

## Teaching Visual Analysis in the Writing & Rhetoric Classroom

### What is visual analysis?

Any “analysis” involves the process of breaking something down into meaningful components in order to better understand the whole. In the context of the academy, “analysis” typically involves using some kind of theoretical lens or framework to dissect a text. So, a “visual analysis” involves using theoretical frameworks to dissect a visual text.

### What does visual analysis have to do with Writing & Rhetoric?

Since we’re doing this analysis in the context of the Writing & Rhetoric classroom, students will use *rhetorical* lenses/frameworks to identify meaningful components of the visual text. In doing so, the goal is to cultivate a richer understanding of both the visual artifacts themselves and the relevance of rhetorical frameworks to a variety of media and discursive contexts.

### But I’m not an expert on photography, film, art, or design! Can I still teach visual analysis?

Yes! The goal of visual analysis in the WR classroom is to attend to the *rhetorical* dimensions of images, so use your training in rhetoric to ground your approach to visual analysis. Any analysis of visuals should include attention to:

- Audience
- Context/Exigency
- Purpose
- Appeals (emotional, ethical, reasonable)
- Ethics
- Values

As you and your students work through those rhetorical dimensions, think about the various choices made by the photographer/artist/filmmaker/architect/etc as they composed the image and how those choices shape audience response about the subject matter. For example, some rhetorical strategies might include (in no particular order):

- Framing
- Focal point
- Foreground/Background
- Scale
- Contrast
- Color
- Mise-En-Scene (the “mounting of the scene” in film—includes framing, set design, costuming, lighting, etc)
- Arrangement
- Camera shots (wide, medium close-up, extreme close-up, over-the-shoulder, etc)
- Special effects/filters/manipulation of the image
- Editing choices (e.g., how are images cut together in a way that invites us to think a particular way about the content)
- Sound (layers of meaning)
- Role of alphabetic text
- Symbolism
- Placement of the camera/viewer
- Transparency/hypermediacy of the medium

### Tips for teaching visual analysis in WR

- *Ground the visual analysis in the larger learning outcomes of your course.* Make this connection clear throughout the unit.
- *Select rhetorically complex images* that can prompt rich discussion. Be sure to emphasize the fact that multiple claims can be made about the rhetoric of the image.
- *Build time into the schedule for sustained, careful observation of images.* Give students prompts that guide their initial process of “seeing,” beyond the knee-jerk response.
- *Model the crafting of questions and claims.* Ground these questions and claims in criteria that speak to the text’s rhetorical dimensions—its persuasive impact on a specific audience in a specific context.
- *Give students frameworks/terminology* to help them dig more deeply into the text. Encourage them to connect points from the readings to their observations of the WHAT and HOW of the image(s).
- *Look for opportunities to connect to other media/genres.* To what extent do some of the strategies you’re discussing in class apply across media/genres? How do they change? What constraints and possibilities and expectations are embedded in the medium/genre?

### Potentially helpful sources (all available on the program Sakai site):

Herrick, James. “Chapter 1: An Overview of Rhetoric.” *The History and Theory of Rhetoric*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Allyn & Bacon, 2001.

Herrick offers a rich, yet accessible framework for defining rhetoric and rhetorical discourse—specifically, that rhetorical discourse is *planned, adapted to an audience, shaped by human motives, responsive to a situation, and persuasion-seeking* (7-8). Herrick’s definition of the art of rhetoric as the “study and intentional practice of effective symbolic expression” (7) is useful for grounding examination of symbolic expression across media platforms.

Lancioni, Judith. “The Rhetoric of the Frame: Revisioning Archival Photographs in the Civil War.” *Visual Rhetoric: A Reader in*.

Though she takes a Civil War documentary as her case study, Lancioni’s discussion of framing as a rhetorical process applies to film and photography more generally. Lancioni also offers a nice overview to visual rhetoric and notions of the viewer as co-creator of meaning.

Bolter, Jay David and Richard Grusin. “Chapter 1: Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation.” *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. 21-50. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999. Print.

