In the Regard of the Image

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Rhetoric has always been visual, and richly so—literally and metaphorically, in theory and in practice, in both its inchoate and institutionally mature forms. To understand the very idea of rhetoric in its canonical forms is to understand its historically diverse affiliations with questions of perception and appearance. In this context, the notion of visual rhetoric might be redundant: allegedly virulent detractors of rhetoric, from Plato to Locke, argued that rhetoric amounts to nothing more than hopelessly obfuscating appearances, while its most dogged defenders championed such appearances, displayed in public discussion and performance, as beneficial features of communal life.

Comprehensively classifying the numerous affinities between rhetoric and visual phenomena evident throughout the rhetorical tradition exceeds the scope of this essay. Distinguishing between representational and non-representational approaches to those affinities, however, would be an instructive starting point for such a project. The very concept of rhetoric emerged from a philosophical and linguistic milieu in which speech and vision were intimately related according to representational axioms. The classical concept of logos, which pervaded early metaphysical thought, fundamentally joined seeing and speaking as instruments of representation. This commanding term, moreover, provided invaluable conceptual foundations for eventual codifications of rhetoric. Heidegger's explication of logos is especially useful for the question of rhetoric and vision because he attends methodically to the senses in which logos connotes a form of oral representation: "logos as speech really means δείκνυμι, to make manifest ‘what is being talked about’ in speech," he writes. "Logos lets something be seen (phainesthai), namely what is
being talked about, and indeed for the speaker (who serves as the medium) or for those who speak with each other" (Being, 28). Logos unites speaking and seeing: "Logos is phonē, indeed phonē meta phantasias—vocalization in which something always is sighted" (Heidegger, Being, 29). To speak is to display or reveal (or, in modern terms, to represent). For this reason, parallels between linguistic and visual arts were commonplace among ancient writers (Kennedy, 92; see also Benediktson). Simonides' legendary adage, "Painting is silent poetry; poetry is speaking painting," provides a classic example of such parallels (qtd. in Weinrich, 9). Even in this inchoate sense, rhetoric is defined by the ideal of a representational unity among speech, perception, and understanding.

Such representational ideals are endemic not only to the history and theory of rhetoric but also to metaphysical thought in general. Western philosophy has consistently and elaborately investigated relationships between supersensible ideas and sensible speech, between ideal intellectual illumination and the disclosing powers of language, between immaterial presence and verbal supplements thereof. Hence Plato's installation, in his Republic, of rigid distinctions between the realm of ideal truth or mental illumination (vision) and the shadowy, distorted representations of human politics, discussion, and opinion (VII); or the conspicuously visual connotations of Aristotle's language when he defines rhetoric as the ability "to see both the persuasive and the apparently persuasive," of "showing or seeming to show something" (Rhetoric, 1.1.14, 1.2.3; emphasis added). Conceiving of the relationship between rhetoric and visual phenomena in a non-representational manner is therefore difficult because representational thought and language permeates our traditional understandings of both categories.

Influential studies in visual rhetoric have provocatively explored the affinities between rhetoric and visual phenomena. They do so, however, predominantly according to representational thought and language, positing that images represent (in visual form) decipherable arguments, experiences, or ideas. This orientation naturally emphasizes explanatory principles such as meaning, consciousness, and presence. Models of reasoned argument, strategic persuasion, or purposeful communication provide logical categories with which to designate visual artifacts as appropriate objects of rhetorical inquiry. To be clear, select authors have
begun to address this issue by proposing alternate critical models. Cara Finnegan, for instance, urges rhetoricians "to conceptualize a visual rhetoric project that expands our vision to something beyond a relatively narrow focus on rhetorical analysis of visual images [in the conventional sense]" and "to bring questions of visuality to bear on rhetorical theory" ("Visual" 235). However, some of the most common frameworks used to heed this call unwittingly reaffirm the centrality of representational categories to the study of visual rhetoric.

This essay recommends additional principles with which to expand the study of visual rhetoric beyond representational paradigms. It does so by demonstrating that non-representational events are integral elements of representational processes. This inquiry thus explores the implications of Maurice Blanchot's premise that a profound non-relation is at work in any perceived equivalence between speech and sight, or word and image (25–32). As such, this study is not anti-representational in nature; it merely advocates an alternate understanding of visual representation itself. Analysis of pictorial representation indeed constitutes a vital site of rhetorical production and reception in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism and democratic public culture. This essay contends that the project of visual rhetoric writ large may be enhanced by investigating additional affinities between rhetoric and visual phenomena, and with them alternate explanatory principles to those of representation alone. Hence the motivating question of this inquiry: is the study of visual rhetoric equivalent to the study of visual representation, or might one productively employ other analytic frameworks in order to further delineate the multidimensional forms and functions of visual phenomena?

Analyzing the rhetorical dimensions of images according to their virtual properties (a line of inquiry not yet advanced in self-professed studies of visual rhetoric) provides a worthy complement to commonplace equations of visual rhetoric with pictorial representation. This essay defines the virtual properties of the image, in accord with Gilles Deleuze's conception of the virtual, by their capacity for producing visual realities that are not yet actual, and therefore cannot be represented as such, but are no less real in the sense that their potentiality affects existing states of affairs (191, 201, 207–14, 279). One can admittedly use images
to represent intelligible arguments or ideas, facilitate the production of meaning, and approximate the presence of former persons and events. But images also function in ways that representational categories cannot explain comprehensively. The following discussion provides a virtual account of images, focusing on the means by which they produce and enact modes of spectatorship, subject-object relations, forms of affect, or grounds for competing attributions of sense and value in ways that cannot be explained in full by representational categories such as consciousness, meaning, or presence. Images function virtually to the extent that they disseminate sense and value of their own accord, and not only as instruments of conscious design or reasoned interpretation. This essay therefore argues for the analytic value of virtual principles such as materiality, production, enactment, and futurity to the rhetorical analysis of visual phenomena.

