

Don't Be Darned

R H E T O R I C A L A N D V I S U A L

Rhetoric has long been in ill repute. This article traces its decline and the underlying social changes that hastened its slow and then precipitous fall from grace. The need for a reconstructed rhetoric is argued. Distrust of the visual is then faced head-on in order to create the context for considering a visual rhetoric and its larger role in design in general. The fundamental perspective put forth by the author is that abstraction and scientific reductionism fail to address issues of human agency. Design has the ability to create prototypes that demonstrate by example a possible future result, support discourse and decision making in direct and understandable ways. Such prototypes are rhetorical.

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Doubly Damned

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SEDUCTIVE, MANIPULATIVE, UNTRUTHFUL – these and other unsavory adjectives come to mind when “rhetoric” is mentioned. Denigrated and misunderstood, this article argues that rhetoric can provide a missing mode of inquiry for contemporary life. Two authors (Thomas B. Farrell and John D. O’Banion) whose work respectively examines rhetoric historically and in a present-day setting provide the technical, philosophical argument for rhetoric’s revitalization. Another pair of authors (Jerome Bruner and Kieran Egan) provide supporting arguments, but from the practical perspective of education. My own contribution to this discussion is to move our understanding of rhetoric from its oral and literary roots into the realm of visual communication. And even further, to consider the designer’s generation of prototypes as rhetorical statements that go beyond presenting a clever argument to becoming the focus of deliberation with regard to the social and technical nature of the future. In conclusion, I will develop the need for rhetoric in the context of contemporary culture by citing five examples of social or cultural problem that rhetoric can help to address.

RHETORIC — A BRIEF HISTORICAL LOOK

What we communicate, how we communicate, how meaning is interpreted, whether something is true or false and how we know that it is the case has always been subject to inquiry, if not speculation and argument for millennia. We are the species that lies and we know it, yet we rely on “good” information that we can accept as true. But not all information can be verified or proven to be true. And this is exactly the core of the problem with rhetoric’s reputation. The frequent epithet “that’s just rhetoric” is a clear indication of the distrustful and dismissive attitude most people have with regard to it. Rhetoric engages in messy human communications that encompass interpretation of events, alternative actions and ethics, opposing values or dramatic re-tellings that hinge on the reputation of the presenter or the source of the information rather than in truth. Yet truth has been the measure of rhetoric and that has been its downfall. Rhetoric is more about meaning and interpretation, as we shall see, than about truth. It is about contingency and human agency.

Early in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*,¹ he identifies three species of rhetoric: *deliberative*, which addresses the future and attends to expedience and harm, focusing on the useful; *judicial*, which addresses the past and attends to what is just or unjust; and *evaluative*, which addresses honor and disgrace, focusing on the good. Aristotle’s rhetoric is a civic practice — it is about practical rationality. The three species of rhetoric can be separated for analytical purposes, but when put into practical use, their edges tend to overlap. Among these, deliberative rhetoric is the one to which I will return at the end of this article.

More than two millennia of changing notions of rhetoric are examined in John D. O’Banion’s recent book *Reorienting Rhetoric*. By tracking its decline in the context of its changing cultural milieu, its current state and the reasons

1 Aristotle. 1995. *Treatise on Rhetoric*. Theodore Buckley, trans. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. See book 1, chapter 3.

for its dismissal become apparent. Originally, rhetoric was a reflection on cognition and communication. Along these lines, the significant shift from oral to written and, later, printed communication is the particular basis for O'Banion's analysis.

*Socrates wrote nothing, encouraging oral ways of knowing and discouraging writing; Plato wrote dialogues, preserving the semblance of oral language but encouraging more technical and cautious modes of thinking; Aristotle wrote exposition, in which conflicting voices became mute, silenced by the singular controlling voice of the author.*²

The relationship between thinking and styles of language use has been investigated by many scholars. Using theories developed by Walter J. Ong and Jack Goody regarding the effect literacy has had on thinking, O'Banion develops his own analysis based on the "Story," a synecdoche for orality, and the "List," a synecdoche for literacy. Story and List become the pivotal elements in the telling of rhetoric's demise. Literacy frees thinking from the constraints of context and immediacy, which are among oral story telling's essential characteristics. Both the teller and the listener are caught in the linear flow of the story which unfolds in a very present moment-to-moment context. Writing encourages logical and systematic expression; it allows comparison because writing externalizes ideas and makes them concrete. While a story is a singular event, the List is generative – facilitating reordering and recombination. O'Banion quotes Jack Goody:

*Appearing in a variety of forms, the list makes visible and explicit the classifications and abstractions that writing both requires and encourages. These processes of thought are characteristic of Western logic, science, technology, and "rationality."*³

Literacy supports logic and orality supports narration or story telling. Figure 1 compares their differences.⁴

And so literacy with its List is detrimental to rhetoric in its original spoken form. Ong defines rhetoric as the art

2 O'Banion, John D. 1992. *Reorienting Rhetoric: The Dialectic of List and Story*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 48.

3 O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 11.

4 O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 14.

FIGURE 1 A Comparison of List and Story

<i>List</i>	<i>Story</i>
discontinuous	continuous
congruent	incongruent
spatial	temporal
expands in space	expands in time
multidirectional	directional
abstract order	sequential order
focus on “idea” boundaries	focus on human effects or boundaries
written	oral or written
anonymous maker	story teller
phrases or words	sentences
emphasizes analysis	emphasizes synthesis
eliminates human qualities	heightens human qualities
categorical	integrative
abstraction	symbolization

developed by a literate culture to formalize the oral communication skills which had helped determine the structures of thought and society before literacy.⁵ In this way oral-based thinking – narration, reflective dialogue, reenactment and public address – was preserved.

Other philosophers continued to develop rhetoric. Cicero (106–43 BC) advocated a discipline of rhetoric that encompassed philosophy, poetry, drama, acting and criticism along with other arts. Quintilian (35–ca 100) did not separate rhetoric and logic but understood them as complementary. “It would be more accurate to say that logic is buried or secreted in narration, that narration is buried in logic, and that rhetoric encompasses both symbolic modes.”⁶ The facts of any case were presented in two ways according to Quintilian: narratively and logically. “‘Proof’ was *narrati-one congruens*, and ‘narration’ was *continua propositio*. Proof was the ‘congruent’ or logical version of Story, and Story was the ‘continuous’ or narrational version of the proposition (to be defended in proof’s Lists).”⁷ The interrelation

5 O’Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 48.

6 O’Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 83.

7 O’Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 82.

of rhetoric and logic was vital. To develop an argument meant telling a story or in a logical mode, analyzing the structural relationships derived from a story or the facts of a situation.