Though this is a challenging reading for first-year students, the concepts of “immediacy” and “hypermediacy” are especially useful for thinking about the extent to which a medium attempts to draw attention to or away from itself, thereby shaping our response to the subject matter.

## Whole-Class Visual Analysis Workshop: PART I

Now that we've spent some time viewing and thinking about some photographs and a film, it's time to begin analyzing those artifacts in light of specific frameworks offered by our sources. To *analyze* means to break up a complex text or idea into meaningful parts (identified by you) in order to better understand the text as a whole. So, since we are doing a *rhetorical analysis* of visual texts, we will look to our readings on rhetoric and visual media for clues as to how to deconstruct our chosen texts. Remember: the goal is not simply to identify the WHAT of the piece (though that is important to articulate, too, particularly early in your analysis); instead, you are primarily concerned with the HOW of your text—the strategies used by the text's creator to shape the thinking of its viewers.

### **Activity 1: WHAT is the argument of the image, WHO created it, and WHY does it exist?**

Visual arguments are often powerful because they invite viewers to co-create claims. This is where *enthymeme* (which Herrick discusses in "An Overview of Rhetoric") becomes important—part of the argument is assumed, rather than stated. Because part (or all) of the argument is unstated, many visual arguments are difficult to explain.

Directions: Jot down notes about the image on the overhead projector. Just looking at the image alone, without the benefit of any historical context or information about the photographer, what seems to be important? Where is our eye drawn? What emotions or thoughts does the image invite? What seems to be the central "claim" or point to this image?

Now, after receiving some historical context for the image, how do you read the central "claim" of the image? If, as Bitzer argues, texts are called into being by *exigence, audience, and constraints*, how does understanding of the *rhetorical situation* likely shape viewers' response to this image? To what extent does context help us to fill in the logic of the image?

### **Activity 2: HOW is the image rhetorically constructed?**

As Lancioni writes in “The Rhetoric of the Frame,” tackling the *how* [of visual rhetoric] means attending to the specific properties of visual images and their processing by viewers. The job of the rhetorical critic...is to locate those effects in the complicated interaction between text, context, and audience” (106). Keeping this complex interaction in mind, study your group’s chosen image and respond to the following questions:

- When you first looked at this image, what was your reaction? What kind of response(s) does the image invite upon first glance?
- What is the subject of the image? What’s the focal point?
- What else do you notice about the composition? What’s in the foreground? What’s in the background? What’s left out of the frame?
- Are any words mixed with the image? What messages do they convey?
- What is the image supposed to *do*? How can you know? Who do you think is the target audience for this image? What makes you think that?
- Are there appeals to ethos—the character/credibility of the subject?
- Are there appeals to logos—our reasoning sensibilities? Where/how?
- Are there appeals to pathos—the values of the audience? Where/how?
- Are there elements that can be considered symbolic? Where/how?
- To what extent does this image try to draw attention TO or AWAY from the medium itself?

### Activity 3: What claim(s) can I make about the rhetoric of this image?

A common pitfall with analysis essays is devoting too much space to simply summarizing the artifact and its argument and not enough space to defending a *claim* you're making about how that text works. Another common pitfall is to get caught up with agreeing/disagreeing with whether or not the argument made by the text is right/wrong, rather than focusing your energy on convincing us to believe something new and interesting about the WHAT, and, more importantly, the HOW of that text. Your thesis statement—your central claim or controlling purpose—is crucial to grounding the essay that follows, and a good thesis statement starts with a good question about your text. Here are some examples of good questions that yield good thesis statements—notice how these thesis statements are debatable, nuanced, and oriented toward the rhetoric of the texts in question.

**Question:** Does the image/collection/film effectively achieve its persuasive purpose with its intended audience? Why or why not?