The goal of this inquiry is not to critique representational approaches to the study of visual rhetoric, to dialectically oppose them with an objectively more accurate methodology, much less to invalidate appeals to reason, meaning, or presence. The analysis offers instead a means of diversifying the analytic vocabulary of visual rhetoric by attending to the non-representational dimensions of images, or their virtual capacities, which provides added (albeit unconventional) insight into the rhetorical status and scope of images as mediums of argument, persuasion, or communication. The passages to come accordingly work to devise a way of thinking and speaking about images that affirms for rhetorical scholars the value and productivity of their virtual functions without predominant reliance on representational paradigms.

The analysis begins by summarizing some of the dominant ways in which representational thought and language informs the aims and methodologies of studies in visual rhetoric. This discussion subsequently warrants a rationale for devising alternate heuristics with which to supplement the existing study of visual rhetoric. Thereafter, the essay delineates how virtual principles of materiality, production, enactment, and futurity allow one to investigate the rhetorical forms and functions of images without exclusive reliance on representational categories.
From Representation to the Virtual

Three related observations support the claim that contemporary studies of visual rhetoric operate primarily according to representational paradigms. First, even rhetorical studies that claim to account for broad and multidimensional contours of visual culture emphasize such paradigms in their focus on pictorial representation. Prominent examples include studies of “the pictorial component” of negative campaign advertising (Barbatsis); editorial cartoons (Edwards and Winkler); popular magazine covers, New Deal-era photography, and Lincoln daguerreotypes (Finnegan, “Darkening,” “Social,” “Picturing,” and “Recognizing”); iconic photographs (Hariman and Lucaites, “Dissent,” “Performing,” “Public,” “Ritualizing,” and Caption); documentary film and photography (Lancioni); photojournalism (Lucaites); eighteenth-century “rhetorical iconology” or “the rhetoric of pictorial images” (Olson, Emblems and Benjamin); “modes of visual argument as exemplified by pictorial views of human evolution” (Shelley); or media coverage of the JFK assassination and Holocaust photography (Zelizer, Covering and Remembering). Mass-produced pictorial representations, however, are only one (historically recent) manifestation of rhetoric’s longstanding association with forms of perception, appearance, figuration, and embodiment.

Second, studies in visual rhetoric employ representational logics by commonly blurring the boundaries between a further pair of key concepts: word and image. W.J.T. Mitchell predicates his entire project of picture theory (a seminal reference point for studies of visual culture in general) on the permeable borders between image and text, between the linguistic (denotative or connotative) dimensions of pictures and the visual properties of language (Iconology and Picture). Finnegan explains the value of conflating image and text for studies of visual culture: “the goal of analyzing the imagetext is not simply to compare images to texts, but rather to recognize the inherent tensions in the marriage of image and texts and investigate how those tensions make or negotiate meaning” ("Social” 340). Speaking of “inherent tensions” between image and text while presuming that they “make or negotiate meaning” a priori assigns representational, or immaterial, significance to an image’s material, non-
linguistic dimensions. In this postulation, such “tension” remains subordinate to the “marriage of image and texts,” to the conviction that the distinctive properties of an image ultimately embody meaning, or representational content, prior and extrinsic to the image itself. This presumption thus defers consideration of how images might also function in a non-representational manner, how they equally unmake or hinder meaning and thereby resist the incorporation of such content.

One may summarize commonplace assumptions underlying this conflation of image and text in syllogistic form: Visual artifacts are a form of representation; representation can be verbal as well as visual; therefore, the representational qualities of visual artifacts may be effectively analyzed as a form of speech or language. Collapsing the boundaries between image and text by citing such a broad notion of “representation” only begs the question of whether and how images often complicate or interrupt linguistic meaning and thus fail to function as a form of verbal or linguistic expression, even in contexts where individuals employ them for such purposes. Images hold no intrinsic meaning, however much we describe their form and function in semantic terms.

In the context of rhetorical studies, this conflation between image and text produces methodologies that privilege verbal over visual phenomena. Studies of ostensibly visual rhetoric often invoke images as analytic devices with which to access essentially verbal public arguments (Barbatsis; Birdsell and Groarke; Finnegan, “Naturalistic”; Shelley). The emphasis in such scholarship on visual argument, and consequently on verbal or linguistic paradigms, constitutes a crucial index of its reliance on representational thought and language. An argument, of course, encompasses a series of direct, logically ordered propositions consciously supported by reasons or evidence. Presumably, then, arguments are not intrinsic to an image; rather, an image symbolically conveys the essence of prior and extrinsic argumentative content. According to Sonja Foss, the particular relevance of visual artifacts for “rhetorical critics” concerns “the influence of images on audiences and the way images are constructed to affect such influence” (“Rhetorical” 214). By this logic, visual phenomena are appropriate objects of rhetorical study because they represent the persuasive influence of purposeful, decipherable appeals foreign to images themselves.
Appeals to prior and extrinsic verbal, linguistic, or textual content thus prove necessary in order to classify visual artifacts as rhetorical in nature. Hence the recurrence of interpretive categories in studies of visual rhetoric that conflate visual with linguistic phenomena in deference to the representational authority of words. Relevant examples include the ‘imagetext,’ ‘image vernaculars’ (Finnegan, ‘Social’ and ‘Recognizing’), the ‘televisual text’ (Barbatsis), or the photojournalistic ‘essay’ (Lucaites). Such ready conflations of verbal and visual categories replicate similar tendencies throughout interdisciplinary studies of visual culture, which commonly interpret images according to forms of denotation or connotation, semiotic coding and sign systems, or voice and style, most famously exemplified in Roland Barthes’ classic interpretations of ‘myth’ or the three primary ‘messages’ in modern photography (Mythologies, ‘Photographic,’ ‘Rhetoric,’ and ‘Third’).