Rather than truth, appropriateness was the rhetorical objective for Quintilian. “Truth alone did not win cases; the truth needed careful, lucid presentation. Nor did presentation alone succeed; such a speech, ‘from its very monstrosity, meets with applause, [but] the case remains unintelligible.’”⁸ Ideas and their presentation were conjoined and evaluated based on “appropriateness.” He took a stand against excessive language. A “congruent argument was effective only when presented within a lucidly told narration of the contexts within which any argument could be perceived as appropriate.”⁹ Both Cicero and Quintilian were committed to securing rhetoric’s place in education.

Somewhat later, Augustine (396–430) defends rhetoric on behalf of Christian truth. His interest was to level the playing field for persuasive presentation so that morality could be cogently and forcefully argued as well as falsehoods and deceptions. Augustine defined the important attributes of *narratio* as brevity, clarity and plausibility. His concern was that through ignorance of rhetoric, cleverly presented falsehood would sway an audience and perhaps initiate regrettable actions. Learning rhetorical methods was not mysterious or subject to inspiration, but was in fact quite teachable.

*Underlying every medieval rhetorical treatise, whatever its genre, is the assumption that the communication process can be analyzed, its principles abstracted, and methods of procedure written down to be used by others. This is the essence of rhetoric.*¹⁰

8 O'Banion, *Rearienting Rhetoric*, 98.

9 O'Banion, *Rearienting Rhetoric*, 98.

10 O'Banion, *Rearienting Rhetoric*, 125.

LOGIC DISPLACES RHETORIC

Rhetoric and logic were complementary, alternative ways to examine, construct and present information for consideration. They were not arranged hierarchically, but that would change. By the mid-fifteenth century, forces were at work that would dramatically change the cultural context.

Johannes Gutenberg's invention of movable type and its expansion and democratization of reading material altered the institutions of that and subsequent times. Scholars no longer had to tediously hand copy manuscripts important to their work. Libraries grew in both the private and public realm. Elizabeth Eisenstein's book *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* gives an extensive and credible account of the changing social and intellectual history that Gutenberg's invention helped to underpin.¹¹ The growing power of print, philosophical attention to the conception of truth, and rationality reduced interest in rhetoric. Style or eloquence became the focus of rhetoric as its formerly integral concepts of order and invention were stripped away. Peter Ramus (1515–1572), an orator and teacher – not a philosopher – was a pivotal figure in this change.

Ramus, the development of his particular pedagogical style, and his impact on rhetoric deepened understanding of the shift from rhetoric and logic as a pair of complementary alternatives to logic as dominant with rhetoric as an embellishment. Beginning with medieval universities there was increasing interest in creating order and efficiency in teaching – in developing a method for knowledge delivery and application. Walter Ong traces what he calls “method agitation” in the two generations before René Descartes (1596–1650), who is generally acknowledged to be one of the foremost thinkers advocating abstraction, rationality and method. Among the many methods developing at this time, Ong mentions methods of speculation, activity, light, darkness, popular, exact, mental, sensory and a whole science.

11 Eisenstein, Elizabeth. 1983. *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

*This tremendous buildup in method in the period just preceding Descartes has never been adequately studied... the phenomena resulting from it in Ramism alone show the utter inadequacy of the view which regards interest in method as stemming from Bacon and Descartes. These late writers on method were great explosive forces indeed, but the reason was less the size of the bombs which they manufactured than the size of the ammunition dumps, stocked by whole centuries of scholasticism on which the bombs were dropped.*¹²

Method was the most famous aspect of Ramus' repertory of teaching tools. His desire was to simplify instruction. In some circles he is known as the greatest master of the shortcut the world has ever known. Ramism is derivative based on logical analysis, systems thinking and diagrammatic presentation. The dialectic or "logic" of the method transformed rhetoric, dividing it, suppressing aspects of it and elevating the operations of logic. Of the five traditional parts of rhetoric – elocution, pronunciation, invention, disposition or judgment and memory – only the first two are now associated with rhetoric. And these two can hardly be dissociated from it.

*Ramist rhetoric is concerned with expression, with communication, with speaking, with not only a subject matter but also an auditor. But it is a rhetoric which has renounced any possibility of invention without this speaker-auditor framework; it protests in principle if not in actuality, that invention is restricted to a dialectical world where there is no voice but only a kind of vision. By its very structure, Ramist rhetoric asserts... that there is no way to discovery or to understanding through voice, and ultimately seems to deny that the processes of person-to-person communication play any necessary role in intellectual life.*¹³

While he emphasized logic, Ramus made no contribution to logic or mathematics. He was known as a fine orator and teacher who used polarities to organize and emphasize ideas. Further, he considered the stuff of thought to be interchangeable as elements or items to be subject to endless combinations. Humanists of Ramus' time used "common-

12 Ong, Walter J. 1958. *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 230.

13 Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 280.

places” to stock the imagination with “matter” by means of extensive reading and processing of much *copie* (ideas, phrases committed to memory, etc.). “Commonplace books and other devices were resorted to, in order to fix in memory, ‘sentences’ or proverbial matter, epigrammatic turns, apothegms, descriptive phrases, allusions, and conceptual and verbal associations of all sorts... abstract truths, hair-raising expressions, detached phrases, comparisons... [to] be exploited at all cognitive levels, sensory and intellectual simultaneously.”¹⁴

A new science was taking shape in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries founded on the development of mathematics and an application of deductive procedures. This was a knowledge that was silent and diagrammatic – separate from a concept of knowledge enveloped in disputation and teaching. Ramist logic owes a debt to medieval developments in quantification which were in part class logics. Influenced by this, Ramus concentrated on dichotomies which found a final form diagrammatically in his *P. Rami Dialectica* (see Figure 2). Ramist dichotomized tables display convincingly in space the results of research and thinking. Apprehended by sight, these visual models present their ideas in a clear and memorable manner.