**Sample tentative thesis statement:** *The series of photographs effectively invites contemporary viewers to reconsider their assumptions about the relationship between humans and the environment. In particular, the photographer's use of scale, contrast, and composition work together seamlessly to disrupt viewers' expectations, thereby providing an alternative perspective on the current state of our natural resources.*

**Question:** What important message(s) embedded in this image/collection/film is perhaps not as obvious as what we see on the surface? How does examination of rhetorical strategies help to illuminate that embedded message?

**Sample tentative thesis statement:** *On its surface, The Social Network entertains viewers with a story about the origins of Facebook. Embedded within this larger narrative, however, is an argument about class relations, as Fincher's film utilizes key rhetorical strategies to invite viewers to share in the critique of college students' perspectives on what it means to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.*

**Directions:** Analyze the effectiveness of the thesis statements below. Specifically, determine whether or not the statement a) takes a debatable stance about the text, b) focuses on the rhetorical dimensions of the text, and c) offers viewers a fresh, nuanced perspective on the text.

- 1) *The Social Network* presents Mark Zuckerberg in a negative light, which is incorrect, since Zuckerberg is actually a very nice person in real life.
- 2) *The Social Network* is a film that tells the story of how Facebook was invented.
- 3) *The Social Network* is a pretty good movie.
- 4) *The Social Network* effectively uses a variety of rhetorical strategies to craft a sharp critique about the impact of technology on the social development of college students.
- 5) The photograph blends ethical, reasonable, and emotional appeals to garner more support for federal aid programs for suffering farm workers.
- 6) Although the exhibit attempts to compel readers to critique the impact of human beings on the land, the exhibit fails to achieve its purpose because the rhetorical strategies used, particularly in terms of composition and scale, make the argument too subtle for many viewers to grasp effectively.

Now, write two sample thesis statements—central claims about the *rhetoric*—that could work in a rhetorical analysis paper on the image you just examined.

1)

2)

Congratulations! You've established a controlling purpose for a hypothetical rhetorical analysis essay. But now you have to defend that position with a variety of meaningful, interesting, persuasive supporting points that you think "prove" one of the thesis statements you crafted above. Remember: these "because" statements are claims in themselves about specific rhetorical strategies you've identified in the text, so you will need to demonstrate to readers—SHOW, and not just TELL—that this "because" actually exists and that it proves, at least in part, your central thesis.

Sample thesis statement: *The series of photographs effectively invites contemporary viewers to reconsider their assumptions about the relationship between humans and the environment. In particular, the photographer's use of scale, contrast, and composition work together seamlessly to disrupt viewers' expectations, thereby providing an alternative perspective on the current state of our natural resources.*

Supporting point #1: *Evans' use of scale initially disorients viewers, inviting them to look more closely at familiar objects that are, on first glance, unrecognizable. In doing so, Evans immerses viewers in a process of coming-to-understanding as they come to grips with the true magnitude of environmental destruction in "The Heartland."*

Your turn!

Choose your favorite tentative thesis statement from the two you crafted above and re-write it here:

Now, write a topic sentence that could anchor a paragraph in support of that tentative thesis statement:

**Viewing Worksheet: *The Social Network* (10 points)**

As you watch *The Social Network*, identify the following characters/topics and their rhetorical significance in the film. How is each *portrayed*? How are we, as viewers, supposed to perceive each character or topic? What rhetorical choices (in terms of dialogue, camera work, lighting, set design, sound, editing, etc) shape that perception? How does this character or idea support/extend/contribute to the argument(s) made by the film?

- Mark Zuckerberg
- Eduardo Saverin
- Sean Parker
- Winklevoss twins
- Erica Albright
- Marylin Delpy
- Facebook/social networking sites
- Gender

- Class/socioeconomics
- Harvard
- College students
- Friendship
- Success (how is it defined by various characters, and with which definition are we supposed to agree?)

General notes/responses to Day 1 viewing—what stood out to you as being most significant or interesting as you watched the film today?

General notes/responses to Day 2 viewing—now that you've seen the whole film, what stands out to you as being most significant or interesting?