Finally, even recent studies in visual rhetoric that question the aforementioned representational models preserve representational categories in implicit but crucial ways. Drawing an analogy between Michael McGee’s notion of the ideograph and visual icons (‘Ideograph’), such studies commonly argue that iconic representations of people, places, or events function visually as the ideograph does verbally: as a high order political term or phrase that influences communal identity by symbolizing a particular ideological orientation (Edwards and Winkler). This methodology advocates, through its emphasis of ideological content, a familiar textual formalism. Studies in this vein frequently justify their inquiry upon the presumably iconic status of a given image, its aesthetic embodiment of prior and extrinsic ideological significance, which warrants a close formal reading of the visual artifact in question (Edwards and Winkler; Hariman and Lucaites, ‘Dissent,’ ‘Performing,’ ‘Public,’ ‘Ritualizing,’ and Caption; Lucaites). In this dual scrutiny of visual formalism and ideological content, interpretation of visual icons amounts once again to a rhetorical analysis of pictorial representation. The fact that the iconic image represents a particular ideology (rather than an argument) makes little difference; the analysis ultimately assigns to the materiality of the image an analytic value subordinate to the immaterial ideological meaning it apparently conveys. Methodologies of this sort accommodate visual artifacts to rhetorical inquiry by positing a
discernible ideological subject who recognizes and responds to the rationally articulated iconic significance or ideological directives represented in a particular visual icon.  

The question of rhetoric and visual phenomena consequently entails implications both broader and deeper than those of representational principles alone (including argument, persuasion, or communication in the conventional senses). Some of the most potent critical and theoretical insights concerning the significance of visual phenomena to modern culture dramatically challenge customary assumptions about the efficacy of visual representation. While rhetoricians today assert that visual rhetoric is noteworthy for its representational functions (because it reveals argument, persuasion, or communication in allegedly unconventional forms) a host of modern thinkers—including Bataille and the Surrealists, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, or Barthes, Foucault, Lacan, and others—have persuasively contended that images fail as often as they succeed in conveying intended, coherent, or objective meanings upon which the very notions of argument, persuasion, and communication depend.  

The present discussion seeks to complement rather than invalidate sophisticated approaches to the ubiquitous affinities between texts and pictures, or words and images, emphasized in studies of visual rhetoric. Representational and non-representational accounts of images are not mutually exclusive. This essay proposes a difference rather than a deficiency: such studies’ emphasis of representational principles (evident in the concepts of intended argument and persuasive or communicative content) reflects different critical aims than those that would explore how the material, non-linguistic dimensions of an image complicate or even undermine strategies of argument, persuasion, or communication. One would require for such exploration an alternate, non-representational mode of analysis.  

Formulating this non-representational approach begins by suspending the tendency to equate the concepts of picture and image. One may, instead, differentiate between them as Mitchell suggests: “between a constructed concrete object or ensemble [a picture] and the virtual, phenomenal appearance that it provides for a beholder [an image]” (Picture 4 n5; emphasis added). Pictures represent only one discrete,
formal product of virtual processes of imaging, or a multifaceted production of visual realities and modes of perception. One may define the term image, in other words, as a verb instead of a noun. An image is a mode of action or material practice. Images evince virtual (or non-representational) functions by literally producing visual realities, including the modes of perception, visual practices, viewing subjects, and forms of affect that comprise them. Such productions consist not in representational processes, mimaetically re-presenting objects or referents prior and extrinsic to the image, but in material enactments immanent to the image itself. Images function virtually, moreover, to the extent that they produce difference and multiplicity. They not only represent existing arguments or discourses but also enact conditions for novel, unanticipated attributions of sense and value in the future. Their material features encompass non-representational dimensions that resist saturation by linguistic meaning. Images engender not a single visual form but multiple enactments of visual perception.

Individuals indeed produce or appropriate images as mediums of intended, rational, and coherent communication; but images simultaneously disrupt communicative intention, rationality, and coherence. We use or interpret images as mediums of instrumental rhetorical exchange; but their material properties severely qualify their efficacy as mediums of discursive or ideological content. The materiality of the image delimits the claims one can make concerning its argumentative, persuasive, or communicative meaning while concomitantly producing something quite other than intended, rational, or coherent meaning as such.

Additionally, then, one may ask not simply how images represent a particular subjective viewpoint but also how they establish modalities of vision, of perception and appearance, that cannot be ascribed to an ideal observer. In certain contexts, we understand images to rationally or coherently reflect subjective meanings and experiences in visual, if not verbal, form. The material form and circulation of such images, however, simultaneously establishes conditions for seeing, for perceiving and assigning sense or value to phenomena, irreducible to the consciousness or desires of a stable, unified subject position.

The following section maintains that these two aspects of the image are mutually constitutive. Exploring how images produce or enact novel
visual realities (aside from representing communicative, persuasive, or argumentative content) enhances the project of visual rhetoric. Investigating how individuals not only appropriate or interpret pictorial representations for strategic effect but how images themselves produce forms of observation and perception—how they produce, in other words, observing and perceiving subjects—likewise contributes to such inquiry. In short, one may study visual rhetoric not only according to the regard, or perspective, of an external subject position but also from within the regard of the image itself—within the modalities of visual practice, or the particular grounds for attributions of sense and value, it provides to any potential viewer.

Shadings

Attending closely to the non-representational, material dimensions of the image requires scrutiny of something other than objects of visual representation, such as photographs, paintings, sculptures, monuments, and the like. This task requires that one also investigate the *illuminative conditions* that produce particular kinds of appearance or perception and in which such objects acquire their form. The image in this context is defined in an especially broad and multifaceted sense: not as a discrete product of visual representation (such as an individual photograph or painting) but as a virtual event—namely, the production of visual fields or modalities of perception. The image generates conditions for seeing or modes of perception that one cannot ascribe to a privileged observer or consciousness but which nonetheless engender a matrix of subjective vantages.