*Ramism is at root a cluster of mental habits evolving within a centuries-old educational tradition and specializing in certain kinds of concepts, based on simple spatial models for conceiving of the mental and communicational processes and, by implication, of the extramental world.*¹⁵

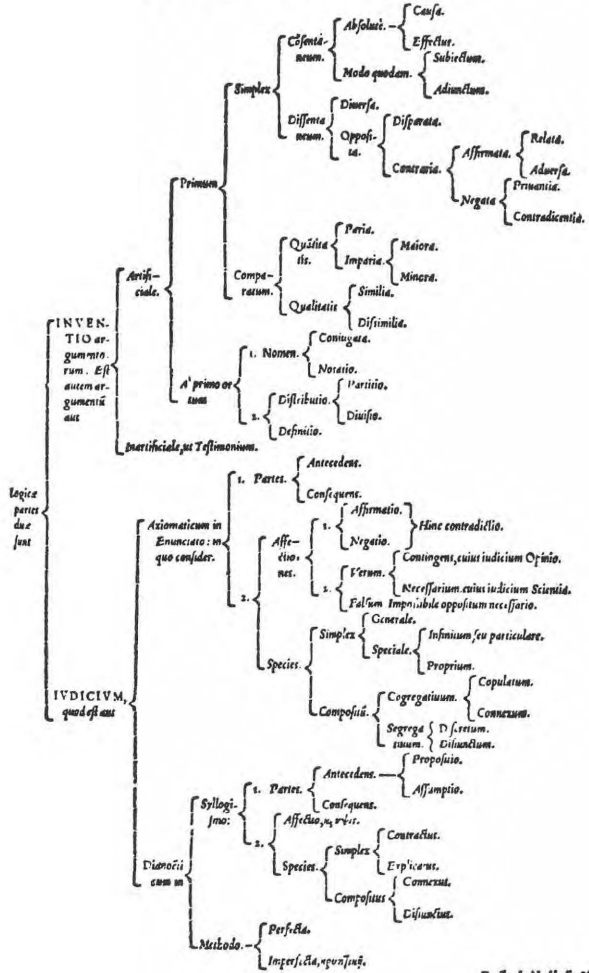
Medieval society, dominated by church authority, family allegiance, tradition and faith with its widely accepted conceptions of virtue and vice was giving way to an increasingly modern society characterized by a focus on science and technology, logic, business and individualism, with increasing doubt and confusion regarding what constituted virtue and vice. O’Banion cites Descartes as a pivotal philosopher in this regard because through his work philosophical thought became more abstract and methodical. His search for abstraction, classification and certainty

14 Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 211.

15 Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 8.

FIGURE 2 A Comparison of List and Story

P. RAMI DIALECTICA. TABVLA GENERALIS.



DE INVEN.

This table is from the 1576 Swiss edition by Johann Thomas Freige of Peter Ramus' *Professio regia*. Ramist dichotomization takes its origin in part from class logic, which is built on the extension of terms and encourages quantified analogies.

undermined the rhetorical tradition, however Descartes' method is not inimical to rhetoric as long as it is viewed only as *a* method and not *the* method.

To summarize the diminishing scope of rhetoric and its increasingly tenuous support, O'Banion lists nine crises in order of their appearance.¹⁶

- 1 *Appearance and reality.* Rhetoric is denigrated as being merely an act of appearance, failing to express reality.
- 2 *Faith, knowledge, and the narrowing of significance.* Rhetoric is accused of unhealthy skepticism.
- 3 *Print, truth, and the quest for rationality.* Rhetoric, rooted in orality, is judged obsolete by literate thinkers.
- 4 *Doubt, fragmentation, and the pursuit of method.* Rhetoric is attacked for its reliance on traditional modes of knowledge.
- 5 *The separation of narration from logic, Story from List.* Rhetoric is cut off from its basis for thinking.
- 6 *Past-blindness, egoism, and rule-mindedness.* Rhetoric is considered inappropriate for the Age of Reason.
- 7 *Immateriality and the search for substance and method.* Rhetoric casts about for ways to survive.
- 8 *Absence, despair, and cultural deterioration.* Rhetoric is marked by a glaring void – narration has disappeared as a way of thinking and arguing.
- 9 *Relevance and rediscovering of narrational bundles of judgment.* Rhetoric is reclaimed by a few.

RHETORIC AS INQUIRY

Thomas B. Farrell agrees with O'Banion's assessment of the decline of rhetoric. He may be more inclined to locate our deprecation of rhetoric in the contemporary media penchant for "high style," catchy sound-bites and buzz words

¹⁶ O'Banion, *Reorienting Rhetoric*, 107–109.

that while memorable, often signify nothing or obscure the issue at hand. For Farrell, the essential problem for rhetoric is that it is caught between the cunning of technical reason and the relativistic notion of meaning as demonstrated by post-modernism. He establishes his particular point of view early in his book *Norms of Rhetorical Culture* :

As a theory, if this term is even applicable, it [rhetoric] is seen as either an archaic longing for an original lost ideal or reason's evil twin, the carnivalesque sideshow of figurative relativism. This latter view has justifiably provoked suspicion from what remains of philosophy. But neither of these views does us much good when it comes to empowering, engaging, and trying to ameliorate the collaborative practices of civic life.¹⁷

Using Aristotle's ethical and aesthetic rhetorical tradition as a base, Farrell desires to use rhetoric to inform the practice of contemporary advocacy. Aristotle begins inquiry with appearance, but recognizes there are multiple ways to approach appearance. He defines three methods: *analytics*, *dialectics* and *rhetoric*. Analytics are concerned with the grammatical relationships between subjects and predicates; dialectics deal with dichotomous relationships formed by question and answer; rhetoric explores appearance by proposing themes and arguments which invite judgment, decision and action.

Rhetoric as practical reason provides us with a manner of engaging the particularity of appearances. Specifically, it presents audiences with appearances as particular contingencies in which they share an interest. The argument for rhetoric's ethical propensity thus turns on the mutual regard that speakers and audiences must have for one another, given the simultaneous condition of being a witness to the construction of proof and an agent vulnerable to the partisanship of others.¹⁸

In this sense, the audience is reconceived as a party with a vested interest, not a passive audience, a market entity or a voyeur. The audience takes on a responsibility as a social agent engaged in "formulating and adjudicating proofs on

17 Farrell, Thomas B. 1993. *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2.

18 Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 62.

difficult, but inescapably public practical matters... the reflective judgment of the audience remains pivotal to the story's outcome."¹⁹

Rhetoric's material is appearance in all its particularity and the assignment of meaning which leads to possible human action. As such, contingency, which is troubling to some (philosophy and ethics in particular), becomes an issue. "Aristotle distinguished the contingent from both the necessary and the impossible. The contingent is neither something that is necessarily the case nor something that could never be the case. Rather, it is something which sometimes is and sometimes is not the case."²⁰ The voluntary nature of the contingent binds it to human agency.

