... in which both image and word collaborate to induce an emotional and moral response" during the Irish potato famine (85). In much the same vein, Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites examine the rhetorical role the iconic photograph—in this case, the famous tank-stopping news photo from Tiananmen Square—plays within the context of Western journalism to restructure "that conflict on the terms most legible and reassuring within a Western narrative of the continued expansion of modern technologies, open markets, and liberal ideals throughout the world" (130). The iconic photo, in essence, both flattens and broadly redefines the event by allowing the image to replace an understanding of complex and ongoing political struggle. The reduction here is not inherent in the photo itself, quite obviously, but rather in its use to reinforce those notions most comfortable to a Western audience that can somehow recognize the lone citizen standing against the machine. Meaning, as always, does depend on situation and circumstance. As Hariman and Lucaites point out, "The man stopping the tank can be a model of democratic dissent or a parable of liberal hegemony, symbol of a new world order and a masking of its true cost" (133).

In many of these offerings, however, the rhetorical frame is not as clear as a reader might expect, and in the sheer number of contributions it is sometimes difficult to recall the thread—rhetorical analysis—that is meant to unify the collection. Moreover, the reach of the collection leaves almost nothing out. Nearly everything, it seems, is display.

Still, the strongest contributions (like those mentioned above as well as S. Michael Halloran and Gregory Clark's reading of national park landscapes in the context of epideictic rhetoric; and Gerald Hauser's "Demonstrative Displays of Dissident Rhetoric," which reaches back to Quintillian to explain the workings of the acts of dissidence that empowered prisoners on Robben Island) do what Rhetoric Society of America has been aiming at for quite some time now. They bring communication/media studies and rhetoric in both the communication and English department models together to inform each other. If the precise rhetorical frame is not always apparent, many of the essays themselves are compelling reading unveiling how, for example, notions of race and
power and national imagination and resistance work as rhetorics of display.

My memories of Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and the Land Mine Museum were triggered immediately by these writers’ attempts to explain how display works. And although I am haunted by the disturbing nature of those displays, I am troubled much more by displays that tell the truth but tell it slant, if I might borrow Emily Dickinson’s words for my own purposes here.

In the business of memorializing, some things simply cannot be said (or, displayed) without risking impropriety (or future donations). In 2004, I visited Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church where, in 1963, four young girls were murdered in a bombing prompted by racism and hate. Across the street from the church is Birmingham’s National Civil Rights Museum. The museum’s own publicity points to the re-creation of Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Birmingham jail cell that, along with audio tapes of King’s voice, “puts you right in the events.” And, yet, it is surely the 16th Street Baptist Church that is, quite literally, the culminating “exhibit” of the museum. Each room leads visitors through key moments of the struggle for Civil Rights, including a burned-out bus in the Freedom Riders exhibit. The final room, however, is empty. Instead, one wall of the room is a massive “picture” window that frames the church across the street.

The National Civil Rights Museum certainly engages in restraint here. The discourse is surely “appropriate to the site.” Yet, this display is almost too constrained—the final room with its view of the church almost manipulative, even sanitized. After all, is it the church that is important here or the event? Is it the space or the lost lives? What, then, is the discourse of this display? We might argue that in framing the church as the culminating “exhibit,” the visual rhetoric is one that reduces the site to historical artifact, aesthetic object, a mere picture framed by that window—now redefined by the language of museum and art gallery. More than that, once the site has been redefined in this way, it takes on a very different meaning. Where the skulls at Choeung Ek insist upon vigilance, the 16th Street Baptist Church has become an historic site—something in the past, completed, a problem solved. Instead of a “rhetoric of sympathy” or an epideictic display of dissidence, the language of
museum is a language of completion, and in that language is surely a truth told slant.


Reviewed by Jody Shipka, University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

In the foreword to Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory, Mark Hansen locates the text’s “theoretical payoff” in its fourth and final chapter, “The Medium is the Body,” where Wegenstein ties all “loose threads together” and where her analysis of contemporary media converges with a rehabilitation of certain strands in phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and feminism in order to generate a powerful conceptualization of the human as a form of distributed embodiment, an “organ instead of a body,” that does not so much demarcate itself against an environment as extend seamlessly and robustly into the now ubiquitously digitized technosphere. (xii)

I begin with this excerpt from Hansen’s foreword because it helps prepare readers for what can be a particularly challenging read given the way the text is structured and the range and number of theories/theorists Bernadette Wegenstein, an assistant professor of media study and director of the film studies program at the University of Buffalo, draws on throughout the text. For example, in a move that foregrounds the breadth and scope of the theoretical insights and practical examples she will offer readers, Wegenstein, in the preface to Getting Under the Skin, indicates that it was largely the result of experiencing Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds exhibit in Vienna in 1999, and reading N. Katherine Hayles’ How We Became Posthuman, published that same year, that she became increasingly convinced that something important was “happening to the body”