Indeed, the operative *topos* here is *light*: that which makes the image possible, which en-lightens its apparent contents or referents and thus renders them available for perception. The crucial question of the image is not merely what phenomena it presents (or re-presents) but how it does so: how it establishes conditions for seeing that render some phenomena visible, though always in partial perspective or illumination, while withholding others from view. Heidegger’s treatise on the origins of artistic works provides a convenient antecedent here. He insists that one
attend to "the thingly character" that all such works possess—to the intrinsic properties that define them as particular things or beings ("Origin" 19). "[E]ven the much-vaunted aesthetic experience," Heidegger asserts, "cannot get around the thingly aspect of the art work. There is something stony in a work of architecture, wooden in a carving, colored in a painting, spoken in a linguistic work, sonorous in a musical composition" (19). For Heidegger, the "thingly aspect" of any such work is not inert; to the contrary, it dynamically produces the distinctive kind of thing or being that a work is. Defined as a virtual event, the "thingly character" of the image—light—is no definite thing at all. To paraphrase Heidegger, even provocative representational accounts of the image cannot get around its thingly aspect: there is a process of illumination always already at work within it—a process that represents nothing and cannot be represented. One cannot categorically separate the question of how phenomena are literally brought to light, how they are made available to perception, from the question of how we assign meaning to them. The putative meaning or symbolism of a given image depends upon a material practice that has no essential meaning: the practice (the thing, happening, or event) of illumination, of presenting particular phenomena for viewing, immanent to the image itself.

Hence the following truism of studies in visual culture: visual artifacts are never neutral. Such an artifact (a painting, photograph, sculpture, or any other object of visual representation) does not simply represent a person, place, or event. Rather, it establishes a particular gaze produced by social, political, and ethical exigencies that condition relationships between subject and object, between spectator and visual phenomena (DeLuca and Demo; Mulvey, "Visual" and Visual). Photography of indigenous peoples during the era of European colonization illustrates a principle evident in all gazes: the seemingly objective visual presentation of that which appears in its most natural state is made possible by a host of power relations and cultural practices that determine who enjoys the institutional authority to observe, and thereby shape the entire visual order, and who is obliged to submit to that gaze (Lutz and Collins). Even the most apparently natural forms of vision in Western culture likewise enact these asymmetrical power relations. For instance, according to commonplace conventions of Western painting, John Berger
dryly notes, "men act, women appear" (47). The material event of bringing phenomena to light in specific institutional settings, of rendering them available for perception, observation, analysis, and response, is a primary element of this dynamic. The image therefore enacts such differential relations in its very composition.

Michel Foucault's famous studies of the clinic and the prison reveal in greater detail how institutions distribute lightness and darkness, the process of which produces particular kinds of visual practices and, as a result, corresponding forms of knowledge, subjectivity, and judgment. The clinic, Foucault proposes, is an institutional space devoted to tracing the origins and effects of the passive patient's illness through the penetrating gaze of medical examination (Birth). The prison, he similarly concludes, is an institutional space defined by the unremitting gaze of legal and judicial authority, which prisoners in their narrow confinement cannot return (Discipline). In Foucault's assessment, these codified methods of observation, analysis, and interpretation function in non-representational ways; they are inexplicable as neutral mediums for expressing the extrinsic nature or meaning of disease and criminality. They actively produce the appearance, the materiality and physicality, of sickness and health or crime and punishment. Such visual practices, moreover, reproduce asymmetrical power relations that delimit what can be seen, who can see it, and how one may understand it. The clinic and the prison, in this account, function through the production of images as such.

Foucault's description of the clinic and the prison reveals that if one speaks of light, of illumination, then one must also speak of shading. Or, more precisely, one must speak of the distribution of lightness and darkness, for whatever is seen necessarily acquires its recognizable character, its ostensible identity, within a variegated play of light of shadow. Illumination cannot take place without shading, the contrasting gradations of which define particular modalities of perception or fields of vision. This distribution of lightness and darkness, therefore, does not consist in a dialectical relationship that posits the former and latter as categorical opposites. Light and shade subsist, to the contrary, in a mutually germinating relation that evokes the palpable and singular dimensions of a given image. Illumination in this context, distinct from
Platonic idealism, does not signify apprehension of purely intuitive, immaterial truth or knowledge, while shadows signify the absence thereof. "Light" and "dark" have a literal rather than a symbolic significance in this context. The ability of an image to render phenomena available to perception depends equally on lightness and darkness, on the characteristic shadings that define its visual environment. Heidegger perceives the truth (as *aletheia*) of a given work of art not in its transparent illumination of extrinsic content or meaning but in the thick interplay of veiling and unveiling, of concealment and "unconcealedness," that it establishes of its own accord (*Origin* 50–78). Derrida confirms and extends this line of thought in his own treatise on painting (*Truth* 324, 367). Such shading—the interplay of light and dark, veiling and unveiling, concealment and unconcealment—neither represents nor assigns decipherable meaning to prior and extrinsic phenomena. Rather, it enacts their very appearance or manifestation, and with it particular modalities of perception that condition or delimit the kind of truth claims one can make regarding their perceived sense or value.

Consider the following contrast. Dramatic plays of light and shadow characterized Romantic painting of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which consisted of sublime and fantastic images depicting the awe and terror of nature, ghostly apparitions of the supernatural realm, or the tragic fragility and overwhelming passions of individual human existence. Romantic painting thus produced a strikingly different gaze, a different basis for perception, knowledge, and judgment, than, for instance, the combinations of perspectival exactitude and religious solemnity featured in the paintings of Renaissance masters (Ciseri). The image, as described here, is distinct from a specific painting or photograph; it refers instead to a reproducible and historically characteristic *techne* of casting phenomena in a certain light, of endowing them with a distinctive manner of appearance, that a single painting or photograph merely exemplifies. In virtual terms, the image enacts such material practices.

Jonathan Crary's work well illustrates the irreducibly heterogeneous nature of the image as a manifestation of material practice. In his research on vision and modernity, Crary insists that modes of perception are historically conditioned and observes that modern visual culture pro-
motes "attention," or "disengagement from a broader field of attraction" as a standard of observation and spectatorship, which distinguishes its visual practices from those of previous eras (Suspensions 1). His demonstration of this premise reveals the multiform qualities of the image scrutinized in this essay: he locates instances of such attention in a broad array of visual artifacts, including art, cinema, and photography, but also in such popular amusements as the stereoscope, optical experimentation, museum exhibitions, and even the organization of urban spaces. In this example, the image refers to conjoined processes and products of visual perception, for it produces modes of vision enacted in myriad visual practices, of which discrete visual artifacts are merely one component. Visual representation thus turns out to be only one facet within a larger matrix of material production.