Contemporary rhetorical theorists are engaged with developing theory with unmistakably ethical, aesthetic and normative significance. Theory and practice in rhetoric require criticism – it is a manner of thinking that turns on the invention of possibilities for persuasion, judgment, resolve and action. The goal of rhetoric for Aristotle was for the audience to see a situation more clearly and be able to act more judiciously as a result.

These philosophical arguments for rhetoric may seem remote from the scientific and technological context in which we live. One might ask why the facts of a situation are not a sufficient guide to human action. The very facts one considers are often subject to contingency. Many so-called facts remain open to interpretation depending on the viewpoint one brings to a situation. Which facts take priority, how compellingly they are presented, even the order of their presentation alters their perception. But it is the very scientific and technological context in which we live our lives that has created a resurgence of interest in the ethical issues that arise as a result of increasing human control – human agency – over what were formerly thought to be the acts of a supreme being.

19 Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 79.

20 Farrell, *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*, 77.

RHETORIC AS LEARNING PROCESS

To underscore the abstract argument for rhetoric, I will present two more concrete arguments, one from Jerome Bruner, a psychologist, the other from Kieran Egan, an educator. Their recent work is concerned with education.

While Bruner only mentions rhetoric in passing in his book *The Culture of Education*, many of his observations are synonymous with or at least tangential to cultural criticism which leads to a repositioning of rhetoric and narrative. After a lifetime of investigation of perceptual psychology and human cognition from a scientific perspective, Bruner is interested in developing a *cultural* psychology. The test frame for his enterprise is education, a cultural institution generally regarded as now failing to meet ordinary performance expectations and failing to adapt to contemporary needs.

Taking the broadest possible view of education, culture and psychology, Bruner considers “the questions that loomed large in creating such a cultural psychology – questions about the making and negotiating of meanings, about the constructing of self and a sense of agency, about the acquisition of symbolic skills, and especially about the cultural ‘situatedness’ of all mental activity... learning, remembering, talking, imagining, all of them are made possible by participating in a culture.”²¹

Bruner discusses two strikingly different views about how the mind works. One is computational and concerned with the sorted, coded, stored, retrieved information processing view of mind. The other is culturism or a technical-social way of life organized and construed by virtue of symbolism. He defines culture as superorganic. The computational approach is concerned with all the ways in which information is organized and used, but only information in the well-formed and finite sense. In contrast, culturism concentrates on human beings in community – how they create and transform meaning.

²¹ Bruner, Jerome. 1996. *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, x–xi.

*This clarity, this prefixedness of categories that imposes the most severe limit on computationalism as a medium in which to frame a model of mind... For the meaning making of the culturalist, unlike the information processing of the computationalist, is in principle interpretive, fraught with ambiguity, sensitive to the occasion, and often after the fact. Its "ill-formed procedures" are like "maxims" rather than like fully specifiable rules."*²²

Despite the extreme difference between computationalism and culturism, they are not unrelated. Once meanings are established, they can be subject to formalization that can be managed by a rule system. In this sense, the meanings are transformed from their ill-formed beginnings to a well-formed state, thus becoming more abstract and manipulable. Culturalism's task is messy and double layered. "On the 'macro' side, it looks at the culture as a system of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities, power. On the 'micro' side, it examines how the demands of a cultural system affect those who must operate within it."²³

Among the educational tenets that Bruner discusses is narrative. Two broad ways in which human beings organize and manage their knowledge of the world are logical-scientific thinking and narrative thinking.

*Truths are the product of evidence, argument, and construction rather than of authority, textual or pedagogic. This model of education is mutualist and dialectical, more concerned with interpretation and understanding than with the achievement of factual knowledge or skilled performance."*²⁴

All knowledge has a history and is subject to revision. Bruner reminds his reader that "being interpretive does not imply being anti-empirical, anti-experimental, or even anti-quantitative."²⁵ Bruner thinks we may have erred by separating science from the narrative of culture. He suggests that a more complete understanding is possible if science and its cultural story, even its story *in* culture is reunited. In O'Banion's terms the List has brought fragmentation and isolation.

22 Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 6.

23 Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 11.

24 Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 57.

25 Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 133.

I have tried to characterize the new idea [school culture] as creative communities of learners. Indeed, on the basis of what we have learned in recent years about human learning – that it is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them – we even do better at teaching science, math, and languages in such schools than in more traditional ones.²⁶

Bruner supports the idea of teaching live science by shifting attention to making science “by invoking criteria like conceivability, verisimilitude and other criteria of good stories.”²⁷ The focus shifts from “finished” science to the making of science – it is process rather than answers. Science becomes the story of discovery – an individual student or team story as well as the story of the professional scientist. Giving over science to narrative, developing a memorable story, creating interest and curiosity, taps into human desires, intentions, beliefs and conflicts.

Regarding the debate on the issue of interpretation and explanation, Bruner says:

It has always been supposed, moreover, that it is the object of study that determines which of the two approaches is appropriate to it. Generally, human action that is believed to be mediated by meaning is regarded as the domain of interpretation. Meaning, according to the classical mantra, cannot be explained causally. . . . Causal explanation, on the other hand, is categorical rather than particular, and based on the testing of propositions whose verifiability does not depend upon a contextual setting or upon the meaning-making processes of participants in the action. In old-fashioned terms, causal explanations deal only in material, efficient, and formal causes.²⁸

Returning to O’Banion, he observed that recent scholarship has no name for the mode of thought one uses when logically derived rules do not apply. From a technical/scientific perspective, the ideal language of knowledge is ahistoric and timelessly universal – that is, not a narrative. There is no denying the power of abstraction, of understanding and applying theorems, logically deriving proof,

²⁶ Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 84.

²⁷ Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 126.

²⁸ Bruner, *The Culture of Education*, 102.

or coming to grips with theories and principles, but not all knowledge or human activity is amenable to this approach.