## Whole-Class Visual Analysis Workshop: PART II

In Part I, we worked through the process of identifying **WHAT** a visual has to say and **WHY**, the **HOW** of that image's argument, and claims **YOU** can make about that image based on your emerging understanding of rhetoric and visual analysis. Now, we will build on that foundation by zeroing in on *parts* of a visual text and connecting those parts to our understanding of the whole (and, by extension, our understanding of key concepts from the readings). For this activity, we'll turn our attention to film, since filmmakers make choices about content, composition, camera work, and editing to, as Lancioni notes, "guide what is seen, for how long, and in what order" (109). Throughout this examination, be thinking about the extent to which medium actively attempts to draw attention **TO** or **AWAY** from itself (as Bolter & Grustin describe in their discussion of immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation) for rhetorical impact.

Sequence 1: Opening. As you watch, take notes on the following:

**What I SEE**

**What I HEAR**

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Briefly reflect on the **WHAT**: As we conclude this opening sequence, what do we already know about the main character(s), ideas, etc., of the film? What key narrative strands, concepts, etc are already foregrounded in this opening sequence?

Now, reflect on the **HOW**: How do we know all of that? What's important about the sound, the mounting of the scene, the editing, the dialogue, the language, etc? In other words, what *rhetorical choices* shape our thinking about the items you identify above?

Sequence 2: Journaling/Face Match/Party Scene.

**What I SEE**

**What I HEAR**

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**WHAT** ideas/claims from that opening scene do we see further developed in this sequence? What new pieces of evidence do we get to further bolster those initial claims?

**HOW** do we experience that evidence? Analyze the relationship between **CONTENT** and **EDITING** in this sequence—how does the editing give us clues as to how we're supposed to interpret the **CONTENT**?

To what extent does the **MEDIUM** draw attention to itself in this sequence? To what extent does it try to become invisible? What's the impact of immediacy/hypermediacy/remediation on our response to the content?

Sequence 3: Closing.

**What I SEE**

**What I HEAR**

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**WHAT** ideas/claims from that opening scene do we see further developed in this sequence? What new pieces of evidence do we get to further bolster those initial claims? How are we supposed to feel about MZ, social media at this point in the film?

**HOW** do we experience that evidence? What significant editing choices are at work here? Are there any connections to earlier points in the film? What's similar? What's different? How do those similarities/differences give us clues about how to think/feel by the end of the film?

What **CLAIM(s)** about the rhetoric of the film could be supported with evidence from the three scenes we've just examined?

## Paragraph Development/Synthesis Activity

In your group, choose one of the claims you crafted in the previous activity and draft a sample paragraph that could appear in a hypothetical rhetorical analysis paper in support of that claim. Your paragraph should 1) clearly articulate a topic sentence about the particular rhetorical strategy under examination and its connection to a larger argument made by the film, 2) explain why that rhetorical strategy is one a filmmaker might take into consideration, 3) offer examples and analysis of those examples to illustrate the existence of that strategy and its likely impact on viewers, and 4) integration of at least two key quotes/ideas from source material that help bolster the credibility of your analysis. You may refer to some of the samples we read for homework for ideas for how to set up this type of paragraph, and you may also refer to Dr. E's Guide to Paragraph Development for additional development strategies.

## Sample 4-Week Unit Schedule for Visual Analysis

### SETTING UP THE UNIT

Class Discussion: What is rhetoric? Connection to argumentation, essay, other things that are "rhetorical." How can images be rhetorical, and why does it matter? Assign analysis essay.

- Read Herrick, "An Overview of Rhetoric," pp. 1-25 (Sakai)
- Read "Criteria For Analyzing Visuals" handout (Sakai)
- Read "[Visualizing Rhetoric](#)"
- Read Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation" (Sakai)
- Take the reading quiz in Sakai.
- Blog Entry (approx 500 words, due in your blog by the next class): Using your readings as a guide (Herrick, Bitzer, "Visualizing Rhetoric," and "Criteria for Analyzing Visuals,"), select an image you encounter on a daily basis (a poster, painting, sculpture, building, or anything else you think might qualify) and do an informal analysis of that image in your blog. Be sure to include summary of your chosen artifact, as well as relevant quotes/summaries from the readings as you illustrate how the piece functions rhetorically. If possible, include a picture of the image in your blog entry, as well.
- Meet in the Snite Museum lobby next class.