Images, therefore, are not meaningful in and of themselves. Their production of phenomenal appearances evokes a material relation between subject and object, and thereby conditions the kind of meanings one can attribute to its putative referents. The availability of the image for particular rhetorical claims is, at some level, inseparable from the perspective, affect, or gaze it employs to bring phenomena into view in specific institutional or cultural contexts. Thus, the materiality of the image—its enactment of lightness and darkness—unavoidably informs the viewer's resources for interpretation and judgment concerning its apparent contents or referents.

In his treatise on painting, John Sallis describes how the image produces forms of subjectivity (in this case, that of a painter) through its distribution of light and shadow:

"Painting is determined by the absolute imperative of shading. For the painter everything depends on communication with the shading, with the raising into relief, through which things comes to show themselves in a self-showing that is their very emergence into presence. The painter must be capable of learning the secrets—the alchemy—of that mixing of light and shade by which being is configured. (7)"

Learning the secrets of this alchemy is quite different from presuming that the image functions a priori or exclusively as a medium of representation
(including intelligible argument, persuasion, or communication). Rather, the perceived intentions of the subject (the painter in this case) are conditioned by the visual reality of the image itself, by a *self-showing* array of appearances: a play of contrasts no longer determined or governed by subjective consciousness, a field of likenesses and differences that enact their own presentational powers and in which the painter seeks to participate. The subject, in other words, always already occupies a position *within* the distribution of light and shadow that defines an image. In Crary's terms, "Though obviously one who sees, the observer is more importantly one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations. . . . There is no observing subject prior to this continually shifting field" (*Technologies* 6). One's ability to define oneself as the master of a particular visual environment, as a sovereign subject presiding over all that he or she surveys, is made possible by the limited horizon of perception that an image produces.

Ordinary visual perception depends for its coherence upon a delimiting frame, an encircling horizon that defines and arranges a particular visual reality. The formative influence of this frame or horizon is not limited to the margins of a given image; its influence pervades the delimited space of the image, thereby defining the singular gaze and affect, scope or focus, without which the image's entire visual environment—indeed, the image itself—would not exist. The notion that the frame (the "border" or "parergon") of an image comprehensively shapes its capacities for visual presentation and representation is a major leitmotif of Derrida's meditations on truth and painting (*Truth*). As such, the particular framing of light and shadow, or conditions for seeing, which constitute an image make possible one's present and future attributions of sense and value to its nominal contents or referents. The truth value of subjective claims made on the basis of an image's putative content or meaning depends upon its characteristic visual order, which depends in turn upon its framing of light and shadow, its physical distribution of illumination and concealment.

In sum, the preceding assertions all support the premise that the image is a virtual event—a premise that further informs our understanding of how images function in both representational and non-representational
capacities. The image encompasses at once the process and product of visual representation, for discrete pictures or other visual artifacts are merely symptoms of visual practices consubstantial with the production and reproduction of various conditions for observation, analysis, and interpretation. In its physical distribution of lightness and darkness, the image provides a medium for attributions of sense and value upon which efforts at strategic argument or intended communication depend; yet it simultaneously stages the dissolution of sense and value and the instability of symbolic communication insofar as its materiality retains no intrinsic social or political significance. In this sense, the virtual dimensions of the image manifest its inherent capacity for difference and multiplicity, for the fragmentation and alteration of meaning both in the present and future, rather than a natural equivalence with privileged cognitive or discursive content. Acknowledging the virtual dimensions of the image as such warrants further consideration, undertaken in the following section, of how its indeterminate rhetorical status yields insight into its political functions.

(Political) Images

Any understanding of how images function politically is incomplete without inquiring into their material and non-representational dimensions. Such attributes provide indispensable incitements to political activity. Previous research demonstrates, for instance, that the corporeal appearance of veiled Muslim girls in French public schools has reactivated colonial-era habits of looking, and with them political reorganizations of social space, insofar as state authorities and segments of the French public literally see such young women as signs of violence, terrorism, and threats to public safety (Vivian). Kevin DeLuca, moreover, has shown that "image events" staged by social and environmental protest groups are politically consequential not because they automatically encourage rational, ordered dialogue but because the very act of producing and disseminating certain images has tangible, non-representational effects: it directs collective attention to the disturbing existence of phenomena conventionally withheld from public view (1–2).
These virtual capacities demonstrably invigorated some of the twentieth century’s most storied social movements. Jacob Riis’s pioneering photojournalism during the Progressive Era cast light into the labyrinthine darkness of turn-of-the-century tenement slums precisely because the depredations of immigrant poverty were largely withheld from public inspection (Riis; Gandal). When, in 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till was brutally tortured and murdered in Mississippi, his mother insisted on photographing his grotesquely disfigured body as it lay in an open casket. The photograph was subsequently published in *Jet* magazine and public outcry in its wake marked the beginning of the modern Civil Rights movement (Harold and DeLuca; Williams). In both instances, the blunt visual rendering of profound injustices and inequalities otherwise confined to the shadowy margins of society constituted a new, potentially transformative visual practice. Such is the virtual capacity of the image as this essay defines it: the production of novel visual practices, and with them new phenomenal appearances and viewing subjects, of which a single pictorial representation is only one modality.

The physical activity of rendering such phenomena publicly visible created simultaneously political and non-representational effects. The images in question produced customarily unseen visual realities, and with them novel modes of perception and judgment. Visual practices of this sort transgress the norms of public scrutiny that serve the interests of reigning institutional authorities, establish an emergent spectrum of subject-object relations, and inspire novel truth claims and value judgments concerning the image’s putative contents or referents. The act of illumination produces visual phenomena available for conscious appropriation by efforts at political argument, persuasion, or communication. Nonetheless, this virtual production is distinct from such rhetorical content, however indispensable it may be for their incitement. To understand how the image contributes vitally to the formation of political events is to acknowledge the material perdurance of something devoid of essential political meaning: its virtual production of visual realities as a formative dynamic of myriad social practices.