Moving to a consideration of educational theory, very young children are not capable of using a technical/scientific perspective. Another critical voice with regard to educational practice is Kieran Egan, who wrote *The Educated Mind, How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. He agrees with Bruner regarding the overemphasis on abstract scientific knowledge in learning. He argues that children go through different modes of learning from their earliest attempts to understand the world through mythology and fantastic stories, to more reality-based heroic accounts of daring deeds, to the scientific abstraction we consider to be the highest and most powerful form of knowledge acquisition, and finally to ironic understanding, which encourages a creative and flexible turn of mind. He terms these phases: mythic, romantic, philosophic and ironic respectively. Egan ties these integrative cognitive tools to fairly specific ages: *mythic*, 2½–7 years of age; *romantic*, 8–15; *philosophic*, 16–adult; and *ironic*, adult.

In many circles, Egan would need to defend his progressive and changing application of cognitive tools to education. The mythic approach requires a defense of fantasy and story telling. “[The] persistence of various forms of fantasy at every stage of life suggests that it is not some contingent, accidental invention of a few storytellers but is somehow tied up with profound features of our mental lives.”²⁹ Who among us has not mentally entertained possibilities for future action which if examined carefully would reveal themselves to be stories? Who among us does not cast ourselves as the hero or heroine in our life story as we selectively relate its episodes to others? Mythic understanding is not an aberrant or deficient form of thinking – it is thinking vividly in a poetic mode. Bruner presents yet another argument: “We all know by now that many scientific and mathematical hypotheses start their lives as little stories or metaphors, but reach their scientific maturity by a process of conversion into verifiability, formal and empirical, and their power at maturity does not rest on their dramatic origins.”³⁰

29 Egan, Kieran. 1997. *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 45.

30 Egan, *The Educated Mind*, 29.

Romantic understanding attends to the extremes of experience and the limits of reality – knowledge is personalized and contextualized. Discovery could be an underlying theme – the human search, the problem, the frustrations, all leading to the triumph of new knowledge that improves the human condition. Fantasy is gone but a sharply told story with a strong human context is present. Egan is concerned about the transitional years when children move from one mode of cognition to another. The story can provide the glue between the mythic and the romantic. Egan emphasizes the importance of the romantic curriculum in its relation to middle school children who are often alienated from the process of learning, and are making the transition between mythic and philosophic understanding.

The philosophic needs no defense, it is the abstract powerhouse of modern education. But the last category, irony, needs discussion. Irony is about the development of multiple perspectives and a flexibility of mind that fosters creativity. It challenges the categories and givens of philosophy and abstraction. “The recognition of epistemic fragility has been one of the constants of Western intellectual life. Irony has been both a traditional product of this recognition in the West and a changing strategy for dealing with it.”³¹ The ironic and the philosophic need to coexist. Philosophy and abstraction attempt to capture the complexity of reality into a coherent scheme. “These two somewhat distinct perspectives... do not fit entirely clearly together, but they are far from incompatible. The trick is to keep one’s irony pervasively skeptical without letting it undercut and disable the exercise of philosophic capacities. Irony without philosophic capacities is impotent.”³²

Much learning grows by accretion and amendment, or is revisited in greater depth or abstraction. Many children would say that the repetitive aspects of a curriculum are boring. Egan’s four cognitive phases or tools provide appropriate context for increasingly sophisticated modes of thinking. While Egan envisions a progression of cognitive tools that are sympathetic to a child’s development, Bruner proposes a “spiral curriculum” based on teaching a subject intuitively at first and then returning to it later with a more

31 Egan, *The Educated Mind*, 155.

32 Egan, *The Educated Mind*, 157.

formal or highly structured account of it. According to Bruner, the topic should be returned to as many times as is necessary for mastery of the topic's full generative power.

As demonstrated, rhetoric is undergoing a resuscitation by contemporary philosophers, psychologists and others. Something is missing in human discourse, and rhetoric may be what we are searching for. But now, given the broader rhetorical context, we need to look more specifically at communication design.

RHETORIC — INTO THE VISUAL WORLD

Communication design (graphic design and information design) has been looking for contributory theory on which to position practice. And like many young disciplines, it has been borrowing theory from more developed disciplines, trying to cobble together an understanding of itself. The search is for a pattern that reveals and explains the activity or for a method to guide practice. No one expects it to be a formula but most expect it can serve as both an analytical and generative tool. Developing an analytical tool is by far the easier activity. Moving from theory to its analytical application to an existing communication can demonstrate what falls within the realm of theory and what escapes it. It also shows how deeply the theory takes us and whether it is a genuine aid to understanding. Using theory generatively, finding a way to close the gap between theory and practice, is more problematic. A successful generative approach often results in a method to guide practice.

One of the most persistent theoretical connections has been to language itself. Semiotics and semiology continue to compete for territory and credibility under the banners of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure respectively. Neither camp has been able to mount the definitive demonstration that neatly puts theory into an analytical frame and then uses it as a generative tool within communi-

cation design. There seems to be a tantalizing relationship between the structure of spoken language and that of visual imagery; perhaps this is true only if language is taken metaphorically as a system of signification. But if language is understood to be what linguists study – spoken language – then, as they have argued, the structure doesn't translate. Still, there seems to be a connection. Could it be rhetoric?

Before looking at this in more detail, the visual world needs acceptance. The shadows in Plato's cave have historically cast doubt on the trustworthiness of images. Now to compound this, contemporary digital manipulation allows for a seamless collage of parts – some created, others pirated. What are we to believe? Barbara Stafford, an art historian, has been arguing for the importance of the visual.³³ The problem is once again that of using truth as the measure for usefulness – as if what we call reality were a given, stable situation that we can behold if only we cast off certain habits of mind or use only “pure” language.

The growing sophistication of electronic mimicry and the explosion of unlicensed private publishers who fiddle with software add a new dimension of uncontrollability to the venerable notion that images are dangerously transgressive and ungovernable. To the destabilizing of reality... can be added a second, disquieting social phenomena. On one hand, electronic infringement by everyman debases visualization by calling attention to the problematic practice of borrowing. Even legitimate and openly acknowledged imitation necessarily undermines the long-standing, if mythic, ideal of an unmixed original. On the other hand, the proliferation of software has, paradoxically, created two classes of citizens separated according to whether they need images or not.³⁴

Images for the less-than-literate have a long history to which a new digital chapter is being written. Visualization has long been associated with a kind of “plain” intelligence. The presumption is that full knowledge cannot come through images, and that those who create or use images instead of words or numbers are somehow deficient. Literacy and numeracy have been the key symbolic instru-

33 Stafford, Barbara. 1996. *Good Looking: Essays on the Virtue of Images*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

34 Stafford, *Good Looking*, 45.

ments of education. Yet not all ideas, concepts or plans of action can be presented effectively through these systems.