### WEEK 1

**Day 1:** Snite Museum visit. Homework for next class:

- Respond to the following in your blog: Of the pieces we viewed today at the Snite, which did you find most memorable, and why? What did you find most surprising about analyzing visuals? What did you find most challenging?
- Read Lancioni, "The Rhetoric of the Frame" (Sakai).

**Day 2:** Brief reflection on Snite visit. Begin watching *The Social Network*. Homework for next class:

- Read Bolter & Grusin, "Immediacy, Hypermediacy, and Remediation" (Sakai)
- Using "The Rhetoric of the Frame" and the Bolter & Grusin chapter as a guide, reflect on the following in your blog: In the case of the photos we examined at the Snite and the film we're watching together as a class, to what extent does the medium draw attention TO or AWAY from itself in those texts? What's the impact of that medium's framing, immediacy/hypermediacy, etc on the overall rhetorical impact of the piece? In other words, how does the use of the medium itself shape viewers' thinking about the subject matter? Prove your case with examples that reflect quotes you pull from the readings.

## WEEK 2

**Day 1:** Finish *The Social Network*. General discussion of film. Reminder of assignment sheet.

- Review your notes on Herrick, Bitzer, "Visualizing Rhetoric," Lancioni, and Bolter & Grusin. Be prepared to identify key points of definition/analysis provided by those readings and highlight key quotes to possibly use in your analysis essays.
- Choose the image(s) from the Snite that you'd like to analyze for this assignment.
- Drawing from the activity we did in class today about identifying the WHAT, WHO, and WHY of the image, as well as the sample Snite essay, write a paragraph that provides viewers unfamiliar with your chosen image(s) with this key information to set up your analysis. You may need to revisit the Snite to get some of this key information. Post the paragraph to your blog.

**Day 2:** Visual analysis workshop, continued. Generate possible thesis statements and supporting claims for analysis essay. Homework for next class:

- Drawing from the activity we did in class today, craft a tentative thesis statement and supporting points for your chosen image(s) from the Snite museum. Post the thesis/supporting points to your blog.
- Read McGraw-Hill's "Writing a Film Analysis," including sample papers (Sakai)
- Read Del Genio, "Inspiring A Movement" (*Fresh Writing*).

## WEEK 3

**Day 1:** Visual Analysis Workshop, continued. Basic organization and development strategies. "Quoting" from film and photographs vs. quoting from print-based texts. Homework for next class:

- Drawing from the activity we did in class today, formulate a few key points to support your tentative thesis. Then, decide what examples from the image(s) and quotes you might use from the readings to "prove" these claims to readers unfamiliar with your chosen image(s). Post this scratch outline to your blog.
- Read the Purdue Owl's [basic guidelines for MLA page format and citation](#). Set up your essay in a MLA-formatted document, if you haven't already. Be sure to include a Works Cited page for both your chosen image(s) and the sources you're using to support your analysis of those images.
- If you have not done so already, begin formulating a tentative thesis for your second analysis paper (your analysis of *The Social Network*).

**Day 2:** Development strategies, continued. Counterarguments. Homework for next class:

- Continue developing your analysis essays. Be prepared to share a strong draft of one of your essays during peer workshop on Tuesday. Now would also be a good time to set up an appointment with the Writing Center, if you have not already done so.

## WEEK 4

**Day 1:** Workshop. Strategies for intro/conclusion, making a case for why the argument matters. Homework for next class:

- Read "[Steps for Revising Your Paper](#)"
- Read "[Writing Transitions](#)" and apply some of the strategies suggested to your analysis draft.

**Day 2:** Wrap up analysis essay/transition into research paper.