Jacob Riis’s stark photographs of tenement slums, or that of Emmett Till’s viciously mutilated body, demonstrate poignantly the palpable withdrawal of meaning that occurs even in the production of such
politically consequential modes of perception. The act of bringing these disquieting and conventionally unseen phenomena to light is a powerful incitement to speech and action because it likely dramatizes, not the abiding presence of intersubjective connection, but its very loss: a visual manifestation of the sheer alterity that inheres between irreconcilably different individuals. Iconic artifacts of this sort acquire that status not because of their obvious significance, however obvious it may be to some, but because they embody a profound aporia: their apparent retention of an inexhaustible abundance of meaning indicates that whatever profundities they hold retreat into the realm of the ineffable as much as they lend themselves to intelligible denotation or connotation.

In this context, however, photographs lucky enough to acquire the rarified status of an icon prove a more general rule about the inherently changeable political function of all images. The image withholds the truth of a given social or political reality precisely in appearing to reveal it; but it also reveals that truth, in compelling verisimilitude, by withholding it. In Blanchot's evocative terms, "The image is the duplicity of revelation. The image is what veils by revealing; it is the veil that reveals by reveiling in all the ambiguous indecision of the word reveal. The image is image by means of this duplicity, being not the object's double, but the initial division that then permits the thing to be figured" (30). The notion that an image naturally or effectively represents a social or political reality, much less truth, is foreign to Blanchot's language and thought. An image (iconic or otherwise) is a form of duplicity and revelation at once. Its apparent function as "the object's double"—as its mimetic representation—is also the mark of inherent alterity, or "the initial division," that renders it completely alien to that same object, precisely as it "permits the thing to be figured." The object in question is absent from the image precisely as it appears to be so palpably present, and is simultaneously present in its initial and irreversible absence. By implication, the efficacy of an image as a medium of stable and uniform sociopolitical truth or reality is profoundly conditioned by its characteristic "duplicity of revelation."

The issue here is not whether we are accustomed to treating images as effective mediums of persuasion, argument, and communication, or whether we habitually use them to represent prior and extrinsic political
premises. We are so accustomed, and do use them in such ways. Nonetheless, something notably other than reasoned argument, strategic persuasion, or purposeful communication transpires in this context: the stubbornly independent existence of the image as a distribution of light and shadows devoid of essential and discernible meaning.

Barthes succinctly illustrates the obstinately asignifying nature of the image in his oft-cited discussion of the punctum. For him, the punctum designates a tell-tale dynamic in the image that implacably resists any attempt to name it. Capturing or even approximating the punctum in language, in contrast to other "always coded" elements, is impossible (Camera 51). It marks the (literally) inexplicable core of an image. Whatever speech or language it provokes "is an addition," not an interpretation (55). Barthes' prose highlights the polarity between one's attempt to name the punctum and its unyielding independence from any representational process: "it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there" (55). The enigmatic nature of the punctum suggests that explicating the metaphorical meaning or argumentative logic of a given image risks overlooking, in Barthes' terms, "what is nonetheless already there": the asignifying coming-to-presence or coming-to-perception—the "raising into relief," as Sallis would have it (7)—intrinsic to the image, which resists every such attempt at explication. In one and the same movement, we assign meaning to the phenomenal appearances that an image produces while the image divests itself of such meaning. In doing so, its regard—its field of vision or mode of perception—incessantly makes possible the attribution of different meanings according to potentially incommensurable social or political interests.

Walter Benjamin, in his classic treatise on the status of art in an age of mechanical reproduction, maintains that the political significance of visual works is consubstantial with the technological innovations or cultural practices that produce them. In his analysis, the modern technological progression from lithography to photography to film reveals a steady divesture of authentic or authoritative meaning from works of art in favor of "transitoriness and reproducibility" (223). For him, this divestiture amounts to a substantial change in nothing less than "human sense perception" (222). Mechanical reproduction thus destroys the aura of authenticity that previously defined the work of art as a repository of
meaning or insight separate from sociopolitical developments. The revelation that technological practices and social rituals actively produce whatever semblance of authenticity the work of art enjoys is, for Benjamin, an emancipatory insight. "[T]he instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production," he writes, "the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice—politics" (224). The politics of mechanical reproduction, so conceived, consist in dramatically unfurling the image from its traditional enclosure around an ostensibly authentic, universal conception of artistic value and cultural significance. This transformation of "human sense perception" reveals that whatever aura of authenticity the work of art enjoys, far from existing outside of the realm of ordinary social and political practices, is itself a production of those very practices.

By implication, the so-called aura of a given image—its perceived authenticity in faithfully representing particular times, places, people, or events—depends upon its virtual production and reproduction of such nominally prior and extrinsic realities. The image so defined does not refer to a single picture, photograph, or any other discrete visual artifact; it refers, instead, to a web of sociopolitical relations—a field of perception, observation, or interpretation in which an array of subjects participate, and from which they derive competing, even irreconcilable, grounds for truth claims and value judgments. The materiality of the image as such never encloses a stable identity, whether in the form of truth, knowledge, meaning, or subjectivity. It produces, instead, continual multiplicity—multiple gazes, subjectivities, and grounds for judgment as it stimulates the virtual production of differing social, political, and historical realities. The ostensible transparency of the image, its apparent representation of prior and extrinsic meaning or presence, is itself a virtual production or enactment that serves social and political interests. Such an orientation obliges us to not only plumb the image for its immaterial content but also to affirm its virtual production thereof. The apparent sense and value of an image, Benjamin teaches us, does not grow incrementally dimmer with every material reproduction of its distinctive visual reality; instead, every appropriation of the image continually renews and elaborates its potentiality as a ground of truth or meaning.
By way of analogy, therefore, one may ascertain the political function of images by analyzing them in the manner texts as well as works. Barthes differentiates between “works,” defined as weighty, authoritative masterpieces of literary genius, and “texts,” meaning networks or interwoven formations of heterogeneous strands of discourse (“Work”). He observes that we customarily interpret and assign value to literary works by trying to divine within them the author’s original intentions. As such, the author’s supposed transhistorical presence regulates the meaning of the language on the page. A work consequently emphasizes essential meaning, or “closes upon a signified,” to the extent that we assume it provides objective access to a privileged form of consciousness. In Barthes’ estimation, texts emphasize the play of signifiers, the thick and arbitrary materiality of language itself, rather than lending priority to disembodied subjective meaning or objective referents. Works, therefore, presumably represent the author’s intentions once and for all time, whereas the so-called truth or meaning of a text is fashioned, and ineluctably refashioned, from readers’ novel engagements with its discursive threads. A text “fulfills the very plurality of meaning,” Barthes writes. “The Text is not coexistence of meaning, but passage, traversal.” Works appear to be finished, but texts evolve persistently from one reader to the next.