The suppressed premise maintaining the inferiority of images (and, conversely, the superiority of texts) is predicated on the privileging of language as standing for all higher handless and sightless cognitive activity. Hermeneutics, defined as the interpretive, exegetical, and theoretical procedure performed on resisting text, fostered such a hierarchy by ranking close reading above the ostentatious shallowness of sight. The historical emergence of difficult discourse was contingent on the moral censure of fast and loose gazes. Thoughtless visible experience has as its foil the internalized, invisible patrimony of literate civilization.³⁵

But looking isn't quite so simple. Ordinary looking locates the viewer in space, identifies the attributes and affordances of the objects and individuals in his or her immediate range, tells about time, weather and movement. But even what is looked at ordinarily is based on selective attention and choice. Unschooled looking tends to be literal; it accepts the world as a given. More sophisticated forms of looking – whether instrument-aided or whether achieved by a willed attention to geometric form or color – go beyond the literal world to reveal either an invisible structure or new patterns of information and structure present in the usual visual environment. This movement to abstraction and a constructive approach to creating particular kinds of representation has been discussed in the literature of art history and need not be reviewed here. This century has explored the relation between abstraction and construction – we have become masters of controlled making. For example, the constructivists, cubists and minimalists in the visual arts; and Mallarmé, the Zaum poets and Joyce in the literary arts have uncovered the syntax of their particular materials. Exploration of music based on a twelve tone scheme, the disaffection of architecture from the Beaux Arts tradition – these and many more events in multiple forms of representation mark the deconstructive and reconstructive tendency of this century.

While focusing on syntactic or constructive aspects of human artifacts, the semantics or meaning dimension of what was made was taken as a given or was at least obvious to the recipient. Just past mid-century, Gui Bonsiepe called attention to a visual/verbal rhetoric in an article of the same name,³⁶ in which he observed that rhetorical practices were considered largely in terms of verbal application. (Rhetoric was originally not a literate practice but an oral one.) Two thousand years of history accompany this practice, yet it is usually discussed from its classical perspective. Bonsiepe stated that “the practice of rhetoric has far outrun its theory.” He was referring to what is now an ever more mediated world of verbal and visual communication.

Of the five sections of classical rhetoric, Bonsiepe focused on stylistic formulation of material (the visual equivalent of elocution and pronunciation, i.e., presentation) – the part of rhetoric most vociferously attacked for its ability to mislead. These stylistic formulations are referred to as rhetorical figures – they depart from ordinary, normal or uninflected communication for the purpose of increasing attention to the communication or casting its idea in a new light. They are like communication templates or patterns that can suggest ways to control the syntax and semantic construction of a message in order to achieve attention and reception on the part of the recipient.

Shifting from verbal to visual, Bonsiepe discussed two subdivisions of rhetorical figure: the *syntactic*, which operates through formal visual construction such as position in space, color, contour or shape; and the *semantic*, which operates through its meaning or more literal identification as a particular person, place, thing or event. A third subdivision, *pragmatic*, use forms of “address,” the character and believability of the originator of a message and the kinds of expected response as its basic material. This was thought to have less application to visual communication than the syntactic and semantic, and while its impact remains less obvious, post-modern analysis of communication would include it as important to understanding the institutional and authoritative structure of a communication’s origin. The list of rhetorical figures is presented in Figure 3 (page 224).

36 Bonsiepe, Gui. *Visual / Verbal Rhetoric. Dot Zero* 1.2, 37-42.

Bonsiepe was also interested in quantifying the rhetorical force of a statement – to measure its persuasive force. This needs to be understood in the push for objectivity and quantification that was very present in the middle of this century during a time of high modernism and logical positivism. The idea of quantifying rhetorical force is fatally flawed. His proposed idea was to count the use of rhetorical figures and contrast this with “normal” communication in order to arrive at a ratio of rhetorical to non-rhetorical elements. The fiction here is that non-rhetorical elements can be identified – that they even exist – and that rhetorical elements can be separated and categorized according to their power. Advertising, which represents the most direct persuasive appeal, provided the visual examples of various rhetorical figures.

A few others have picked up on this idea, and of course many designers and communicators intuitively use these figures as they seem so deeply embedded in our processes of telling, witnessing, influencing, showing and convincing others. Hanno Ehses took up the problem of using rhetorical figures generatively. He was interested in the possibility of using rhetoric for the purpose of concept formation in visual terms. He considered rhetoric to be a kind of secondary grammar. “Rhetorical figures do not by any means represent specific recipes. They are exploration tools that can spur lateral thinking, giving designers awareness of possibilities to make the best choice... The real problem continues to be that of bringing together the abstract construction principles with original ideas within the confines of a specific task.”³⁷ His students created a series of posters for *Macbeth* to demonstrate various rhetorical approaches.

Neither Bonsiepe nor Ehses question the limited role allowed to rhetoric. Both use it as a means to improve communication and focus the stylistic aspects of a message. Their contribution was understanding and demonstrating that rhetoric transcended the verbal world and had efficacy in the visual world as well.

37 Ehses, Hanno. 1984. Representing *Macbeth*: A Case Study in Visual Rhetoric. *Design Issues*, 53–63.

FIGURE 3 *List of Rhetorical Figures*

SYNTACTIC FIGURES

The following examples use structural elements rhetorically.

Transpositive Figures

- Apposition* Uses an explanatory insertion
- Atomization* Treats dependent parts as independent
- Parenthesis* Encloses one thing in another
- Reversion* Dislocates an element for emphasis (Also called *anastrophe*)

Figures of Omission

- Privative* Omits elements
- Ellipsis* Leaves out elements that can be supplied from context

Repetitive Figures

- Alliteration* Repeats a sound or form
- Isophony* Repeats similar elements in a series
- Parallelism* Repeats a rhythm

SEMANTIC FIGURES

The following examples develop meaning rhetorically.

Contrary Figures

- Antithesis* Unites elements with opposite meanings
- Exadversion* Asserts with a double negative
- Conciliation* Joins contradictory relata

Comparative Figures

- Gradation* Organizing in ascending or descending order
 - Hyperbole* Exaggerating obviously or intentionally
 - Understatement* Excessive minimization
 - Metaphor* Transfers an element to another field of application so that a similarity is assumed and expressed between the two fields
 - Simile* Explicitly compares two unlike things
 - Analogy* Extends a known comparison to include a partially known one
-

Figure 3, continued

- Allegory* Tells an extended story that deals with an idea indirectly
- Parable* Tells a brief story that deals with an idea indirectly
- Satire* Tells an exaggerated and simplified story
- Irony* Tells a story by using words to express a sense contrary to that really intended

Substitutive Figures

- Metonymy* Replaces one sign with another, the relata of both being in a real relationship
- Synecdoche* Replaces one sign by another, the relata of both being in a quantitative relationship; uses a part to stand for the whole
- Personification* Attributes human qualities to an inanimate or nonhuman object

PRAGMATIC FIGURES

Address

- Fictitious dialogue* Author asks and answers
 - Direct address* Author addresses the audience
 - Reposition argument* Translates an objection into an argument in one's favor
 - Asteism* Replies with an irrelevant statement
 - Rhetorical question* Asks a question that expects no answer
-

RHETORIC — DESIGN PROCESS AND HUMAN DECISION

But rhetoric can do even more than this. It is even legitimate to consider it in the world of three-dimensional constructions — it can go beyond convincing argument to a direct role in the design process itself. As mentioned earlier in this article, rhetoric supports issues of human agency. Individuals engaged in defining some future prospect to be realized through the expenditure of resources, whether human or material, sometimes unwittingly use rhetoric in the creation of prototypes and models of the projected future. In this sense, virtually all designers (architects, urban planners, product designers, multimedia designers, information designers, software designers, etc.) are developing rhetorical representations as prototypes of the idea to be realized.

Unpredictability is a characteristic of the future — one we try to neutralize through strategies like trend projection, control management, hedging and statistical surveys. Yet the essential unpredictability remains. Four sources of unpredictability in human affairs can be identified: 1) radical invention cannot be predicted; 2) decisions contemplated but not yet made escape prediction; 3) elements of game theory such as indefinite reflexivity, imperfect knowledge or the open character of situations cannot be predicted; and 4) pure contingency escapes prediction.³⁸

To these can be added the more sweeping statement that design generally takes place in a concrete situation characterized by complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict.³⁹ These are situations of high fluidity which require the human agency of judgment and choice.

Aristotle also envisioned rhetoric as a civic art of deliberation — as part of our mental strategy for developing practical reason. As mentioned earlier, Aristotle defined three kinds of rhetoric: that which dealt with the future was deliberative, that which dealt with the past was judicial and that which dealt with present performance was evaluative.

38 Macintyre, Alasdair. 1984. *After Virtue*. Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press.

39 Schön, Donald. 1983. *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books. Schön explores the problem of judgment in such diverse fields as city planning, psychotherapy, architecture and business management.

Our interest here is only with the first. Deliberative rhetoric considers action for the future by reasoning from example.⁴⁰ It is not a big step to consider Aristotle's examples as the designer's prototype or the planner's scenario. All are examples or postulations of a possible future – ones that are contingent and subject to human choice and action.

*The useful is not automatically just or honorable: there is a surplus, usually marked off by necessity, for what it is best to do, although unjust, or at least not just. Deliberative rhetoric is especially concerned with the possible and the impossible, and so necessity becomes its special plea. The characteristic method of deliberation is reasoning from example, and so a concern with consequences and success dominates. It is easy for pleas of necessity to get a hearing. Apart from that surplus, in the area where translation is successful, the intertranslation between utility and justice assures that deliberative reason not be reduced to instrumental reason. If the useful is generally just, then it is not useful in the amoral sense that arguments from necessity bring with them.*⁴¹

The ability to anticipate a future situation is difficult. Failures to do so make the evening news and are represented by well documented unexpected side-effects such as the impact of the automobile on living and working patterns. Even sophisticated deliberation may be unequal to the task of accurately envisioning the future, but no deliberation surely is not the answer.

*Deliberation is both ethical and logical because it is reasoning that requires knowledge of ends as well as means. Deliberation is always in danger of becoming merely instrumental reasoning, since... it simply takes for granted whatever end is desired by the audience; we deliberate about means, not ends.*⁴²

Designers question the problem they address, for the framing of that problem proposes or at least limits a solution. Schön specifically cautions designers and policy makers to be careful about the analogies and metaphors used to describe and discuss a problem, for these descriptions will

40 Garver, Eugene. 1994. *Aristotle's Rhetoric, An Art of Character*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 51–67.

41 Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric*, 67.

42 Garver, *Aristotle's Rhetoric*, 69.

direct both means and ends. One of the important skills the designer brings to deliberation about the future is the ability to manipulate concrete means (the prototype) to envision an understandable and concrete end.

Deliberative rhetoric uses opinions about the good to advocate a policy or decision. Examples, like prototypes, are the important focus of such inquiry. These examples are the rhetorical version of induction – reasoning from particular cases to a general rule. The choice of examples cannot evade ethical discourse.

In these terms, rhetoric is used in two ways: as a prototype or as an argument in favor of realizing a plan. While the prototype and the plan for its realization are deeply interrelated, here they are considered separately. Prototypes are the objects all designers create in order to externalize and make concrete the objects they design before these designs are realized in the everyday world of use. Prototypes are a form of synecdoche, in which some part is representing an as yet undeveloped whole. The prototype helps the designer understand what they know about a design and what is unknown, half-baked or faulty.⁴³ It is also a pragmatic form of address as it serves to share a vision with others involved in the decision making process. The generation of a prototype is not a naive or neutral operation. In the early stages of its development, a prototype is a kind of “ill-formed” argument. The designer is working through conceptions of what “might be.” These early prototypes can take the form of a diagram or sketch which respectively reveal a primary set of functional relationships or an even more general basic concept.

Designers who engage in user observation as part of their design process may develop behavioral prototypes which offer users in the field a kind of thesis about how an idea will communicate or work. These prototypes are usually highly focused on what the designer desires to validate.