Images function, in the context of visual rhetoric, not only as discrete products of visual representation with discernible representational content, akin to a work. Images, analogous to texts, emphasize the material production of visual signifiers, the virtual enactment of visual phenomena. Within this frame of reference, images are therefore defined by their irreducible futurity. The rhetoric of an image consists not merely in its representation of a prior, intended argument or ideology but in its present and future productions of multiple or differential modes of perception, viewing subjects, forms of affect, and attributions of sense and value. Rather than repeating the first and original time, the image “begins” by “carry[ing] the first time to the ‘nth’ power”—by repeating a time yet to come. The image produces, independently of its representational functions, modalities of perception that accommodate potentially unlimited attributions of distinct meanings or referents hospitable to a multitude of subjective interests, indefinitely deferred into the future. What Merleau-Ponty said of paintings applies to all images: they have
"almost all their life still before them" (190). Or, in the inverse formulation, their future significance intrudes incessantly upon their present sense and value.

Such futurity profoundly informs both the rhetorical and political status of the image. It renders an image available for appropriation as a medium of argument, persuasion, or communication while nevertheless ensuring that it remains equally available as the ground for entirely different claims or judgments in the present and future alike. The rhetorical instability of the image as such suggests a parallel with Derrida's descriptions of the asignifying or non-representational production of meaning in language. The image, like units of speech in Derrida's account, ceaselessly divests itself of stable and uniform meaning, both temporally and spatially: it supports an array of irreconcilably different interpretations in the present and defers infinitely into the future any possibility of their reduction to a normative sense ("Différence" 3-14; "Signature" 314-21). What Derrida says of any grapheme applies equally to the visual inscriptions, as it were, that comprise the image: "[T]he movement of signification is possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of the past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element" ("Différence" 13). In this respect, the material perdurance of the image, its enactment of multiple visual modalities, explains what one might describe as its potent yet indeterminate rhetorical and political status: the very properties of the image that appear to offer such a powerful medium of representation concomitantly preserve its indelible capacity, in both present and future contexts, to acquire radically divergent meanings without ever becoming meaningful in and of itself. Or, as Derrida says of writing, "No context can enclose it. Nor can any code" ("Signature" 317).

Recent geopolitical events dramatize this lesson concerning the rhetorical indeterminacy of visual phenomena. Many in the United States assumed that photojournalistic coverage of the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, or of the Abu Graihb prison scandal in Iraq during the spring and summer of 2004, disseminated the horrific, undistorted, and incontestable truth of such events. However irrefutable
the significance of these images appeared to some, international dialogue and debate soon revealed that geopolitical communities espoused deeply fractured, sometimes irreconcilable, public opinions as to their supposedly unmediated meaning. In this case, discrete and ostensibly unambiguous pictorial representations functioned virtually insofar as they produced radical difference and multiplicity: an entire spectrum of irreconcilable visual realities and political judgments.

The fact that the non-representational dimensions of an image prevent its reduction to an essential argument, moral, or meaning underscores once again the political importance of its materiality. Barbie Zelizer interprets the reversible significance that images obtain as a manifestation of their subjunctive voice. The subjunctive, in grammatical terms, suspends the certainty of present actions and circumstances by introducing hypothetical qualifications, commonly indicated by terms such as “might,” “could,” or “should.” The statement “I might have shot that man” (to cite Zelizer’s primary example) is a subjunctive modification of the declarative “I shot that man” (“Voice” 163). Zelizer contends that the subjunctive quality of visual representations ensures the following destabilizing outcome:

The condition under focus is transformed from a reality or future certainty into a probability made possible by someone’s desire, emotions, or imagination. Technically defined as the mood of a verb used to express condition or hypothesis, the subjunctive creates a space of possibility, hope, and liminality through which spectators might relate to images. (163)

What Zelizer interprets as a grammatical operation is, more fundamentally, a virtual condition intrinsic to the image, which one can describe in linguistic terms only by recourse to metaphor. One may recognize that the image as such is a material site of political activity: in producing various institutional gazes, it provides a virtual forum for the production and reproduction of subject-object relations upon which competing truth claims or value judgments depend.

The radical indeterminacy of an image, however, is cause for affirmation rather than lament in the context of rhetorical inquiry. It engenders fields of perception in which innumerable, unacknowledged subjects
may participate and assign new sense and value to its apparent contents or referents. Even when a given image appears to provide an unmediated, objective, or self-evident representation of people, places, and events, its materiality stubbornly retains an undiminished availability for competing, even irreconcilable, interpretations of its meaning and worth. The image is politically consequential precisely because it is devoid of an unmediated, objective, or self-evident political significance, even as it appears to powerfully embody such attributes.

Conclusion

Contemporary studies of visual rhetoric interpret visual artifacts predominantly as representational phenomena. The question posed by this essay is whether the study of visual rhetoric is equivalent to the study of visual representation, or whether one might productively employ other analytic frameworks in order to further delineate the multidimensional forms and functions of visual phenomena. Representational accounts of the affinities between rhetoric and visual phenomena are only one of many compelling modes of thought and speech with which to apprehend the complex social forms and functions of the image.

The preceding pages have therefore offered a rationale for complementing the current emphasis on representation in studies of visual rhetoric with an attunement to the virtual dimensions of visual phenomena. Representational accounts of visual rhetoric understandably emphasize the ways in which discrete visual artifacts represent prior and extrinsic textual, verbal, or linguistic meaning and thereby reflect broader, rationally articulated public arguments. A virtual account, however, emphasizes the non-representational, material, and productive dimensions of images: it illuminates their capacity to produce or enact a multiplicity of visual realities in both the present and future instead of a priori or exclusively representing immaterial meaning, referents, or presence. This contrast does not support a dialectical opposition between the representational and non-representational, or immaterial and material, properties of the image. The preceding analysis shows, to the contrary, that the representational capacities of images depend upon concomitant
virtual functions that resist meaning, content, or presence in their conventionally lucid and legible senses.