As users work through some behavioral activity with the prototype, they sometimes inadvertently reveal an antithesis – their conception of how something should work is not compatible with the designer’s. Such moments are critical to the observation, its analysis and the future develop-

43 Besides *The Reflective Practitioner*, see also Schön, Donald. *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies*. 1994. New York: Basic Books; and *Generative Metaphor: A Perspective on Problem-setting in Social Policy*, in Ortony, Andrew, editor. 1979. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

ment of the prototype. The antithesis is a product of communication and use – a product of interaction that would not be revealed without the behavioral prototype.

A procedural prototype may take the user through the logic of an operation to see if they can follow the classification, organization and operation of some activity. This more rigorous form of prototype helps to move an idea from “ill-formed” to “well-formed.”

An appearance prototype concentrates on the formal design values of the object. It applies rhetorical ideas broadly, including syntactic, semantic and pragmatic adaptations, with the goal of focusing the user’s attention, assuring a revealing organization, and even creating pleasure in the use of the design. Like other prototypes, the appearance prototype may undergo user interaction in order to refine and clarify the visual aspects of a proposed design. In a sense, the various kinds of prototype are indices of where the designer is in a development process. However, to the extent that the design process is iterative, it may be impossible to identify the extent of design development from the most current prototype alone.

It should be clear that prototyping is a way to postulate some proposed design for a kind of reality check with those involved, whether clients, other designers or end users. The kind of prototype developed for interaction and discussion depends on how far the designer has gone with an initial idea, what kind of information they need to elicit from an interaction and who is the partner in the interaction. For example, if the designer is communicating with those people engaged in the project, the designer must be careful to communicate the important features, the most important attributes of the proposed idea in as real a relationship as possible so as to honestly reveal the idea in its current state of development. Sometimes several prototypes will be put into competition with each other, or one concept will be developed in many divergent ways. All these are ways in which the designed object (prototype) explores contingency, appearance and alternative points of view in order to facilitate sound judgment, decision and action. It is in this sense that rhetoric is a design tool supporting human decision.

The rhetoric of the prototype allows a vision of a proposed future in much the same way that science fiction is a rhetorical narrative of future science and technology developments. Technology can be separated from science in that its development is more related to contingency – what might be – while science is related to certainty. In this sense, technology is like design, its prototypes for practical use and action can be examined as rhetorical statements rather than as necessities or givens.

*Solutions are only probable and can always be changed or set in opposition to others. In this sense, technology is part of the broader art of design, an art of thought and communication that can induce in others a wide range of beliefs about practical life for the individual and for groups... Design is an art of thought directed to practical action through the persuasiveness of objects and, therefore, design involves the vivid expression of competing ideas about social life.*⁴⁴

CONCLUSION

Walter Ong speaks powerfully in favor of rhetoric: “The loss of narration left much of the Western world with no language of order and disorder, no moral criteria, no sense of life as a heroic quest, no instruction on how to interpret the relevance of general principles for particular situations, no sense of man as a storyteller, and no means by which to encourage individuals to discover their own stories. What the West did have, and pursued with a vengeance, was Lists, rules, detachment, universals, solipsism, rationalism, and anomie.”⁴⁵

I have argued here for rhetoric and the visual. In closing, I would like to make a practical connection between rhetoric and the situation in which we are living. Five contemporary needs serve to demonstrate the role rhetoric can play in its ability to celebrate appearance, focus meaning

44 Buchanan, Richard. 1989. Declaration by Design: Rhetoric, Argument, and Demonstration in Design Practice. In Margolin, Victor, editor. *Design Discourse*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

45 Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*, 180.

and interpretation, deal with contingency and support human agency.

- *First, the need for a critical apparatus for understanding information and media relationships.* In an ever more pervasive media environment, calculated manipulation of an audience seems to be the standard. Like Augustine, we need to be concerned that people can understand the manipulation in order to question its purpose and be able to use rhetorical methods to advance other points of view.
- *Second, the need for a mode of inquiry that can address social and cultural issues.* Discussion and decision making in the context of daily human life lacks form and voice. Without going into a critique of the media, suffice it to say that news reports, for example, use a severely abbreviated form of story-telling which frequently presents only one point of view, pretends to deliver the “facts” as they are known, and fails to connect to larger human issues and agency. The conundrums of our time (genetic engineering, multiculturalism, euthanasia, globalism, educational reform, to name a few) need to be given form by advocates for various points of view so that the public may play its role in determining future action. These issues need to be brought down from the largest “abstract” context to a more manageable “concrete” and local context for examination.
- *Third, the need to reinvigorate learning.* The crisis in education is well documented and culturally profound. As discussed previously, Bruner and Egan both point to an educational blind spot that prevents seeing rhetoric and story-telling as a legitimate method for learning.
- *Fourth, the need to address “meaning” in visual communication.* In recent decades there has been much focus on technique and syntax. The digital situation reinforces attention to technique and syntax while it constrains the means of execution. Technique and syntax can be technologically automated, but the making of meaning remains a human enterprise. In the largest sense, rhetoric can serve to develop a sharper awareness of this process.

- *Fifth, the need for a better understanding of sign context for new media.* The tradition of print or television does not translate to computer mediated communication in the largest sense. Book pages yield to sequences with links that reveal “selected” information. Given the pressure of increasing information processing and interpretation, seamless, real-time live-action or animation may not be the best use of multimedia’s potential. Sampling, selective examination in depth and other, as yet unspecified, operations may better serve our needs.

None of the above lend themselves to a purely technical or even factual solution. All point to rhetoric and storytelling as a way to open inquiry and explore possible futures. Returning briefly to science fiction as it rhetorically represents future scientific and technological developments for our consideration, design prototypes rhetorically postulate a future situation or condition that can elicit behavior as well as enthusiastic endorsement or critical comment. Rhetoric is culturally present, but we recognize it only negatively when it is blatantly over or under used.

[No] culture or public life project can survive for long without some form of rhetorical practice, some coherent, symbolic manner of securing collaborative public action... every culture requires some avenue for addressing and thereby explicating its identities, accomplishments, and needs – and hence some form of rhetorical practice.⁴⁶

Rhetoric provides us with the occasion for higher order thinking. The messages are not “givens” but are rooted in the messy contexts of our lives and the possibilities of human agency. As such, they engage our consideration of rejection or acceptance, or the creation of another possibility. Some might still say rhetoric is bad while others might say the opposite. This article would like to convince the reader that rhetoric is necessary and unavoidable – it supports communication and human decision.

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