Indeed, the preceding analysis only serves to remind us of the remarkably variegated relations between word and image. Both classical and modern analogies between words and images typically posit a symmetrical relationship among the two categories. Consider, for instance, Simonides' previously quoted adage ("Painting is silent poetry; poetry is speaking painting") or Mitchell's conceptual fusion of text and image. The symmetry posited in such analogies provides a warrant for presuming that images and words are naturally joined by intrinsically representational affinities. The very concept of visual rhetoric is a prime example: images are worthy of rhetorical study because the natural symmetry between words and images allows the latter to function effectively as mediums of communication, persuasion, or argumentation.

In his well-known recommendations on training one's memory, however, Cicero's use of visual metaphor suggests a notably different, asymmetrical inflection. He advises his pupils to memorize the various components of complex discourses by following "the systematic approach of a consummate painter, who keeps the different localities distinct from each other by employing a variety of shapes" (Ideal 2.358-59). Cicero's analogy reverses the normal representational synthesis of word and image: here, the features of a consummately arranged image (a painting) supply an ideal model for one's discourse not because of its communicative, persuasive, or argumentative properties but because of its physical features (its artful spacing of "different localities" and rendering of "shapes"). Images are not natural representational supplements for speech or language in this conception; rather, one's discourse should structurally unfold, in a non-representational capacity, like a skillfully wrought image.

Economies of spacing and shaping govern words (spoken or written) as much as those of meaning. In Cicero's text, words and images indeed share a close resemblance—not because images supplement the immaterial meaning of words in substantial form, but because words are themselves types of images. Blanchot notes that "the proper tool for writing" in its ancient inception "was also proper for incising: the stylet" (28). Words refer to a system of visual incisions as much, if not more, than
a medium of communication. On this basis, Derrida argues that even speech is a system of marks, when one takes into account the rhetorical indeterminacy previously attributed to all images (even minute ones such as individual words or letters): "This structural possibility," he writes, "of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is, as we have seen, the nonpresent *remaining* of a differential mark cut off from its alleged 'production' or origin" ("Signature" 318). Additional research on the rich affinities between words and images might therefore proceed by investigating in greater detail not only how images function as a supplement to words but also the extent to which words are imagistic.

For now, it is sufficient to note that the image as conceived in this essay suggests a conception of the visual that affirms the sort of *similitude* Foucault identifies in his commentary on Magritte's paintings. In such images, he avers, "similitude is restored to itself. It is no longer the finger pointing out from the canvas in order to refer to something else. It inaugurates a play of transferences that run, proliferate, propagate, and correspond within the layout of the painting, affirming and representing nothing" ("Pipe" 49). This restoration of similitude to itself redefines the nature of the image in a way that disrupts the logic of the model and the copy, of true and false appearances, and elides the ground of every transcendental signified. "Through all these scenes," Foucault writes, "glide similitudes that no reference point can situate: translations with neither point of departure nor support" (52). In the play of such similitude, we encounter and learn to value anew the materiality of both rhetoric and images.

Rhetoric has always been visual. This essay has delineated critical differences in the means by which one can understand visual manifestations of rhetoric according to either representational or virtual orientations. To speak of the image does not necessarily mean that one must do so in representational terms. One may do so, instead, by speaking in the regard of the image itself.\footnote{Syracuse University}

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Notes

1. For background on the significance of *logos* to early theories of rhetoric, consult Cole; Enos; Jasinski; F.E. Peters 111–12; Schiappa, *Protagoras* and *Beginnings*; Sloane 507.

2. See O’Gorman for an excellent treatment of *lexis* and appearance in Aristotle’s rhetorical theory.

3. See also Foss, “Visual”; Osborn, “Rhetorical.”

4. A secondary issue warrants acknowledgment here: Michael Warner’s account of circulation as a constitutive element of publics and counterpublics has also been appropriated by select scholars in visual rhetoric as a means to circumvent standard notions of visual representation. Warner’s description of circulation, however, refers to the circulation of *texts*, broadly construed, as a constitutive dynamic of *reading or literary* publics (see Warner “Publics” and *Publics*). Such a description admittedly encompasses visual dimensions of print culture, yet when applied to visual artifacts it nonetheless sanctions the same reversibility between image and text central to Mitchell’s picture theory as well as the strains of visual rhetoric it helped to inspire. Finnegan and Kang conclude, “For all its interest in abandoning dialogic, conversational models of the public, Warner’s conception of circulation privileges a linguistic [or representational] model of the public” (395). By implication, Warner’s notion of circulation, adapted for the study of visual rhetoric, retains an emphasis on the role of discrete verbal-visual texts in discursively transmitting meaning between subjects (the addresser and addressee) rather than amplifying our understanding of how entire fields of vision or practices of looking engender viewing subjects.

5. Helpful surveys chronicling these aspects of modern studies in visual culture include Evans and Hall; Jay; Jenks; Levin; Mirzoeff, *Introduction and Visual*; Mitchell, *Iconology and Picture*; Sturken and Cartwright.

6. See also Foucault, “Pipe,” *Madness*, and *Order*. Tagg and Phillips provide especially deft investigations of how vision serves as an institutional technique of knowledge production and discipline as Foucault described it.

7. See also Derrida, *Memoirs*.

8. See also DeLuca and Delicath; DeLuca and Demo; DeLuca and Peeple.

9. Cadava offers a particularly commanding explication of this dimension of Benjamin’s thought. Thanks, as well, to Diane Davis for expanding my understanding of Benjamin in this context.

10. See also Barthes, “Death.” McGee is credited with introducing Barthes’ theories on works, texts, and authorship to rhetorical studies (“Text”).

11. The author would like to thank Lynn Worsham, the reviewers, and Anne Demo for their insightful commentaries on earlier versions of this essay.
Works Cited


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